

# **My Story, My Terms**

## A Workbook for Survivors





## Contributors

**Women's Justice NOW**, a New York City non-profit dedicated to connecting and supporting women to make change, partnered with two educators - Claire McCue and Roxanna Azari - to create this workbook for survivors.

**Claire T. McCue**, co-creator, is a trauma-informed forensic social worker and doctoral candidate at the Graduate Center for CUNY. In her 20+ year career in social work, Claire has worked in direct care, supervisory, and training capacities at social service and legal service organizations, and developed a specialization in providing psychodynamically-oriented treatment for survivors of incest, sexual and physical abuse, intimate partner violence and family violence.

**Roxanna "Roxy" Azari**, co-creator, is an Iranian-American spoken word poet, performer, storyteller, and educator, serving as an Adjunct Lecturer for the Women's and Gender Department at Hunter College and Director of Coaching for Story2. Azari combines her passions of art and activism by leading nation-wide performances and writing workshops for participants to explore and utilize their voices. She has been featured as a performer Off-Broadway, at the United Nations, and on PBS.

**Jean Bucaria** is the Deputy Director of Women's Justice NOW since 2007, where she drives the organizations' actions and advocacy, communications, public education, and volunteer programs. She recently authored and edited SurvivorStoriesNOW.org, an interactive report that amplifies the voices of survivors to defend a strong Violence Against Women Act and based on a series of Women's Town Halls she organized across NY.

**Sonia Ossorio** is the Executive Director of Women's Justice NOW. She has led the organization in changing laws and policies to further women's economic empowerment and access to reproductive healthcare, to improve the criminal justice system's response to gender-based violence, and to advance women in government and business leadership. This includes successful campaigns to win clemency for a survivor of domestic violence, repeal the statute of limitations on rape, raise the legal age of marriage to end child marriage and challenge the commercial sexual exploitation of women and girls.

## Acknowledgments

Women's Justice NOW extends a special thank you to The New York Women's Foundation for supporting this work to raise women's voices and address gender-based violence.

## A note on language:

Throughout this workbook, you will notice the use of the word "survivor." This was a conscious decision. The word "survivor" embodies a sense of strength and empowerment. The word "story" comes from the language of the Me Too movement in which women and others have shared their stories of sexual harassment and abuse. "Story" is defined as synonymous with the sharing of one's experience.

# MY STORY MY TERMS

## **INTRODUCTION**

My Story, My Terms: A Workbook for Survivors

## **SECTION 1**

Building a Foundation: What You Need to Tell Your Story, On Your Terms  
Emotional Safety Toolkit: My Resources for Resilience

## **SECTION 2**

The Power & Science of Storytelling

## **SECTION 3**

Understanding the Stages of Writing, Healing, and Compassionate Reframing

## **SECTION 4**

Using the Power of Your Resilient Voice to Bring Your Own Words to Life

## **SECTION 5**

Sharing Your Story, On Your Terms

## **SECTION 6**

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

## **ADDITIONAL TOOLS & RESOURCES**

Writing & Wellness Exercises, Resources, & Further Exploration  
Online at [WomensJusticeNOW.org/MyStoryWorkbook](https://WomensJusticeNOW.org/MyStoryWorkbook)

### **My Story, My Terms Workshops & Programs**

This workbook is rooted in the curriculum of our transformative storytelling workshop, “My Story, My Terms,” which offers a safe space for survivors to reframe and reclaim their stories and experiences in the #MeToo era. Women’s Justice NOW launched the trauma-informed workshop in New York City in the spring of 2020. If you are interested in learning more, please visit [WomensJusticeNOW.org/MyStoryWorkbook](https://WomensJusticeNOW.org/MyStoryWorkbook) or email us at [contact@womensjusticenow.org](mailto:contact@womensjusticenow.org).


## INTRODUCTION

# My Story, My Terms A Storytelling Workbook for Survivors

In this #MeToo era, survivors around the world have come forward to share their experiences of sexual harassment, abuse, and/or assault as means to heal, seek justice and demand social and legal change. There's no question that the surge in public survivor accounts are having a powerful and transformative impact on cultural attitudes and public policy. The goal of this workbook is to guide individuals through the healing power of storytelling and help those who are considering sharing their stories make an informed decision about doing so.

How, when, and if you decide to share your story with others is entirely up to you. It is a highly personal decision and no one should be compelled to share their experiences publicly. Regardless of whether or not you choose to share your story publicly or just write it for yourself - the purpose of this workbook is to give you the tools to harness the healing power of storytelling and to write your story in a way that is purposeful and meaningful to you. This is your place to decide how and when your story is told. This is your roadmap and resource for telling your story—on your terms.

Some common goals survivors have in telling their story on their terms include: releasing stress and trauma; using creativity as part of their healing; raising awareness about gender-based violence; connecting with other survivors and inspiring others; and pushing for social change.



The purpose of this workbook is to give you the tools to harness the healing power of storytelling.

---

## ***THIS WORKBOOK HAS BEEN CREATED FOR YOU.***

This trauma-informed workbook was created for you and every survivor of sexual or gender-based violence who wants to reframe and reclaim their stories and experiences in the #MeToo era. This workbook is intended to create a safe space for survivors who are searching for a place to write, share, reflect, and heal. You do not need any prior writing or storytelling experience. Sexual violence can come in many forms, including: sexual harassment, rape, forcible touching, date rape, marital rape, child sexual abuse, molestation, human trafficking, intimate partner violence, and dating violence. Forms of sexual violence happen to people of all ages, races, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, religions, professions, physical and mental abilities, and incomes. While changing systems and addressing perpetrators are both critical, that is not the purpose of this workbook. This workbook is about you. It's about your journey, your healing, and your story.

## Here's what you'll do in this workbook

- \* Reflect, write, and share your experiences as a survivor of sexual violence.
- \* Focus on expressive writing and storytelling.
- \* Use your writing and voice as a tool for personal, political, or social change.
- \* Learn safety guidelines for navigating the process of sharing your story with others.

## Our key tips for getting the most out of using this workbook

- \* This workbook is intended to be used by survivors with wide ranging experiences of sexual violence. You may find that some activities and guidelines don't fit your experience. Apply what makes most sense to your experience.
- \* If you are working with a counselor or therapist, let them know you plan to complete this workbook. This workbook was written for individual survivors of all forms of sexual violence and can be used by survivors independently, with a therapist, in a self-help group, or as part of group therapy.
- \* Think about the right time and place to do this workbook. Consider choosing a specific time and schedule.
- \* Make room for emotions and thoughts to arise while you are completing and reflecting on the activities.
- \* Plan to do something relaxing or refreshing after you have been using this workbook. For example, call a friend, listen to nice music, take a relaxing bath, or get some exercise.
- \* Feel free to write in the spaces provided in this workbook or to get an accompanying notebook or journal for more space. You may also want to write your story on your computer or device. Find what works best for you.
- \* This workbook is intended to be an ongoing project and process. This is not intended to be done all at once! In fact, there is no timetable. The activities can be used and revisited as you wish.

## Keep in mind

This workbook provides information about trauma, healing, writing, storytelling, and resilience, along with tips and guidelines for you to feel protected as you prepare to write or share your story. This workbook may help you better understand and process your own personal reactions to the experience. It is not intended as a replacement for counseling or therapy.

