



PERSUASIVE STORYTELLING: Discover the power of your personal story

SAMHSA

Substance Abuse and Mental Health
Services Administration

S O C I A L M A R K E T I N G T A T E A M



Give Your Story Legs Through Social Media

Even when they're not your own, stories offer a great way to start a conversation with friends, colleagues, and larger networks with whom you interact. These groups may benefit from what you're learning right here, right now!

Social Media Strengthens Storytelling

If you are comfortable, consider sharing your story on your website and promote it through the other social media platforms you use. If you're sharing your story in a public place, let your social media followers know when you'll be speaking and where; it is comforting to have supporters present. Likewise, it shows those in the audience that there are many people who care about strengthening the mental health of young people and children. Audience members may then be motivated to share your story with their own followers.

Be sure someone takes images to share after the event on your social media platforms!

You also can communicate your experiences, learning, and most powerful moments as the session is happening or later on via:

- Twitter
- Facebook
- Instagram
- Pinterest
- Storify
- Tumblr
- Other platforms that your audience follows

Ready to Share Now?

Let everyone know what you're learning and engage with others both in and outside this session in real time using the hashtag shared by your trainer.

Not Great With Multitasking?

That's OK—keep paying attention to the presenter! Just prepare to share later. After all, compelling stories have a great shelf life, and you can grow today's experience for others after the session wraps.

The Benefits of Getting Out There

Why should you spend the time and energy presenting to parent-teacher associations, state and local councils, legislatures, boards of education, newspapers, and other community groups about your experiences?

- Because the best way to help children, youth, and families is to educate the community on issues surrounding children’s mental health.
- Because people fear what they don’t understand, and mental health needs are probably the least understood of all health conditions.
- Because people need to know that issues surrounding children’s mental health affect real people in their community. One-on-one communication is the most effective, because audiences are able to interact and ask you questions. Your issue then becomes humanized and real to them.
- Because the foundation of systems of care is the community; systems of care cannot work unless people in the community understand the concept and do their part to help it succeed. Making yourself known to the community and sharing your experiences is the best way you can help them do that.
- Because your strength and courage, as well as your challenges and obstacles, will connect you to others. Lessen your fear and that of your neighbors about reaching out to others and being judged because of your child’s mental health needs. Say “no” to blame and shame!
- Because connecting with the community shows that you are part of it. Once you tell your story, people will know more about you and realize you are a part of their world. Your work and issue won’t live in the shadows.
- Because you are the expert on your own story. You know what it’s like to “be there.” Your story can open up people’s minds to reality, educate them, and persuade them.

The Power of Telling Your Story

Telling your story can be a powerful tool to raise awareness of children’s mental health needs and effective treatment options, as well as to improve systems of care for our children, youth, and families. Families can use their stories in many different settings, including presentations at conferences, before community leaders, trainings for professionals, public awareness events, and providing support to another family so they do not feel alone.

A well-told story is an extremely compelling way to convey your message, which will linger longer in the mind of the listener than a set of facts.

Getting Ready to Tell Your Story

Before you decide to publicly share your story with others, be sure to:

- ✓ **Check yourself.** Know and understand where you are in your journey, and decide if it is a good time for you to be presenting to *this* audience and in *this* place. It is important to let go of the anger or hurt you have felt and not let it color everything you do. This will help you to communicate your message in a clear and convincing way without anger overriding your message. Learn to use a variety of approaches to speak the truth, such as real-life situations you may have experienced accessing services and supports for your child.
- ✓ **Prepare.** Organize your thoughts in advance. You may want to write an outline, or if you are telling your story for the first time, you may feel more comfortable writing down what you want to say. It is helpful to practice beforehand. Try not to read every word of your story, as you want to connect with your audience rather than reading from your paper and avoiding eye contact with the people who are listening to your message.
- ✓ **Have a purpose.** It is important to know and understand your audience so you can best craft your story. Consider the purpose of your story and how to “frame” the message in a way that resonates with your audience. For instance, if you are talking to business leaders, highlight how the challenges of caring for a child or youth with behavioral health needs affect productivity at work. If you are speaking to educators, show how lack of access to services affects grades, attendance, and classroom behavior. You should also have a clear action item, or “ask” of your audience, such as providing services for students in school.
- ✓ **Filter.** Your story is compelling and has the power to influence and motivate others. Think about the key messages you want others to remember and focus on those as you share your story. Leave out the details that may lose people and focus on a few key experiences. Use data to show that your story is not just an anecdote, but the experience of many people like you. However, don’t overwhelm your audience with numbers.
- ✓ **Consider timing.** Know in advance how much time you have to speak. If there isn’t enough time to cover all you want to say, pare down your message to one or two major points or stories. When you are presenting before a large group, there is usually an allotted time given for your presentation. To ensure you won’t have to rush, or even risk being cut short, make sure your message will fit into the time you are given.

