

How to Tell a Story Safely

This document is adapted from Jack.org's many resources to train and equip young leaders to take action for mental health across Canada. We're thrilled to be sharing our learnings externally with this resource. *It should be noted that this resource goes best in tandem with our other resource, "How to tell a story."

Objectives

- To understand the gravity of sharing a personal mental health story and how to choose which stories you are comfortable with sharing
- To learn to speak from your personal experiences in way that is not only safe for you, but your audience as well



What should we consider?

- Stories should not be a comprehensive, detailed account of your entire "story" and the many experiences throughout your life.
- Don't present any struggles you've had as your identity; these are just **one part** of who you are.
- When building your story, eliminate details that are irrelevant to main messages.
- Don't include details that make you feel vulnerable or make you uncomfortable. Make sure you have distance from the experiences you're sharing.

What are the messages of the story?

Going into any presentation, you should be able to boil down your content to a handful of key messages. For example, in Jack Talks, speakers are encouraged to understand several important **key messages**, and speakers choose one or two to focus a story on:

- Stigma is harmful, we need to end the silence around mental health
- Everyone has mental health, 5 in 5 of us
- Everyone can struggle with their mental health at times
- It's okay to talk about mental health and reach out for help
- Mental illness is real, recovery is possible
- It's important to know how to help ourselves and support others

Any stories you tell should present how you learned one or two of your key messages – illustrating a problem and demonstrating how change is possible.

How to Tell a Story Safely

Stories should work to gain common ground with the audience and lead them to a new learning. Typically, the best way to do this is to describe a way that a relevant problem (e.g. stigma or a lack of mental health knowledge) existed in **your life** - so audiences will hear it and think, “Yeah that’s awful-let’s change this!”

Important things to avoid

- Too many details or going off on tangents, especially if they are irrelevant to the messages or inconsistent with your narrative. Pick every detail with intention.
- Making your story too long – a story should be no more than five minutes at a time
- Trying to convey too many thoughts - the message should be simple and clear
- Providing details on personal mental health distress, symptoms, treatment, or recovery - focus more on the impact of stigma/silence/other broader factors and what happened in your life to challenge these and/or lead to positive changes
- Triggering language and descriptions
 - This means not going into vivid details, whether around a suicide attempt, a traumatic experience, distressing symptoms, etc.
 - Say just enough so that the audience gets the point, the gravity, and no more
 - For example: “I felt really hopeless, and I tried to take my own life. After that, I realized that I needed to get help.”
 - Avoid: “I thought about all the ways I could end my life and I planned it [like this].”
 - This is important in order to keep the audience comfortable, but also for your own safety. **Sharing a part of your story should never be difficult or traumatic for you!** If it is, choose different stories from your experiences to tell.

Don’t feel pressured to represent your entire self and life in any presentation. That shouldn’t be the purpose, unless the presentation is at a book launch for your auto-biography! Instead, this is an opportunity to bring some important messages to life through real life experiences.

Final Note

Sharing a story from your personal experiences up on a stage is a brave and vulnerable thing to do. It’s important to remember that you’ve likely only shared these experiences before in controlled environments with close friends or family members. When you bring these to a stage, you are bringing these experiences to a **public forum**. That’s why it’s so important to pick details with intention, and only share what you’re comfortable with everybody knowing about you. Your experiences are meant to colour the presentation and bring it to life, but never to make you feel uncomfortable. With practice and preparation, you can stay in control of your messages and keep this a positive experience for both you and the audience.

Homework

Get going on a story with a mental health message!

Using the guidance in “How to tell a story” and everything you’ve learned here, craft a story around a key mental health message you want the world to know. Depending on your comfort level with speaking, either write a detailed outline in bullet points or a full script. Be sure that it follows the standards and tips laid out here. Now, film it, watch it back, perform it for a friend, and develop it until you feel it’s safe and effective!