## SECTION 1

# Building a Foundation: What You Need to Tell Your Story, On Your Terms

Writing and sharing your story about your experience(s) of sexual violence or any form of gender-based violence can have a profound impact on you and others. Your insight into your recovery from the violence and the challenges you have faced—and may still face—send a powerful message that surviving and healing from sexual and gender-based violence is possible.

This section will enable you to build your own personalized toolkit of resources and support that you can turn to as you move through the process of thinking about, writing, and possibly sharing your story with others. Every survivor's experience and path to healing is unique. The resources found here can provide a strong foundation for anyone seeking to explore difficult or possibly traumatizing experiences more deeply.

Before we begin, it is important to note that while writing your story on your terms can be a healing experience, this workbook is not a replacement for seeking professional help. If you need support, you can speak with a counselor or an advocate, by calling these helplines:

- \* National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-HOPE (4673);
- \* National Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-799-SAFE (7233);
- \* National Victim of Crime Hotline 1-855-4-VICTIM (855-484-2846).

***NOW, LET'S GET STARTED!*** To prepare yourself to write and tell your story on your own terms, review the steps below:

### **Check-in with yourself emotionally. Where are you today?**

Sharing your story can provide many benefits when you follow certain guidelines to protect your safety and well-being. Trauma experts have found that survivors sharing their stories of sexual or gender-based violence can become an important part of their healing process and strengthen their resiliency. You are the only person who can determine your readiness to begin writing and sharing your story, on your own terms.

Writing down or sharing your story of sexual violence or abuse publicly can also be a challenging experience. Survivors can experience a wide variety of emotions, and every person has their own way of dealing with emotions. Allow yourself to feel a full range of emotions. Some survivors have remained silent for a multitude of reasons, such as shame, guilt, or fear that people will not believe them.

Here are some questions to consider when determining if you're ready. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers. It is up to you to gauge your readiness. This workbook will still be here for you if you want to come back to this later. Your mental health and safety are the priority.

- \* Are you able to state that something happened to you that was not your fault?
- \* Can you talk about the experience, and have you begun to spend time with your feelings?
- \* Have you given the responsibility for the violence to the person who committed the act and accepted that the responsibility is not yours to accept?
- \* Do you recognize that you can get back power and control in your life?

If you answered “no” to any of these questions, these are aspects of your experience that you may want to think more about and work on either prior to starting this workbook or while completing this workbook. While it is common for survivors to blame themselves for their experience, your assault is not your fault. Use these questions as a personal gauge to see how you are feeling. Once you feel ready, developing an emotional safety plan can help you stay emotionally safe while you write your story on your terms. Emotional safety can look different for each survivor. The main idea is to develop a personalized plan that helps you feel accepting and aware of your emotions.

## **Build your emotional safety plan**

Review the five steps below and respond by completing the My Resources for Resilience page at the end of section one. You can refer to that page throughout your journey for support.

### **STEP 1**

#### **Create a peaceful space for yourself.**

Consider designating a physical space where you can use this workbook. It could be a room in your home, a comfy chair in the library, or a spot in your favorite park. Be sure it is a place where your mind can relax and feel safe. You may want to incorporate certain elements to enhance your peacefulness, like plants or fresh flowers, a scented candle, or some calming music. Complete “My Peaceful Spaces.”

### **STEP 2**

#### **Identify your support network.**

A support system is a network of people who can help you make it through times in your healing process that can be scary or bewildering. These are people who believe you were abused and that the abuser hurt you. These are also the people who believe you have the ability to heal. They care for you and respect you. Don't include people who may minimize your abuse, downplay your feelings, tell you to hurry and get over the abuse, ridicule you when you are struggling with the trauma, or blame you for the abuse. Complete “My Support Network.”

### **STEP 3**

#### **Understand your emotions.**

You may want to keep track of your emotions as you start the process of writing your story on your terms. An emotions tracker helps you keep track of how you're feeling throughout your writing or during any reflection activity. You can do this by checking in

with yourself regularly while you work and at least one time for each activity you do. Be sure to take note of what you are doing in that moment: are you remembering an aspect of your experience, writing a part of your story, or reflecting on a specific question or writing prompt? Then, note your mood and write down any associated physical sensations. Complete “My Emotion Tracker.”

#### STEP 4

##### **Have a self-care practice in place.**

Developing your story on your terms and sharing it can be very empowering, but it can also be emotionally draining. Your emotional well-being as a survivor is always the first priority, but especially so as you begin this workbook. Self-care practices are any simple things we do for ourselves to maintain and improve our emotional, mental, and physical well-being. We’ve all heard about how to live a healthy life by eating right, exercising, and getting plenty of rest, but it is just as important to put things into place that may ease any pain and help you as you heal, write, and tell your story on your terms. Preventing undue stress and emotional overload must be your top priority. Complete “My Self-Care Menu.”

#### STEP 5

##### **Make sure you’re realistic about your goals and expectations.**

Setting goals can be very helpful, by giving us a sense of motivation and direction. However, sometimes we expect too much of ourselves and set unrealistic goals. This can cause unnecessary stress and self-criticism. Complete “My Goals.”

### What to do if you get stuck

#### **The Challenge:**

It may be difficult for some survivors to begin the exercises in the workbook. You may feel as though you have “writer’s block.” Don’t force yourself to do an activity. Be gentle with yourself, especially if you are doing things that you’ve never done before, like expressive writing and storytelling, or reflecting that exists outside of your comfort zones like writing about certain aspects of your experience for the first time.

#### **What To Do:**

Set realistic expectations. For example, commit to write for 15 minutes per day for four consecutive days before you stop and reassess if you want to continue.

#### **The Challenge:**

Some stressful experiences are so traumatic that the memories can’t be consciously accessed. This can be very frustrating to some survivors whose stories of sexual violence don’t fit into a neat and clear narrative structure. Your story may not be “linear” or “complete” and that is okay.

#### **What To Do:**

Understand that it is completely normal to have fragmented and incomplete memories of what has happened to you. A realistic expectation is that you can begin to accept that having challenges with memories is the nature of trauma and its impact on the brain. It is not a shortcoming on your part.



**The Challenge:**

For some survivors, they may be able to start writing about their experience right at the start, but arrive at a certain detail and become stuck. It is common for there to be aspects of your experience that are too difficult to write about and share because of the flooding of feelings that can occur. The trauma of being raped or sexually assaulted can be shattering; leaving a person feeling scared, ashamed, blamed, guilty, alone or plagued by nightmares, flashbacks, and other unpleasant memories. These feelings can surface immediately following the assault or arise years later.

**What To Do:**

Give yourself permission to skip over aspects of your experience that are too painful to write and share about right now. There is no need to push yourself to write about all aspects of your experience(s).

**How to use My Resources for Resilience**

If you are feeling stressed, anxious, or emotionally unsafe, or if you are experiencing upsetting memories - turn to the “My Resources for Resilience” page that you have completed for a reminder on how to reach out, recharge, and take care of yourself. We will also discuss some of the warning signs and challenges you may face and how you can manage them.

**Know the signs of feeling emotionally unsafe**

By monitoring your emotions, you can recognize when you start to feel scared, ashamed, or alone while you are writing, remembering, or sharing your story. Monitoring your emotions can help you identify parts of your story that make you feel emotionally unsafe.