- ✓ **Remember whose story it is.** As you share your story with others, remember that you are sharing your child’s story as well. Always respect your child’s privacy and dignity. If your child is old enough, ask permission to share their story. Your child may prefer that you not publicly disclose some aspects of what he or she has gone through. As your child matures, it truly becomes *their* story of challenges, resilience, and recovery; your story takes on a new focus as one of parent empowerment and is specific to your journey in a caregiving role.
 - **Have open discussions.** Have an open and honest discussion with your child about what you want to say during your presentation. Ask your child what information he or she does not want you to publicly disclose.
 - **Empower your youth or young adult.** Encourage your child to find the power of telling their own story of resilience and recovery. If he or she wants to share their story, offer assistance, and respect what your child chooses to share. Refrain from editing or refuting your child’s version of their story. It is their story to tell.
 - **Consider a team presentation.** Look for opportunities where you and your child can team up to tell your stories together. You can share your personal challenges as a parent, especially in navigating services, and your child can share his or her perspective of growing up with behavioral health challenges and how they are now managing their recovery.
- ✓ **Think ahead.** Content posted to social media never goes away. Anything you disclose publicly can end up on social media and could later have an impact on your child’s future, such as job applications, military involvement, or social relationships.

Presentation

Being nervous before a presentation is normal. Remember the purpose for telling your story and focus on that.

- ✓ **Be yourself.** Let your personality and passion shine through.
- ✓ **Use humor.** Caring for a child with behavioral health needs can be challenging, but it also has its moments of humor. A funny incident that occurred with your family can lighten the intensity of a difficult story.
- ✓ **Stand tall.** Body language can reinforce your message to the audience.
- ✓ **Have an opening and closing.** Start your presentation with a story about your family. This will grab the audience right away and put you at ease. Use your passion to close with a key message or call to action from the audience.

Anyone can utter a series of words; it is the presenter’s personal connection to those words that can bring them to life for the audience.

It took Abraham Lincoln less than five minutes to deliver his immortal Gettysburg Address.

✓ **Apply your POWER.**

POWER = Pause, Others, Why, Eye contact, Relax

Write **POWER** at the top of your presentation notes or outline. This will be a reminder of what to do when your nerves take over, emotions run high, or the environment is not friendly.

- **Pause.** If you are feeling emotional or have lost your place, just pause. People will understand if you simply say that you need to compose yourself. Explain that although this is difficult, it is important to you to finish your presentation. Pausing will also get the listeners' attention.
- **Others.** Remember: You are not alone. You are using your voice to represent many others who are unable to speak or will speak when the time is right for them.
- **Why.** Stay focused on why you are presenting. Remember the important points without getting lost in your story and losing your message.
- **Eye contact.** Make eye contact with someone in the audience who is friendly. Look for a person who gives you supportive head nods or smiles at you. Use them as a focal point when you are feeling emotional or nervous.
- **Relax.** "Left foot ... right foot ... breathe." This is a simple phrase to recall when you need to relax and get through a tough period. Taking a breath and letting it out can be relaxing and helps to settle you so that you can continue.

