
HOW TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE BY TELLING YOUR STORY

A GUIDE FOR NEWBIES (OR “OLDIES” NEEDING A
REFRESHER)



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Introduction

A family member's personal story is the most powerful weapon a family member has in bringing change to mental health services. We find, however, that this powerful weapon is often blunted or discounted for a variety of reasons. Some individuals fail to stay on message and stray off onto unrelated paths. Others are uncomfortable in public forums. Their lack of confidence diminishes the effect of their message. Still others are more comfortable playing the role of victim and underscore their messages with anger or emotion, which almost never produces the desired results. Effective public speaking requires a skill set that can be taught. The goal of this manual is to teach family members how to effectively tell their personal story in a compelling fashion in five to ten minutes. The outcomes of successful completion include enhanced public speaking ability and greater self-confidence.

At a meeting a few years ago, dignitaries including a state senator, the mayor, a city council member, and the chief of police sat at one table. At other tables sat professionals from state and local agencies. During the event, a former senator spoke positively about Systems of Care in Oklahoma. The director of Systems of Care for the entire state explained its virtues. The audience gave each their polite applause.

Then a grandmother struggling to get her four grandchildren out of foster care stepped in front of the group. She was nervous and not nearly as eloquent as the experienced speakers were. She told her story of struggle with agencies, emotional and behavioral problems in her grandchildren, and her own despair. She talked about how

wraparound and systems of care gave her the support she needed to carry on. She shared the positive difference it made for her family.

When she finished, everyone in the room stood in a standing ovation. Why the difference in response? Why would a crowd of people give an important dignitary only polite applause and a struggling grandmother an ovation? Because the first only talked about systems of care, the other lived it. One of the most powerful things families can do to make a difference is to tell their stories to decision makers—stories of struggle, injustice, and frustration—stories of breakthrough, possibility, and hope.

Part 1: Your Story is Important

The last thing most families with struggling children want to do is to tell others of those problems. We are afraid others will think we are poor parents. In addition, the problems we face every day make us think we have nothing to offer anyone else. Yet your story is exactly what decision makers and others need to hear. If your family is to heal and if the lives of others experiencing similar difficulties are going to be addressed, you must tell your story. Consider the following reasons.

Stories promote sensitivity and awareness. Your story is a way to let current and future service providers know how they can be sensitive to families. Most service providers have little or no opportunity to interact with families of children with disabilities before they begin working in the field. It is impossible for them to understand the depth of struggle. Your story contributes to their education and preparation to work with families in your situation.

Stories educate about the importance of family-centered services. Children with emotional and behavioral

challenges are part of a family. As you speak about your family, others will see that services to a struggling child must include the family as well. Service providers will learn from your story that the family is a valuable resource to enhance their own education and to give aid to specific family members.

Stories show your audience that kids are kids.

Children with emotional and behavioral challenges are kids first and have the same hopes and dreams as other children. In addition, children with mental illness need opportunities to be with other children in natural community settings.

Stories advocate for quality programs. Current policies sometimes affect families negatively in unintended ways. When policy makers hear these stories, they are motivated to bring change to the system. In addition, service providers want to improve their programs to meet the needs you express in your stories.

Stories help us connect. Your story reveals the details and impact of systems on the daily lives of families and children. In so doing, they are a powerful way to develop relationships among parents and professionals. The stories deepen our understanding of individual and shared experience. This spurs change in systems that seem impossible to understand otherwise.

Stories make statistics real. Providers and policy makers too often make decisions based on statistics and other objective data. Unfortunately, statistics, charts, and graphs do not summarize all the important data decision-makers need. Sharing your story gives others a broader, more complete picture of the issues that need to be addressed. Statistics become more real and important when they can

attach a real face and a story to the otherwise faceless numbers.

