Our stories matter: A guide for publicly sharing lived and living experiences of suicide

The power of storytelling

Sharing your lived and living experience of suicide is incredibly powerful. It can create change, provide hope, empower others, and contribute to your own healing. It can also be challenging, uncomfortable or met with resistance and barriers.

These guidelines and accompanying resources have been co-created *by* people with a lived and living experience of suicide, *for* people who have a lived and living experience of suicide.

Every quote in this resource suite has been provided by a person with lived and living experience. We have drawn on this broad collection of unique insights to develop guidance resources that can support others who may want to share their story.

Throughout your storytelling experience it is important to remember:

- Your story is uniquely yours.
- You do not have to share all your story at once.
- You can change your mind about sharing at any stage.
- You do not have to answer questions about your story if it makes you feel uncomfortable.
- Your story matters and speaking your truth is courageous.

Mindframe

An EVERYMIND program

Guidelines summary

About this advice

These guidelines identify key advice for people to consider when they are contemplating sharing their story of suicide publicly. The advice covers three stages: before you tell your story, during the storytelling process, and after sharing your story. The guidelines have been developed to promote the long-term wellbeing of the person sharing their story and the wellbeing of the community engaging with the story. Further detail on each point is included in the following pages, along with quotes from real people who have shared their experience.

Things to consider before sharing your story:

- Connect with a mentor or trusted advisor
- Understand your purpose for sharing your story
- Consider the parts of your story you are wanting to share
- Differentiate between meaningful storytelling opportunities and tokenistic opportunities
- Consider your current wellbeing and whether you will feel able to share your story with others at this time (this may change regularly)
- Understand the angle the media may be taking with the story
- Consider the impacts that may come from sharing your story publicly.
- Learn about safe language use and understanding why it is important for the audience
- Have a self-care plan in place
- Practice telling your story, alone or with a trusted person.

Things to consider during the storytelling process:

- Consider the language you are using
- Seek consent if your lived experience involves also sharing another person's lived experience
- Consider including a message of hope and recovery in your story
- Set boundaries to maintain wellbeing.

Things to consider after the storytelling process:

- Be prepared for other people in distress to contact you or reach out for support
- Request to see final edits before the story is shared publicly
- Be prepared for people, including strangers, to ask you questions about your story
- Have a safe person to debrief with after sharing story
- Action your self-care plan and allow time for rest.

What does the research tell us?

Research tells us there are positive and negative impacts relating to the way we communicate and portray suicide in the community. It is important that you understand these impacts before sharing your story so you can make informed choices about the way you choose to talk about your story in the public domain. The two main bodies of research that explore these impacts are outlined below.

Negative impacts: The Werther effect

The Werther effect refers to the negative impacts of problematic media reporting about suicide that may lead to distress and increased suicidal behaviour in the community. These negative effects are increased when communication is about a celebrity's death by suicide, when information about method or location is included, if people can relate to the person who has died and their challenges, or when communication is sensationalised. There are over 150 pieces of research that have examined this effect which have informed guidelines about safe communication of suicide, including the *Mindframe* principles and guidelines.

Positive impacts: The Papageno effect

The Papageno effect refers to the positive impacts of safe public communication about suicide that shares information about people living through and overcoming suicidal thinking and suicide attempts. Sharing lived experience stories of people overcoming or managing suicidal thoughts and behaviours can prevent further suicides from occurring and provide a survival blueprint for others who are having these experiences. This is a more recent area of research that shows the opportunities and profound impact people sharing their lived and living experience can have on community.

> "Be authentic to your story, be mindful of language and purpose of sharing your lived experience. What is your intention for sharing your lived experience and how can it be used constructively to help others? What is the purpose of sharing and how can it positively impact others?"
>
> Survey respondent: 26-35yrs

Content advice

Before sharing your story, consider including content advice (also known as a 'content warning'), or requesting that it be included if your comments are being published by a third party. The current evidence about the use of content advice is mixed with no specific evidence about the use of content advice in the context of suicide. Everymind's national research survey (2024) found that people with a lived and living experience of suicide believe content advice should be included in media and public communication about suicide.

In the absence of direct evidence, we recommend providing content advice when communicating about or portraying suicide. This provides the audience with information about what is going to be discussed so they can make an informed decision about whether they would like to engage with the content or not.

Content advice doesn't need to be complicated or make assumptions about how people will react. It may be the title of the story, in a verbal introduction to a live audience, included at the start of a podcast episode or a sentence at the top of a written piece. It may also be where people purchase tickets for a talk.