The Give an Hour\* campaign identified five signs to look for that may signal you are in emotional pain and might need to take a break from writing, remembering, or sharing your story:

- \* You notice sudden or gradual changes to your personality.
- \* You begin to notice feeling angry, anxious, agitated, or moody.
- \* You begin to pull away from family and friends, and/or stop taking part in activities you enjoy.
- \* You may begin to neglect your self-care and engage in risky behavior.
- \* You may notice you are feeling overcome with hopelessness and overwhelmed by the circumstances you are writing, remembering, or sharing about.

Whether or not you notice these signs or just recognize that you feel badly and are experiencing any form of emotional pain then take a break, reach out to your support network, or consider using any of the self-care resources you put together in this section.

**Trigger warning: Be prepared for the possibility of flashbacks and upsetting memories.** Flashbacks, nightmares, and intrusive memories are extremely common for survivors, especially in the first few months following the assault. However, it is not uncommon for survivors to experience these things for much longer. There are specific things that you can do to reduce the stress and upsetting memories that may arise as you are completing the workbook:

\*You can learn more about Give an Hour and the five signs to obtain more tools about wellness by visiting the Campaign to Change Direction at [www.changedirection.org](http://www.changedirection.org).

- \* Try to anticipate when they are likely to occur by understanding what your triggers may be. Some common triggers can include anniversary dates; people or places associated with the rape; and certain sights, sounds, or smells. If you are aware of what triggers may cause an upsetting reaction, you'll be in a better position to understand what's happening and take steps to calm yourself down.
- \* Be aware of your body's danger signals. Your body and emotions give you clues when you're starting to feel stressed and unsafe. These clues include feeling tense, holding your breath, racing thoughts, shortness of breath, hot flashes, dizziness, and nausea.
- \* Take immediate steps to calm and soothe yourself. If you notice any of the above symptoms, it's important to quickly act to calm yourself down before they spiral out of control. One of the quickest and most effective ways to calm anxiety and panic is to slow down your breathing.

It is not always possible to prevent flashbacks, but there are specific things you can do to deal with flashbacks. If you find yourself losing touch with the present and feeling like the sexual violence is happening all over again, there are actions you can take:

- \* Accept that it is happening and reassure yourself that this is a flashback, NOT reality. The goal is to tell yourself that the traumatic event is over and you survived. Here's a simple script that can help: *"I am feeling [panicked, frightened, overwhelmed, etc.] because I am remembering the sexual violence (rape, molestation, assault), but as I look around I can see that the violence isn't happening right now and I'm NOT in actual danger."*
- \* Do a grounding exercise to ground yourself in the present. Grounding techniques can help you direct your attention away from the flashback and back to your present environment. For example, try tapping or touching your arms or describing your actual environment and what you see when look around—name the place where you are, the current date, 3 things you see when you look around, and identify what sounds you hear.

Find Additional Tools & Resources online at [WomensJusticeNOW.org/MyStoryWorkbook](https://WomensJusticeNOW.org/MyStoryWorkbook).

## Explore

- \* *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook* by Davis, Eschelman, McKay, and Fanning
- \* *The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion: Freeing Yourself from Destructive Thoughts and Emotions* by C.K. Gremer
- \* *Psychological Trauma and Adult Survivor* by McCann and Pearlman
- \* *Taking the sense of safety beyond the therapy setting* by M. B. Williams
- \* *The Body Keeps Score* by Dr. van der Kolk
- \* *In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness* by Peter A. Levine.
- \* *Start Where You Are: A Journal for Self-Exploration* by Meera Lee Patel
- \* *Made Out of Stars: A Journal for Self-Realization* by Meera Lee Patel
- \* Gift from Within, [giftfromwithin.org](https://giftfromwithin.org), aims to help rekindle hope and restore dignity to trauma survivors.
- \* Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network, [rainn.org](https://rainn.org), supports sexual assault survivors and offers resources

# My Resources for Resilience

## My Peaceful Space

Take a moment to identify what space you will use to write in your workbook and what elements you would like to utilize to create a peaceful space.

<b>My Space:</b>	<b>My Elements:</b>
------------------	---------------------

## My Support Network

Take a moment now and write down three people (if you need to, please add a support number listed in the introduction section) who you can include in your support network. The people you list can offer a caring presence to help you talk through difficult emotions or situations.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

### Helplines

*National Sexual Assault Hotline*

1-800-656-HOPE (4673)

*National Domestic Violence Hotline*

1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

*National Victim of Crime Hotline*

1-855-4-VICTIM (855-484-2846)

## My Emotion Tracker

An example of an Emotions Tracker can be found in the appendix. Alternatively, you can create your own emotions tracker in your diary or journal. And for those of you who prefer, you can download an app, such as: iMoodJournal, Moodtrack Diary or Moodlytics.

Take a moment to identify how you might like to track your moods.

What method will you use? \_\_\_\_\_

## My Self-Care Menu

Here is a sampling of self-care and stress reduction ideas you can choose from:

- \* **Exercise** like jogging, biking, zumba, or walking; relaxation techniques like yoga, massage, music, hot baths; prayer and/or meditation.
- \* **Listen** to music. Make a playlist of songs you know either cheer you up, soothe you, or help you process your feelings.
- \* **Discover** your playful and creative “self.” Playing and creating are important for healing from hurt. Find time for noncompetitive play – start or resume a creative activity like playing an instrument, painting, gardening, handicrafts, etc.
- \* **Take “time outs.”** Give yourself permission to take quiet moments to reflect, relax, and rejuvenate – especially during times you feel stressed or unsafe.
- \* **Read.** Reading can be a relaxing, healing activity. Try to create short periods of uninterrupted leisure reading time.

Identify at least four self-care ideas you will have in mind as you begin this workbook that can help you feel supported and healthy:

1.	2.	3.	4.
----	----	----	----

### My Goals

*What goals do you have for yourself as you begin this workbook?*

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

*How confident do you feel about achieving these goals? If you believe reaching your goals may be challenging, you may want to revisit or adjust your goals to be more realistic.*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

*What tools and tips outlined in this section will you use to meet your goals?*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## SECTION 2

# The Power and Science of Storytelling

Telling stories is one of the most powerful means that people have to influence, teach, humanize, inspire, and mobilize. Stories convey messages about our culture, societal conditions, personal history, and the values that unite people. Storytelling creates human connection.

Storytelling is one of our brain's most complex activities. Connecting our most primitive emotional responses with higher order thinking, storytelling enables our ability to learn, grow, and build community. Stories teach us to love, to forgive others, to survive, to be just, and to transform. They can move us to laughter or tears, and they inspire empathy, human connection, and action.

Below is a story shared by educator, storyteller, and co-creator of this workbook, Roxanna Azari, that you can either watch or read. The story is not about sexual violence.

As you are listening or reading the story, think about what you are learning about this person. How? Also, how are you feeling as you follow along? Read the shortened transcript, "On Our Way to Ellis Island" on Page 14. To watch, visit <https://worldchannel.org/episode/sfts-rain-shine/>. Roxy's story begins at 3:22.

