

ACE-DV Webinar Tip Sheet #3

Navigating Challenges in Storytelling with Audiences

This tip sheet offers key points and takeaways from the webinar, [Navigating Challenges in Storytelling with Audiences](#), hosted by the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence (December 2018). This webinar featured the voices and experiences of Adult Children Exposed to Domestic Violence (ACE-DV) Leadership Forum members Rebecca Balog, James Henderson, Ruby White Starr, and Olga Trujillo.

Setting boundaries

- Set boundaries and expectations with both your host and the audience
- Set parameters around your presentation – timing, setting, content, and partners
- Decide whether or not to take questions, and how you will do so
- Draw boundaries between your story and the stories of others with whom your story intersects

“It’s easier for me to walk around, hear what the question is, and repeat the question so I can reframe it if there is victim-blaming without embarrassing the person who asked the question. And it’s easier for me to manage someone who just got triggered and is about to tell everyone the details of their own abuse.” – Olga on why she prefers not to pass a microphone for audience questions

Olga considers boundaries with both 1) the people who are inviting her to present and 2) the audience. Hosts may forget to ask about things like whether or not they can film you, take pictures, share on social media, etc. They may also expect that you serve in multiple roles. These are places where you can make your preferences known. With the audience, it’s important to set boundaries up front, such as whether you will take questions, and how.

Ruby noted that there used to be a traditional format where professionals would come in to comment on survivors’ stories, and had a tendency to “rewrite the narrative to fit their own biases.” She learned to set a boundary around that – she wasn’t going to tell her story and allow someone else to interpret it. She also learned that she had a right to set boundaries around how much time she needed to share her story and the parameters for doing so.

James realizes that his story is directly connected to his mother and sisters’ stories, but makes it clear when he speaks that he will not talk about their experiences. He sets expectations with his audience up front around what he will or will not address.

When your truth is challenged

- Expect and don’t get stuck in one piece of negative feedback among all the positive
- Consider your response to those who may stereotype or make generalizations about your experience based on your identity or culture
- Use humor as a tool to both protect yourself and put your audience at ease
- Use I-statements, and be sure not to speak for others



- Don't hesitate to take control of the room as the storyteller
- Pay attention to the words that you use, as some may have loaded meaning or significance for different audiences
- Go back to organizers to get insight into audience feedback and how to frame your story in ways that might resonate better or more fully in the future

“Anyone who takes in information and then generalizes it on everyone is then not going to be able to actually assist people, because everyone has a different story and a different experience.” – Ruby on the danger of the “single story”

Ruby observed that challenges tend to show up in the feedback that is collected afterwards. There will always be one person who says something negative, and that tends to be the one you will hold on to. She advises, *“Be prepared for those kinds of comments, because when you expect it, it feels more normal.”*

When Olga shares her story, especially along with Ruby or other Latinas, people sometimes make assumptions that that Latino culture is violent. When this happens, she tries to reframe things for them by saying, *“No, it doesn't mean that Latino culture is violent. It does reflect on the skill of storytelling that Latinos have. And what you have are two people from this culture who are really good storytellers and can take their experience and lay it out for you in a way that will help you learn from it.”*

Managing less receptive (or unfriendly) audiences

- Acknowledge the stigma of trauma
- Identify your allies in the space and focus on them
- Plan for disbelief
- Learn more about specific audiences you may engage with to get a sense of their beliefs, values, and perspectives in advance
- Find out if the audience is mandated to be there, and consider the challenges of presenting to them in that circumstance
- Remember that your perception of how people are receiving you may be off – silence doesn't necessarily indicate disconnection, it may mean the opposite

“I do a certain amount of criticism of a lot of people in the system... I always point out that these are well-meaning people with well-meaning intentions, but their words and actions did devastating things to the people they are trying to help.” – James

Rebecca acknowledged that unintentional unfriendly audiences happen often, where well-meaning people can make comments that hurt. She advises that you *“Bring yourself forward as far as you want to go, but also know that it's okay to shut it down”* noting that it's important to both practice and receive allyship when you see this happening.

Ruby noted that *“unfriendliness often has to do with the inability to look beyond their own worldview.”* Her approach to manage these situations is to prepare to offer another perspective that may expand her audiences' worldview.

Olga explained that audiences who are mandated to be there will most likely be challenging. The first time she talked to a group of people who were required to be at her training, she observed the audience sitting back in their seats with their hands crossed as if to say, *“I dare you to engage me. I'm not going to make this easy for you.”* Olga recommends using humor to bring people in.

When your story triggers others

- Identify resources available for those who may be triggered
- Provide honest and thoughtful disclosures
- Practice trauma-informed storytelling practices and messages
- Reflect on opportunities for growth and self-reflection
- Promote “vicarious resilience” by sharing your healing journey
- Decide how to handle disclosure



“To me it’s really important that we tell difficult stories of things that happen in our lives to assist one another and help each other to release the intense feeling that underly these stories.” – Ruby on challenging audiences to sit with feelings of discomfort

Rebecca suggested folding disclaimers into your “housekeeping” items at the beginning of your presentations, and finding out if there is a “safe room” participants can go to or support staff for individuals who may need it.

Olga has learned important lessons around triggering: 1) set up audience expectations carefully (for example, just because you may promise not to graphically describe violent incidents doesn’t mean that what you do share won’t be hard to hear), 2) pay really close attention to your audience to look for signs of triggering, and 3) be approachable so that people can tell you what was hard for them, and refine your presentation based on this feedback. After a recent presentation, Olga went to the quiet room to sit with people who had been triggered. She said, “*Nobody really had questions, as much as they were crying. And I could just sit with them and be there.*” Olga noted how sometimes it’s important to just be with people in their pain.

Self-care in wellness

- Investing in your wellness is an important part of the storytelling process
- Try not to internalize others’ perceptions of you and your experience
- Reach out to people who care about you, understand you, and nourish your soul

“My role is only to tell my story. My role is not to control someone else’s perception of my story. My role is not to convince them.” – Ruby

When the engagement is over, Olga usually calls her partner or asks to get together with people she knows and feels comfortable with. It helps ease her tendency to ruminate when she is with those who give her energy more than take it.

To help let things go and take the best care of himself, James likes to “*pray that the spirit moves me, and that people will hear what they need to hear.*”

Access the full recording and related materials from this webinar at VAWnet.org.

More information about the ACE-DV project can be found at found at nrcdv.org.

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