

SURVIVOR STORYTELLING WORKBOOK

for advocates with lived experience
working in the many movements to end violence



*Written by Sabra Boyd and Chris Ash
for the National Survivor Network - Cast*

www.nationalsurvivornetwork.org

Recommended citation: Sabra Boyd and Chris Ash. *Survivor Storytelling Workbook for advocates with lived experience working in the many movements to end violence*. National Survivor Network - Cast (2023).
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Introduction

Stories are powerful. Storytelling is the reason we are here today. Thousands of years ago, we told stories to warn others about things like dangerous berries that aren't safe to be eaten. Your story, knowledge, and expertise as a survivor are powerful, whether or not you choose to share details of your story. The goal of this workbook is to help guide you through the decision to share your story on your terms, how to prepare, and what to expect. Coloring our experience as survivor storytellers is honoring those who have not physically survived to share their stories. For some people, it means exploring if, how, and when we want to share our story. For others, this means honoring the choices that were taken from them by recognizing that you don't owe anyone your story, now or ever, that sharing your story on your terms fosters meaningful change, and that sharing your story isn't necessary to co-create a better story for generations to come.

As survivors of violence who work in movements to end violence, we hear a lot of talk about “bringing our whole selves” into the work. But what does that mean? How do we do it in practice?

While there are excellent examples of this in grassroots organizing spaces, we don't have a lot of models for how to do this in nonprofit and professional spaces.

In the movements to end domestic and sexual violence, advocates with lived experience are often discouraged from sharing their survivorhood. In the movement to end human trafficking, advocates with lived experience are expected or even encouraged to share their trauma stories, and are often limited to tokenizing roles that focus on sharing their stories.

Both of these come from the same assumption: That you can either be a professional or a survivor, but not both at once.

A brief history lesson on survivor storytelling

While there is overlap, it can be helpful to think of a **movement** as the grassroots organizing and community care that happens between and among people impacted by an issue, and the **sector** as the nonprofit and governmental programs that develop to address the issue.

The first leaders in the anti-sexual violence and anti-domestic violence *sectors* were largely people impacted by the issues, who had been leaders in the *movements* as well. Grassroots organizing among survivors of intimate violence has always happened, and (in the United States, at least) particularly among Black and Indigenous women who were disproportionately targeted. In the 1970s, we started to see “Speak Out” and “Take Back the Night” events to raise awareness, and in 1980 the Department of Health and Human Services codified their anti-domestic violence goals. In 1984 the Family Violence Prevention Act was passed, and

ten years later the Violence Against Women Act was passed. This may be seen as the time in which the United States saw the development of an institutionalized *sector*.

In the 1970s through 1990s, government and professional spaces were dominated by white, cisgender men. Funding often required collaborations with the criminal legal system and solutions embedded in that framework. This was during a time when women in male-dominated professional spaces were subject to intense levels of harassment and perceived as being overly emotional, less capable of intelligence or professionalism, or of being temporary workers until they had families. Because of this dynamic, women in the developing *sector* to address intimate violence often de-emphasized their survivorship, didn't speak of it, or treated questions about it as "off-limits" or "irrelevant." They wanted to be seen as *professionals*, not *survivors*.

Similarly to intimate violence, the *movement* to address exploitation and human trafficking has always had lived experience leadership. Workers and migrants organized for their rights, survivors of forced labor while incarcerated advocated for prison reform or abolition, and people in commercial sex coordinated harm reduction efforts. Even as the early *sector* was starting to address human trafficking in the late 1990s and early 2000s, these forms of lived experience organizing were already happening. However, these movement leaders from impacted communities were rarely the leaders of the early *sector* to address human trafficking.

This led to having two parallel but sometimes divergent tracks of work. One track, the lived experience organizers of the movement, continued their advocacy and organizing (but not always under the banner of "human trafficking"). The *sector*, by contrast, tended to have leadership who came from: 1) the criminal legal system, such as law enforcement and prosecutors, 2) faith-based missions and outreach, and 3) activists concerned about the moral impacts of sex trading or pornography. While the needs and goals of the sector sometimes aligned with those of the movement, they often did not.

Over time, the human trafficking *sector* faced criticism for its lack of survivor leadership. While some organizations genuinely rethought the ways they operate, most began to engage the survivors in their networks in specific ways. Survivors were often "invited" to provide feedback or share their lived experiences of trafficking based on the needs of the organization or agency, and the survivors were chosen based on existing positive relationships with service providers and law enforcement. This led to what we might call "selection bias," which means that the ways we select survivors for this form of leadership are by default biased in favor of the assumptions of the organization or agency.

On top of selection bias, survivors hoping to work in the anti-trafficking sector faced another challenge: working with non-survivors who were not used to working with survivors as *colleagues*. Anti-trafficking professionals may hold assumptions about survivors, such as that

they are *broken* or *incapable of meaningful healing*. Additionally, survivors may be subject to *respectability politics* based on racism or educational backgrounds.¹ These biases sneak into service provision for clients experiencing or recently out of their trafficking experiences, and they also sneak into the professional interactions between allies working in the sector and the survivors they engage.



Survivor?



Professional?

This has led to frequent *tokenization* among survivors working in the sector. Tokenization means you are brought in as the “token survivor,” in roles that highlight your survivorship without acknowledging or incorporating the depth of your experience, knowledge, ideas, and insights. This has meant that in the anti-trafficking movement, survivors are generally *expected* to show up as *survivors*, not *professionals*.

Assumptions that make it hard for us to bring our whole selves into our work:

- Survivors can't be professionals when they are speaking about their lived experiences.
- You can't simultaneously acknowledge your lived experiences AND advocate for the needs of others.
- Survivors are experts in their lived experiences but need "real" professionals to make sense of them.
- Most professional norms and knowledge are suspect.

OR...

- Professionals can't work off of evidence if they acknowledge their survivorship.
- You can't effectively advocate for the needs of others if you acknowledge or reflect on your own lived experiences.
- Professionals are experts in practice norms but don't have any relevant lived experience.
- Most community-based knowledge is suspect.

This binary denies us the ability to access ALL our wisdom and insight in our work.

BUT, lived experience insights have unique value for our work, for other professionals who do not have your unique lived experiences (including other survivors), and for resetting the balance of decades of non-survivors thinking they know what we need.

¹ ““Respectability politics” refers to the way that people attempting to make social change present their demands in a way that are acceptable to the dominant standards in their society.” - [Democracy Limited: The Politics of Respectability](#) by the National Park Service.

So how do we figure out how to navigate this? This workbook has been created by the National Survivor Network to help you sort through if, how, and when you want to share your personal experiences of trauma in professional spaces. We draw upon years of experience with and evidence about survivors' experiences of storytelling, having learned from those who came before us. Many of them learned these lessons the hard way, but you can be prepared thanks to the sometimes-painful foundations they laid.

We offer our gratitude to all the survivor leaders who came before us, hope this workbook honors their legacy, and invite you to join us in carrying that legacy forward.

Decisions

Thinking through your options, your background, your needs, and your preferences is an important part of deciding whether or not to share your story. The following section provides reflections and activities to support you in making important decisions about if, when, and how you want to share your story.

Choosing to share your story is always your choice. The reasons that survivors may feel compelled to share their stories can vary, but it should always be your choice. Your story can be powerful, but there are many things to prepare for and consider before you decide to move forward. Your safety and well-being are most important, and you don't owe anyone your story – it is yours, and yours alone.

Nonprofits, journalists, politicians, other groups, and even other survivor leaders may pressure you to share your story. You may feel coerced or like you can't say no. You may see successful survivor leaders sharing their stories, and feel like you need to be like them. By considering your motives and why you want to share your story on their platform, you may be better able to navigate potentially exploitative situations.

While it can be a good experience, many survivors who share their story report feeling pressured, exploited, or tokenized. Regardless of your decision, you are more than your story. This workbook will help you strategize your path, as well as identify your objectives and how to achieve them. Activities and checklists are designed to help you prepare for coping ahead and anticipating any obstacles or challenges you may face.

Remember, you can educate and train others without sharing the details of your story if that's what you decide. You can bring your whole self into your work without being a Professional Survivor™. Your expertise and lived experience are valid and powerful, even if you choose not to share certain details of your story or not to share your story at all.

There can be many things at stake when you publicly share your story, both professionally and personally.

Do I want to tell my story?

Thinking about telling your story publicly in any form can be intimidating, and can kick up many of our fears and traumas. Maybe you've told people in the past and were not believed. Maybe people you've told about your experiences blamed you or questioned you in ways that felt unsafe. Maybe you've told someone your story and they treated you differently from that point

forward – either like a delicate, fragile weirdo or like a superhuman hero who is “just so *brave* and *powerful* and *strong!*” Both of these can leave us feeling unseen, and both can have harmful impacts on us.

When we begin sharing our story publicly before we have worked out our own feelings about our story, we run the risk of hurting others. Before moving into the *intellectual* decisions about storytelling, we must start with the *emotional* ones.

Take a moment to settle into a comfortable space and do whatever helps you feel more grounded and relaxed. If you have a therapist, peer support person, or close friend, it might be good to do some of these activities with them, in dialogue.

The following journal prompts are meant to help you begin exploring your relationship with sharing your story so you can make the best decisions for yourself. While it may seem silly, it’s important to work through these steps before diving into the logistics. Many people who share their stories before they’ve considered these issues regret it later, and we want you to feel empowered and prepared.

Journal activity:

Later on in this workbook, we’ll offer activities to help you think through, cope ahead, and manage your boundaries around specific storytelling and speaking engagements.² But for now, let’s start broadly.

Imagine yourself sharing your trauma experiences publicly. Notice what comes up in your body and mind.

What are your *fears* about sharing your story? What are you afraid might happen in your community in response to sharing your story? What are you afraid might happen in your life as a result of sharing your story? (*If you feel safe doing so, consider where some of those fears may have come from – did your past experiences telling your truth have unexpected or hurtful consequences? How did you navigate that, and how have you supported yourself in the wake of that hurt?*)

² Coping ahead is a Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) skill.

What are your *hopes* for sharing your story? What do you hope might happen in your community or in the world in response to your sharing your story? What do you hope might happen in your life as a result of sharing your story? *(Feel free to use art, poetry, or other creative expressions to explore this in depth. If you do choose to tell your story publicly, consider keeping any art you create in response to this somewhere you'll see it regularly to stay focused on your hopes and reasons.)*

Sometimes, other people (survivors or allies) may unexpectedly start reaching out to you for support that is outside your professional role or capacity. Random strangers on the internet may send you detailed and disturbing messages about things they've read or heard about. You may open your inbox to find unsolicited introductions to journalists or acquaintances. Survivors may send you their full, detailed stories and ask for help. What might that feel like to you? How will you take care of yourself and honor your own boundaries with increased visibility?

Telling your story publicly can have many impacts on you, both exciting and upsetting. Consider your current support network. Do you have folks you can reach out to who can support you? Do you feel like you're in a reasonably stable place in your mental health to be able to manage the ups and downs of having your story become public?

While some survivors tell their stories through spoken or written narrative, others may share their stories through different mediums. Are there other formats that you would like to tell your story in, such as music, performance art, visual art, a behind-the-scenes role of some kind, etc.?

Thinking it through: teaching, training, & peer support

Many survivors work (or want to work) in anti-violence movements in roles that are not specific to storytelling. These roles may include teaching, training, peer support, and policy work. Because survivor storytelling is so common in the anti-trafficking sector, other professionals (including other survivors) may assume that all survivors are comfortable sharing their stories or that storytelling is part of their role.