**Now that you have watched the video or read the transcript, use the space below to reflect on your experience.**

■ *How did you feel while listening to or reading the story? What thoughts or emotions came up for you? What did you learn about the person? How did you learn that about them?*

---

---

---

---

---

■ *What are the elements of this story that may have moved you or that you believe will stick with you?*

---

---

---

---

---

## A STORY

# On Our Way to Ellis Island

I am working 3 demanding jobs, and tomorrow is Sunday. It's the one day I have all week to myself. All I am daydreaming about is putting my feet up and relaxing when I get home. That's when I get a call from my 85 year old-great-uncle who asks me if I can give his friend a tour of New York City tomorrow. He tells me that his friend is visiting America from Iran for the first time and that it has been his lifelong dream to visit the States. He tells me his friend doesn't speak English, and asks if I would also be his translator. Without hesitation, I say, "Yes of course!"

The next day, I meet his friend and while he is 76, he speaks with eager 5-year-old eyes. He is just so excited – about everything. The air, NYC magnets, public transportation. I kid you not he spoke to me about pigeons. I told him, "Oh my goodness, if you like our pigeons, wait till you see our rats!"

Everywhere we go, I am speaking in Farsi, and I am translating interactions and signs for him. He informs me that it has taken years to obtain his tourist visa, and it has been his dream to see America. Every 2 minutes like clock-work he keeps saying... "You are so lucky to be born here to live here... to be born here!" And one point he brings up the pigeons again and says, "Even your pigeons look more free."

He then asks if we can go see the Statue of Liberty, because he has dreamt of seeing it up close. I tell him "Yes of course, but it is going to rain soon, so we should do it now. The last thing I want is for you to get sick!" And so, we get on this boat to go to Ellis Island. The clouds are looming over us, and there is a couple wearing bright yellow ponchos in front of us and everything feels so beautiful because his joy is so contagious. And on the ferry, he turns to me and passionately declares in Farsi: "I have fallen in love America!"

He asks me if it's okay to take a photo of this moment I say, "Yes, of course but you should do it soon because it is about to rain." He says, "Let me ask! Let me ask! I want to practice my English." I tell him, "Of course, no problem." He leans in towards the couple in front of us, and begins rocking back and forth, as if it's almost his turn to jump rope. He has an accent but its very clear what he is saying, "Exsqkuuz mi"...There's No response..."Exsqkuuz mi" No response..... "Exsqkuuz mi?"....and I am sitting here thinking okay maybe they don't hear him or understand him. I chime in with my American tongue, "Excuse me, Sir? Would you mind ta-" Before I can even finish my sentence the man's wife twitches her neck and her husband snatches her arm, and in a stern, mid-western accent warns her: "Don't help them."

The silence that takes over my body feels piercing. My heart is somehow both shattered and numb all in the same moment. At this point it is raining, which is ironically convenient because it supports me in successfully hiding that tears are streaming down my face. All I keep thinking is how can I translate this moment to this man who literally just spent the last two hours going on about how he is in love with America. How do I tell him that this same America that he loves doesn't love him back? As I am bracing myself, he turns to me with a huge smile and he asks, "What did they say?" And another tear falls. Without me saying a single word, he knows. Hatred doesn't need translation.

He somberly puts his head down, and it's the first moment in our meeting that I don't see the smile that has felt like home the whole day. He then suddenly jolts up, looks at me, and says, "Look there it is! The Statue of Liberty! Come come! Let's just take a selfie!" He literally uses the word "selfie" which I had no idea had traveled to Iran. As we are taking the selfie, another couple approaches us and asks if we need a hand with the photo. Before I can say anything, he is already on it, jumping up and down with a huge smile, "YES PHOTO! Please! Thank you!" Then he motions with his hands if he can take a photo for them. And they understand him. Without him saying a word they understand him. It was as though love also doesn't need a translation.

As he takes their picture, he turns to me and in Farsi he says, "You mustn't let people like that get to you. There is still beauty in the world."

Great. Keep these reflections in mind as you will need them in the next section.

***NOW, IT'S YOUR TURN TO WRITE A STORY.***

Take a moment to brainstorm one of the following:

- \* A time you had an unexpected adventure
- \* A time you tried something new
- \* A time you couldn't stop laughing
- \* A moment with your first crush
- \* A moment you were brave

**Got your story? Write it in as much detail as possible here:**

*Who were you with? What were you doing? What was being said? Where were you?*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Great work. Now that you have written out your story, answer the following questions:**

*How did you feel listening to or reading the other person's story? How did you feel while writing your own?*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Keep your experiences in the forefront of your mind, as you read about the science of storytelling.

### **The Science of Storytelling**

What is happening in our brains when we tell and listen or read stories? Neuroscience studies reveal that when we tell stories, three brain processes engage at once:\*

1. Memories get accessed.
2. Emotions come alive.
3. The desire to act is ignited.

**But the most powerful part?** The same three things happen in our brains as we listen to or read someone else's story. Our brains are constantly searching for ways to connect with other people through storytelling. Neuroscientists call this process "mental mirroring." While sharing or listening to stories, brain chemicals—like cortisol, dopamine, and oxytocin—are also released that assist with formulating memories, regulating our emotions, and building empathy. It's as if stories give us a little positive jolt to our systems.

And, while that is all going on at a deep, intuitive level, storytelling is also working with your rational brain, helping you make sense and meaning out of new situations. It is through story that we form and examine our own beliefs, as well as figure out how they correlate with the truths and beliefs of others. Through listening to others' stories, we gain new perspectives and a better understanding of the world around us. We challenge and expand our own perceptions by exploring how others see and understand the world.

**Storytelling sparks action.** When we are working with stories of sexual violence, it's important to think about the kind of action we want to inspire (if any) when sharing our stories. Some of you may have come to this workbook for catharsis and healing, others may be trying to piece together your trauma, while some may be here to learn how to share your story to spark political, social, or personal change. Whatever your goals may be, storytelling can help you to trust your own voice and advocate for yourself.

**We are all made up of stories and memories.** The stories we tell ourselves shape our perceptions of ourselves and the world around us. Our stories have the power to support our recovery and healing or to deepen our pain and trauma. Throughout this workbook, you will have several spaces to work on reframing the stories you tell yourself while keeping in mind that our stories can have a significant impact on our self-beliefs and self-confidence.

Many of you may not have had the space to write or share your stories about sexual violence, abuse or harassment on your own terms. Perhaps you've never had the chance to tell the full story of what you experienced and how it impacted you in the way that you wanted to tell it.

\*Based on Dr. Carol Barash's review of neuroscience studies in her founding of Story2, a leading storytelling company that has helped hundreds of thousands of students and professionals tell their stories. Story2 bases their platform on extensive research about the power and science of storytelling.



## **THIS WORKBOOK IS YOUR SPACE AND NO ONE ELSE'S.**

The following exercise is a space for you to examine the stories that may have shaped you, but that are not authentic to you.

