

## SECTION 6

# Making an Informed Decision About Telling Your Story, On Your Terms

### Making the choice to read or speak your words aloud

If you choose to share your words aloud as a survivor of sexual violence, you may be asked or feel moved to speak publicly about some or all of your experience.

Things to keep in mind:

- \* Sharing your story is up to you.
- \* You are in control of whether and how to share.
- \* You have many options in your healing journey – sharing your story publicly is just one.
- \* Some survivors find sharing their story aloud and publicly is an empowering experience.
- \* It is difficult to fully predict how others will respond to listening to your story.
- \* Telling your story is not all or nothing – you can choose how, in what circumstances, and at what level of detail you feel comfortable talking about your experience.
- \* What matters most is not what others want from you, but what has value and meaning to you.

### An important message for survivors

While many survivors around the world have spoken publicly to advocate for change, the burden of ending sexual violence in all its forms does not and must not rest on the shoulders of survivors. There must be multiple strategies implemented to hold perpetrators accountable and prevent and stop violence at its roots. Unfortunately, our society and culture continues to normalize and foster gender-based violence. Victim-blaming attitudes still exist and survivors still do face a backlash from speaking out. This is what many survivors who have spoken out are trying to change! Regardless of how or when you decide to share your story, it's important to remind yourself that you are more than your story of sexual or gender-based violence. This is just one of your many experiences and stories.

### Special considerations to make when telling your story\*

#### 1. What is your goal in telling your story on your terms?

Positive goals can often help you overcome challenges. Telling your story on your terms is more likely to be positive when you are clear about what you hope to achieve and feel confident that the platform(s) you contribute to will serve that purpose.

Some common goals survivors have in telling their story on their terms include:

- \* Releasing the impact of stress and trauma on the body;
- \* Using your creativity to take control over your narrative for cathartic healing;

\*Adapted from “Sharing Your Story: How to Think Through Your Options” by the Boston Area Rape Crisis Center

- \* Raising awareness of the impact of sexual violence and educating people about the many aspects of the issue;
- \* Connecting with other survivors, letting them know they are not alone, and offering them hope in their own healing;
- \* Wanting to share their story to request accountability from an offender or from an institution; or
- \* Wanting to change policy and educate people for social change.

*Ask yourself: What is motivating me to tell my story on my terms?*

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The level of detail you share might affect your goal. For example, if public education is your goal, and you share a very detailed story, some people may be too triggered to take in your message.

*Ask yourself: What level of detail do I want to share to achieve my goal?*

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The most effective speakers share only the key aspects of their experience and journey that convey specific points, such as the harm of self-blame, the impact of a positive response to disclosure, or the challenge of not being believed—to name only a few.

*Ask yourself: What key aspects of my experience and specific points do I want to make with telling my story on my terms?*

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## 2. Do you feel emotionally prepared to share your story on your terms?

Talking about your experiences of sexual violence publicly can be very empowering, however it may also be difficult or painful. It is important to keep in mind that societal attitudes have been changing for the better, but it is still common for some people to unfairly blame survivors of sexual violence and excuse perpetrators. Revisit the emotional check-in located in Section One of this workbook, and review the Resources for Resilience that you put together. If you're unsure, you may want to speak with an experienced therapist or counselor or other source of support.

*Ask yourself: Am I emotionally prepared to share my story on my terms? What support do I have to draw on if I decide to move forward?*

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## 3. What platform is best to use to tell your story?

There are several platforms you can use to share your story publicly if you would like to. Each platform will come with its own set of benefits, risks, and privacy considerations.

Examples include:

- \* blogs or collections of online stories
- \* social media posts,
- \* in-person speaking events, such as rallies, protests, or special engagements,
- \* news editorials or articles,
- \* radio and television shows, and
- \* public testimonies in front of lawmakers or law enforcement.

It's important to think about what you share online, as it may not be possible to remove it. In thinking about sharing your experience online, remember that it may be impossible to completely remove any content that is shared on the internet. While you might feel comfortable sharing your story now, give yourself time to consider how you may feel differently in the future and why. You may want to consider a pseudonym, initials, or using only your first name to protect your privacy.

*Ask yourself: What platform am I considering to share my story on my terms?*

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Consider whether the platform will permit responses directed back to you and what that will mean for you. Responses can often be supportive, but they might also be critical.

*Ask yourself: Do I want to permit responses directed back at me? And, what would that mean to me?*

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Consider what kind of feedback and support you may need before, during, and after sharing.

*Ask yourself: What feedback and support do I need throughout the process of sharing my story?*

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#### **4. What should I consider to protect my safety?**

Your safety and that of your friends and family is paramount and an important factor to weigh when you are considering to share your story on your terms publicly.

*Ask yourself: Will telling my story on my terms put my safety or the safety of my friends and family at risk? If yes, how?*

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*Will sharing my story on my terms open up the potential for retaliation even if my perpetrator is not named? If yes, how?*

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*Are there other people or entities that I identified in my story that hold responsibility for my sexual violence that may pose a safety or privacy concern to me or my family and friends? This could include any identifying details or information about where or when the violence or abuse took place.*

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*What can I do to ensure my safety?*

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**5. How can I protect my privacy?**

There are ways to reach your goals of telling your story on your terms to take action to end sexual violence, or to pursue greater healing, or to connect with other survivors, that don't involve publicly sharing about your experience. However, if you decide to publicly share your story, there are several questions pertaining to privacy that you should consider.