You CAN educate and train others without sharing the details of your lived experience. Remember that sharing your trauma and trauma stories:

- Should not be mandated or required in any training or educational setting.
- Should not be coercive or exploitative.
- Should be on your terms.

If someone asks you in advance of an event if you'll share more of your story, some sample responses might be:

Hi, Jane! Thank you so much for co-presenting with me. At this time, I've already incorporated the elements of my story that I plan to share into our slides. If I decide at a later time (including during the presentation) to share any more, I'll do so then.³

Hello, Dr. Allert. I am a trainer, so most of my presentation will be focused on training your attendees on the use of trauma-informed skills in a healthcare setting. While I may weave elements of my personal and professional experiences into the training, my story will not be the focus of this presentation. Thank you for understanding.

Hi, Judge Marks. I'm happy to share the elements of my story that we spoke about, including the timeline and charges against my trafficker. But I prefer not to go into graphic detail about the abuse because I don't feel that serves the audience well, and there may be survivors in the audience who could be triggered by those aspects of my story that I'd prefer not to share. Thanks so much.

Hi Director Bower, I appreciate the invitation to share more of my story, but I would prefer to focus my presentation on data that represents all survivors. If a detail of my own story helps to illustrate aspects of the statistics better, I may do that. But I'd prefer to not distract people with details of my own experience while presenting about effective interventions and outcomes for survivors as a diverse demographic group.

What other responses might you offer?

³ For more sample language for navigating boundaries in the workplace, see the NSN's blog series on [Navigating Workplace Trauma](#), available in our website's resource library.

If someone asks you an intrusive question or if you'll share more of your story *during* an event, some sample responses might be:

Ah, that is a very common curiosity. It's also something most people aren't comfortable discussing in rooms full of strangers, so I think I'm going to pass on sharing my experiences. But, I can tell you that for many survivors....

I can understand why sometimes people are curious about my story. For people who have experienced this kind of trauma, it can be validating to hear someone else's experiences. For people who have not experienced this kind of trauma, it can be helpful to understand someone's first-person experience. However, I am one of many survivors, and the most important survivor's experiences to honor are those of the one in front of you when you're working with a new patient or client. I'd rather stay focused on how you can better support that survivor's needs.

What other responses might you offer?

Worksheet for evaluating a single engagement

After *feeling* through whether you want to share our story, the answer *may be* a resounding YES! And still, each opportunity to share your story will have its own considerations. Your desire to share your story might also evolve over time. For example, you may become too busy with other projects, or you might not have the emotional energy to do public presentations for a few months, and that's okay. For many of us, our offers to share our stories are connected to specific agencies, organizations, or media outlets.

Below is a worksheet you can fill out to cope ahead and help you anticipate concerns about sharing your story in a particular situation or engagement. If you decide not to share your story publicly, that's ok too. We've included this worksheet as a standalone resource in Appendix 2 of

this workbook for you to make copies of, and it is available in the [resource library of the National Survivor Network website](#).

What is the engagement, opportunity, or event?

What organizations, agencies, or outlets are facilitating this engagement, opportunity, or event?

Many survivors struggle to feel confident saying “no” to an organization or person who asks them to share details of their story. It can be helpful to check in with yourself and ask:

Do I want to share details of my story at all?

Do I feel pressure to share my story?

Do I feel obligated or required to tell my story, or like I “owe” it to them?⁴

Do I feel like I can say “no” to the person or organization asking me?

Do I trust this organization and its mission? Are there survivors or allies who I trust that I can freely speak with about my concerns?

⁴ Note: Most organizations who support survivors are funded to do that. They were *doing their job* when they supported your recovery. We can honor the times they went above and beyond while still recognizing that paid work is not the same as unpaid service, and that service given with an expectation of “payback” can have coercive impacts.

What are the pros (things I'm excited about) or cons (things I do not like) about this particular engagement, opportunity, or event?

| Pros | Cons |
|------|------|
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| | |

Do I feel tokenized?

Am I comfortable with the setting in which I'm being asked to present? Are there any accommodations or changes I can request?⁵

⁵ Consider sharing the NSN's [Event Host Guidelines](#) with the organization in advance of an event. You can find this in our website's resource library.

Am I sharing my story the way I want to? If not, do I feel comfortable telling the organization or person that I'd like to modify the format/way I'm sharing my story?

Do I feel comfortable with having my photo taken or being filmed for the event? Is the organization asking me to share a photo for a bio, etc.? Do I feel comfortable saying “no” if I’m uncomfortable with this? How will I ensure that the event organizers know my boundaries in advance of the event?

Do I have any other specific concerns?

Although you should consider your audience and objectives for why you are sharing specific details with them, sharing your story should be on your terms. If there are aspects of your story that you want to keep private, that should be respected. You should always feel comfortable saying “no” or “I don’t want to speak about that.” If you don’t feel like you can do this, that is a red flag to reconsider. You can also ask for more time to decide to commit to the engagement if you are feeling uneasy.

Respectability politics or tokenization is another concern that can sometimes come up. Some survivors may be asked to share their stories specifically for events like Sexual Assault Awareness Month, Human Trafficking Awareness Day, Domestic Violence Awareness Month, Black History Month, Gay Pride, or other population-specific purposes. This can cause some survivors to feel tokenized, particularly when the organizations inviting them have not otherwise made progress on equity and inclusion. Respectability politics can also have an insidious impact because survivors who present in a way that some organizations prefer may be invited over others.

This can occur in a range of ways, such as organizations inviting only survivors who are white cisgender heterosexual Christian women who oppose sex worker rights and abortion, survivors who have college degrees, or survivors who dress or speak a certain way. Conversely, sometimes organizations will intentionally invite survivors who seem “unrefined” in order to other or exoticize them, such as a professional association explicitly requesting a survivor who seems “raw” or “hood” in order to fit an expectation. In both of these cases, the needs of the organization are being prioritized over the authentic experience of the survivor and the needs of impacted communities. **It’s okay to tell an organization: “I feel like this is a tokenizing engagement and I’m not comfortable taking this on.”** Alternatively, some survivors may choose to take this engagement as a tradeoff to get access to the room to say what they need to say.

Intersections of privilege can also factor into one’s decision to share their story. Some survivors report feeling like they need to share their stories for speaking engagements and their livelihood. Others may feel the opposite, and that they need to not self-disclose out of fear that the stigma of being a survivor may harm their livelihood, career prospects, and public perception of their professional acumen. Some survivors may not feel comfortable sharing their stories until they are stably housed with a supportive spouse and a good therapist to help them process afterward, while others may feel more comfortable sharing their lived experience in a more behind-the-scenes role.

Tip: Connect with other survivor leaders such as those you may connect with through [National Survivor Network](#) or [Survivor Alliance](#) to speak with peer survivor leaders who you trust about your decision to partner with an organization and share your story. Finding community in other survivors can be helpful when navigating this decision.

Considerations

Once you've decided you want to share your story, you will want to consider a number of factors, concerns, and preferences so that you can have a more empowered, informed, and prepared storytelling experience.

Coping ahead and planning for how you'll care for yourself after an event is important if you decide to share your story. Even if you have told your story many times before, each time can be exhausting and emotionally fatiguing. Set aside time to rest afterward. Assess what helps you recharge. If you think you'll need time to be alone, set up accommodations and clearly communicate that to your loved ones in advance. If you feel like you need to be surrounded by people you trust, schedule a call or dinner with your loved ones to recover afterward. If possible, schedule a session with your therapist soon after to process what might come up.

There is no wrong answer to what care and accommodations you'll need to recover after a storytelling event. Just make sure that you plan ahead and anticipate what you'll need in order to cope ahead and care for your future self, because you know yourself and your needs best.

You may also want to consider setting up a website and social media (i.e. LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, Facebook, etc.) in advance. This will be covered more extensively in sections about crafting your story for impact, but consider other information you might want to share with those who are familiar with your public story. This could be your availability as a consultant, a book project you're working on, links to your other work, etc. This could also entail links to your newsletter published on Medium, Substack, or another platform. On your website, you might name your dream scenario – perhaps you'd like to someday produce a documentary about the intersections of domestic violence and human trafficking, or you're writing an album and recording songs about your experiences with police brutality, or maybe you have a goal to complete a marathon this year. Whatever your dreams are, consider including them in your online presence and brand-building (however cringey that might feel). You are more than your story, your existence is enough, and you have more control over your narrative in these self-curated spaces. Again, this is completely up to you, and choosing what you keep private and for yourself is equally powerful as what details of your story and dreams you choose to share with the world.

See the *Checklist for creating a safety and privacy plan for yourself, your family, loved ones, and friends* in Appendix 3 to think through how to care for yourself as you begin sharing your story.

Planning for uncomfortable responses

What will you do when:

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1) Someone questions the truth of your experiences?

2) Someone asks an uncomfortable or intrusive question?

3) Someone asks victim-blaming questions or suggests you contributed to your own trauma?

4) Someone minimizes the impact of your experiences?

5) You experience a microaggression while or after sharing your story.

In all of these cases, consider: Who is the person I can contact to let them know that I had an uncomfortable experience? This might be an event host, the journalist's supervisor, or a video segment producer. Providing feedback after the fact may *also* be uncomfortable, but it is often an essential part of advocating for yourself.

Boundaries as a public figure

Once your story is out there, you cannot control (and will likely lose control of) your image and narrative. Your story will be retold without you, possibly indefinitely (including online), which can mirror many survivors' experiences of online or other public-facing exploitation.⁶ Other folks who hear of your story may experience the sense of entitlement or ownership over you and your story that often comes with parasocial relationships. This can happen in a positive and idealizing way (in which they think you are a hero, a saint, or an inspiration) and in a negative or stereotyping way (in which they blame you, deny your survivorship, or hold oppressive or biased stereotypes about you). In all of these cases, people (other survivors, other sector leaders, and absolute strangers) will feel a sense of intimacy with you and will send you direct messages on your personal social media accounts, make comments or posts about you, or write journal, news, and research articles about you, often using your name.

These re-tellings of your story may include frameworks, recommendations, or language that you find denigrating or harmful (such as "sex slave" or "illegal immigrant"), and may generate sizable income for other people without benefitting you financially. Whenever your story or name is used in a post or publication, you may experience a period of increased scrutiny, harassment, or fear. Some people may cross the line into stalking survivor leaders or disclosing graphic details of their own abuse and asking survivor leaders for advice, so it is important to adequately prepare for how to protect your privacy, as well as handle, deflect, and filter these types of interactions in order to preserve your safety and well-being.

Parasocial Relationships

"Parasocial Relationship" is a way of understanding a relationship with unequal intimacy, social connection, and consent. A survivor leader who becomes highly visible in the movement likely cares deeply about the survivors they're impacting and has great compassion for others who are trying to find their way through healing. However, others who hear their story or come to know their work may feel a deep intimacy with that person that does not match the actual relationship.