Here are some examples you could use yourself, or ask media to include:

- "This article includes discussion of suicide."
- "Content advice: This play contains depictions of suicide. Viewers are advised that this death will not occur onstage but simulated sounds may be heard during the performance."
- "This week's episode is a conversation with [Joe Smith], and he'll be sharing his story of surviving a suicidal crisis."
- "Content advice: This post mentions suicide"

Please note, the term 'content advice' is preferred over terms such as 'trigger warning' as some people may find this term distressing, particularly in the context of suicide.

Part 1: Before sharing your story

Consider connecting with a mentor

People who have shared their stories publicly often identify the importance of working with someone who has previous experience sharing their lived and living experience with the public. These individuals can support you to develop your skills and help you navigate the challenges of sharing your own story publicly. You can find a mentor by looking up who is working in the area you are interested in, or by speaking to mental health and suicide prevention sector organisations who may have lived and living experience groups or advocates you can connect with.

> "Practice with someone who has done this before to ensure there is nothing that will [cause distress for] you or others.
>
> Stick to the script you have practiced and take considered time to answer questions."
>
> Survey respondent: 65yrs+

> "Speak to someone else who has a lot of experience doing this, so you can gain an understanding of what is involved, ask questions, find out about challenges etc."
>
> Survey respondent: 36-45yrs

Understand your purpose for sharing your story

Understanding why you want to share your story will assist you in creating the key messages you choose to communicate. This helps you share your story with purpose and helps you to answer any difficult questions that people may ask.

> "Know your why, get attuned to it and stay connected with it."
>
> Survey respondent: 36-45yrs

> "You do not have to share every single detail of your lived experience and you don't have to get specific. Only tell what you feel comfortable sharing and don't feel pressured into saying things that may not be true to your story just because someone feels it might 'make the story more dramatic'. Also, you don't have to! You can always change your mind. Don't get pressured into it. If things don't feel right, trust your gut."
>
> Survey respondent:
> 26-35yrs, LGBTQ+

Consider the parts of your story you are wanting to share

The parts of your story that you choose to share may change given the context of the situation or the audience you are sharing them with. You also may choose to leave out aspects of your story that are distressing for you to share or for the audience to hear. Your story may evolve over time as you learn and grow with more experience of telling it.

Differentiate between meaningful storytelling opportunities and tokenistic opportunities

People who have experience sharing their stories publicly have, at times, reported poor experiences when their story was inappropriately used to legitimise the message of an organisation, or reshared without any meaningful engagement.

Make sure opportunities for you to tell your story align with your purpose and remember that your story is valuable and should be shared with people who understand this and want to platform your story in a helpful and ethical way.

> "Understand the intent behind the group requesting the story - what is the purpose of the story being shared - who is the audience and do your values and intended messages align with theirs?"
>
> Survey respondent:
> 18-25yrs, Aboriginal person

Consider your current wellbeing and whether you will be able to share your story with others at this time (this may change regularly)

Your wellbeing is more important than anything else during the storytelling process. Being aware of your current state of wellbeing is important for assessing whether it is the right time to be speaking publicly. Sharing your story when your wellbeing is low, can cause additional distress for you and your audience, and it may detract from the message you want to share.

It is okay for people to experience different reactions and even become upset while sharing their story, but this is different to sharing your story when your state of wellbeing is already low. It is okay to say no to storytelling opportunities if the time is not right for you. Saying no to current opportunities will not prevent you from engaging in future opportunities. Supporting your wellbeing by engaging in self-care activities and connecting with formal and informal supports will also prevent you from long term impacts such as burnout.

> "Be honest with yourself. An opportunity may come up or be offered and it may not be the right time. Don't feel as though you HAVE to do it to get messages out there, or inform others of what you are experiencing. Everything has its own place and time, and right now might not be that time for you."
>
> Survey respondent: 46-55yrs

Understand the angle the media may be taking with the story

Understanding the way your story will be used in the media will help you decide whether it aligns with your values and the key messages you want to share. It is okay to ask the journalist about what angle they're taking, the context in which your quotes will be used, or who else is being interviewed, and make your own decision about whether or not to share your story at this time. When you understand the angle the media is taking, you are less likely to feel like you have been misquoted or that your story has been misrepresented.

> "Be well informed about the media's purpose and only agree if you are treated with respect throughout, if appropriate consent is sought, and if you are clear about what [you wish] to share and are well supported by people you know and trust."
>
> Survey respondent: 65yrs+

Consider the impacts that may come from sharing your story publicly

It is important to be informed about all possible outcomes from sharing your story publicly. While many can be positive, you may also experience stigma, judgement, people asking you unwanted questions or people you don't know approaching you about your story.

