

The Power of Telling Your Story

Telling your story can be a powerful tool to raise awareness of children’s mental health needs and effective treatment options, as well as to improve systems of care for our children, youth, and families. Families can use their stories in many different settings, including presentations at conferences, before community leaders, trainings for professionals, public awareness events, and providing support to another family so they do not feel alone.

A well-told story is an extremely compelling way to convey your message, which will linger longer in the mind of the listener than a set of facts.

Getting Ready to Tell Your Story

Before you decide to publicly share your story with others, be sure to:

- ✓ **Check yourself.** Know and understand where you are in your journey, and decide if it is a good time for you to be presenting to *this* audience and in *this* place. It is important to let go of the anger or hurt you have felt and not let it color everything you do. This will help you to communicate your message in a clear and convincing way without anger overriding your message. Learn to use a variety of approaches to speak the truth, such as real-life situations you may have experienced accessing services and supports for your child.
- ✓ **Prepare.** Organize your thoughts in advance. You may want to write an outline, or if you are telling your story for the first time, you may feel more comfortable writing down what you want to say. It is helpful to practice beforehand. Try not to read every word of your story, as you want to connect with your audience rather than reading from your paper and avoiding eye contact with the people who are listening to your message.
- ✓ **Have a purpose.** It is important to know and understand your audience so you can best craft your story. Consider the purpose of your story and how to “frame” the message in a way that resonates with your audience. For instance, if you are talking to business leaders, highlight how the challenges of caring for a child or youth with behavioral health needs affect productivity at work. If you are speaking to educators, show how lack of access to services affects grades, attendance, and classroom behavior. You should also have a clear action item, or “ask” of your audience, such as providing services for students in school.
- ✓ **Filter.** Your story is compelling and has the power to influence and motivate others. Think about the key messages you want others to remember and focus on those as you share your story. Leave out the details that may lose people and focus on a few key experiences. Use data to show that your story is not just an anecdote, but the experience of many people like you. However, don’t overwhelm your audience with numbers.
- ✓ **Consider timing.** Know in advance how much time you have to speak. If there isn’t enough time to cover all you want to say, pare down your message to one or two major points or stories. When you are presenting before a large group, there is usually an allotted time given for your presentation. To ensure you won’t have to rush, or even risk being cut short, make sure your message will fit into the time you are given.

- ✓ **Remember whose story it is.** As you share your story with others, remember that you are sharing your child's story as well. Always respect your child's privacy and dignity. If your child is old enough, ask permission to share their story. Your child may prefer that you not publicly disclose some aspects of what he or she has gone through. As your child matures, it truly becomes *their* story of challenges, resilience, and recovery; your story takes on a new focus as one of parent empowerment and is specific to your journey in a caregiving role.
- **Have open discussions.** Have an open and honest discussion with your child about what you want to say during your presentation. Ask your child what information he or she does not want you to publicly disclose.
- **Empower your youth or young adult.** Encourage your child to find the power of telling their own story of resilience and recovery. If he or she wants to share their story, offer assistance, and respect what your child chooses to share. Refrain from editing or refuting your child's version of their story. It is their story to tell.
- **Consider a team presentation.** Look for opportunities where you and your child can team up to tell your stories together. You can share your personal challenges as a parent, especially in navigating services, and your child can share his or her perspective of growing up with behavioral health challenges and how they are now managing their recovery.
- ✓ Think ahead. Content posted to social media never goes away. Anything you disclose publicly can end up on social media and could later have an impact on your child's future, such as job applications, military involvement, or social relationships.

Presentation

Being nervous before a presentation is normal. Remember the purpose for telling your story and focus on that.

- ✓ **Be yourself.** Let your personality and passion shine through.
- ✓ **Use humor.** Caring for a child with behavioral health needs can be challenging, but it also has its moments of humor. A funny incident that occurred with your family can lighten the intensity of a difficult story.
- ✓ **Stand tall.** Body language can reinforce your message to the audience.
- ✓ **Have an opening and closing.** Start your presentation with a story about your family. This will grab the audience right away and put you at ease. Use your passion to close with a key message or call to action from the audience.

Anyone can utter a series of words; it is the presenter's personal connection to those words that can bring them to life for the audience.

It took Abraham Lincoln less than five minutes to deliver his immortal Gettysburg Address.

✓ **Apply your POWER.**

POWER = Pause, Others, Why, Eye Contact, Relax

Write POWER at the top of your presentation notes or outline. This will be a reminder of what to do when your nerves take over, emotions run high, or the environment is not friendly.

- **Pause.** If you are feeling emotional or have lost your place, just pause. People will understand if you simply say that you need to compose yourself. Explain that although this is difficult, it is important to you to finish your presentation. Pausing will also get the listeners' attention.
- **Others.** Remember: You are not alone. You are using your voice to represent many others who are unable to speak or will speak when the time is right for them.
- **Why.** Stay focused on why you are presenting. Remember the important points without getting lost in your story and losing your message.
- **Eye contact.** Make eye contact with someone in the audience who is friendly. Look for a person who gives you supportive head nods or smiles at you. Use them as a focal point when you are feeling emotional or nervous.
- **Relax.** "Left foot ... right foot ... breathe." This is a simple phrase to recall when you need to relax and get through a tough period. Taking a breath and letting it out can be relaxing and helps to settle you so that you can continue.

Later

Congratulations, you did it! It takes courage to stand before a group of strangers and tell your story that may be filled with heartache and pain. Following a presentation, you may experience a range of emotions, from feeling elated that you did it, to uncomfortable that you disclosed personal information about your child and family. It may feel awkward when strangers come up to thank you for your presentation and you don't even know their names. These feelings will subside when you think back to the purpose of telling your story. Whether your purpose was to raise awareness, change the way systems work, or improve services, you told your story for your child and family and to help other children and their families. There is no greater purpose than that! Thank you!

“I have a child with special needs. I didn't know if I would be strong enough. Turns out I am. And so are you.”

— Lisa Thornbury

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