⁶ Challenges discussed in the next few pages are from the findings of *We Name It So We Can Repair It: Rethinking harm, accountability, and repair in the anti-trafficking sector*. Lived and Professional Experience Movement-Building Working Group. (2023) Available at <https://nationalsurvivornetwork.org/harmandrepair/>

These parasocial relationships can be very disorienting for survivor leaders who do not anticipate them or recognize their dynamics. While extensive guidance on how to navigate these relationships is outside the scope of this workbook, recognizing parasocial dynamics can help you remember:

- Sometimes a person is reacting to your words or actions and sometimes they're reacting to *their* story *about* you. Making space for reflection or processing with a trusted person you know is a clear “mirror” can help you determine what is yours to address and what is not.
- Just because someone feels intimacy toward you doesn't mean that genuine trust or intimacy has been built, and you are allowed to maintain compassionate boundaries with people who respect or are inspired by you.
- Someone hating you when you do not deserve it feels uncomfortable, and it will not stop you from doing your work. You do not have to respond to every criticism or rumor; in fact, sometimes just doing your work without responding is the best way to conserve your valuable time and emotional energy.
- Someone idealizing you when you do not want it does not mean you have to be perfect, but it does mean you have to be thoughtful about the power dynamic it creates. When you are more visible, others look up to you more and are more likely to take your “suggestions” as commands or your opinions as big-T Truth.

Some challenges come from within our survivor movement. Because some survivors rely on income from storytelling to survive, they may engage in extensive, aggressive, or competitive self-marketing that others sometimes perceive as “only telling your story for clout” or social capital; when you publicly share your story you may be accused of this or perceived this way, no matter your intentions for sharing your story. Survivors may not share publicly in order to get pity, social capital, clout, or microcelebrity, but when they put their story out there they *will* get these things, and the impacts are often overwhelming, harmful, disorienting, and retraumatizing, especially when not supported by ethical organizational practices and ongoing support for the survivor.

Some survivors genuinely want to take on the potential negative impacts of sharing their trauma narrative publicly for the benefits they hope it will provide to other survivors and marginalized communities. Organizations have a responsibility to prevent and mitigate any negative impacts as much as possible.⁷ When organizations or individuals connect you to storytelling opportunities, they should ensure that they provide adequate support as part of their responsibility for facilitating that opportunity. There should not be expectations for what your story should look like, so that you can share *your* narrative.

Some options for support you could ask for from an organization include asking to have a peer mentor or someone with direct service experience meet with you in advance (similar to a

⁷ For an example, see [Event Host Guidelines for Facilitating an Inclusive and Professional Space for Speakers and Trainers](#) by National Survivor Network and HEAL Trafficking.

domestic violence court advocate's role). This person could help you to prepare for the engagement (if you would like - this should always be optional) or accompany you to the event so that you can have a check in afterward to debrief and process any uncomfortable feelings that came up (always optional). Ideally, organizations should also offer to provide training to survivors on how to get nonconsensual, no longer consensual, or otherwise unwanted content removed when it turns up (such as being sampled in podcasts, inserted into videos, or any other unapproved third-party use).

When your story is “out there,” don't read the comments. Seriously, never read the comments section. Whether you have been published in a magazine, or interviewed by a reporter, the comments section is there for publications and news organizations to generate revenue so that they can say to advertisers: *“Look how much audience engagement this got! You should pay us more and buy more ad space!”* The comments section is frequently bots and trolls seeking attention. Occasionally there might be positive feedback, but this is very rare. If you would like to know what the comments say, ask a friend who you trust to read and filter them for you, sharing only the comments they think you might actually want to know about.

What to do instead of reading the comments section:

- Write your own “comments” section of things you wish people would say on sticky notes, and put them around your home.
- Go for a walk.
- If you live somewhere you don't have as much nature outside and can't get away for long, spend a little time watching a “tv for cats” video on YouTube, and enjoy “birdwatching” and nature sounds.
- Call someone who is a good “mirror” for you – who you feel sees the good and bad of you and loves you anyway – and ask them to tell you their favorite memory of or things about you.
- Do something that does not require your phone, so you won't be tempted to look: a puzzle, art activities, or dancing in a way that feels good for your body.

Sometimes “fans” or people who are not survivors will contact you after you've shared your story. They may project certain assumptions on you, your experience, your politics, or your spirituality. This can be a very uncomfortable experience that you may have no control over. Some of these people may develop into stalkers and may become dangerous over time. Ignoring them is usually the most effective route. You also have every right to correct them if you would like. You can use filters for your social media and email, screen calls, and set up a private mailbox away from your home to preemptively mitigate these potential threats to your safety and privacy. Checking in with your therapist or another survivor leader who you trust can also help you determine a strategy for how to proceed. Your local rape crisis centers may also be a helpful source of support if a situation begins to feel unsafe or like stalking.

Remember, you do not owe someone an explanation or lesson even if you have publicly shared your story. Occasionally, trolls or curious people who don't realize how offensive they are being will comment or message you about your story. You have every right to ignore them if you'd like. Check in with yourself and protect your health, safety, and well-being above all. Acknowledge that some people say inflammatory things just because they like to. Ignoring and "grey rocking" people like this is usually the most effective option. "Grey rocking" means accepting that you cannot fix everything in the world or correct every misguided person on the internet. What you can do, however, is preserve your own happiness and peace of mind.

Boundaries with other survivors

Your story is powerful. Once you share it publicly, there may be other survivors who resonate with your story and may reach out to connect with you for advice, community, or other reasons. While building community is important, be aware that it may become taxing over time, and you may not have the skills or capacity to support every survivor you'd otherwise want to. Some survivors may be at the very beginning of working through their trauma, and a parasocial relationship like this can quickly spiral into an unhealthy dynamic in which you are asked for help and advice at all hours of the day, and for support that you are not equipped or ready to provide. Be thoughtful about sharing your phone number or personal details even with other survivors; you are allowed to have boundaries with them. Developing a plan for interactions like this will help you remain neutral and maintain healthy boundaries with other survivors, especially those who may be disclosing for the first time.

Tips to maintain healthy boundaries with other survivors who may reach out:

- Keep a list of trusted organizations you can refer survivors to who contact you.
- Write a script for yourself of friendly, healthy boundary responses. This can help you maintain an emotionally neutral response that doesn't push you to immediately jump into action to help everyone. You can't fix every single thing in the world alone, and burning yourself out, burying yourself under stress, or being trapped by your desire to help does nothing to advance your wellness or our collective power.
- Recognize what you can help with and what you have the capacity to help with if a survivor reaches out to you. Maintaining healthy boundaries and expectations is key to your well-being and the other survivor's because one of the worst things anyone can do is overpromise and underdeliver, especially when someone is in crisis and you don't have the resources or skills to help.
- Maintain a list of resources to have on hand if a survivor discloses that they are suicidal or want to harm themselves. The NSN maintains a list of commonly needed resources on our Get Help page: <https://nationalsurvivornetwork.org/get-help/>. Remember that in some states, all adults are mandatory reporters for cases of child maltreatment or abuse.

Negotiating professional fees

When negotiating your speaking fee for engagements, the easiest negotiation skill is to never be the person to name a number first. Some organizations will have a set speaking fee or only offer a per diem, and nonprofits may frequently ask for a discount on your fee. If you feel comfortable, point out the cost of your travel expenses, the costly fatigue of sharing difficult details of your story, and how you want to set an example for anti-exploitation. Money and negotiating can be especially triggering for survivors of human trafficking, so reach out to other survivor leaders for guidance and support in this.⁸

Anonymity

For interviews with journalists for print, television, or audio, you can ask for anonymity or a pseudonym of your choice on the basis of safety concerns, fear of retaliation, or the impact that being public about details of your story might pose to your livelihood and job. Journalists, editors, and producers will usually agree. One exception to this is if you are publishing your own story in a personal essay or op-ed, etc. When writing nonfiction, you usually cannot use a pen name. There are exceptions to this but you should be prepared to use your legal name when publishing your own work.

Unspoken rules when being interviewed by journalists

- When doing an interview with a journalist, it can help to take notes in advance. These notes can be whatever is important to you, such as boundaries on details you know you don't want to talk about so that you don't feel pressured in the interview, or issues that you know you want to make sure you remember to discuss.
- If you feel most comfortable doing a phone interview instead of a Zoom video interview, tell the journalist and they will usually agree without any issue. Similarly, if you need any accommodations for a tv appearance, or have any specific boundaries and concerns, tell the team and be firm on your needs being related to safety and they should comply.
- There are some discussions about this, but generally speaking, journalists in the US do not pay interview subjects for their time. If a nonprofit has connected you to a journalist, you can request that the nonprofit pay you for your time, including preparation time.
- Before agreeing to an interview with a journalist, podcast, newscaster, documentarian, etc., you'll want to vet them and their platform to ensure that this is an engagement that you feel comfortable committing to. Sometimes it may be advantageous to agree to an interview with a more contentious figure, but this should only be agreed to if you feel very confident that you feel prepared and supported. If you feel uncertain about the interviewer's reputation, the angle for their story possibly exploiting you or twisting your words, or concerns about how they might edit you, reach out to other survivor leaders for

⁸ While speaking fees for storytelling or fundraising engagements may differ, you can draw ideas from the NSN's post on [Negotiating Pay](#). Remember: You are allowed to negotiate both the rate and the terms.

help navigating your decision and weighing the options. Remember, you can always say no for any reason, and you never need to provide a reason.

- When preparing for an interview with a reporter, know your rights, terms, and rules of engagement as an interviewee
 - **On background** means that you are just speaking generally about issues or hypothetical scenarios. You may just want to fill the reporter in on issues as a nameless source.
 - **On the record** means that you are saying things that the reporter has your permission to quote directly. Unless explicitly stated, the reporter can attribute those quotes to your name.
 - **Off the record means** that you are hitting the so-called “pause button” in the interview to ask that the reporter not quote you or directly attribute to your name what you’re saying. You can clearly end the “off the record pause” in the interview by saying something like: *“Okay, this is now back on the record.”*
 - Use “off the record” sparingly because ultimately, what you don’t say definitely can’t be printed. Also, talking to a reporter is an exercise in trust, so know that there is some risk in using “off the record” to speak about things that you don’t want printed or quotes that you don’t want attributed to you.
 - You can ask to take a break or reschedule if it becomes too difficult. Keep in mind, however, that journalists are often on a short deadline and may need to publish their article within a day or two, depending on the outlet and their editors.
- Not all journalists will agree to do this, but you may ask to review direct quotes in the draft before publication. While reporters may say no to this request, many will offer to send over snippets attributed to you in the article if you ask. This helps ensure they are quoting you accurately and not misinterpreting what you said in your interview. Journalists will never send you a full draft of the article, but you can ask for the sections that quote you with the understanding that they may say no. Keep in mind that the pace for publishing can be very fast, so you’ll want to review and respond immediately if you have any feedback.

Example Script:

Hi John,

Thanks so much for the opportunity to speak with you for your article. If at all possible, can you send me the paragraphs attributed to me in the draft, just so I can make sure that I’m being quoted accurately? I know this is kind of unusual, but it’s really important to me that my trafficking experience is not misinterpreted, as I’ve had some bad experiences with this in the past and I’d prefer to check before publication if that’s ok. Thanks so much!

Hi Cynthia,

I really enjoyed speaking with you for our interview. When you have a second, can you please send me the paragraphs where I’ll be quoted in the draft so that I can make sure that I’m being

quoted accurately? I trust you with my story, but I've had some bad experiences in the past, and would really appreciate checking that I'm being quoted accurately, etc., before publication. Thanks!

Remember: They can't publish what you don't say.

Considering implications for yourself, your family, and your children

Being public about your story may have a significant impact on your family. Consider the possible implications, speak to other survivor leaders about their experiences and strategic safety plans, and consider discussing these concerns and what may be at stake for your immediate family (i.e. your spouse, children, siblings, parents, etc). For some survivors (e.g., those who live alone), this may not be a concern.