It is also important to consider the permanency of information once it has been shared via the media and the long-term impacts sharing your story may have. It is helpful to seek information from a mentor, someone who has experience sharing their story, or an organisation that works with people who have a lived experience to help you understand and navigate these challenges.

Finally, please consider whether there is anything in your background that you aren't comfortable with the media finding and sharing to the public.

> "Consider the implications of others knowing your story and the possibility that you may be treated differently after sharing - make sure you are OK with that."
>
> Survey respondent: 26-35yrs

Learn about safe language use and understanding why it is important

Language that is safe, inclusive and thoughtful can improve audience engagement with your story and your key messages. It is helpful to learn about preferred and problematic language choices and how this can reinforce or challenge stigma and impact different community groups. Remember that your safety, and the safety of your audience, is more important than the impact or 'shock-factor' that sharing your story may have in driving engagement or attention to an issue.

> "Safe language: it's not just a list of words but about thinking about your audience - intended and unintended consequences."
>
> Survey respondent: 46-55yrs

> "Have a support person ready to debrief with. Plan something afterwards for self-care (e.g. walk, swim, art etc)."
>
> Survey respondent: 36-45yrs, LGBTQ+

Have a self-care plan in place

Self-care plans can be a helpful way of ensuring you are prioritising your wellbeing during the story telling process. These can look different for everyone, as they are based on what helps you personally. If you're not sure where to start, take a look at the *Our stories matter: A workbook for sharing your story of suicide* in this resource suite. The workbok has a template for developing a plan.

Talking about suicide method and location

Publicly sharing details of how or where a suicide attempt or death occurred has been linked to increased rates of suicide deaths and attempts, as well as increases in the use of the specific methods. If your story includes suicide planning, a suicide attempt, or a loss of life as a result of suicide, it is recommended to remove the details relating to method or location.

It is also important to know that some media outlets and professional communicators will not include these details, even if you would like them included, due to their own editorial policies that may be based on the evidence above.

> "You can have a powerful and purposeful story without vicariously traumatising your audience."
>
> Survey respondent: 46-55yrs

Part 2: Things to consider during the story telling process

Consider the language you are using

Language choices can challenge or reinforce stigma or stereotypes about suicide. Language choices may also influence how your audience reacts and engages with you story. For example, instead of using the phrase 'commit suicide', use phrases such as 'died by suicide' or 'suicide attempt'. Read more about language use in *Our words matter: Guidelines for language use*.

> "[Consider] talking about it perhaps in a more casual tone. It doesn't have to come across clinical. Use more validating and 'normalising' language to help break down the stigma."
>
> Survey respondent: 26-35yrs, LGBTQ+

Seek consent if your lived experience involves also sharing another person's lived experience

It is important to seek informed consent to share someone else's lived experience, including any medical information. In a digital world, this is particularly important as once a story has been shared with the public, it is permanent and can have lasting impacts on an individual's digital footprint. For example, if you are sharing your experience of caring for someone who has made a suicide attempt, it is important to have consent from this person and understand how they would prefer this experience to be discussed and how you can appropriately de-identify them.

> "I've only ever shared one element of my lived experience and I was ready to do so. Other parts of my lived experience are not something I want to ever share as it's not my story to tell. I also don't feel comfortable sharing it."
>
> Survey respondent: 36-45yrs

Consider including a message of hope and recovery in your story

Hope encourages people to keep going when faced with difficult experiences. However, hope looks different for everyone. For some people, hope may look like returning to work, raising a family, linking someone you care about with professional support or achieving goals you thought were impossible.

To others, hope may look like having secure housing, seeing other people going through similar experiences, and feeling less alone or simply being alive to see a new day (even if the associated feelings are complicated). Sometimes thinking about what messages may have helped you during challenging times will help you include this message of hope for others.

> "[I would urge people] to share what they are comfortable with, to feel like they don't have to shape their story in a certain way; that if they can't find hope then that is OK and people will connect to struggling to finding hope and that this is a powerful story in itself, especially being alive after a suicide attempt and feeling ambivalence towards this."
>
> Survey respondent: 36-45yrs, LGBTQ+

> "Be explicit about which parts of your story are off limits and articulate what you, the person offering up your story, wants the key messages to be. Make sure you prepare, hone your story and tailor it to suit the event purpose."
>
> Survey respondent: 56-65yrs, LGBQT+

Set boundaries to maintain wellbeing

Setting boundaries during the storytelling process can reduce distress and support your wellbeing. Setting boundaries is an individual process and unique to each speaker. Some examples may include deciding not share parts of your lived experience, only participating in interviews when you can have a support person present, or setting a limit on the number of public engagements you do each week.