Part 2: Opportunities to Tell Your Story

On occasion, you might receive a formal invitation to tell your story for a specific purpose. Recently, for example, someone asked me to tell my family's story to a gathering of special education teachers. Organizers of the meeting believed it was important for the conference attendees to hear the story of a real child that struggled with learning disabilities and behavioral problems and how it affected the family. The story I told highlighted the importance of a family-centered approach like systems of care that other presenters discussed.

Other family members have been asked to share their story at organizational meetings across the state so that potential stakeholders might understand the value of systems of care. Sometimes, community coalitions might ask you to share your story to help them refocus their purpose or measure their efforts. One of the most effective ways to use your story to make a difference is by telling it to your legislator who forms policies for future generations.

Formal presentations, however, are not the only time you can tell your story. Perhaps you might be part of a community coalition as a participating member. During the conversation about a particular topic, you might say, "In my experience as a parent ..." Then you tell a portion of your story to make a point. Telling your story doesn't have to be formal. It should come naturally in your conversations with service providers, policy makers, and coalitions. They need to hear this personal input. They want to hear your story.

Part 3: Preparing Your Story

A well-organized story makes a much larger impact over one that is not organized. When you take the time to organize a story well, you will make better use of your presentation time, cover things you want to say, and have less anxiety in your presentation.

In addition, when you prepare well in advance, audiences are more likely to hear your message, appreciate your story, and respond favorably. A well-organized story adds credibility to the storyteller. When you present your story in a way that listeners can easily follow, they spend less time trying to make connections and more time hearing the essence of what you are trying to say.

Pay attention to these key questions in preparing your story.

Who is the audience? If you are telling your story to a gathering of other parents who are going through the same struggles you have experienced, you will tell the story differently than if you are telling the story to a gathering of state senators and representatives.

I've already mentioned the group of special education teachers I told my story to at one point. Knowing to whom I was speaking, dictated what part of my story I told, where I put my emphasis, and how I grabbed their attention. I started my story that day by sharing an experience my wife and I had while interacting with our son's second grade teacher. It is a story that immediately grabbed the attention of every person in the room.

What is the purpose for telling my story? Are you trying to educate service providers on the benefits of wraparound for your family? Are you trying to convince policymakers to change poor rules? Are you trying to convince

legislators to give additional money to an important program that has helped your family?

Before preparing your story, you must take the time to determine what it is you want to accomplish with the telling. The purpose will determine what part of your story you will tell and where you will put the emphases in your storytelling.

How much time do I have to tell my story? If someone invites you to tell your story in a formal setting, your invitation may be to “take ten minutes” or “share the highlights of your story in five minutes.” If you are telling your story in an informal setting, you might want to encapsulate a portion of your story that meets the specific need in just a couple of minutes.

Later, we’ll talk about the importance of rehearsing your story to make sure you can stay within the time limits, but for now understand that the time you are given is an important component in story preparation. If you go too long, listeners may lose interest. If you cut the story too short, you may leave out key components.

How should I begin my story? Beginnings need to draw the audience into the story. I like to begin by telling a story from my experience that the audience can relate to immediately. At other times I ask a thought-provoking question that gives the audience something to think about and a clue to my major point.

Beginnings also need to introduce the key characters. If the story is about you, your son, and your daughter, you need to introduce them. How old are your children? What are their names? What are the particular difficulties they or you deal with regularly?

Finally, beginnings need to be just that—beginnings. You need to share how things were in the beginning, before things changed. For example, you might share how

difficult life was *before* you were part of a wraparound process. Similarly, you might share how things were before your daughter began displaying emotional problems. Start at the beginning and lay the foundation for the rest of the story.

What should I include in the middle of the story? The simplest way to organize this section of your story is chronologically. What happened first, second, third, and so forth? The middle is a place for you to elaborate. By telling specific incidents in your life or your child's life, you can demonstrate the problem.