Becoming a more public figure and managing boundaries on parasocial relationships that may develop are all important concerns to prepare for. Consider measures you can take to protect your privacy, as well as legal, logistical, and safety concerns. Preparing for potential backlash or pigeon-holing is an important consideration for survivors who choose to tell their stories publicly. You can ask for anonymity or the use of a pseudonym if you have safety concerns, fear of retaliation, or worries that your name and/or photo being published might impact your livelihood and job. For interviews with journalists, you can ask for anonymity on the basis of these concerns and they should grant it.

Developing a safety plan

My Plan for Privacy and Safety:

People I need to consider and/or speak with among my family and friend group or colleagues before I share my story publicly. (This can be regarding mutual safety measures on social media, cooperative strategy to maintain privacy and/or anonymity, preparing for criticism, etc.)

Coping Ahead Plan: What do I need to make sure is ready and in place before the event/before I share my story, so that I can effectively recover and care for myself? (i.e. bring a snack, clear calendar, spend time alone or with loved ones, play a video game or watch a movie, schedule a call with my therapist, etc.)

My other concerns are:

My motivation/hope in sharing my story is:

See Appendix 3: Checklist for creating a safety and privacy plan for yourself, family, loved ones, and friends for more considerations when planning for safety and privacy.

Trauma-informed storytelling

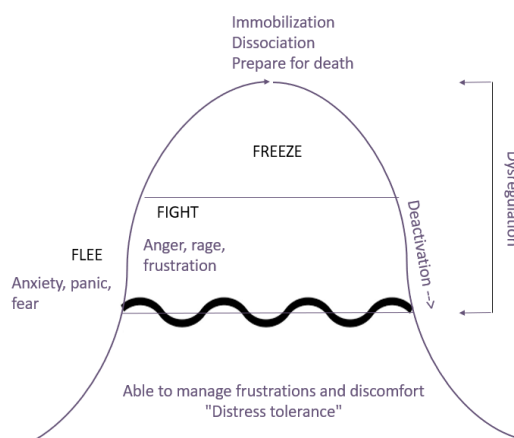
Understanding how trauma impacts *you* as a storyteller and *your audience* as listeners can help you craft a story that meets your goals for sharing.

“Trauma-informed” is more than a buzzword. It’s a way that we navigate interactions with people (including ourselves, our friends, and our audiences) that recognizes that all people may have trauma and that they should not have to disclose that trauma in order to receive thoughtful, compassionate treatment.

Being trauma-informed does not mean that other people will never be offended, triggered, or upset. It simply means that we do our best to avoid things that we anticipate *will* be highly upsetting to people in a way that triggers a physiological trauma response in their bodies.

- *We may not be able to anticipate some trauma triggers.* For example, people may find the smell of lavender, the sound of a train, or the idea of a bedroom in the finished basement of an otherwise lovely home to be triggering, and yet these might be hard to anticipate.
- *Some triggers are unavoidable.* For example, many people find it triggering when someone ends a romantic relationship with them, and that does not mean their partners should stay in a relationship that is unhealthy or unwanted to avoid triggering them.
- *The topics of human trafficking, sexual violence, and intimate partner violence are inherently triggering for many people, including those who have never personally experienced them.* We can still talk about it in ways that aim to avoid triggers where possible, using non-sensationalized language.

Trauma triggers activate a physiological response in the body. A trigger is not “being offended.” It is when hearing or reading about something activates the body’s physiological responses to trauma. It is not rational or in the brain. It is an unconscious response in the body. When we experience a traumatic *incident*, our nervous system activates and prepares us to fight. If we cannot fight, our nervous system shuts down into a freeze response. Humans’ natural nervous system wiring is set up for us to live in the lower part of this curve, where we can manage distress. We may sometimes experience moments of distress that may kick us into that fight/flee level of escalation, but we are able to reset, resolve, and



Recommended citation: Sabra Boyd and Chris Ash. *Survivor Storytelling Workbook for advocates with lived experience working in the many movements to end violence*. National Survivor Network - Cast (2023).

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work through the distress. We may have triggers, but they often resolve over time or with healing.

When we experience a *significant trauma without the support we need* to process and heal, or if we experience *repeated traumas over a period of time* (“complex trauma”), these nervous system responses may become embedded in our bodies and be much harder to undo or learn to manage. We may develop trauma triggers to certain smells, objects, physical sensations, sounds, memories, or kinds of stories.

What is a trauma trigger?

A trigger is when something brings up a memory or feeling from a time we were experiencing active trauma, and our nervous system responds as if it is still in the trauma. When we are triggered, our body may shift into fight, flee, freeze, or fawn (trying to appease people in order to stop the trigger). When we are triggered, our body is flooded with nervous system chemicals just like it would be if we were actually in active danger. This can make it very confusing to tell what is a real threat and what is our trauma history, and learning to manage and cope with triggers is one of the hardest and most important parts of healing with accountability. **Learning how your body tells you when you are triggered is a useful skill – notice any sensations, thoughts, or behaviors so that you can recognize that feeling in the future.**

One easy way to manage trauma triggers and the physiological reaction in your body is [icing your vagus nerve](#). The simplest way to do this is to place an ice pack or something else that’s cold on your chest or the back of your neck and upper back, then take a few deep breaths. You will likely feel more relaxed within a few minutes. You may also hold your wrists under cold running water in a sink when you have access to the restroom. The Vagus nerve is one of your body’s longest, most powerful sensors that acts almost like a systems alarm when you’re overwhelmed without consciously realizing it.

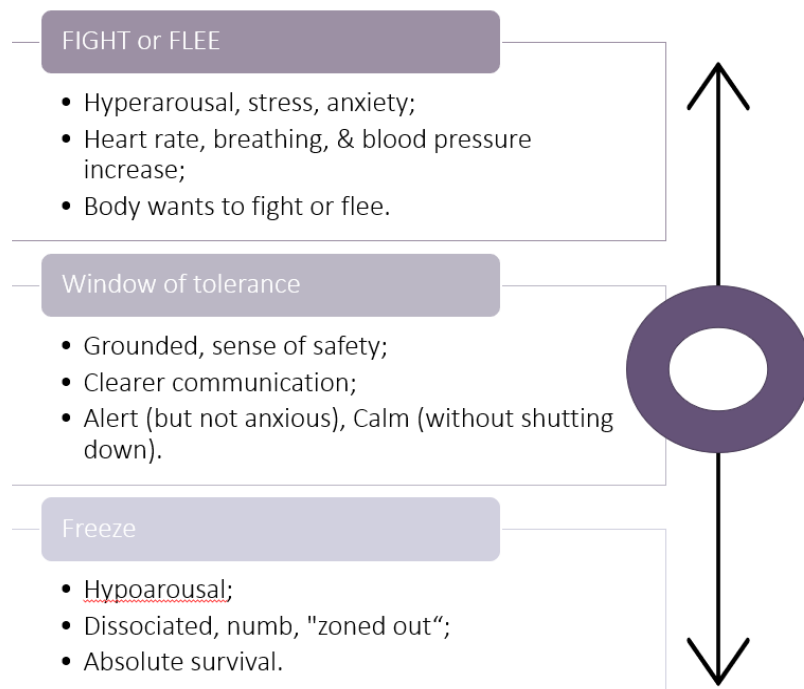
You learn best and remember more when you are in the “window of tolerance.” This is part of why memories of past traumas or times when someone was triggered are often confusing, out of order, or missing important details. Fight or flee kick people into excess energy that can be dysregulating; Freeze takes away important energy needed to process information. For each person, the window of tolerance will look differently, as will the things that cause them to become dysregulated. Survivors may even enter into a “fawn” response, in which they try to please others in order to avoid consequences. These others might be the interviewer, the person who invited them, or the person who hired them.

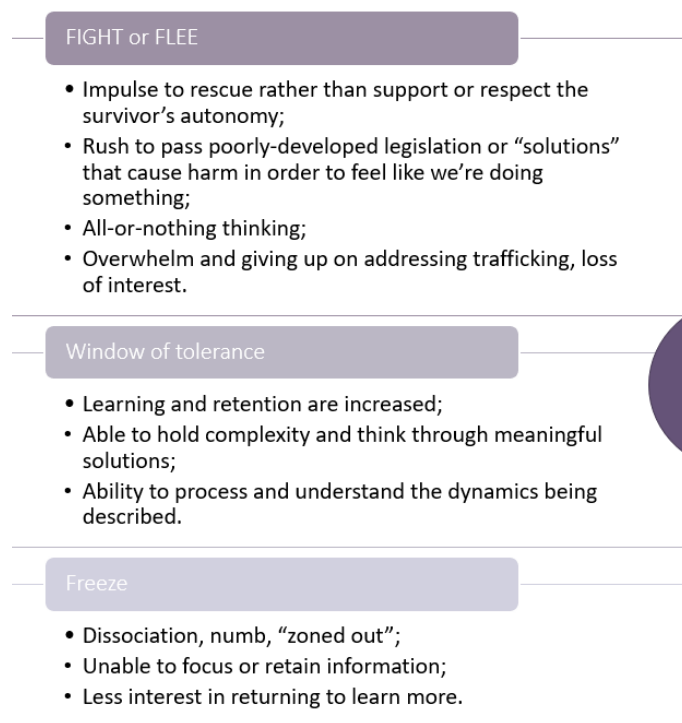
When telling your story, you will be better able to stay focused on what you intended to say when you are in your window of tolerance. When people get triggered while telling their stories, their thoughts may become more chaotic or feel more distant, as if they’re describing someone else’s story. Survivor storytellers may share details of their stories they’d never

planned to share publicly and regret it later, or answer questions they didn't want to answer. When sharing things publicly that they haven't even processed in private, the impacts on them and their audiences can be significant and possibly even cause harm.

Notice how you feel when you tell your story or practice sharing your story.

- Are there any physical sensations that suggest your nervous system is having a trauma response? Was there a certain part of your story that kicked that up for you? If so, consider:
 - Is this element of my story one that I'm ready to share outside of a healing container, such as in therapy, at a support group, or with close friends?
 - Is this element of my story an important one to include in this particular context or setting, or should I reserve this element of my story for different, safer, or more structured settings where I have more control over the narrative and outcomes? Is this element of my story essential to my objectives for this engagement?
 - If my story is largely unscripted, would I feel more comfortable and confident scripting the sections that are about this element of my story? For example, you might choose to share your story in an impromptu way, but practice a specific script you can use for the parts of your story that are potentially more triggering for you.
- Has sharing your story become so routine that you no longer feel anything when telling it, or that sharing intimate and frightening details with strangers feels entirely normalized? If so, consider:
 - This may be a long-term freeze response. Often, survivor leaders are expected to share their stories publicly for organizations or journalists so often that they become numb to it over time, even when it was distressing or uncomfortable at first. **Some survivors may heal to a point where they are no longer (or are less) triggered by sharing their stories or by certain elements of their stories, but long-term numbness is a sign of dissociation, not healing.** Just because you are not triggered into a fight or flee response by continually telling your story doesn't mean you aren't triggered. Reflect on this distinction, process it through mediums that feel helpful for you, and discuss it with a therapist or a trusted friend who is a good mirror for you.





Your audience will be more likely to retain and make sound decisions about what they hear if they are in their window of tolerance. You cannot control their triggers or responses, and you are not responsible for managing their trauma for them (just like others aren't responsible for how you manage your own triggers). However, just as it is compassionate for others to be conscious of potential triggers when working with you or other survivors, it is compassionate for you to be conscious about unnecessarily graphic content or sensationalized retellings that may be triggering for others.