What stories about your experience of gender-based or sexual violence have shaped you or your past? What are the stories that don't feel authentic to you? What are the stories you want to release?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

What are some of the parts of your story you wanted to share but have never been able to? Or what parts of your story do you feel that you don't want to share?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### **Explore**

- \* *Storycatcher: Making Sense of Our Lives Through the Power and Practice of Story* by Christina Baldwin
- \* *Storyworthy: Engage, Teach, Persuade, and Change Your Life through the Power of Storytelling* by Matthew Dicks
- \* *The Science of Storytelling: Why Stories Make us Human and How to Tell Them Better* by Will Storr
- \* The Moth: The Art and Craft of Storytelling @ [themoth.org](http://themoth.org)
- \* Podcasts and articles @ [storyteller.net](http://storyteller.net)
- \* Story2: Interactive Tools for Building Your Story @ [storybuilder.story2.com](http://storybuilder.story2.com) and [story2.com](http://story2.com)

## SECTION 3

# Understanding the Stages of Writing, Healing, and Compassionate Reframing

We are all storytellers. We make sense of the world we live in, we create meaning, and we explain things that happened to us and others. We largely do this in an informal manner, like when we are chatting with friends, sending a text, writing a letter, or posting on social media. This section will help you understand the benefits of writing or telling your story and will guide you through exploring your experience.

### What can writing do for survivors?

All forms of sexual violence can be deeply traumatic and can impact a survivor's physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological well-being. Trauma is complex in its impacts, and recovery from it is equally as complex. Each survivor reacts to forms of sexual violence in their own unique way and needs to find their own path to healing. Recovery from sexual trauma is a gradual, ongoing process, but there are steps you can take to reclaim and reframe your experience to enhance your healing by incorporating the injury, loss, pain, and changes caused by trauma and its aftermath.

Expressive writing and storytelling have been found to offer real psychological and physical benefits and aids in transforming pain and suffering into resilience. Research\* shows that writing about troubling issues improves our mental and physical health by giving us a space to channel, process and release negative emotions. Some benefits you may experience are:

- \* Improved mood
- \* Enhanced immune system functioning
- \* Reduced high blood pressure and cholesterol
- \* Reduced symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic disorder (PTSD)

### What transformation can come from writing and telling your story?

- \* Confidence that you can survive anything and a new awareness of your inner strength.
- \* A better understanding of your life's complexities.
- \* Acceptance of what was once too frightening to even think about.
- \* A deeper connection with your emotional and spiritual self.
- \* Respect and compassion for others who survived a trauma.

While healing and transformation is possible, it's important to also acknowledge that it can be a difficult journey at times. Any time you delve into something deep or uncomfortable, it

\*Studies by those in the forefront of this research -James Pennebaker, Ph.D of the University of Texas at Austin, and Joshua Smyth, Ph.D of Syracuse University - suggest that writing about emotions and stress can help improve functioning.

may lead you to tap into emotions that might be emotional and exhausting. It is important to know that when you tap into something really heavy, in the immediate it might feel really uncomfortable. But, when you work through something, the long-term gains can be quite positive. Allow yourself to sit in your discomfort – accepting it as a part of the process of healing and transformation. It might be helpful, too, to recognize that your feelings of discomfort or exhaustion can be a sign of progress.

Let's get started on some deeper work!

**FIVE STAGES OF WRITING YOUR STORY ON YOUR TERMS**

Sandra Marinella, MS MEd, is an award winning writing teacher and the author of, “The Story You Need to Tell,” which she wrote to help people cope with trauma, illness or loss through the art of writing. We have adapted her five stages of writing to help survivors of sexual violence develop strategies to write through difficult times in order to find their voice. We'll guide you through these stages. Take your time with each stage. You can do just one per sitting or day and come back to the next one whenever you're ready.

**STAGE 1**

**Experiencing Pain and Grief**

Reliving painful memories and experiences are a large part of the healing process. Unfortunately, there are no shortcuts when it comes to feeling grief. Getting in touch with your grief will be important as you start to write your story. Take some time now to reflect on what you have lost as a result of the sexual violence you experienced and write down those losses (if applicable). If you need assistance in identifying some of your losses and getting in touch with your grief, consider answering some of the following questions.

■ *Do you feel that someone has stolen something from you as a result of your experience? For example, your sense of safety, your confidence, your desire to be intimate, or your trust? Did you lose any relationships with special people as a result of your experience? Did you have to change a dream or goal that you had as a result of your experience? Were you robbed from having a special experience or opportunity because of the sexual violence?*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## STAGE 2

### **Breaking the Silence**

For some survivors, this stage begins with writing down all of their painful emotions and details of their experiences. It can serve as a helpful release of the pain and grief, especially if these emotions have been buried deep inside for a long time. Keep in mind that every emotion has a charge, and the positive or negative energy an emotion generates has a real and measurable impact on our bodies. The act of writing allows us to physically release some of that emotional charge. A release of emotions allows you to utilize your voice. Take time now to write down the details of your experience and the painful emotions that may come to mind that may be disturbing your peace. This should be a continuation to your writing exercises in the last section.

Expressive writing comes from your core, so write this part only for yourself. It is personal and emotional writing without regard to form or the other writing conventions like spelling, punctuation or verb agreement. It is best that you don't overthink it – just start. Write for 15 minutes on page 21 and then stop.

## STAGE 3

### **Accepting and Piecing Your Story Together**

Reaching acceptance about the pain you experienced as a result of sexual violence comes when you acknowledge the experience that occurred, express anger and grief about what was done to you, share what you lost as a result, start talking to others about the experience, and begin to understand your feelings about the experience.

At this stage, you can begin to move your emotions into a logical framework. Writing is profoundly helpful in doing this. Here are a few sentence starters that you can use to begin accepting and piecing your story together:

- \* What comes to mind when I think of my experience...
- \* What bothers me most about my experience(s) of sexual violence is/ are:...
- \* What I would like to understand is...
- \* I am hopeful that...
- \* What I have learned is...
- \* Perhaps it would help if...
- \* I knew I was faced with the biggest challenge when...
- \* The secret I still harbor about this experience is...
- \* The scars that I hide from this experience are...

# JUST WRITE



A large area of horizontal blue lines for writing, spanning most of the page width and height.



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**STAGE 4**

**Shifting Your Perspective and How You View Yourself**

This is a multi-step stage that requires you to zoom out and stand outside of your experience to see the complete picture. To do this, it is important to understand that your reactions to your experience of sexual violence – your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors – are a result of not only the details of the experience itself, but what happened afterwards. This may include how others may have reacted to what happened, how you coped, or how this experience may have shaped how you feel, act, or view yourself - consciously or subconsciously.

Healing from trauma often involves gaining a new perspective that allows you to view yourself after the experience differently – identifying who you are outside of this experience can help to decrease any power it may hold over you and your life. There are steps you can take to help reframe your perspective of yourself to support your healing. This includes looking at the details of your experience of sexual violence, examining your reactions, and understanding how the experience might have changed, shaped, or disrupted any deep beliefs about yourself, others, and the world around you.

To help you with this stage, we will utilize an adapted exercise written by Dr. Rosenbloom and Dr. Williams, authors of “Life After Trauma: A Workbook for Healing,” to provide you suggestions for thinking through your experiences and finding a perspective of yourself that will support your healing and well-being moving forward.

## Steps for Thinking Through Your Experience

**STEP ONE**

**Sort Out Your Experience**

There is no right or wrong way to understand your experience.