One of the most important principles of storytelling is **“show, don't tell.”** For example, you mustn't just tell the audience that your child has compulsive behaviors; you should describe his behavior by telling a specific story about the way he lines up canned goods in the pantry in descending order of height and you can never find the green beans because they are mixed in with the fruit. By the way, throwing in some humor now and then breaks the tension in the room and helps listeners relate.

The middle of your story must demonstrate the conflict in your family. Don't be afraid to describe your own frustration as well as that of other family members. What are the things that contributed to this conflict? It could be your child's diagnosis. It could be teachers or service providers that didn't understand your problems. It might be your own inability to find solutions.

Remember, don't just tell the facts. Share the specifics that back up the facts. Share your own feelings and emotions as you dealt with specific incidents.

Obviously, you can't share everything that has happened to your family in a five or ten-minute presentation. Therefore, one of the most difficult things to do is narrow your story down. The tendency in shortening a story is to take out the specifics and talk in generalities. A story is more powerful

if you leave out more generalities and focus on one or two key events that make your point.

How should I conclude my story? Your conclusion begins when you describe what changed in your life that made things better. In the middle, you may have shared the stories of your child's emotional problems. Now it may be time to talk about your acceptance into wraparound and how family life began improving. Or maybe you'll talk about some program and if legislators hadn't funded it, your family would still be living in chaos.

Our tendency is to say, "Things are better at my house." Your audience wants to know *how* things are different. Be specific about how things have changed for you. "My son no longer punches holes in the walls" or "My daughter hasn't been suspended from school for over six months." Like in the middle section, it's important to show specific ways things have changed rather than talking in generalities.

Finally, you should know exactly how you want to end the story. What are the very last words you will say? When you think these through early, you won't find yourself repeating yourself or floundering for a way to stop and sit down. A good way to conclude is simply to tell your audience what you want them to learn from your story. "Wraparound changed my family and gave us hope again," or "Systems of Care needs more money in local sites to make a difference in other families like mine."

Story Organization

Beginning



Middle



Ending

- How can I draw the audience in?
- Who are the key characters?
- When did the story take place?
- What were things like in the beginning?

- What happened first, second, third, etc.
- What was the major conflict?
- What were some of my key feelings?
- What specifics can I share?

- What changed in my life?
- What specifics can I share?
- What are the very last words I will say?
- What is the key theme I want the audience to understand?

Part 4: Presenting Your Story

Every storyteller has his or her own style and personality. Good storytelling occurs when your individuality comes out in the story. One of the keys to telling a good story is to be yourself.

With that said, every storyteller should pay attention to a few simple keys for good presentation. These will make the story more enjoyable and powerful.

Practice Makes Perfect. You can't expect to tell your story without mistakes unless you rehearse it often ahead of time. Although I know my own story well, I still practice it four or five times before standing in front of an audience

to tell it. You can do this in front of a mirror, in the privacy of your bedroom, or in front of a close friend.

When you practice, time yourself. Are you going over the allotted time? If so, think about what you can cut. Are you projecting well? Are you hurrying through your notes without looking up or do you have a good pace? Repeating your story aloud in the privacy of your home several times will give you confidence and dramatically improve your presentation.

Some storytellers prefer to type out their story and read it. On the positive side, this is a great way to make sure your story includes all the necessary elements. It also helps keep you within the defined time limit. On the negative side, “readers” rarely make good eye contact with listeners. In addition, the story they read sometimes sounds “flat” or unemotional. It is important that the audience hear the power behind the story. That power is relayed through eye contact and telling your story from the heart. It’s okay to use notes, but don’t be so tied to them that you don’t connect with your audience.

Find and Use Your Own Voice. When a storyteller mumbles or talks softly, listeners can't hear the story. When you tell the story too quickly, the audience misses important details. When you talk too slowly, the audience may become bored. Here are some key elements every storyteller needs in his or her story.