Whether or not they are survivors of the kind of violence you are presenting about, people in your audience may have:

- Experienced violent childhood or intimate partner abuse;
- Experienced child sexual abuse or sexual violence;
- Witnessed violence and death, or loss of a child;
- Had a close friend or family member experience human trafficking or any of the other above traumas.

Do I need a content warning? Unexpected trauma stories can be harder on emotional regulation than those we know are coming. Content warnings can give someone a heads-up so that they can prepare or choose their level of participation. Content warnings still need to be followed by a trauma-informed approach to storytelling. See the NSN's materials on trauma-informed storytelling for more information.⁹

⁹ See: <https://nationalsurvivornetwork.org/traumainformedstorytelling/>

Content warnings need to be specific. The purpose of a content warning is to give someone a heads-up of what to expect ahead.

| | Ineffective content warning | Effective content warning |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Content Warnings are not meant to “titillate” or create suspense. | “Watch out! There are triggers ahead!” | “The next section of our presentation may contain content that some attendees may find triggering, such as...” |
| Content Warnings need to be specific. | “Content warning” “Content warning for violence.” | “Content warning: Racism, police brutality.” “Content warning: description of violent assault.” |
| But not so specific that they need their own content warning! | “Content warning for the time my relative [abuse details] to my little sister and went to jail where [abuse details].” | “Content warning: Child sexual abuse, family incarceration, prison rape” |

Storytelling in advocacy and training

Storytelling should never be mandated in advocacy or training spaces. That said, bringing your whole self into your work means knowing that your wisdom as a survivor is part of your wisdom as a professional and that you should never be afraid to bring elements of your lived experience insight into your advocacy and training work. This section provides considerations and tips for how to do so ethically and impactfully.

When you are conducting a training, educating others about violence, or engaging in policy advocacy, you can choose whether or not you want to incorporate elements of your story. Whether or not you do, as well as how much and which pieces, will be influenced by several factors.

Who does this storytelling serve?

First, be clear on your "why" for storytelling and who sharing your story in this way or in this setting serves.

Common reasons survivors may choose to share our stories may include:

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| To receive validation, affirmation, or support | <i>This serves you and assumes that the attendees are willing, able, and prepared to meet your needs.</i> |
| To seek connection or support from others who have been through similar experiences. | <i>When the others hearing your story are similarly looking for support that involves story-sharing and the relationship is reciprocal and consensual, it can meet others' needs as well.</i> |
| To empower others who have been through similar situations. | <i>This is to meet the other survivors' needs, which may be different from your own.</i> |
| To educate others about the dynamics of human trafficking, sexual violence, intimate partner violence, and other forms of trauma. | <i>Training and education are always for others.</i> |

To receive validation, affirmation, or support: Always for you.

When the storytelling is so that you can receive validation, affirmation, or support, it might not be appropriate for a workplace setting. Consider 1) the context of the storytelling, 2) the consent of the listener, and 3) the relationship between you and the listener.

- 1) Sharing your story can be **powerful** and **cathartic**, and doing so in an appropriate context that is designed to hold space for that is essential. Contexts that are set up for you to share your story for emotional support include therapy, support groups, and some peer coaching spaces. In therapy or support group spaces, trained facilitators are present to guide the space, provide redirection when needed, and ensure that all participants are well-supported in any trauma responses they may have from sharing their stories or hearing the stories of others. **Public speaking events, fundraising events, educational and/or skills-training spaces, and professional networking spaces are rarely designed with the infrastructure to safely host this kind of sharing, making it irresponsible to open this kind of space without appropriate trauma support.**
- 2) Someone who has shown up consensually to a training to learn new advocacy skills or learn policy responses to violence **has not consented to hold space for unnecessarily graphic details of your personal trauma story.** Many advocates and professionals have been put into the uncomfortable space of showing up to a training ready to learn, only to find our bodies shifting into “crisis responder” mode while watching well-meaning survivors become overwhelmed, dissociate, or be retraumatized while sharing details of their painful histories that weren’t needed for the purpose of the setting. For many of us, the parts of our brains we engage in crisis response are not the same parts of the brain we use for learning. Additionally, many survivors report deep overwhelm, sadness, and sometimes even regret during and after speaking events where their overwhelm or dissociation led them to share far more than they’d meant to, sometimes without even remembering everything they said. Occasionally, a survivor will say, “Well, I had to live through it. Why should I care if it traumatizes these professionals?” Remember: This is exactly the reasoning used by many of the people who abused us. We are working toward a world where people no longer normalize passing their trauma on to others.
- 3) When you share your story, you may receive validation, affirmation, and support. This is more likely to happen, and to be genuine and unconditional when it does, when you have a trusting relationship with the listener. When you share your story, you might also receive other kinds of responses that are hurtful or disappointing. Sharing your story publicly is a risky and ineffective strategy for getting validation, affirmation, and support.

Reflect:

Do I have spaces where I can safely share my story and receive validation, affirmation, and support?

If so, what are those spaces, and what about them feels like a good “container” for my story?

If not, are there spaces I could find in my local or online communities, such as a support group, peer-led support space, or safe friend?

To seek connection or support from others who have been through similar experiences: Primarily for you.

When seeking connection and support from others who have been through similar experiences, keep in mind that others may have different expectations, boundaries, and needs around connection and support. While some people may be grateful to hear your story and know they are not alone, others may prefer not to hear graphic details of an acquaintance's trauma story. Some other reasons this might get complicated or confusing include:

- 1) Someone might be in a vulnerable place where they do not want to hear graphic details of others' traumas, but might be uncomfortable saying so or navigating boundaries with other survivors;
- 2) Someone might work in this field or a related trauma-based field and prefer to build friendships around other interests, experiences, and identities so that making friends does not feel like more of their "day job;"
- 3) Someone might not be in a place (in their life, or in that specific moment and setting) to offer support or genuine connection;
- 4) Someone might need more support than you can offer, making it difficult to have a truly reciprocal relationship;
- 5) Sharing personal details before trust has been built can lead to hurt and harm if the other person betrays that trust;
- 6) Some survivors' most common trauma response is fawning instead of fight or flight. This can cause internal tension that may not be externally visible to you. You may not be aware of their struggle to maintain boundaries while searching for a kind, polite way to say "no" and tell you that they are not in the right state of mind with the energy to provide you the support that is needed in that moment. In other words, part of being a good support and ally for other survivors is being sensitive and aware to their nonverbal cues, and treating each interaction delicately with as much presence and graciousness as possible;
- 7) Meet other survivors where they are. Survivors are not a monolith, meaning that we are all different with different experiences, expertise, and skills — and that's what makes us stronger together! Acknowledge that there is a spectrum of recovery, that it is not simply a linear progression from more to less healed, and we must all be sensitive to other survivors' needs.
- 8) Acknowledge the inequity and privilege that exists among survivors. Be sensitive to the fact that not all survivors have equitable access to housing, time, assistance, financial stability, legal advocacy, childcare, language, disability resources, healthcare, qualified mental health services, food, travel, tech, safety and protection, education, immigration attorneys, employment, etc. Due to racism, misogyny (and the stigmatized exclusion of male survivors), transphobia, homophobia, xenophobia, ageism, classism, ableism, singleism, and so many other forms of discrimination, some survivors have more ease of access to resources than others.

Reflect:

What kinds of connection do I prefer (Such as sharing stories, “parallel play” or doing things together, learning together, outdoor activities, quiet time with friends, etc.)?

How do I like to be supported and what feels supportive in my relationships? (Side note: **You deserve supportive relationships that feel good. Other people do too.** Write that down and put it somewhere you can see it, like on a wall near your desk or on your bathroom mirror.)

How can I find out what kinds of support new friends want?

Are there any kinds of support I am *not* able to offer another survivor right now, or that would compromise my own healing?

Where and how might I meet new supportive survivor friends?

Peer support is always for others.

You will want to ensure you are treated and treat others ethically and compassionately, but beyond basic respect and safe working environments, **peer support is always for the benefit of the person you are supporting**. Be conscious to share elements of your story that may support the other person's healing, rather than sharing in order for you to feel heard or seen. The purpose of peer support is not to "inspire" others, but to help them clarify what they need and what their options are. Remember that not everyone needs what you did, or understands their experiences the way you do. Highlight examples from your story in ways that illustrate them as one option, rather than presenting your own choices and your own path to healing as an ideal.

Remember, people sometimes idealize and idolize their mentors. Be conscious of power dynamics, and be thoughtful not to make your story the focal point of the other person's efforts to heal.

Training is always for others.

As with peer support, you will want to ensure you are treated ethically and compassionately and have a safe working environment, but training is about the learning needs of the audience.

When sharing elements of your story for training or educational purposes, consider:

1) Who is your audience?

2) What are your learning objectives?

3) What elements of your story support your learning objectives?

4) Minimize elements that are irrelevant to your learning objectives, including:

Policy advocacy is always for others.

As always, you will want to ensure you are treated ethically and compassionately, but policy requires a broad lens, and policy work cannot focus primarily on you and your needs.

When sharing elements of your story in policy spaces, consider:

1) Who are the diverse people impacted by the issue? Who are the diverse people who will be impacted by the policies you are recommending?

2) What are the diverse needs of impacted people, including those who are unlike you?

- 3) What policies can you advocate for that create the greatest good while minimizing harmful impacts on marginalized communities?

- 4) Highlight elements of your story that illustrate potential systemic gaps or solutions, including:

Media, awareness, and fundraising benefit others but should always be on your terms.

Again, you will want to ensure you are treated ethically and compassionately. Be conscious of power dynamics that may exist between you and the journalist, you and the funders or organizational leaders, and you and the other survivors who will be impacted by the things you say. Highlight elements of your story that illustrate potential systemic gaps, solutions, or issues that are often ignored in mainstream dialogues.

Consider what kind of support you want before, during, and after the event. Good intentions do not negate the goals of media outlets and fundraising organizations: ratings and or funding, which both increase with sensationalism. And sensationalized stories can have impacts on the storyteller afterward. **Don't read the comments section.** You don't owe anyone your mental health.

If you control the space, you set the terms. If you don't control the space (public or nonprofit), you can still maintain control over your presence and participation. Enlist the support of more experienced survivor leaders and any allies in the room to support your boundaries. Remember, journalists are not allowed to pay sources, BUT organizations can pay you for the time you spend developing your story, debriefing, and preparing. Negotiate!

What is the purpose of the personal share?

If you are weaving elements of your lived experience into a training, advocacy, or policy space, consider how the lived experiences you are sharing support or detract from your purposes.

- 1) Remember the window of tolerance for our audience, described above. Are there ways you can word your experience that are truthful and convey the point while being conscious to minimize the traumatic impact on the audience or yourself?
 - a) Example: "My trafficker threatened to harm my loved ones" vs. "My trafficker told me if I tried to leave they would do X, Y, and Z to my little sister."

- 2) Unnecessary detail can cause your audience to lose focus, or to focus on the wrong part of the story. How much detail is needed to illustrate the point?
 - a) Example: "My abuser kept me on substances to maintain control" vs spending 10 minutes describing all the different ways drugs were leveraged against you and every drug that was used during your years of abuse.

- 3) Remember that what you needed or wanted may not be what others need or want. How are you helping to avoid an undue focus on your singular survivor experience? How are you using your story to advocate for people whose experiences were different from your own?

- a) Example: "My trafficker abducted me from a playground, so my story is unique. Typically, traffickers know or spend time building trust with the person that they intend to exploit."



Is this the right space or audience for this part of your story?