Think about your own reactions to your experience first and then the reactions you may have received and ask yourself:

\* What ideas or beliefs did I make up about myself because of what happened?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**STEP TWO**

**Identify Any Changes to Your Beliefs**

Beliefs are meanings we hold about ourselves, other people, and the world around us. There are five basic needs that all people have that shape our core beliefs:

1. Safety
2. Trust
3. Control
4. Self-Esteem
5. Intimacy and Connectedness with Others

We develop beliefs from what has happened to us, from watching what happens to people around us and from what we have been told to believe from people in our lives. These beliefs become part of who we are and how we function. It is possible for beliefs to change. When we are traumatized, our basic beliefs can be impacted dramatically.

■ *Has your traumatic experience changed your beliefs about some things? In which situations have you noticed this?*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

■ *What lessons did you draw about yourself? About other people? The world?*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### STEP THREE

#### **Identify Your Underlying Beliefs**

Some of our beliefs may even be unconscious, and we may not be aware of how these beliefs affect our actions. When we identify these underlying beliefs, we can discover which ones may limit or hold us back and which ones can be empowering and help drive us toward the life we want to live.

■ *Are there any beliefs you may now hold about yourself after your experience that you believe protect or help you? For example, “What happened to me was a trauma, and it did affect me; ignoring it wasn’t helpful anymore,” or “I am not alone. The difficulties I’m facing and the feelings I am going through are very common among survivors of sexual assault,” or “I know this was not my fault.”*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

■ *What are underlying beliefs you may have that hold you back or get in your way of healing? For example, “I should have responded differently,” or “I will never be the same again,” or “It must have been my fault.”*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



## STAGE 5

### Redefine How You View Yourself Today

This stage is not asking you to reimagine your assault or to find any “silver lining” in your trauma. This stage asks you to reimagine how you view yourself during and after your trauma and to release any possible self-blame you’ve given or interpretations you’ve made about yourself that do not serve your healing.

Are there other ways to reinterpret how you view yourself during and after your experience?

#### Here are some sentence starters to help you answer those questions:

- \* Tuning into my body now....
- \* I can honestly say now...
- \* These were things that used to get in my way of healing, but today...
- \* I know I am not responsible for...
- \* Three things that give me hope...
- \* Something I can now celebrate about myself is...
- \* Although it feels like I can never get back \_\_\_\_, today I know...
- \* I know it is okay to...
- \* I learned that these are the qualities that I admire in myself...
- \* The ways I cope are....
- \* It feeds my soul when...
- \* I know I am not alone because...
- \* A major obstacle I overcame was

---

---

---

---

---

## Explore

- \* Step out of Your Story: Writing Exercises to Reframe and Transform Your Life by K Schneiderman
- \* Writing Ourselves Whole: Using the Power of Your Own Creativity to Recover and Heal from Sexual Trauma by Jen Cross
- \* The Year After Journal: Your Guide to Reclaiming Personal Power After Rape by Ashley Warner
- \* The Story You Need to Tell: Writing to Heal From Trauma, Illness or Loss by Sandra Marinella
- \* Life After Trauma: A Workbook for Healing by Dr. Rosenbloom and Dr. Williams
- \* Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within by Natalie Goldberg
- \* The Artist’s Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity by Julia Cameron
- \* Online resources to help you write your own story: @ blurb.com/blog/10-story-writing-websites/

## SECTION 4

# Using the Power of Your Resilient Voice to Bring Your Own Words to Life

Before we continue working on your story, let's first acknowledge your resilience as someone who has experienced sexual or gender-based violence. Take some time to check in with how you are feeling. Please remember to be compassionate with yourself. You are doing difficult and meaningful work. Incorporate ways to acknowledge and celebrate yourself and your journey. In this next section, you will have space to refine, redefine, and continue working on your story.

## Resilience

- \* Resilience is the process of adapting as best you can in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, or significant sources of stress.
- \* Being resilient does not mean that you don't experience stress, emotional upheaval, or suffering.
- \* Being resilient should not be equated with mental toughness. It includes working through emotional pain and suffering.
- \* You can learn to become resilient by being flexible, adaptable and committed to perseverance and by using a combination of inner strengths and outer resources. There isn't a universal formula – all people are different.

## Keep in mind:

- \* You can bring a new perspective to a story from your past, and to what comes after it.
- \* You can break your silence.
- \* You can keep rewriting and transforming.

## How can we use resilience as a framework to tell our story?

Thinking of yourself as the main character in your life story, not the trauma, can help you shift your perspectives on situations. Instead of staying stuck in the same storyline, you can break a common habit of telling stories about your life in a way that you forget you are not merely just a character in a story to whom things happen to, but one who likely has demonstrated bravery, courage, and resilience. You can be the creator of your story and tell a story that embraces the personal victories you have achieved that have built your character – like facing a fear, changing your attitude about yourself, or overcoming an obstacle. This, of course, does not excuse or undo the injustices you experienced, but it can support you in celebrating your character and your strength.

## Possible new ways to tell your story:

- \* Focus on how you moved forward positively from the emotional upheaval and crisis you experienced by focusing on the obstacle and challenges you overcame.

- \* Focus on how you can take care of the “unfinished business” of your experience and convey your feelings, expectations, and intentions for yourself and others.
- \* Focus on using a metaphor to tell your story using poetic writing.
- \* Focus on the affirmatives, like your awareness of your best qualities and strengths that you utilized to cope/ survive/ thrive, and how you want to live your life in the future.
- \* Focus on your legacy by writing about your values, what you most want to be known for, what major lessons did you learn that you want to pass onto others, what were your turning points in your recovery from sexual violence and what were any epiphanies that took place.
- \* Focus on who you are in the present as a result of what you experienced. You can achieve this by examining six aspects of mindfulness: your current awareness, what you give your attention to now, what you have come to accept, what you appreciate about yourself and your body now, and your current personal affirmation.

## Time to Freewrite!

The key to freewriting is to write non-stop for a set period of time without worrying about grammar or tone or “how it sounds.” Write what comes to mind. As you complete this freewrite, check in with yourself to see if your old story still serves you. The goal of this freewrite is for you to consider the resilience and reframing perspectives you explored earlier, as you write your story. Think about whether you can find a new perspective, one that will better support you.

- \* Find a comfortable spot.
- \* Forget about rules! Grammar, punctuation, and spelling should NOT matter. Just write.
- \* Write for at least 15 minutes.
- \* Write as often and as much you would like. Always giving it your best. Freewriting can become a regular practice.
- \* When you’re done, re-read and reflect on what you have written. You may be surprised at the stories or thoughts you hold within.
- \* Develop a personal writing practice that works for you. Every writer is unique, and by finding how you write best, you will grow your words and your voice.
- \* Everyone has a story to tell. Focus on your truth.



## Structuring your story

Now that you have worked through your story and experience in a number of different ways, you can take what you've written and brainstorm an outline for the story you want to tell on your terms. Where do you want your story to begin? And, where do you want your story to end? There is no right or wrong order regarding which of these questions to answer first. Generally, many people find that starting at the end can be helpful, as it can often serve as a north star for where you want your story to go. Take about 5-10 minutes to write for each of these sections to ensure your story has a clear beginning, middle, and end that feels authentic to the story you want to tell. It can be helpful for this section to ask yourself if you have turned to this workbook to share with yourself, a loved one, or a large audience. If the intention of sharing your story happens to be to spark action, this is something you can consider brainstorming for your ending.