Remember that there are ways to share your story while remaining anonymous (you can use a pseudonym or your initials, for example). Not all public speaking is the same. In terms of privacy, talking to a group of college students versus speaking to a legislator and their team at their office are generally very different experiences than speaking at a press conference, being interviewed by a reporter, or sharing your story on social media.

*Ask yourself: How do I feel about my story being out in the world for anyone to see?*

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*What details am I comfortable sharing about my experience of sexual violence? What details am I not comfortable sharing?*

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*How might sharing my story impact my personal, family, and professional life, as well as those of my family and significant others, today and in the future? Could this impact my current or future job?*

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**6. What if I'm involved in a legal case?**

If you are involved in any kind of legal proceeding, such as: criminal, civil, grievance, or other formal proceeding, even employment, immigration, housing court, a campus case, or family court - it is strongly advised that you avoid sharing anything publicly until your case has concluded. It is possible that what you share publicly could become part of the formal proceeding and may disrupt what you hope to achieve in that process. You should consult with your legal counsel about the impact of publicly sharing your story before doing so.

*Ask yourself: How will sharing my story on my terms affect my legal case? Is there a way I could share my story safely without affecting my legal case? How?*

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*What does my legal counsel say about my sharing my story on my terms?*

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**7. Could there be legal liability for telling your story publicly?**

There could be legal implications for speaking publicly, as there is legal liability and responsibility when naming or identifying specific people. When you publicly share identifying information, it could give rise to someone taking legal action against you. This issue is very complex, and it is strongly recommended that you consult with an attorney about potential legal liability and how to navigate those risks if this might be of concern.

*Ask yourself: What legal liability could there be for telling my story on my terms publicly?*

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*Could someone want to take legal action against me? Who? And, why?*

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### **8. How much control will you have over your story?**

If you choose to speak to a reporter for a story on the news, in the newspaper, or for an online publication, you may not have full control over how you are portrayed, or even what you say. Media and print journalists will edit your words. They will choose what to share with their audience based on the angle or story they wish to convey. In some situations, your message, your point of view, even some facts you relay might not come out as you said or intended them. This can occur even if you are speaking live on television. So, it is possible that the way you and your experience are portrayed will not feel true to you, and in some situations, it might even show you in a negative light. There are a number of resources about media for survivors, but here are a few key things to consider:

**Do your homework.** Before you agree to an interview, do research to get a sense of how your experience might be treated. Make sure you are able to answer the following questions:

- \* Who is the reporter? How do they generally frame their stories? What is their way of thinking about sexual violence? You can look up the stories the reporter has written to see if any of their work contains myths or stereotypes about sexual assault or viewpoints with which you disagree.
- \* Ask the journalist if they know how the story will be “played.” Is it the cover story? What section of the paper/site or segment of TV/radio? Will it be part of a larger news story? If so, which one?
- \* Who else will be interviewed?
- \* If the news article or clip will be online, will the comment section be open? If the comment section is open, will it be moderated? By whom?

It could also be helpful if you can connect with any anti-violence organizations who may have worked with this reporter. See what sources they've quoted in previous articles on the topic of gender-based violence. These organizations may be able to provide you with behind-the-scenes experience of working with this particular journalist and their media outlet.

### **Set your ground rules.**

- \* How will you know if you are on the record? Is it possible to go back and forth? Can you view the piece or video before it goes public?
- \* You've decided on your story on your terms. Be clear to yourself about what you are willing to say and what you don't want to share, and don't feel pressured to change this. You are not obligated to share anything, no matter how much they may ask you to do so.
- \* Revisit the prior questions in this section to consider how much identifying information about yourself you are willing to share. Will you share your full name; are you willing to share a photo?
- \* Once you do an interview, this may open the door to more media requests. Ask yourself how your participation will serve the goals that you laid out in this workbook.

If you do not trust the reporter, the outlet, or anything about the potential experience, don't give the interview. Remember, you decide with whom you share your story. And, if you have begun to give the interview, know that you have a right to opt out. If, at any point in the process, even the day of, you feel uncomfortable, you can decline the interview or stop during the interview - unless it is a live broadcast. Ethically, journalists should honor your request.

### **Explore**

- \* Speaking Out From Within: Speaking Publicly About Sexual Assault, Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape (PCAR) @ [pcar.org](http://pcar.org)
- \* Your Voice, Your Choice: A Survivor Media Guide, Prince Edward Island Rape and Sexual Assault Centre @ [peirsac.org](http://peirsac.org)
- \* Visions, Values, and Voice: A Communications Toolkit @ [opportunityagenda.org](http://opportunityagenda.org)
- \* Storytelling for Social Change by Frameworks Institute @ [frameworksinstitute.org/storytelling.html](http://frameworksinstitute.org/storytelling.html)
- \* Story Circles @ <https://roadside.org/program/story-circles>
- \* Guide on Developing Your Own Public Narrative @ <https://roadside.org/porgram/story-circles>
- \* How to Build a Story Bank @ [https://www.thegoodmancenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/free\\_range\\_2012\\_06.pdf](https://www.thegoodmancenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/free_range_2012_06.pdf)