Each space and setting is going to be unique, and your training and policy work will be enhanced by customizing your lived experience shares to the needs of the audience.

- 1) Sometimes, sharing relevant lived experiences means sharing your experiences of systems rather than your experiences of the initial forms of violence.
 - a) Example: An audience of mental health providers may find your experiences of navigating mental health systems more helpful in improving their response than hearing increased detail about your abuse.
- 2) Remember that part of decisions about storytelling can mean vetting the journalist or organization planning the event. How are they holding the container? Are they moderating questions? What kind of preparation do the attendees receive? Does the person introducing you provide expectations for appropriate behavior? See [Event Host Guidelines](#) by National Survivor Network and HEAL Trafficking for sample guidelines.

Helpful phrases for deflecting undue emphasis on your personal story when engaging in training or policy work

- "Some survivors experience... while others might experience..."
- "Some survivors may have experienced..."
- "There have been cases where..."
- Composite stories are your friend when doing trainings or presentations, as it is limiting to only focus on the personal details of *your* story and unethical to share other people's stories without consent or for your own purposes. Composites should ideally be trauma-informed, written in an educational manner, and (ideally) written by survivors. See the NSN's resource library for examples.

Crafting story structure

While there will be times when you are not “sharing your story” in a linear arc (such as in a training or peer support space), there may be times when you are interested in telling your story in a way that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. This section provides information that can help you create a compelling story.

There is no wrong way to tell a story, but there are conventions that may help your audience feel more of an impact. There are many different cultural norms and plot structures for storytelling, and this workbook focuses mainly on common Western story structures. That said, experiment, learn the “rules” so you can break them with graceful precision, throw Eurocentric storytelling out the window, and follow your instincts! However you decide to tell your story, it is yours to tell. Just keep in mind that connecting with your audience is key, so workshopping may help guide you in feedback about your structure.

Your story can have many different impacts or takeaway points depending on how you structure it. A story, just like a recipe, needs more than a list of ingredients. The way you mix everything together, the temperature you turn the stove to, how long you cook it – all these elements play a part in the concluding product and the audience’s takeaways.

For example, if a survivor shares only that they spent time living in a shelter, the audience may interpret that in wildly different ways such as:

1. “Homelessness is one way in which people are made more vulnerable to being exploited by traffickers.”
2. “Homeless shelters are great and perfect solutions! Just look, a shelter helped this survivor!”
3. “That’s terrible that they had to stay in a shelter, but it was probably their own fault.”
4. “Housing First and being provided a home probably would have been a better option to help them stay safe.”
5. “Homeless shelters cost too much money and are too nice.”

Ultimately, you can’t completely control how people interpret your story, nor how they might repeat it to others like a game of telephone where they misunderstand or misremember elements of your story. But you can shape your narrative in a compelling way that connects details and information in a structure that is engaging for the audience.

The universal is in the details

A beloved saying among writers is that the universal is in the details. What this means is that although the people in your audience may not understand what it is like to survive the kind of violence you did, there may be details in your story that emphasize your experiences in ways that others can relate to. Ways in which the audience might be able to relate include:

- | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Loneliness | 16. Hunger |
| 2. Hopelessness | 17. Visiting the hospital |
| 3. Hope | 18. Insomnia or sleep deprivation |
| 4. Resilience and overcoming insurmountable challenges | 19. Anxiety |
| 5. Acts of defiance | 20. Financial distress or poverty |
| 6. Violence | 21. Humiliation |
| 7. Grief | 22. Isolation |
| 8. Anger | 23. Confusion |
| 9. Sadness or depression | 24. Being lied to or coerced |
| 10. Fear | 25. Trusting someone |
| 11. Pain | 26. Frustration |
| 12. Love | 27. Being lost |
| 13. Being cared for/caring for another | 28. Being policed, monitored, or surveilled against your will |
| 14. Dreams and desires | 29. Loss |
| 15. Friendships, relationships, parents, children, siblings | 30. Safety or privacy |

Many of the above examples will be detailed in your story with anecdotes that are far more extreme than audience members might have experienced themselves. They may not be able to comprehend certain details. But that is the power of storytelling – you are painting your experience with touchpoints that illustrate the human experience. For example, an audience member who has not been trafficked has probably been lied to and can empathize with coercion in that way. They may not be able to understand how you were coerced, and to guide them through that understanding you might describe the circumstances that led to you being in a more vulnerable state. Some audience members may not understand what it's like to be in a relationship with an abusive partner, but they can probably understand what it's like to trust someone who broke their trust. There are details you may not want to share. It's good to keep things for yourself. But think through elements of your story and what aspects are universal.

Similarly, to improve the impact of data, empirical studies, or other austere presentations you may give, think of whether there are any parts of your story that can help find the human narrative between the lines of a spreadsheet. For example, there is a strong statistical correlation between domestic violence and human trafficking. Is there an element of your story that you would like to share that can help humanize and emphasize this fact?

Trauma can sometimes make it difficult for us to perceive how well the audience is receiving and understanding our story. When recounting a very traumatic event, people will sometimes gloss over the details and believe the audience intuitively knows what you're talking about, and can perceive the nuance of what isn't said. The truth is that nonsurvivors will likely not know to "read between the lines" of your story and may wholly miss items in your story that you feel are implicit, but the audience doesn't grasp the subtlety of them at all. Sometimes, directly naming a traumatic event can feel over the top. But workshopping can be helpful for determining how much to name explicitly.

Workshop your story only with people you trust, ideally with other survivor leaders or close friends who you trust. To workshop is to practice telling your story or sharing a draft, and asking for constructive feedback. This can be a painful, difficult, and triggering process that can make you feel very vulnerable. This is why you should only workshop your story with people who you trust.

It can sometimes help to think of yourself as the protagonist or main character in your story so that you feel somewhat removed from the sting of constructive feedback. Feedback is ultimately about your story structure and craft, not about you as a person or the choices you made throughout your story.

Workshopping your story will help you identify holes that you think are obvious, but your audience may not know. For example, a more privileged audience might imagine that prison is actually a really nice place where people get to eat snacks and watch TV all day.

The people you choose to workshop with might ask for clarification on certain items that you didn't realize were not obvious. Piecing together the elements of your story's structure is like shaping a sculpture from a piece of clay, assembling a puzzle, painting a canvas, arranging a collage, or a cooking recipe. All the details of your story are like colors, and you can mix them together in an infinite number of ways. Your audience and the takeaways that you want them to conclude with may alter how you tell your story in different venues, formats, and events.

As the structure of your story takes shape, the process can be very triggering and fatiguing. Let your loved ones know that you might be a little crabby, need extra help with chores, need some extra time alone to process, or that you might want to schedule something fun together.

Above all, be patient with yourself and know that there is no such thing as perfection in art or in storytelling. Thinking of storytelling like painting can be helpful. Let the colors of your story dry before adding another layer of paint – in a literal sense, write a draft of your story that is just a timeline, or perhaps a poem to start, then wait until the next day to add some more splashes of color (detail) in between. Most painters don't finish a canvas in one day, so give the "paint" some time to dry before you add more to the story.

Do not edit and write at the same time. Generative work uses a very different side of your brain than editing, so leave the analytical editing for another day entirely. Otherwise, you will feel like you're driving a car with your foot on the gas pedal and the brake at the same time, very quickly going nowhere.

Crafting your story and finding the arc

To effectively craft your story and find the arc and an impactful conclusion that ties everything together, you must first consider your audience.

Who is your audience?

Approximate age of your audience?

Are there likely to be survivors in the audience?

Are they here for work or other professional obligations? (e.g. lawyer training, healthcare conference, or social work continuing education) Or is it a non-work event?

Based on what you know about the audience's demographics, what are some reasons you think they would want to hear your story? What information do you think they hope to learn or could help them better understand violence and abuse in their own lives or careers?

What do you hope the audience will take away from the story you want to tell them? What impact do you hope your story will make, and what do you hope it will teach or illustrate?

How much time do you have to tell your story, and do you need to leave time for questions at the end?

What do you want the overall message of your story and takeaway to be?

What is the transformation in your story? (There can be more than one)

From _____ to _____.

Example:

From captivity to freedom.

From fear and resistance to acceptance.

From desperation to hope.

From feeling like a failure to being gentler with myself.

From anger and hopelessness to feeling powerful.

From thinking my power comes from others' accolades to knowing that my power comes from my willingness to acknowledge vulnerability in safe-enough spaces.

**Note: For many survivors, a linear redemption arc may feel confining, performative, or like it feeds too neatly into a "rescue" or "savior" narrative. Reflect on your reasons for sharing your story, and remember that a story in which you stay and are still sometimes messy can be freeing and can disrupt the ways in which outsiders twist and misuse our stories.*

What are some scenes that help illustrate a specific point you want to highlight with your story?

| Audience | Objective | Anecdote(s) that could illustrate this point |
|----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Example: Attorneys and Judges</i> | <i>Therapy is a necessary resource</i> | <i>Story about how difficult it was to testify and fear of violent retaliation, but that it was possible because of a therapist you could check in with during the trial.</i> |
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In-scene storytelling

Telling a story in-scene is incredibly powerful. “In-scene” means that you’ve transported the audience there. While considering trauma-informed storytelling, find details for your story that are powerful and universal, while also caring for the audience because they’ve put their trust in you for this journey. In-scene details can be cinematic or visceral, such as how insomnia feels disorienting and dizzying, what it looked like when you woke disoriented, how alienating it felt when you tried to ask for help at a hospital after a violent interaction, etc.

Remember that there may be other survivors in the audience. The value of including specific details of your story should be balanced with knowing that those details can be triggering in ways that could be extremely upsetting for some audience members. Caring for yourself is important in storytelling, but so is caring for your audience who has entrusted themselves to you for a time.

Writing "in-scene" means...



Examples of strong in-scene writing:

- [Distilled Identity by Osayi Endolyn](#) - pdf
- [Crying in H Mart by Michelle Zauner](#) - pdf
- [Beans are good for the planet, for you and for your dinner table. Here's how to cook them right. by Joe Yonan \(Washington Post Food Editor\)](#) - pdf
- [Don't Break the Peel by Noah Cho](#) - pdf
- [Wine and Climate Change by Meg Bernhard](#) - pdf
- [A New Yorker's Journey to South Carolina to Retrace Her Gullah Roots by Dana Givens](#) - pdf
- [I Hate Christmas But I Love These Cookies by Kat Kinsman](#)

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Stories in the Western canon's hero's journey structure typically have three acts. This [video](#) with the author Kurt Vonnegut is a great illustration of the shapes of stories. If you can, watch the video, and draw the shape that you think your story best fits.

Act I:

- In the first act, the hero (you, the protagonist/main character) introduces the audience to the world in which the story takes place.
- The protagonist is presented with a dilemma.
- The protagonist decides to “cross the threshold” and face it head-on.

Act II:

- In the second act, the protagonist embarks on the adventure/battle
- The main character might meet a mentor in this act (or a little earlier) who helps them survive the battle. The mentor can be a kind of exercise, books, a friend, a pet or other animal, a healing place or event, or a literal mentor like a therapist or another survivor, etc.

