

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

What Are Systems of Care?

A system of care is simply a coordinated network of people who take care of the children in our community, with an emphasis on youth who may be facing mental health challenges. These networks can include parents, teachers, neighbors, police officers, therapists, doctors, and so many more. Systems of care wrap services around a child to provide them with support, treatment, and the help they need.

Systems of care reach into all the systems involved in a child's life, from the juvenile justice system to education, child welfare, and health care. Over the past 20 years, more health care agencies and organizations have begun to adopt a systems of care approach to provide mental health supports and services to children.

Why We're Here

The organization that is hosting today's training is a Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services (SAMHSA)-funded system of care community. Part of having a system of care grant means they have access to trainings on social marketing, such as the one being conducted today. The facilitators of today's training are from SAMHSA's Caring for Every Child's Mental Health Campaign.

System of care grantees and the Caring for Every Child's Mental Health Campaign believe in the value of youth and young adults using their voice to change attitudes and beliefs about mental health, which is what we will be discussing today!

As a youth leader with lived experience, your story—if you choose to share it—can be a powerful tool to create change in your community. We hope today's session will equip you with the skills necessary to be an effective communicator and mental health advocate.



Increase Your Impact 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!

Note: It is incredibly important to consider readiness, how to be safe and effective, and that you have permission from others in your story when sharing your story online. Long lasting effects can happen, so consider strategic sharing training before sharing online.

Social Media Strengthens Storytelling

If you are comfortable, consider sharing your story on your website and promoting 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 adults and children. Audience members may then be motivated to share your story with their own followers.

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

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

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

Ready to Share Now?

Let everyone know what you're learning and engage with others both inside 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.

Why 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.

Sometimes, having a human touch and sharing personal stories can be more effective than sharing compelling data points.

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 “main point.”
- 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.

The Benefits of Sharing Your Story

Why should you spend the time and energy presenting to parent-teacher associations, state and local councils, leaders, 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; they 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 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.

Positive Reasons to Share:

Before you embark on persuasive storytelling, you should consider why you want to share your personal story with this group at this time. Some reasons that indicate it is a good idea to share are:

- Self-advocacy—You want to make your own rights, interests, and perspective known.
- To change attitudes—You want to decrease negative or discriminatory attitudes toward those with mental health challenges.
- Community advocacy—You want to be a force for positive change in your community.

Negative Reasons to Share:

On the other hand, sometimes we are compelled to share for the wrong reasons. If you find yourself considering sharing for the reasons below, you should reconsider whether this is the right place and time for you:

- **Pressure**—You feel like you have to share your story because someone asked you to.
 - *What do you do?* In this case, you should respectfully talk to the person who is asking you to share and share your concerns. You also reserve the right to walk away.
- **Anger**—You are frustrated by what has happened to you, and this is negatively fueling your desire to make your voice heard.
 - *What to do?* These feelings are completely normal. Advocacy typically is not a healthy outlet for anger, as your message can get lost in your emotions. You should take time for these feelings to subside or seek help from a professional to find a healthy outlet.
- **To improve feelings of self-worth**—Receiving attention for sharing your story often feels good—and this is not a bad thing. However, this shouldn't be a main motivator for sharing your story.
 - *What to do?* If you begin to feel this way, you should work on refocusing your thoughts and think about why it is you feel this need. It may be helpful to take a break from sharing your story and seek help.