- **Relax.** Before you begin to speak, take a few deep breaths and slowly scan the audience for familiar faces. Remind yourself that this is your story and you know it better than anyone else does. You are the expert on you and your family.
- **Project.** With large audiences, use a microphone if possible. In smaller groups, project your voice with confidence. Do not be afraid to speak loudly so that your voice carries to the back of the room.
- **Pace.** Nerves tend to make us speed up our presentations. Remember to speak calmly and

slowly—just a bit slower than normal conversational style. Good listeners require some processing time.

- **Eye Contact.** It's always helpful to establish clear and frequent eye contact with your audience. Try not to bury your nose in your notes. Finding familiar and sympathetic faces in different parts of the audience may help calm nerves. Their smiles and nods will give you confidence and needed feedback throughout the presentation.

Answering Questions. Sometimes your audience will want to ask you questions about your story. This helps them clarify your point. Remember you are the expert on your own story, so there is no need to fear the questions that may come.

If someone asks a personal question that makes you uncomfortable, don't be afraid to tell that person you are uncomfortable answering that question. Another option might be to state your willingness to answer the question privately after the session. It is also okay to say, "I don't know," if you don't know the answer to a question, especially, if the question doesn't relate directly to your story.

Always keep the purpose of your invitation to speak in mind while answering questions. Otherwise, you may be tempted to "chase rabbits" that have little to do with what the meeting organizers are trying to accomplish. If you are telling your story to promote the advantages of the wraparound process and someone asks you a question about your child's particular medication therapy, it's okay to say, "I'll be glad to discuss that with you after the session. Right now, I want to talk about wraparound."

Handling Emotions. Telling your story can be an emotional event. It may remind you of times of great pain in your past. You might even cry. In addition, you might find your heart thumping with nerves and your voice shaking.

- **How do I calm my nerves?** Different people calm their fears in different ways. Here are some suggestions. Use whatever works for you, even if it's not in this list.
 - Imagine yourself some place that brings you peace.
 - Remind yourself that you are the expert on your story.
 - Remind yourself that the people in the audience want to hear from you.
 - Take deep breaths.
 - Meditate or pray.
 - Rehearse your story well in advance so you are confident that you know what you will say.

- **What if I cry?** Telling a story that reveals personal, painful information can be difficult. Crying is acceptable and nothing to be ashamed of. However, the audience needs to know the source of the emotion. Help them see the connection between your story and the tears. When they understand that connection, their response will be empathy rather than pity. Here are some suggestions for handling tears.
 - Pause and take three or four deep breaths before continuing.
 - Explain to the audience that you need to take a moment to collect yourself. Audiences understand.
 - Mentally focus on something that makes you laugh.
 - Hold a small object in your hand or pocket. If you start to cry, squeeze the object to relieve some of the tension.
 - Don't allow others to "rescue" you by taking over the telling of your story.

Storytelling Checklist

- My story kept the audience in mind.
- My story didn't stray from the purpose.
- I stayed within the time limits given to me.
- My story had a clear beginning that grabbed the audience's attention and introduced my family.
- I showed the audience what happened in my family by telling them specifics.
- The major conflicts and emotions of my story were clear.
- I told how my conflict was resolved in the ending of my story.
- I ended the story with a strong statement.
- My audience could easily follow the connections and logic of my story. It made sense to them.
- I made good eye contact with my audience.
- I used a clear strong voice everyone could hear and understand.
- I did not speak too fast or too slowly.

Conclusion

Everyone has a story. Your story is unique and powerful. No one else has experienced life exactly as you have. No one else has dealt with children that have the exact same difficulties your children have. Because of your experiences, you have an expertise no one else has. You have a story that service providers, policy makers, and other families need to hear. Your story, especially if told correctly, can make a powerful difference in the present and future for other families like yours.

Now that you know how to tell your story effectively, look for opportunities to tell it. Volunteer. You may want to start by sharing it with small groups of people. As you

grow in confidence, you'll soon be sharing your story to larger groups. Each chance you take to tell your story is a new opportunity to make a difference.

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