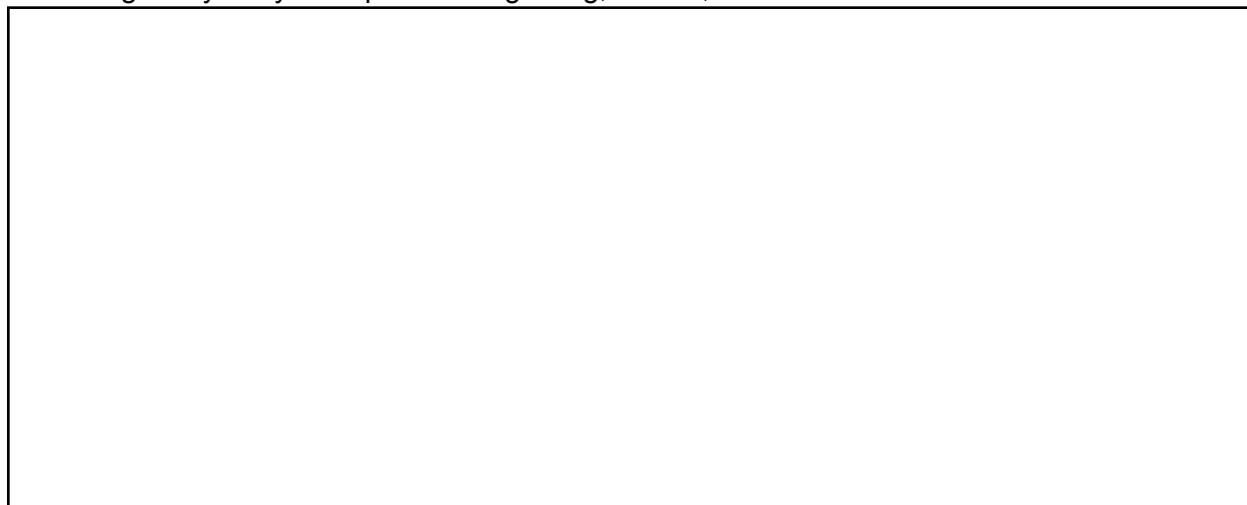
Act III:

- There may be another obstacle that presents itself.
- Returning: It can be very impactful if something in the conclusion reflects back to the beginning. This doesn't need to be literal; it could be metaphorical.
- Conclusions can be difficult to figure out sometimes. It can be helpful to think of the story in terms of transformation: From _____ to _____.

Story structure worksheet

This worksheet is available separately in Appendix 4 as well as in the resource library of the National Survivor Network's website as a standalone resource.

A drawing of my story's shape from beginning, middle, to end:



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What is the overall message of the story you want to tell?

What are some themes in the story? What are some specific points you want to make sure to touch on?

What is the conclusion you want the audience to leave with?

What is an opening that reflects the conclusion you want to work toward?

What is the primary conflict? What is the climactic scene in the story that “turns” the trajectory?

Editing your story

Sometimes you may need to just free-write and journal to see where the story takes you. Designating a separate day for editing, you will likely realize that you've written two, three, or four fully-fledged stories within the single draft. You may not know this until reading out loud to edit your story or workshopping it with people you trust. Reading out loud to yourself is an incredibly helpful editing tool because you'll catch grammatical mistakes and identify a lyrical rhythm to your words, sentences, and paragraphs. You'll also identify themes that seamlessly tie the story together more easily when you read aloud.

As you edit your story, occasionally refer back to your Story Structure Worksheet. Is the conclusion you want the audience to reach set up and emphasized by your story? Are your themes woven throughout your story, in different places and ways?

When editing, it makes for a very strong opening when you can write your intro to be 150 words or less. Read magazine features and notice how the first one or two paragraphs are usually less than 150 words. With that said, try not to think about this until after you've free-written your draft, because you may need to write a thousand words before you can really find the focus of your piece.

In your first 150 words, you are:

- 1) Telling the audience what the story is about in a nutshell and what the audience can expect.
- 2) Foreshadowing the conflict and reflecting the themes of the conclusion in the opening.
- 3) Leaving the audience with a cliffhanger so that they want to continue on. They are excited and invested in knowing the rest of the story.

Goals and long-form storytelling

Assessing what your long-term goals are will help you determine what engagements you'd like to take and will help you assess what boundaries you feel most comfortable setting. Knowing in advance what you want will help prevent you from feeling exploited, and will help you know what you want to say "no" to. With that said, dream big and be open to your goals evolving. That flexibility will serve you well when opportunities you couldn't imagine a few years prior present themselves.

What goals do you have for your career and storytelling? (For example, publishing a book, teaching other survivors, working as a consultant, screenwriting, performing, etc.)

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Long-form storytelling in magazines is usually any story that is over 3,000-5,000 words or more. Long-form stories are harder to place in publications just because of the expense to publish and edit them. Long-form stories are challenging because you don't want redundant details to be the reason it's longer. Similar to long-form essays or articles, books still follow the three-act structure generally. It can be helpful to think of each chapter as its own little universe within the book, each containing its own miniature three-act structure ending with more of a cliffhanger than a fully resolved conclusion.

Additional education and storytelling craft resources beyond this workbook:

- [Longform Podcast](#): Interviews with journalists and writers about their careers, writing journey, tips, tricks, and advice.
<https://longform.org/podcast>
- [Diversity Hire Podcast](#): The archive of podcast episodes from Diversity Hire is a great resource to hear from Black, Indigenous, Asian, Latinx/a/o, and Asian writers who have navigated extensive barriers to tell their stories in the publishing industry and media.
<https://diversityhire.substack.com/>
- [Before and After the Book Deal](#) by Courtney Maum (the audiobook is also very good)
- [The Writer's Journey](#) is a book that is more about screenwriting, but it can be a helpful text to guide you through the common story structure of the hero's journey.
- Sabra Boyd is a trafficking survivor who now works full time as an independent investigative journalist. She teaches writing classes, and offers coaching for trafficking survivors and unhoused neighbors on how to successfully navigate the unwritten rules of the publishing industry and get published. For more information, referrals for writing coach services, peer mentorship programs, and more, check out [Sabra's website](#) or fill out this [form](#) for details on upcoming cohorts and classes.

Website: <https://sabraboyn.com/>

Information Contact Form: <https://sabraboyn.com/coaching/>

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The End

Thinking about your life in this way can be very overwhelming and fatiguing. Be patient with yourself and acknowledge that you might need time to cry, be alone, or watch a silly movie. For this last exercise, write a list of coping ahead things you like to do to relax your mind and body when you need to recover.

What is your favorite movie when you need to “turn your brain off” and rest or laugh?

What is the playlist of music or sounds that helps you relax?

What is the playlist of music or sounds that gets you amped up and feeling confident?

What is your favorite physical activities to help you feel more comfortable in your body?

(Example: Breathing exercises, going for a walk, putting moisturizer on your shoulders, aromatherapy, cooking, dancing, playing music or singing, dancing, hugging yourself, swaying, stroking your arm from shoulder to hand, going for a drive or an excursion on the bus, etc.)

Appendix 1: When you don't want to share your story

Maybe, after working through the activities in this workbook, you have decided you don't want to share your story at all, don't want to right now, or are not in a good place in your life to do so at this moment. **That's okay! Plenty of changemakers are successful in their movement leadership or professional work without ever sharing their trauma stories.** They may not be as visible, in part because of the way that anti-trafficking organizations have historically raised the profiles of survivors who tell their stories, or the ways that the movements to end intimate partner and sexual violence have discouraged professionals from disclosing survivorship. You might not have heard of the ones who don't, because they're quietly doing their work, caring for each other, and creating programs and structures that support social change. **This non-storytelling work is essential to a healthy anti-violence movement.**

Challenging common storytelling myths and harmful assumptions

Myth: It's always a sign of healing to want to share your story publicly.

Truth: Whether or not someone ever wants to share their story publicly has absolutely *nothing* to do with how healed they are. Plenty of people who are in very deep emotional crises and have many unhealed wounds share their stories publicly, and plenty of people who have done extensive healing may share their stories publicly. Similarly, plenty of people who have done significant healing may find that their healing enables them to recognize their boundaries and say "no" to storytelling. Just as there are no "Trauma Olympics" or "Oppression Olympics," there are no "Healing Olympics" marked by willingness to reveal deep vulnerability about painful traumas for others' consumption. Healing brings the ability to say what you need and honor your boundaries, no matter which decision feels right for you.

Avoid saying "It's okay if you aren't ready to tell your story yet," unless you know that sharing their story is an eventual goal. Don't make an assumption that sharing their story publicly is a goal for anyone! Make an assumption that some survivors will want to and some will not, and be thoughtful with your language!

Myth: All survivors want to tell their story if the space is safe enough.

Truth: The reality is, even in some safe spaces, some people may choose not to share their stories. People will be more likely to disclose survivorship in safer spaces where they know their whole self will be welcomed, and disclosure as a survivor does not necessitate sharing trauma stories. Some people simply prefer to maintain their discussions of intimate personal details with a select number of close friends or in specific therapeutic containers. This is not dysfunctional.

Myth: If you don't share your story, you are not a survivor leader.

Truth: A true “survivor leader” is a survivor who demonstrates leadership in our efforts to end abuse, exploitation, and violence. Plenty of people who share their stories publicly do not demonstrate leadership skills and values. Plenty of people with lived experience who work in our sector never tell their trafficking stories. Some don’t even disclose their survivorship! They are still survivors who are leaders. The “divide and conquer” strategy of only considering those who share their stories to be “survivor leaders” only benefits those who would define us by our trauma.

Myth: Bringing your “whole self” into the workplace means sharing your trauma story; or If you don’t share your trauma story, you’re stuck in professional norms that oppress survivors.

Truth: Bringing your “whole self” into the workplace means not being ashamed of who you are, of struggling, or of having a “past.” It does not mean that you compulsively share your story regardless of context or impact on workplace dynamics. It also doesn’t mean that someone who chooses not to share their story is doing so out of shame, oppression, or dysfunction. You can identify as a survivor, discuss the impacts this work has on you, and acknowledge the insights and wisdom learned through lived experience without sharing details of your personal trauma.

Setting boundaries when you don’t tell your story as part of your work

Some people with lived experience may choose to work in this sector without ever sharing *any* details of their trauma experiences. If that is your preference, you may sometimes experience pushback from people who have normalized obligatory or exploitative survivor storytelling practices (including other survivors). Remember that you are *never* obligated to share your story in your work for any reason. Practice language for clearly and kindly articulating your boundaries, and know that it’s okay to articulate them in increasingly firm ways if others continue to pressure you.

Thank you for the invitation to speak at the conference as a keynote! What a wonderful opportunity to join such a powerful learning space. I wanted to make sure we were clear on expectations about the content of my talk. While I am always comfortable identifying publicly as a survivor, I do not typically share details of my abuse experiences or other trauma in my talks. I focus on my experiences of healing, on practices and policies that support survivors, and on sharing my professional experiences providing peer support. Before we move forward with the contract, I wanted to make sure this was understood and would appreciate it if the contract included a sentence indicating that sharing of personal trauma is not expected as a part of this agreement.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this speakers’ bureau event! I’m delighted to represent [organization] in this way and am grateful for the opportunity to share my experiences navigating survivor support services as a Black trans woman. As a reminder: while I am comfortable speaking as a survivor, I do not typically share my trafficking or trauma stories. I want to make sure the hosting organization understands that I will redirect any

questions I'm uncomfortable with about my personal trauma details that may come up during the Q and A session. If this sounds good, please send over the contract and I'll be happy to go from there.

Dear [name], as I have made clear on my website About page, in my email to you on March 3, and in our planning phone call last week, I do not typically share details of my personal trauma in my public speaking events. I want to assume that you mean well, as I value our professional relationship, but I am feeling increasingly uncomfortable that my boundaries are not being respected. In order for me to continue our professional partnership, I need to know that you will stop asking me to share details of my trauma story. Please let me know if this is something you can agree to so that I can evaluate the impacts of my continuing on this project.