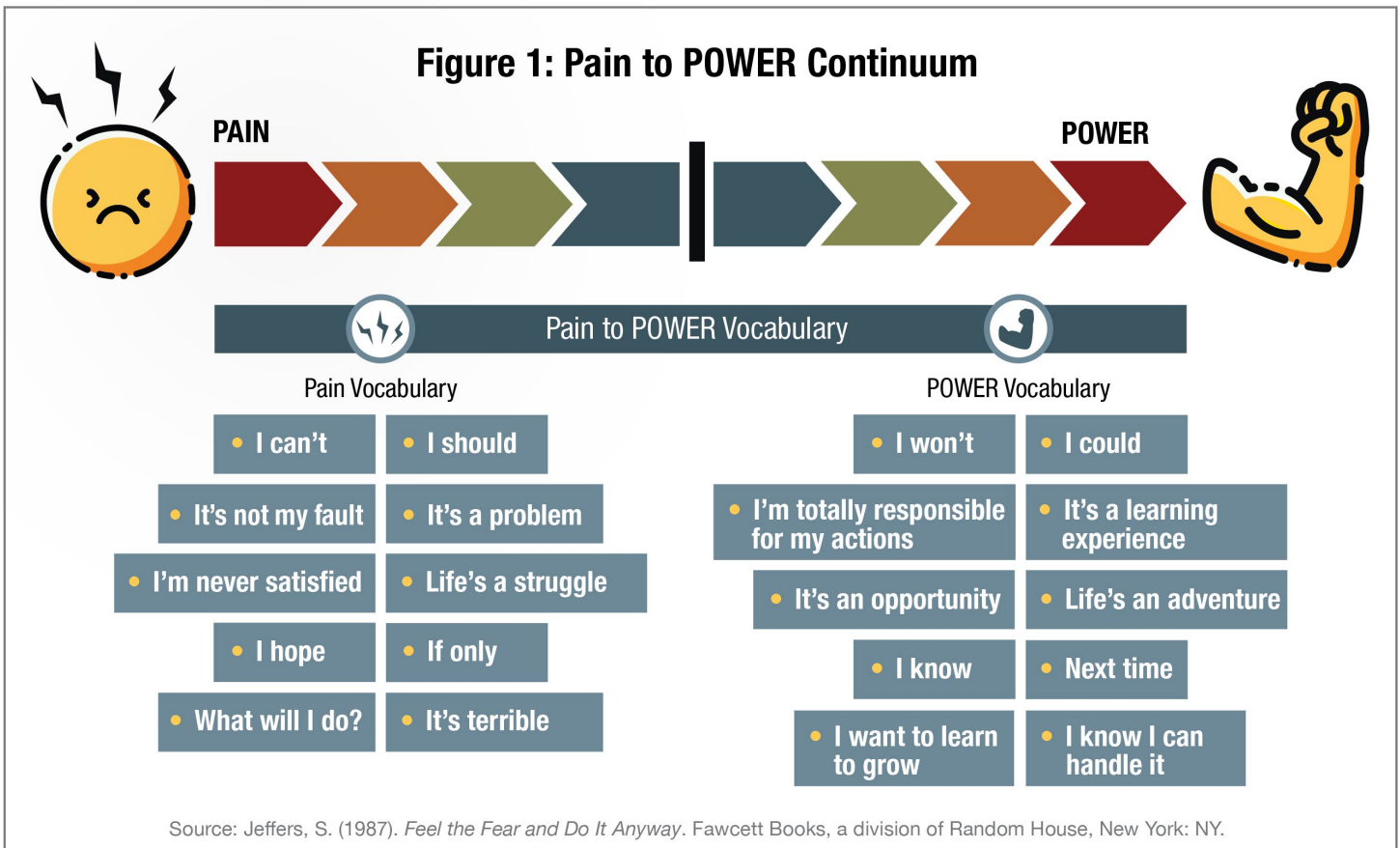
Want to learn more about strategic sharing?

There are some great resources for learning strategic sharing that you can download for free online:

- Strategic Sharing—<https://fostercarealumni.org/strategic-sharing/>
- Youth Leadership Toolkit: Strategic Sharing & Public Speaking—<http://store.fosterclub.com/youth-leadership-toolkit/>
- Strategic Sharing Workbook: Youth Voice in Advocacy—<https://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/pdf/pbStrategicSharingGuide.pdf>

Pain to POWER

As you think about sharing your story, consider the Pain to POWER philosophy, which involves moving from a place where pain controls our behavior to a place where we find power within ourselves.



POWER Preparation

Moving from Pain to POWER requires a little prep work. So before you dig into—or even commit to—presenting your story to others, be sure to:

Check Yourself. Know and understand where you are in your life, and decide if it is a good time for you to be presenting to this audience and in this place. Remember, moving from Pain to POWER is also about letting go of the anger or hurt you have felt.

- Is sharing your story taking too much of a risk for you? How much are you OK with sharing?
- Ask yourself, “Is doing nothing keeping me in a place of pain?” If the answer is “yes,” then you may want to see where you are on the Pain to POWER continuum (see Figure 1). This will help you determine whether presenting will move your thinking and actions closer to POWER.

There is also much to be learned from youth and young adults like yourself, who have experience sharing their story publicly. Below are some tips from young adult advocates, which may be helpful to you as you as you embark on this journey:

“There’s no right or wrong way to share your story, as long as you’re sharing what’s comfortable for you. I found that it was comfortable to share my story in bits. The first time I discussed mental health, I said a few sentences and cried because of the emotional intensity. Gradually, I started to share lengthier versions of my story. Today, a few years later, I speak openly about my mental health challenges on social media, in person, and during presentations that I have given. Take as long as you need to share what you want.”

– Ashley Olafsen

“One of the best things I’ve learned from sharing my story is that you never know how connected your story might be with someone else’s. Letting go of the thought that I’m not like everyone else or that my story is too unimportant to share helped me start healing.”

– Anonymous Youth Advocate

“Telling my story allowed me to mark the end of my journey toward a healthy way of being, while accepting and owning that my struggles helped shape the man I am today.”

