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SAFE STORYTELLING IN THE WORKPLACE

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Aim

This guide aims to help you to:

01
Understand why telling our story is important

02
How we can keep ourselves and others safe when using lived experience stories

03
Promote a culture that accepts mental health to reduce stigma

Introduction

Education and learning are important mechanisms you can use to embed your mental health strategy in organizational culture. Effective strategies need implementation to bring them to life to build leadership capability, challenge unhelpful attitudes and change culture. Organizations are increasingly encouraging people to talk about personal experiences of mental health as one such strategy. It can be a powerful way to reduce stigma and promote a culture where people feel safe to speak about challenges and seek help where they need it.

Benefits of storytelling

Telling stories is a fundamental part of being human. It serves various purposes in life, such as providing healing, helping us understand the world, fostering connections, and challenging mental health stigma. While there's more work to be done, there's a positive shift toward recognizing the role of mental health in work performance and overall well-being. Work can impact our mental health, making discussions about it in a professional context powerful.

There are some benefits to leaders and employees showing more vulnerability in the workplace. An individual sharing their experience of mental health issues or a challenging personal experience in a responsible, accurate and sensitive manner can challenge common misconceptions of mental health and promote positive community discussion. For the workplace, creating a psychologically safe environment can lead to increases in engagement, well-being and productivity (WorkSafe, 2021).

What is safe storytelling?

Safe storytelling supports the individual to talk about their lived experience in a way that addresses these issues of safety and stigma:

PERSON
Maintains the safety of the person sharing their story

AUDIENCE
Maintains the safety of people hearing their story

STIGMA
Reduces stigma about mental health

It serves to protect the individual, their audience, the reputation of their organization and the general community from harm. It's also designed to help people reflect on what they want to share, how they want to share, and who they want to share their stories with.
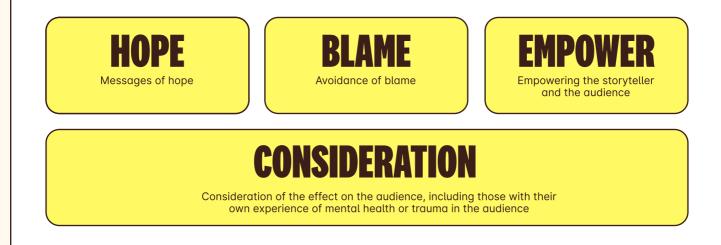
Where is safe storytelling needed?

- Any situation where lived experiences, or real stories about mental health are told first-hand.
- This could include live events, discussions in one-to-one or team meetings, written accounts, or even filmed video content.
- Experiences people share could include their experience of recovery from acute stress, physical or mental health challenges, the impact of significant life events, substance use, suicide, grief, or trauma as just some examples.

How does it work?

Effective storytelling may increase understanding of some of the difficulties of being human, and vulnerable, with the hope we can learn from others' experiences and promote ways people can find support. These stories can have a lasting impact.

Safe stories are framed by the following features:

HOPE	**BLAME**	**EMPOWER**
Messages of hope	Avoidance of blame	Empowering the storyteller and the audience

CONSIDERATION

Consideration of the effect on the audience, including those with their own experience of mental health or trauma in the audience

Some practical considerations

For the organization:

Obligations under psychosocial health and safety

Promote awareness: Ensure that all employees are aware of the importance of addressing things that might affect their psychological wellbeing in their workplace, particularly in the context of storytelling.

Provide resources: Offer resources and support for employees who wish to share their personal stories related to mental health, including access to professional help if necessary.

Non-discrimination: Establish a culture of non-discrimination and respect for employees' mental health experiences and stories.

Anonymity and consent: Ensure informed consent from employees sharing the story, and anonymity when stories involve other people.

Review policies: Review and adapt policies and guidelines related to sharing personal stories within the organization.

Support Network: Encourage the development of support networks within the workplace to help employees after they've shared their stories.

Some practical considerations (Continued)

For the storyteller:

Before telling your story

Understand the why: Clarify your reasons for sharing the story and ask yourself if in sharing, it will have a positive impact on others or challenge stigmas about mental health.

Consider the when: Assess if it's the right time to share, considering your emotional and practical circumstances.

Give informed consent: Find out where the content will be used and if recorded/written, whether you can approve the final version before it's shared.

Reflect on the where: Be aware that once shared online, stories may persist, so you'll need to be prepared for potential interactions about your story or mental health.

Define the what: Focus on key messages and learnings you want to share, avoiding any details that make you uncomfortable.

Involve the who: Consider the impact of your story on others and respect their privacy, only identifying them with their consent.

Plan for support: Think about whether there's anyone you want present while you share your story, and who you can connect with afterwards for support if you need it. For example a friend, family member or colleague.

When telling your story

Message clarity: Communicate clear messages and aim to instill a sense of hope in your story.

Emotional awareness: Be prepared for unexpected emotions and reactions while sharing your story. Sometimes people can get more emotional or upset than they expect. Take your time or stop if you want to.

The right language: Use language that destigmatizes mental health issues and conveys respect for your experience.