When you want to tell your story, but don't feel like you're in a good place to at this time

Sometimes you may *want* to share your story publicly... *eventually*. Maybe after doing this workbook you realize now might be the best time to start sharing your story publicly. Maybe you've been doing public storytelling, but are realizing that you might need a break – circumstances in your life have changed, you need a sabbatical from the public eye, or you need time to focus on your family, yourself, or your healing. **That's okay!** Remember that your worth as a person and value to our world go far beyond both your trauma story and your movement work. Give yourself space and time to focus on yourself, your needs, and your life beyond your public anti-violence work.

Tip: Taking space from storytelling when you need to is easier if you have other kinds of movement work available that do not rely on sharing your personal trauma stories. Have you heard the phrase, "Don't put all your eggs in one basket"? Ensure that you are also engaging in other kinds of movement work, such as document review, policy consulting, and training, that you can lean into more during times when storytelling would be harmful to your healing or safety.

Appendix 2: Worksheet for evaluating a single engagement

Copies of this worksheet are available in the [resource library of the National Survivor Network website](#).

What is the engagement, opportunity, or event?

What organizations, agencies, or outlets are facilitating this engagement, opportunity, or event?

Do I want to share details of my story at all?

Do I feel pressure to share my story?

Do I feel obligated or required to tell my story, or like I “owe” it to them?

Do I feel like I can say “no” to the person or organization asking me?

Do I trust this organization and its mission? Are there survivors or allies who I trust that I can freely speak with about my concerns?

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What are the pros (things I'm excited about) or cons (things I do not like) about this particular engagement, opportunity, or event?

| Pros | Cons |
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Do I feel tokenized?

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Am I comfortable with the setting in which I'm being asked to present? Are there any accommodations or changes I can request?¹⁰

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¹⁰ Consider sharing the NSN's [Event Host Guidelines](#) with the organization in advance of an event. You can find this in our website's resource library.

Am I sharing my story the way I want to? If not, do I feel comfortable telling the organization or person that I'd like to modify the format/way I'm sharing my story?

Do I feel comfortable with having my photo taken or being filmed for the event? Is the organization asking me to share a photo for a bio, etc.? Do I feel comfortable saying "no" if I'm uncomfortable with this? How will I ensure that the event organizers know my boundaries in advance of the event?

Do I have any other specific concerns?

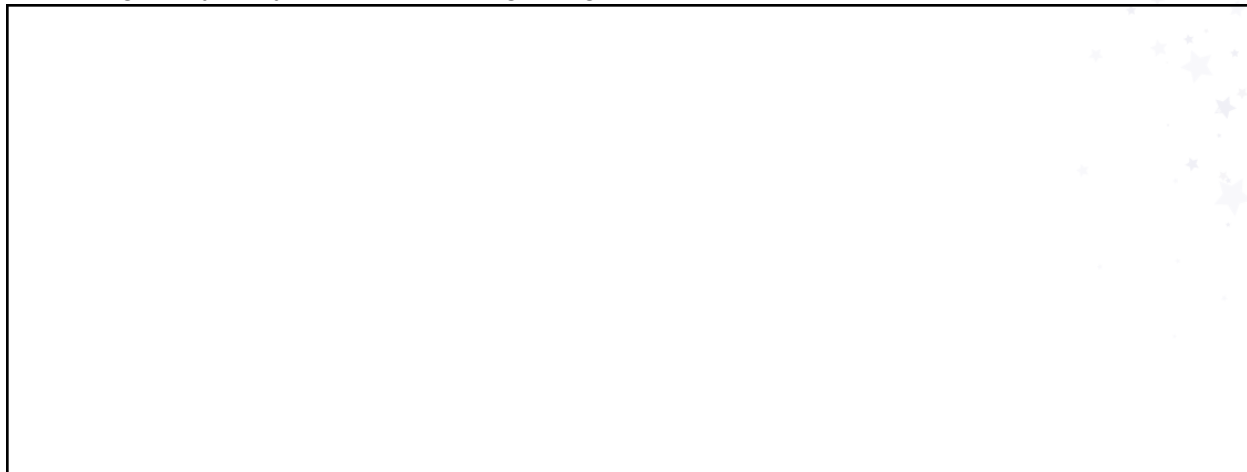
Appendix 3: Checklist for creating a safety and privacy plan for yourself, family, loved ones, and friends

- ☐ Tell interviewers or event organizers if you have any specific safety concerns (i.e. anonymity, blurred background in video, potential attendees, etc).
- ☐ Schedule time to rest afterward.
- ☐ Decide in advance if you'd like to turn your phone off or not check social media after the event.
- ☐ Consider managing filters on your email and social media to block messages with specific words (i.e. curse words, slurs, etc.).
- ☐ Schedule an appointment with your therapist if you can shortly after the event.
- ☐ Try to delete any social media photos that might identify where you live, and avoid posting social media photos that might have your street view reflected in your glasses or eyes, or any mail with your address in the background.
- ☐ Set up a separate mailbox if possible to receive payments, etc.
 - ☐ Talk to an accountant about the laws and regulations around registering your business etc. with an address different than your home.
- ☐ If your state offers it, apply for your state's address confidentiality program so you can do things like registering to vote without your address being public record.
- ☐ Consider subscribing to a service like [DeleteMe](#) to help delete your address, phone number, and other information from the internet.
- ☐ Alert event organizers of any safety concerns you have, or of any specific people who you are concerned might show up to the event and pose a safety issue.
- ☐ Talk to your friends, family, and loved ones about your safety plan so that they can help uphold it as well (i.e. not post photos that could compromise your safety and privacy, etc).
- ☐ Consider boundaries regarding your family and children. Some survivors may not have disclosed their full story to their entire families or children. There may also be safety concerns regarding your children after you share your story. These are all things to consider in advance.

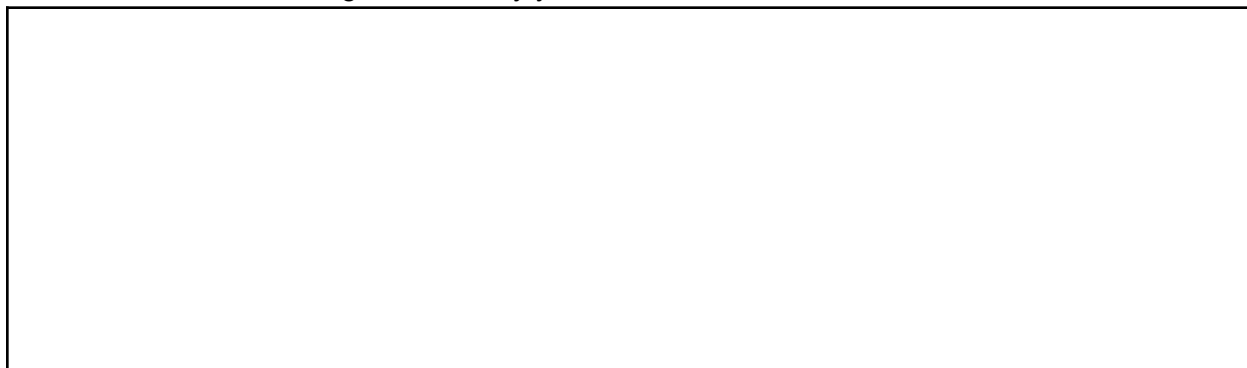
Appendix 4: Story structure worksheet

Copies of this worksheet are available in the [resource library of the National Survivor Network website](#).

A drawing of my story's shape from beginning, middle, to end:



What is the overall message of the story you want to tell?



What are some themes in the story? What are some specific points you want to make sure to touch on?



What is the conclusion you want the audience to leave with?

What is an opening that reflects the conclusion you want to work toward?

What is the primary conflict? What is the climactic scene in the story that “turns” the trajectory?

Appendix 5: Crafting your story and finding the arc

Copies of this worksheet are available in the [resource library of the National Survivor Network website](#).

To effectively craft your story and find the arc and an impactful conclusion that ties everything together, you must first consider your audience.

Who is your audience?

Approximate age of your audience?

Are there likely to be survivors in the audience?

Are they here for work or other professional obligations? (e.g. lawyer training, healthcare conference, or social work continuing education) Or is it a non-work event?

Based on what you know about the audience's demographics, what are some reasons you think they would want to hear your story? What information do you think they hope to learn, or could help them better understand violence and abuse in their own lives or careers?

Recommended citation: Sabra Boyd and Chris Ash. *Survivor Storytelling Workbook for advocates with lived experience working in the many movements to end violence*. National Survivor Network - Cast (2023).

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What do you hope the audience will take away from the story you want to tell them? What impact do you hope your story will make, and what do you hope it will teach or illustrate?

How much time do you have to tell your story, and do you need to leave time for questions at the end?

What do you want the overall message of your story and takeaway to be?

What is the transformation in your story? (There can be more than one)

From _____ to _____.

Example:

From captivity to freedom.

From fear and resistance to acceptance.

From desperation to hope.

From feeling like a failure to being gentler with myself.

From anger and hopelessness to feeling powerful.

From thinking my power comes from others' accolades to knowing that my power comes from my willingness to acknowledge vulnerability in safe-enough spaces.

**Note: For many survivors, a linear redemption arc may feel confining, performative, or like it feeds too neatly into a "rescue" or "savior" narrative. Reflect on your reasons for sharing your story, and remember that a story in which you stay and are still sometimes messy can be freeing and can disrupt the ways in which outsiders twist and misuse our stories.*

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What are some scenes that help illustrate a specific point you want to highlight with your story?

| Audience | Objective | Anecdote(s) that could illustrate this point |
|----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Example: Attorneys and Judges</i> | <i>Therapy is a necessary resource</i> | <i>Story about how difficult it was to testify and fear of violent retaliation, but that it was possible because of a therapist you could check in with during the trial.</i> |
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Check out these additional resources from the National Survivor Network, available in the [resource library of our website](#):

Meaningful Engagement of People with Lived Experience: a framework and assessment for measuring and increasing lived experience leadership across the spectrum of engagement

This toolkit outlines the Lived Experience Engagement Spectrum, explains how to move your organization up the Lived Experience Inclusion Ladder, gives practical tips on how to address common barriers to meaningful lived experience engagement, and offers 30+ pages of surveys, tools, and evaluation guidance you can use to measure your organization's progress toward meaningful survivor engagement.

<https://nationalsurvivornetwork.org/meaningfuleengagement/>

Care, Self-Determination, and Safety: A Community-Centered, Public Health Approach to Preventing Human Trafficking

Care, Self-Determination, and Safety outlines the NSN's approach to preventing human trafficking using a community-centered, public health, root causes approach that changes the societal and structural drivers that perpetuate human trafficking.

<https://nationalsurvivornetwork.org/publichealth/>

Trauma-Informed Storytelling

NSN blog post and associated video training educating about the importance and practice of trauma-informed storytelling.

<https://nationalsurvivornetwork.org/traumainformedstorytelling/>

Event Host Guidelines for facilitating an inclusive and professional space for speakers and trainers

Guidelines by the NSN and HEAL Trafficking for facilitating an inclusive and professional space when hiring speakers and trainers.

<https://nationalsurvivornetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/HEAL-NSN-Host-Guidelines.pdf>

Also check out our YouTube Channel

<https://www.youtube.com/@nationalsurvivornetwork>