



Recommended Guidelines for Sharing Details of Survivors' Experiences in Training or Educational Presentations

This position paper on sharing details of survivors' experiences reflects the views of the Prevention and Education Committee of the Attorney General's Sexual Assault Task Force (Task Force) and was approved by the membership of the Task Force on May 22nd, 2008.

Sexual violence can be a difficult topic to introduce to an audience who has little prior knowledge about the realities of the issue. Often, presenters have very limited time to make a big impact on audience members and need to provide information that is not only educational, but will also resonate with the audience members after they've left the room. Sharing specific details of a survivor's story can seem like an easy way to meet this challenge because stories often demonstrate both the specifics of sexual violence, as well as the impact on the survivor. However, a presenter must consider whether or not it is appropriate and/or safe to disclose information about a survivor.

In presenting on sexual violence, it helps to carefully consider why you might choose to include details about a survivor's experience.

Reasons *not* to share details of survivors' experiences:

- 1) To provide "shock value" about the nature of sexual violence – *too often, sexual violence is sensationalized in the hopes of getting a reaction out of an audience.*
- 2) When statistics and/or other forms of information are just as effective to make your point – *if facts do enough to make your point, leave it at that.*
- 3) To "prove" your own expertise – *let your knowledge and presentation speak for your expertise about the issue, not stories that demonstrate that you've worked with survivors.*
- 4) There are usually survivors in the room – *Sexual violence affects so many people, chances are there will be at least one survivor in the audience. Focusing on the details of an individual's experience may be re-traumatizing for other survivors.*
- 5) Because just as there are survivors in each audience, it is very likely there are also offenders in the room – *sharing stories may incite offenders and/or give them ideas for further perpetration.*

Reasons to share details of survivors' experiences:

- 1) To cultivate empathy for survivors and what they have experienced – *examples remind the audience that these crimes happen to real people.*

- 2) To demonstrate the widespread nature of sexual violence – *when survivors from different populations experience similar things, it demonstrates the commonalities of sexual violence.*
- 3) To breakdown stereotypes and myths about both victims and perpetrators – *sometimes, statistics may generalize an issue while stories show the diversity of people and experiences.*
- 4) To provide a context for the audience about survivors' experiences – *a story can show that a sexual assault is only one part of an individual survivor's identity, putting their experience into a better framework.*
- 5) To make an impact on the audience – *a survivor's story can be a powerful teaching and learning method to make presentations "stick out" to the audience once they're over.*
- 6) To give the audience ideas on what they can do – *using a story as a map, the audience can practice bystander interventions based on real-life examples.*
- 7) As a training tool – *to highlight what worked or didn't work about a particular response or intervention.*

Preparing for the presentation

Take some time to lay out your objectives and consider alternative solutions in creating a presentation that is interesting, factual and will make an impact on the audience without compromising the trust or confidentiality of survivors.

- First, consider the intent and purpose of utilizing survivors' experiences: *What unique benefits will come of this? What other approaches can you consider that would have equivalent effects?*
- Second, consider who the audience is and what you expect to gain by utilizing a personal experience. *What do you know about the audience beforehand to help determine appropriateness? Does the group currently think and/or use statements that place blame or responsibility for an assault on victims?*
- Lastly, have a co-worker and/or peer review the information you'll be providing. *Are there things another professional would do differently to educate the audience?*
- If you do decide to share details about survivors' experiences, arrange to have a support person available with whom participants can debrief if needed.

Informed participation and debrief:

Remember that every room probably has survivors *and* offenders in it. It is important to inform participants of your decision to use details of survivors' experiences. When choosing to do so, always gauge the audience's reaction to what you are sharing as you're sharing it. It's okay and appropriate to stop. This can be done by stating something such as, "I can see that sharing this experience might be difficult for some audience members. I'm going to go ahead and move on to the other points of my presentation."

During the presentation, do the following things:

- State your intention to use a survivor's experience to the audience.
- Identify the support person who is available to debrief with participants.
- Describe the basic materials to be covered in the presentation to allow participants to make informed decisions about being/staying in the room throughout it, as well as an opportunity for participants to opt out or to leave the room.
- If necessary, clearly steer the audience back to your original intention in order to properly utilize the information for the educational purpose for which it was shared.

Graphic images or descriptions of violence:

Sharing graphic depictions can potentially be harmful. Before you choose this, revisit the objectives and intent for sharing the information. The aftermath and details about healing and reintegration may be just as empathy building and less traumatic for an audience than the actual details of an assault.

Ensure strictest confidentiality

Ideally, gain a signed release form from the survivor to discuss the details of her/his experience. It is recommended that you do not ask a survivor who is currently receiving services or support from you or your organization, as s/he may not feel comfortable declining your request. When asking for permission from a survivor to share her/his experience, do your best to ask in a way that allows the survivor to say "no".

If you plan to tell the story anonymously, consider the inherent uniqueness of each story and examine how each detail may lead an audience member to deduce information about the client (especially in rural communities or small populations such as people with disabilities or immigrant groups). Be especially mindful when sharing any demographic or geographic information. You may also consider intentionally changing details to conceal the survivor's identity, but make sure you let the audience know you've done so. It is also a good idea to mention that many experiences have similarities due in part to the prevalence of sexual violence. Finally, inform the audience that you gained the survivor's permission to share her/his experience.

After the presentation

It's always important to be prepared to provide emotional support after educating a group about sexual violence. For many audience members, this may be the first time they're learning about the subject, and they may have a personal reaction to what you have shared.

Make sure to:

- Have a support person available during the presentation and plan to stay after the presentation to offer support.

- Post local resources such as a crisis line number and, if possible, provide a support person from a local agency in the room.
- Allow time and space for a debrief session. This often works well in small groups that are self selected.
- Take time and space needed by the room to emotionally debrief.

Resources

- **Oregon Voices DVD**, Oregon Attorney General's Sexual Assault Task Force
Oregon survivors share stories of their survival, their experiences accessing services after an assault, and how they've moved on in their lives.
- **The Voices & Faces Project:** www.voicesandfaces.org
A nonprofit, national survivor network created to give voice and face to rape survivors, providing a sense of solidarity and possibility to those who have lived through sexual violence.
- **No Fairy Godmother; No Magic Wands**, Judy Katz
Judy Katz's book explores the healing process of survivors of sexual violence, weaving in survivors' stories and experiences.
- **Raising Her Voice:** www.raisinghervoice.org
RaisingHerVoice.org provides a safe space for survivors of sexual assault to share their experiences with emergency contraception (EC or the "morning-after pill").

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