

ACE-DV Webinar Tip Sheet #1

Sharing Your Childhood Story of Domestic Violence

This tip sheet offers key points and takeaways from the webinar, [Storytelling for Social Change: Sharing Your Childhood Story of Domestic Violence](#), hosted by the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence (December 2017). This webinar featured the voices and experiences of Adult Children Exposed to Domestic Violence (ACE-DV) Leadership Forum members James Henderson, Ruby White Starr, and Olga Trujillo.

Why share your story?

- Stories inspire change and growth
- Benefits both the storyteller and listener

“It felt like it was the first time I had a voice in the system. That I actually got to talk about how the system treated my family and what they did to discourage us from participating.... It was really empowering for me.” – James

Olga noted that your story may resonate with others in ways you would not expect, and may help them in ways you will never know. She said, “Sharing makes me feel like I’m doing something useful with something really awful that happened. So it’s kind of turning that experience for me.” Ruby expressed that the biggest benefit of storytelling is the ability to tell your story in the way that you see it, through an outlet that is organized and intentional. James shared that it has been important for him to be able to speak to well-meaning policies and practices that have had negative consequences and impact on his family.

How do you know when you’re ready?

- Consider various storytelling outlets
- Find a balance where the benefits outweigh the potential for harm
- It’s okay to feel ready this time, and not ready another – each opportunity should be given its own consideration
- Identify mentors who may help guide you
- Connect with others with similar experiences to gain support and validation
- Follow your gut feelings when it comes to readiness

“This is a story to everybody else, but this is my life.” – Olga

James noted how he was able to share his story in a way that was comfortable to him. He said he felt compelled when the opportunity arose, and went with it. Reflecting on that decision, he said, “I think it’s done nothing but actually give me more credibility. Because people realize I’m really trying to help all of us look at how the system responds and how that’s interpreted by the families we’re doing things for



or to.” Olga had a similar experience, participating in meetings where colleagues were discussing and making decisions about the very situations that were actually happening in her family. She felt the need to add her voice and experience to inform these conversations, and reflected on this choice by saying, “When I first started, I was a lawyer and I had people, including mentors, tell me that I should not be talking about my experience because I was going to lose all credibility... Ultimately, I decided I didn’t care. And I think it was a good decision, because it felt too important to me.”

Ruby noted that it is critical to connect with others who have shared experiences, paths, and identities, asserting, “That’s why the ACE-DV is so important. Having other people that you can bounce off of, that you can talk to....You have to create those opportunities, and this is one of those.”

What are the themes of your story?

- Through storytelling, you can push back against misperceptions and myths by bringing voice to your lived experiences
- Consider what you want people to feel, know, or understand differently
- Metaphors can be a powerful way to deliver your message
- Build in intentional calls to action considering what you would like your audience to do

Ruby shared the importance of her theme of resilience, focused on what children need to be resilient, and pushing back against the focus on negative impacts. She built her story around the metaphor of WINGS, considering both what she needed to build her wings, and how her wings helped her fly.

For Olga, in the beginning it seemed to her that people may have walked away from her story with the wrong messages rooted in harmful stereotypes and cultural beliefs around violence in Latino culture or victim-blaming. She shaped her story based on this feedback, being sure to focus on important points like how trauma can impact people’s behavior and choices. She was also intentional about bringing forward Dissociative Identity Disorder and the intersections between trauma and mental health.

James reflected on how the system designed to help his family really created a lot of the trauma that was experienced by his family. That is why his theme is centered on systems work – how well-intentioned systems can actually cause harm, and how to better support and empower survivors.

Clarifying your message

Reveal the complexity of your story, which may be characterized by:

- A broader cultural or historical context
- Unique relationships between family members
- The humanity of both survivors and those who cause harm
- Intersecting oppressions and experiences of adversity
- Specific barriers or promotive factors
- Systems involvement

“If we can give [people] the ability to see the whole picture, then we’ve done something really powerful.” – Ruby



“People go really quickly to demonizing members of my family... I try to lay out the complexity of what I could see that was happening in our home... It’s just that this stuff is super complex... It’s hard for people to sit with that kind of complexity.”

– Olga

“The thing about grace is: You can’t teach people grace and then ask them to only use it in the times when you think they should be able to see a more complex picture. If you want them to care about you as a victim and the fact that maybe you didn’t always make the best choices, it requires an ability to be able to see a huge picture, to have compassion, to think about what are the things that didn’t work in the system that were a result of oppression... and all of these other barriers, not the monstrosity of a human being. So that’s part of our work, to get them to see that fuller picture.” – Ruby

Attending to your wellness

- Identify and express your needs
- Invite supportive people to play key roles
- Allow space for healing and reflection
- Give yourself permission to say no
- Practice self-care before, during, and after



“There is always one person that is so engaged, that’s smiling, that’s nodding their head, that’s going ‘Amen!’ sometimes, you know... So find that person, because you need that kind of support during it. And they are a mirror to how you’re touching a whole bunch of people in the audience.” – Ruby

Olga pays really close attention to how her body feels, taking the time to sit with and really consider each opportunity, and giving herself permission to say no, noting how “As rewarding as it is, as powerful as it is, it’s still really hard to go up... and make yourself vulnerable in a way that people feel connected to you.”

James recommends paying attention to how your day looks both before and after your storytelling, and having supportive colleagues there that you know you can talk to afterwards. He said, “The time that was the toughest for me was when I took the ACEs quiz before my presentation.”

Closing thoughts

“For me, it’s been helpful just to feel like I have a voice, even 30 years after the fact. But things I really wish I could have said then, I still feel that I had an opportunity to say. And I think that was healing.” – James

“When you think, ‘Oh, there’s all these people who are already doing it,’ ‘There’s no reason for me to do it,’ or ‘I don’t have anything different to say,’ there’s always room for you.” – Olga

Access the full recording and related materials from this webinar at VAWnet.org.
More information about the ACE-DV project can be found at nrcev.org.

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