– Anonymous Youth Advocate

“When I tell my story to someone, I always plan a short get-away from the situation afterward. Whether it’s grabbing a cup of coffee or running a few errands, I schedule some time for myself and usually, a friend joins me that is already aware of my story to help decompress and center myself for the remainder of the day.”

– Kirsten Donato

“Sometimes responses are negative, and it’s important to set boundaries to disengage from people when criticism stops being constructive. On the other side, sometimes positive responses can lead to others reaching out and sharing their own vulnerabilities with you. It’s also important to set boundaries in those circumstances and remember that just because you’re sharing your story does not make you an expert, nor should you feel responsible for others’ mental health.”

– Kate Leddy

“The discrimination I experienced throughout my life prevented me from sharing my story with anyone. When I ultimately decided to take a leap and start talking about my experience with mental illness, I experienced an outpouring of support from the people who mattered most in my life. This experience taught me that compassion transcends our perceived inadequacies and flaws. While some people may not react the way you would hope, you do not need their validation to be confident in yourself. There are countless people throughout the world, myself included, who share your experiences and commend you for taking steps to gain power through your story. Together, we form a community that will always support you.”

– Daniel Schwartz

Pause, Others, Why, Eye Contact, Relax

- **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 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 that is friendly. Look for a person who gives you some 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 out the air can be relaxing and help to settle you so that you can continue.



Tips from a Mental Health Professional

Sharing your personal story with others can have both a positive and a negative impact on your mental health. Before deciding to share your story, you may want to consider these tips from a mental health professional:

- No one truly knows if you are ready to share except for you. Trust yourself and your decision—but understand yourself at the same time—and talk the choice through with someone you trust and who understands your goals for sharing. You can also journal or reflect in whatever way works best for you.
- There can be great satisfaction in telling your story. It can provide an internal release when you tell your story as a whole from the beginning. However, even experienced storytellers can sometimes feel anxious or nervous before and after sharing. It's a reasonable and expected response for anyone taking a step outside of their comfort zone. In choosing to share, know that these feelings can cause some hesitation—and that's OK.
- Care for yourself after your "telling." Sometimes the energy involved can make you feel emotionally drained or even depressed afterward. All of this is a very common response. Make sure that you have a person who you trust and you feel comfortable talking with to check on you in the hours and days following sharing your story. This can be a friend, peer, supportive adult, or therapist.
- In sharing your story, know ahead of time that not everyone will know the appropriate way to respond to you. If you experience negative feedback, discuss it with someone. It is likely that their negative response has more to do with themselves than it does with you—and that is not your burden to carry. Also know that you don't have to answer any questions that you don't want to. Training in strategic sharing and how to answer difficult questions can be hugely beneficial to navigate negative feedback.
- Remember that your story, even if you share it, will always belong to you. If you decide later that you don't want it to continue to be shared, you have that right! Feel empowered to share or not share at any time during your journey.

Audience Segmentation Worksheet

1. If you could talk to anyone in the world about mental health in order to try to change their knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors, who would it be?

2. What do you know about this audience's knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors as they relate to youth and young adult mental health?

3. What else do you know about this audience? How do they spend their time? Who influences them? What might make them listen to you, or motivate them to change? What are their language considerations?

4. What could your audience gain from understanding your message?

5. What stands in the way of your audience thinking, acting, or behaving differently based on your message?

6. Once you've talked to them, what do you want them to do?

Remember Your Main Point!

“The main thing is to keep the main thing, the main thing.” – *Stephen Covey*

Your “main point” is the primary thing you want your audience to think, feel, or do as a result of hearing your story. 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 two 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 if you want to make sure they think, feel, or do something as a result of hearing your message.

To use your time efficiently and ensure that your audience understands and will remember your key points, develop a main point for your presentation.

Your main point:

- Will help you organize your thoughts. After that, if necessary, you can develop a more focused set of messages that tie your main point to an individual speech or presentation.
- Is the reason you do a presentation or interview. If you stay true to your main point, 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.
- Remember—if you could only tell your audience ONE THING that you want them to think, feel, or do as a result of hearing your message, that’s your main point. Try and relate everything back to it.

Prepare Your Main Point

1. Introduce yourself! What is your name? What brought you to speak to this group? Are you representing yourself, or another organization?

2. What personal story can you share that will help your audience understand your point of view?

3. What other facts, figures, or important information will help you “prove” your point, and help your audience understand your story?

4. What do you want the audience to think, feel, or do as a result of speaking to them? What could they do that would help your cause? What is the one thing you want them to remember?

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.
- **Facial expression.** Does your face say you are approachable? It does if you smile at appropriate times.
- **Emotional 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.