**Beginning:** Review your prior writing. *What feels like the right place for your story to begin?*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Middle:** Often this can look like demonstrating how you overcame an obstacle using detailed language. *Is there a point like this that you would like to highlight?*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Ending:** *What feels like a powerful place to end your story?* Keep the action and resilience you may want to inspire in mind (if applicable).

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## What makes a story memorable and compelling?

Often, in general storytelling, for larger audiences the more details and descriptions that you can include in a story, the more you will place your reader or listener right in the moment with you. However, given that with sexual and gender-based violence we often don't want to re-trigger ourselves or others, we encourage you to think about what details and descriptions you feel comfortable sharing when writing your story. This may mean that certain details are left out - and that is completely okay. This is your story.

Here's some suggestions on using details and descriptions in safe ways when speaking about your experience.

**1. Show Don't Tell.** As much as possible, don't tell us what you did, show us how you did it. Showing often uses description and action words to depict a story for the reader/listener. Telling is a more general statement of what happened.

*Examples:*

**Telling:**

I was sad to see my daughter leave.

**Showing:**

I wiped the tears down my face as I watched my daughter board the airplane.

**Telling:**

She is scared.

**Showing:**

My sister wakes up screaming and starts shaking uncontrollably. I grab her and hold her close. I remind her that it is just a dream and that she is safe.

In the telling examples above, the reader or listener is told the emotions. In the showing examples, they are given a descriptive picture of what is happening that causes them to vividly see, follow, and be in the story with you.

**2. Use Your Authentic Voice.** Your story is yours—no one else's. It's important you stay true to yourself as you tell it. As you begin practicing, pretend you are telling the story to a friend or loved one in your life. If it's an option, it can be helpful to actually practice telling your story to people who are close to you so they can also give you feedback and help you feel more at ease if your intention is to later share with larger groups.

**3. Stay connected to why you may want to share your story (if you think you'll share it with anyone).** When sharing about sexual and gender-based violence, it's important to stay connected with what inspired you to come forward to share—as that will drive the tone and delivery of your story. Did you want to share for self-healing? Therapeutic practices? Inspiring other survivors? Educating others? Making people feel less alone? Getting lawmakers to take sexual assault seriously? Allow the passion and drive that brought you to this moment to support you in telling your story.

**Now that you have reviewed supporting frameworks, tips, and tools to shape your story, take your time and take a look back at ALL of your writing in this workbook.** Use the space on the next page to re-write your final story. You get to decide the message of your story and your audience. Is it for yourself? Friends and family? The public? There is no right or wrong answer. If you are thinking about sharing your story publicly for political or social action, be sure to review Section 5 before doing your final freewrite and Section 6 before sharing!



## SECTION 5

# Sharing Your Story, On Your Terms

This workbook was designed to meet every individual where they are in their healing process. This is in no way intended to influence people with where, how, or even if they should or should not share their story out loud. Deciding to share your story is a completely personal decision. You are in the driver's seat. **The following sections are here IF you have turned to this workbook because you are passionate about sharing your story to inspire political or social action.**

Some ideas for sharing your story in political and social contexts are:

- \* Encouraging others to seek help with their experience of sexual violence, by sharing your personal experience of recovery and healing, or highlighting challenges you experienced to improve services and resources to help survivors.
- \* Educating elected officials, leaders of institutions, policymakers, and others about the issues surrounding sexual violence and the needs of survivors.
- \* Speaking to the general public or the media to humanize the issues of sexual violence, reduce misconceptions and myths about sexual violence, and provide firsthand knowledge about your experience.

Before you shape your story to tell it publicly, be sure to consider how and when you want to share it and to think through the possible outcomes of doing so. The next section, *Making an Informed Decision About Telling Your Story, On Your Terms*, can help guide you.

### How do you tell a story for social change?

Everyone has their own ways of writing and telling stories for social change. There is no one-size fits all when writing about social inequities. Below are some guiding questions to ask yourself that will help you focus your goals.

- \* What is the message I want to share?
- \* Why is it important that we have more spaces to talk about this?
- \* Why is it critical that action needs to be taken?
- \* What does the action I want to inspire look like?
- \* How can I use my writing or personal story to give a face or name to the statistics?
- \* How can I write about this issue without it sounding too much like a lecture (ie. not talking **at** people but **with** people)?
- \* Am I speaking from my heart, and is this my authentic voice?

### Tips for telling your story publicly

Telling your story publicly can be challenging, but it can also be a release, a part of your



healing, or an empowering experience. It can be helpful to remember that the injustice you are speaking about is bigger than you - and while our stories are intimate, vulnerable, and about us, they are also a part of a much wider structural injustice. Our stories are our testaments to how the personal is still political.

For those of you that plan on speaking at public events, there is a world of public speaking tips that can help you. Below are some key tactical tips to support you in speaking at public events where your intention may be to share and also spark action.

**1. Be clear on what you want to share, and practice sharing**

Sometimes dipping your toes in the water can prepare you for the plunge! Make sure you have spent some time feeling comfortable with sharing your story, and remind yourself of any commitments you made on what you will and won't share. Then, try sharing your story with loved ones and trusted, supportive friends before speaking in a larger public forum. This can help put you at ease and help you get comfortable telling your story. It can also help to reduce any anxiety you may have.

**2. Have a storytelling plan in place**

Experienced presenters will often have markers in mind to help propel them through their presentation. This means being clear on the beginning, middle and end of your story. Think of this as your own personal story map that will give you a clear direction for where your story needs to go and help you get through any moments in which you add or forget something (in the case where you aren't reading prepared remarks from a page).

**3. Practice in front of a mirror or a recording device**

While it may seem vulnerable, practicing in front of a mirror or recording yourself on camera can support you by helping you become aware of your body language, tone, and speed. Practicing in this way will help you identify what unintentional mannerisms you may want to change and which ones you may want to embrace. Sometimes you may notice that your body is trying to communicate through your movements. Go with the flow. Your body is trying to support you in communicating your message. Don't be afraid to welcome its support fully and find ways to have it become a part of your practice.

**4. Practice with distractions**

It can be helpful to practice with distractions - i.e. maybe have the tv or stereo on in the background. This will support you with staying on topic, no matter what kind of movement or background noise there may be in the audience.

**5. Be intentional with your tone and projection**

Get in touch with what emotions you want to convey and find the places in your story where it feels natural to bring them out. While practicing, it may be helpful to note or highlight places in the margins where you want to stress or project something in a different tone. Practicing your tone and projection in this manner will support you with accessing the emotion naturally when you share your story.

**6. Speak slowly and incorporate silence**

When speaking publicly, our adrenaline can often kick-in making us unaware of how fast we may be speaking. Practice speaking slowly. Almost unnaturally slowly. Record yourself as you practice as it will help you hear your speed, but keep in mind that on

the day you may naturally speed up. Thus, it's important to practice speaking sl-ow-ly and to embrace silent pauses. The words you are saying are important and needed. It's critical that they get to be heard and that you fully believe that they deserve to be heard.

