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## OUR STORIES, OUR STRENGTH: COMMON PITFALLS

There are some common pitfalls that inexperienced storytellers can sometimes encounter. As you craft your story, consider how you might avoid these common traps and feel free to ask your peers and mentors for guidance.

**STIGMA.** Storytelling is often about getting and keeping people interested in your story, so sometimes storytellers will accentuate the aspects of their stories that seem most dramatic. The problem with doing this mental health stories is that accentuating the drama can sometimes reinforce stigma.

Likewise, an audience can often tell if a mental health storyteller is embarrassed of parts of their story or is holding back. It's critical that a storyteller has had the time and space to move past their own stigma and shame regarding their story so that they can share it most effectively.

**SAFETY.** Safety is one of the most critically important aspects of mental health storytelling. Sometimes we know our stories so well, especially the details, that we forget that some of the details aren't helpful to people in the audience. Here are some guidelines for ensuring safety:

- *Avoid specificity about means.* Whether you're discussing a suicide attempt, self-injury, or an eating disorder, it's very important to refrain from talking about the specific behaviors used to self-harm or to cover up that harm.
- *Avoid talking about specific weights, calorie counts, etc.* If you're discussing eating disorders it is very important not to share numbers. Often when numbers are shared it can trigger audience members struggling with a disorder to eat less, lose more weight, exercise more, and engage in more frequent or different eating disorder behaviors.
- *If you're speaking, have a professional in the room.* When you deliver your story verbally, as in a panel discussion or solo event, try to have a counseling professional in the room to respond to folks who may be triggered by your story. No matter how much safety you build into your own story, it's hard to anticipate what could upset someone. A trigger warning to readers can be helpful in written pieces.
- *"In a better place."* This is a phrase that some survivors of loved one's suicides use to provide themselves with a sense of comfort in knowing that their loved one is no longer in pain. Although the impetus to do this is often a natural response and helpful to the survivor themselves, it's important to refrain from sharing the idea with your audience. You never know if someone in that audience is contemplating and may be looking for reassurance that suicide could be an answer for them.

**MISJUDGING COMFORT.** It is common for people to be comfortable with the idea of sharing their story generally, but to have a much harder time sharing some of the details. As a rule of thumb, if a wound from the past is still healing, err on the side of not sharing it. There may be a time in the future, once it heals, that you'll feel comfortable. However, typically if you're still getting over something, your audience is going to sense your discomfort and be uncomfortable, too.

**FAILURE TO FACTOR IN THE AUDIENCE.** Our stories are such intensely emotional and central pieces of our lives. We are familiar with every detail, feeling, and image, and all of them seem important. Yet, sometimes it's possible to get so buried in the details that we forget our primary purpose in telling the story: to impact our audience.

Learn and think about who your audience is in advance, and think about what you would like them to take away and do once they have heard or read it. Invite them into the story. If there are experiences that folks unfamiliar with mental illness won't understand, then try to use an example from every day common existence to illustrate your thoughts or feelings.

**STRETCHING THE TRUTH.** Sometimes people don't feel that their story is "extraordinary" enough to be told so they embellish their story or pad reality with some untruths to make it seem more exciting or profound. The truth is, authenticity is a lot more valuable than fabricated plot twists.

**RAMBLING.** Concise stories are the most powerful. Don't feel like you have to explain every detail between Time 1 and Time 2. Focus on the most important details and flesh them out for the audience. Choose details that are particularly applicable to setting the scene, describing feelings, or setting up the next big event. A good rule of thumb is that you have 45-90 seconds to make a point and move forward.

**PUT A BOW ON IT.** Be strategic about how you conclude your story. Make it a "soft landing" for you audience that focuses on them and what they can do to help the mental health movement, your fundraising effort, or your advocacy campaign. We're not talking demands here, either. Let your appreciation for their time shine through, and reinforce how well you know that they have the power to make change.