Later

Congratulations, you did it! It takes courage to stand before a group of strangers and tell your story that may be filled with heartache and pain. Following a presentation, you may experience a range of emotions, from feeling elated that you did it, to uncomfortable that you disclosed personal information about your child and family. It may feel awkward when strangers come up to thank you for your presentation and you don't even know their names. These feelings will subside when you think back to the purpose of telling your story. Whether your purpose was to raise awareness, change the way systems work, or improve services, you told your story for your child and family and to help other children and their families. There is no greater purpose than that! Thank you!

“I have a child with special needs. I didn't know if I would be strong enough. Turns out I am. And so are you.”

— Lisa Thornbury

Thank you to FREDLA and the Caring for Every Child's Mental Health Campaign's Family Council for their input on "The Power of Telling Your Story."

Storytelling

“We are lonesome animals. We spend all our life trying to be less lonesome. One of our ancient methods is to tell a story begging the listener to say—and to feel—‘Yes, that’s the way it is, or at least that’s the way I feel it.’ You’re not as alone as you thought.”

—John Steinbeck

Storytelling is humankind’s original medium for conveying the details and passion that define our lives. It remains our most powerful tool for educating, persuading, and effecting social change.

Telling a personal story makes a statement about you and what’s important to you. Storytelling enables people to connect with other people. It has the unique ability to grab someone’s attention, connect to what they feel is important, and link that feeling to whatever you want them to see, do, or feel.

Storytelling has the power to break through the noise of daily life and create visual and memorable impressions for your listeners.

There is no one way to tell stories; you should tell them in the way that you’re most comfortable. Here are some tips to help you.



Tips for Storytelling

Before

- Know your audience. Your story may not change from audience to audience, but the way you tell it will.
- Know why you are telling your story to this audience at this time and how much you are willing to share.
- Have a prepared, well-thought-out story to make appropriate, necessary connections with your listeners.
- Prepare your single overriding communications objective (SOCO).
- Consider whether you are ready to put yourself out there. Sharing information about your personal story can be emotional and stressful.

During

- Have a beginning, middle, and end to your story.
- Keep the story focused, and have a point.
- Paint a picture. Avoid generalities, and describe what happened, even reconstructing dialogue when you can. Use as many images as possible that people can identify with and that describe the places, sounds, and sights in order to draw them into the experience.
- Keep the story concise and organized.

After

- Reflect on the experience.
- Think about what you liked or disliked about the experience and use those things to improve your next presentation.

Pointers for Public Speakers

Set the stage by sharing information about yourself up front. This personalizes you to the audience and helps them feel that they know you. No matter how long you are speaking, the introduction should be 15 percent of your speech, the discussion about 75 percent, and the closing 10 percent.

Understand what is culturally appropriate for your audience. This will allow you to make the most effective presentation.

- **Practice, practice, practice.** If possible, spend time alone just prior to your speech; take some deep breaths and think about your central theme. Avoid practicing in a mirror; it leads to overcorrecting of natural gestures and facial expressions.
- **Body language.** A picture is worth a thousand words. Defensive, negative body language is communicated through crossed arms, a “fig leaf” stance, or a military stance. Positive body language is seen through openness, gestures, moving away from the podium, and taking off your jacket, if appropriate.
- **Eye contact.** The reason you maintain eye contact with your audience is for feedback and to make your story more personal. One way you’ll know if your audience is getting the message is through eye contact. Look for eyes following you and heads nodding with you.
- **Smiling.** Does your face say you are approachable? It does if you smile at appropriate times.
- **Facial expression.** It is impossible to hide your feelings when you talk about something you really care about. The kind of passion people feel and exhibit when they talk about their loved ones, their mate, or their children is the same passion that should be harnessed when talking about your issues. That kind of passion gives off energy, and energy makes you convincing.
- **Gestures.** Gestures help tell the story. Remember, 50 percent of what people retain is through your body language. Gestures reinforce and highlight your story and add energy to your delivery.
- **Humor.** Jokes and anecdotes make for an entertaining speech, but make sure you practice them. Choose material carefully, and never tell “off-color” or possibly offensive jokes.
- **Voice.** You have six different octaves—use them. Never try to camouflage a regional dialect. Tell people where you’re from and they’ll expect you to sound the way you do.
- **Pauses/silence.** There are four good times to pause: 1) when you move from one subject to another; 2) when you want the message to sink in; 3) when you need to collect your thoughts; and 4) when you receive laughter or applause.
- **Avoid distractions.** Don’t fiddle with your hair, shuffle your feet, sway back and forth, jingle change in your pockets, play with your eyeglasses, or make other possibly distracting movements.
- **Don’t use the podium as a crutch.** In fact, don’t use the podium at all if you can help it. Let your gestures and body language tell your story, and give your audience a refreshing break from the other speakers who may have spoken exclusively from behind the podium.
- **Take time to focus before you start to speak.** Most of us feel we have to immediately say something to our listeners. The audience needs and wants a little time to visually process a new speaker. If you start too soon, they will feel anxious and rushed and may initially tune you out.
- **Talk with—not at—your listeners.** Think of your audience as individuals, not a large, impersonal group.