Practice

Some people find practicing sharing their story or answering questions about their story useful while others do not. Decide what works for you and how you would like to prepare.

> "Practice getting someone to ask you questions so that you can answer them in a trauma-informed way."
>
> Survey respondent: 65yrs+

Part 3: Things to consider after the story telling process

Be prepared for other people in distress to contact you or reach out for support

People who connect with your story may want to reach out to you for help and support, so it can be useful to have information about services or professional support you can direct them too.

Those who are distressed by your story or people who don't agree with your key messages may also reach out to you. This can also be confronting and distressing. We recommend having a plan for managing these difficult situations, including help seeking information and knowledge of who can provide you with support during this time. Working with a mental health or suicide prevention organisation can be beneficial as they can help you navigate this situation.

It can be helpful to consider your privacy and the pathways you choose to make available for people to contact you, as well as thinking about how you may want to limit how people can get in touch such as social media.

> "Consider the potential negative/unexpected impacts, such as the media misrepresenting your story, receiving negative comments from others, or others reaching out to you to share your own story. This might become overwhelming if you're not in the right mental space to be supporting others."
>
> Survey respondent: 26-35yrs, LGBTQ+

> "I found having a good rapport with the interviewer [is important as well as having] a support person with you if it's a live interview, knowing what questions will be asked so if there are any you don't want to answer they can be omitted. And if it's a newspaper article, make sure you read it before it is published."
>
> Survey respondent: 65yrs+

Request to see final edits before the story is shared publicly

This gives you the opportunity to approve the final piece before it is released to the public and ensures there are no surprises. It should be noted that the ability to review content can be different between the different types of media and any deadlines that need to be met. If having final approval on how your story is being shared is important to you, you may like to check with the journalist before you share your story that this is possible.

Be prepared for people, including strangers, to ask you questions about your story

Some people may be curious about you and your story or even ask you questions about aspects of your story that you did not share. These people may be strangers or people you have known for a long time. The questions may support the key messages you are sharing but can also be inappropriate or distressing. It is recommended to have a planned response for any questions you are not comfortable answering. For example: "Thank you for your question, I understand why you might be curious about that but that is a part of my story I am not sharing with other people".

> "Be prepared for inappropriate and shaming/blaming comments or questions as a result of sharing your story."
>
> Survey respondent: 65yrs+

> "I utilise self-care strategies that I know worked (including turning off emails, reading, watching TV, being in nature) and reflecting on ways that I felt when I was in a better head space."
>
> Survey respondent: 26-35yrs, LGBTQ+

Action your self-care plan and allow time for rest

After sharing your story, it is important to take time for yourself to rest and engage in activities you enjoy. Allowing time for rest and self-care supports your wellbeing and helps prevent burnout from occurring in the future. The self-care activities you engage with may be different depending on the format and intensity of the storytelling experience you have. Read more: *Our stories matter: Self-care planning for sharing your lived and living experience publicly*.

Have a safe person to debrief with after sharing story

Having a safe person provides an opportunity for you to discuss your experience of the storytelling process. Your safe person may be a friend, family member or mentor. They may also be a more formal support such as a psychologist, counsellor or religious leader. Some people may even prefer speaking to their pets. Debriefing may also include taking time to talk about other things to decompress from the experience.

> "Debrief and have good people to connect with and talk about things beside suicide."
>
> Survey respondent: 26-35yrs

> “ It is an opportunity to show how lived experience of suicide stories are messy and complicated - but in no way are they one dimensional. Consider what your call to action or key message is for each time you share and this may change depending on the target audience for the content.”
>
> Survey respondent: 56-65yrs, LGBTQ+

How were these guidelines created?

These guidelines were created through the *Mindframe lived and living experience of suicide projec*t. They were developed in conjunction with people with a lived and living experience of suicide, including the *Mindframe* Lived Experience Working Group, a subgroup to the Everymind Lived Experience Advisory Group. More than 300 people who have a lived and living experience of suicide and/or an experience of sharing their stories of suicide publicly completed a research survey to assist in the development of these guidelines. The development process also included an evidence review, workshops, and semi-structured interviews involving people with a lived and living experience of suicide.

This document is part of a suite of resources developed out of this research project that also includes a guide to avoiding burnout when sharing your story, a guide to self-care, and a workbook with a range of advice and things to consider as you prepare to share your story.

For more information about this project, visit: **mindframe.org.au/our-stories-matter**