After telling your story

Self-check: Reflect on how you're feeling and reach out to your support network if needed.

Review the story: If it's not a live event, take the opportunity to review the final edit of your story to best prepare yourself for what will be released.

Being fully informed

Sharing a story may be immensely rewarding, however there are some obvious and not-so-obvious risks to consider. Taking time to think over these possible consequences enables people to give informed consent before sharing their stories.

For individuals, risks can include:

- **Revealing more about themselves at that moment than they're comfortable with or that others are able to respond to helpfully.**

- **Ongoing comments and speculation about their mental health in the future.**

- **Being typecast as a mental health spokesperson or ambassador after they've recovered or when they no longer want to be a spokesperson.**

- **Unwanted attention from people with similar experiences.**

For leaders:

Leaders who are willing to be vulnerable and take risks are more likely to build trusting relationships, encourage innovation, and foster a culture of creativity and growth. As part of this narrative, leaders are often told that they should role-model and talk about their mental health to break down stigma. While this can be helpful in some situations, it should be remembered that this isn't compulsory. The sharing of your story is personal and you should never be forced into doing something you're not comfortable with. There will also be an appropriate time and place for sharing a story.

> *"An orchestra conductor wouldn't be discussing stage fright with their musicians as they guide them through a symphony performance"*
>
> Dr Anthony Newton

Because there is still stigma and misunderstandings around mental health, to be fully informed before sharing their story, leaders might also want to consider:

The impact on those they're managing. Team members may hold back due to worry about adding additional stress or burden, or may worry about what to say or if to say anything at all. In this case, reassurance can help open up the conversation.

The potential blurring of home-life boundaries. Sharing personal stories typically includes outside-of-work factors and some may prefer to keep home life private.

Cultural differences, particularly if working in a global company. In this case, it's important to acknowledge that mental health, and how it's perceived, could differ across audiences.

The change in people's perception of them. Overall, it may be seen in a positive light, but there may also be some people who incorrectly see vulnerability as weakness and could judge them negatively.

People may question their ability to lead through challenging times, decision-making ability, or simply show a lack of understanding. What would be more beneficial is for others to recognise the resilience of the leader, believing that they can and have overcome challenges and obstacles.

Being fully informed (Continued)

For organizations:

For organizations, the risk mitigation strategies are often very practical.

It may be worthwhile to provide people with a brief synopsis of the content prior, alerting them to any material that might be challenging. This will allow attendees the option to listen and decide whether or not to engage in what is being offered/the content e.g. discussions around trauma, sexual assault, suicide, family violence etc.

When discussing sensitive or distressing topics, it is important to provide information about resources and support options, including mental health services, helplines, your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provider, and counseling services. Additionally, your mental health first aiders or champions can also be helpful to support and signpost.

If sharing stories on a platform or through a live event, you may also want to have a moderation system in place to manage interactions and feedback safely and effectively.

To conclude

In sharing our stories, we have the power to inspire, educate, and connect, fostering a positive and compassionate community. Yet, it's crucial to be mindful of the potential impact on both storytellers and audiences. Safe storytelling principles protect emotional well-being and nurture a culture of empathy and understanding. Our words wield immense power, and by using them responsibly, we can create stories that inspire, uplift, and unite us all.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

Here are some questions to consider if you're supporting safe storytelling

For the individual:

○ Why do they want to share their story? Clarity over the message helps frame a call to action when using storytelling in an advocacy context.

○ Has there been enough distance from the experience or are they still going through difficulties? It's helpful to have enough distance from the experience.

○ Is it a story of hope or learning that can help others?

○ Have they considered both the pros and cons of sharing their story?

○ Are they aware of the appropriate language and framing to use?

○ Do they need to access mental health support first?

○ Who or what can support them afterwards?

If someone is experiencing a mental health crisis or suicidal thoughts, always advise them to contact their doctor or to attend their local hospital. For more information, look here: Global Urgent Help Support Information

For leaders:

○ Do leaders understand that being vulnerable and taking risks can lead to building trusting relationships, encouraging innovation and fostering a culture of creativity and growth?

○ Do leaders acknowledge that sharing their stories is a personal choice and not a mandatory requirement?

○ Have leaders considered that sharing their stories may alter people's perceptions of them, both positively and negatively?

○ Are leaders aware of the potential impact on the individuals they manage and have plans to provide reassurance to team members?

○ Have leaders considered the potential blurring of home-life boundaries and how they would handle this situation?

○ Are leaders prepared for the added pressure that may arise and potentially affect the success of their initiatives?

○ Do leaders acknowledge the importance of recognising and respecting cultural differences, particularly in global companies, when discussing mental health?

For the organization:

○ Have practical mitigation strategies been established, such as providing a brief content synopsis before sharing?

○ Have resources for mental health support such as suitable and relevant helplines linked to the subject matter discussed.

○ Have 'wellbeing spaces' been created for individuals who choose not to participate in the session?

○ Have help-seeking options made available at the end of the session, including access to an employee assistance programme (EAP) or recommendations for support linked to the topic being discussed.