Don’t forget that being nervous is normal. Try to reframe your fear into excitement and enthusiasm. Remember, you are the expert on your own story. People have come to hear you talk about what you know.

Audience Segmentation Worksheet

Who is your audience?

What do you know about this audience's knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors as they relate to your goal?

What are the characteristics of this audience? How do they spend their time? What is their gender, ethnicity, and income level? How have they been educated? What are their language considerations? By what or whom are they influenced? What makes new information credible for them? What or who could motivate change or action?

How will information about the characteristics of these audiences be collected (interviews, focus groups, surveys, group discussions, satisfaction surveys, etc.)?

Remember Your Single Overriding Communications Objective!

We've all experienced the speaker who presents way too much information in a condensed amount of time—most of it over our heads. Or we've seen a TV talk show guest who has 2 minutes to get a point across, but loses the opportunity because the interviewer led them away from the core message.

An audience retains one to two key messages from a speech or presentation. You must maximize the time you have with your audiences.

To use your time efficiently and ensure that your audience understands and will remember your key points, develop a SOCO—single overriding communications objective—for your presentation.

Your SOCO:

- Will help you organize your thoughts. After that, if necessary, you can develop a more focused set of messages that tie your SOCO to an individual speech or presentation.
- Is the reason you do a presentation or interview. If you stay true to your SOCO, there will be no doubt in the audience's mind about what you stand for, how you want them to think, and what you want them to do.
- Can help you apply the “KISS” principle—Keep It Short and Simple. Only a small percentage of what is heard is retained. Make sure what you say is brief and to the point.

Prepare Your SOCO

(1) Who are you? (Name, occupation, title/position, geographic area in which you work or reside)

(2) What have you witnessed or experienced in your work, community, or personal life that illustrates the need to raise awareness of children's mental health?

(3) What is going on in the world of children's mental health? How might this frame your presentation today? As appropriate, tie your story to a new study or related major news story. Share what you or your organization seeks to accomplish in the coming months and why you are presenting to this audience now.

(4) What do you want the audience to do?

Write Your SOCO

Based on your responses to the previous questions, develop your SOCO with three to four key statements that:

- Describe who you are and your connection to children’s mental health.
- Describe what your system of care seeks to accomplish in the coming months/why you are presenting to this audience now.
- Describe what makes your system of care unique.
- Tell your audience what you want them to do.



Integrating Youth and Family Stories—Things to Consider

- Share information about the audience and environment for the presentation with youth and families ahead of time. Is this a formal presentation or an informal discussion around a table? What is the dress code? How many people will be there? How much time will they be asked to invest? Is a stipend available? Do they require child care?
- Work with youth and families to have a prepared, well-thought-out story. Encourage them to prepare and practice their SOCO.
- Share the purpose and context for the presentation and how their story fits in. Work together to identify what you want the audience to do as a result of the presentation and then practice together. Ask for their feedback on your SOCO and presentation and offer your thoughts on theirs.
- Public speaking, especially when it involves a personal story, can be very stressful and bring up emotions. Ask youth and families to reflect if they are truly ready to put themselves out there, and if so, make them feel that it is OK to change their mind. Encourage them to have a support system in place following their storytelling experience.

NOTES