## **7. Embrace any nerves and anxiety**

Keep in mind, most people, no matter how seasoned they may be at public speaking, get nervous. It is natural to feel nervous before, during, or even after you speak. This in NO way means you will do poorly. That adrenaline rush can often just mean that you care about the subject you are speaking about. The rush can also support you in feeling more alert and present. It can be challenging for many of us to share parts of our experiences that are so intimate, personal, and vulnerable to a room of people. Try to view any nerves and anxiety as strengths instead of thinking of them as things there to harm you.

### **The 3-Minute Rule**

Here's how national and international poetry slam artist and co-creator of this workbook, Roxanna Azari, deals with public speaking anxiety: the 3-minute rule.

*People don't believe me when I tell them that I am shy. They always say things like 'Yeah right. You just performed in front of 1,500 people.' They don't know the amount of self-doubt, anxiety, and self-bullying that happens in the background leading up to the moment I step on stage. But that's my truth. As a teen, I created a system for myself. I called it my '3-minute rule.' I honestly still use it all these years later. What I tell myself is that for 3 minutes all my fears, anxieties, and worries are not as important as the message I am here to share. I say, the topic I am here to talk about today is much bigger and more important than my fears. So I negotiate with myself - I say for 3-minutes...all those fears need to take the back seat. I reassure myself that all the fears are welcome back after - but for those 3 minutes, they can't be more important than the social issue at hand. Now that I perform more and more, the 3-minutes have increased to 2-3 hours.*

No matter where on the spectrum of comfort you fall when it comes to speaking and sharing your story, Roxy's 3-minute rule may be a tool that can support you. The tool encourages you to connect with your impact and message - it acknowledges your fears are there, but it reminds you that your message is far more important.

## **8. Command the space**

Try your best to be confident in your vulnerability:

- \* Know your message and stay connected to why sharing your story is important.
- \* Own your story. Know that it is a powerful contribution to this movement.
- \* You, your experience, and your story matter. Speak with the intention that your words are here to move people to action.

## **9. Make eye contact**

Maintaining eye contact while speaking about something deeply personal can be difficult, but it is a powerful way to connect with the audience members who will feel you are talking directly to them. As difficult as it may be - prepare yourself by practicing looking up and around so that it can feel more natural the day of your share. Remember that eye contact helps create a connection.

## Finding places to share your story on your terms

Below are some suggestions for places to share your story on your terms when you are looking for public platforms to share.

\* **RAINN (Rape, Abuse, Incest National Network)** has a Speakers Bureau that connects survivors with opportunities to share their stories and educate the public through speaking events, school events, and media interviews.

**Contact:** [rainn.org/join-rainn-speakers-bureau](http://rainn.org/join-rainn-speakers-bureau) or [speakersbureau@rainn.org](mailto:speakersbureau@rainn.org)

\* **Take Back the Night.** Many colleges, universities, and rape crisis centers sponsor “Take Back the Night” rallies at which student survivors speak about their victimization. The Take Back the Night Foundation lists organizations across the country that hold events.

**Contact:** [takebackthenight.org](http://takebackthenight.org) or your local college or university’s women’s center

\* **The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC)** has a list of local anti-sexual violence organizations. April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month and many rape crisis centers host events during the month honoring sexual assault survivors. The events include rallies, press conferences, and workshops.

**Contact:** 1-877-739-3895 or [nsvrc.org/organizations](http://nsvrc.org/organizations)

\* **Rape Crisis Centers.** Volunteer at your local rape crisis center. Many rape crisis centers encourage survivors to become prevention educators or ask for their assistance in workshops and trainings.

**Contact:** Call RAINN affiliate at 1-800-656-HOPE

\* **Crime Victims’ Agencies.** You may also find it helpful to connect with these agencies where you can learn about special events and programs that could lead to speaking opportunities.

**Contact:** The Office for Victims of Crime at [ovc.ojp.gov/news](http://ovc.ojp.gov/news)

\* **Elected Officials.** If there’s a specific policy concern you may have or even a proposed law to address gender-based violence, consider reaching out to your local elected officials. Your story can be a powerful tool in getting legislation passed or in getting your legislator’s attention and moving them to action. Telling your story is a key part of effective advocacy.

**Find your representative:** [ballotpedia.org/Who\\_represents\\_me](http://ballotpedia.org/Who_represents_me)

\* **Organizations & Campaigns Accepting Online Stories.** You can also submit your written story online to any of the following organizations that collect and share survivor stories (consider whether or not you are comfortable using your full name, a pseudonym, or your initials):

**Out of the Shadows’** mission is to raise awareness and educate and activate the public on sexual assault and abuse issues.

**Contact:** [outoftheshadows.today/share-my-story](http://outoftheshadows.today/share-my-story)

**Darkness to Light** is dedicated to preventing child sexual abuse

**Contact:** [d2l.org/get-involved/share-your-story](http://d2l.org/get-involved/share-your-story)

**Break the Silence Against Domestic Violence** serves victims, survivors, and families affected by domestic violence

**Contact:** [breakthesilencedv.org/share-a-story](http://breakthesilencedv.org/share-a-story)

**World Without Exploitation** is a website dedicated to ending human trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation, collects stories of survivors of these abuses

**Contact:** [worldwithoutexploitation.org/share-your-story](http://worldwithoutexploitation.org/share-your-story)

**Survivor Stories NOW** is an online campaign collecting stories to illustrate the need for a strong Violence Against Women Act (VAWA)

**Contact:** [survivorstoriesnow.org](http://survivorstoriesnow.org)

## 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)

## 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?*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

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?*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

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?*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## 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?*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## 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?*

---

---

---

---

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?*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

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?*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

#### **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?*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

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

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



*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.*

---

---

---

---

---

*What can I do to ensure my safety?*

---

---

---

---

---

**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?*

---

---

---

---

---

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

---

---

---

---

---

---

*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?*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**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?*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

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

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**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?*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

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

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### **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**

- \* [Sharing Your Story: How to Think through Your Options](http://www.barcc.org), Boston Area Rape Crisis Center @ [www.barcc.org](http://www.barcc.org)
- \* [Your Voice, Your Choice: A Survivor's Media Guide](http://www.victimrights.org), Victims Rights Law Center, [www.victimrights.org](http://www.victimrights.org)

# YOU DID IT!

## You've completed the My Story, My Terms workbook.

Thank you for your bravery, courage, vulnerability, and trust. This work is not easy, and we hope you are proud of your perseverance! Throughout this reflective process, you took time to honor your resilience and strength. We encourage you to continue to carry this strength and self-compassion with you as you move forward.

As a reminder, you can find supplemental exercises and resources to continue supporting you with your healing in the online appendix at [WomensJusticeNOW.org/MyStoryWorkbook](https://WomensJusticeNOW.org/MyStoryWorkbook).

### **My Story, My Terms Workshops & Programs**

This workbook is rooted in the curriculum of our transformative storytelling workshop, “My Story, My Terms,” which offers a safe space for survivors to reframe and reclaim their stories and experiences in the #MeToo era. Women’s Justice NOW launched the trauma-informed workshop in New York City in the spring of 2020. If you are interested in learning more, please visit [WomensJusticeNOW.org/MyStoryWorkbook](https://WomensJusticeNOW.org/MyStoryWorkbook) or email us at [contact@womensjusticenow.org](mailto:contact@womensjusticenow.org).

