

As a public survivor of several forms of sexual violence, I recently gave a two-day workshop at the National Sexual Assault Conference called *Telling Your Story To Change the World*. This is a brief summary of the segment of that workshop on what to consider before choosing to speak publicly, and self-care.

Before Sharing Your Story Publicly as a survivor of sexual violence, here are some things to consider. First, remember that *you're never obligated to share your story*. However, you may decide to do so because:

- Silence is no longer serving you (but take time to honor that silence may have served you well).
- Sharing your story may advance something for you or something you care about.
- You might feel your lived experience offers necessary information at this moment in time.

Potential Risks

- Think about personal and professional consequences of publicly coming out as a survivor. Who is a trusted friend with your best interests in mind who you can discuss the consequences of sharing your story? This is, ideally, someone who already knows you're a survivor
 - How will family members, friends, colleagues, etc. react? What do you need to do prepare yourself for that? Who will support you through that? Ask for help in advance.
- Publicly identifying yourself as a survivor may invite a lot of attention, wanted and unwanted.
 - How do you feel about that attention, and what will you need to be stay grounded in the midst of that attention?
- People may say things or ask questions that are hurtful, inappropriate, or triggering.
 - What are the worst things you could hear or be asked? It can be useful to prepare responses to those questions in advance. You are always allowed to say, "That question is off limits," or "I don't share that particular part of my survivor journey," or even, "That's not an appropriate question." Silence is always an acceptable response, especially when talking to the media.

Preparation and Self-Care

- What do you need to take care of yourself *before, during, and after* you speak publicly?
 - How can you be extra kind to yourself during these times?
 - Consider at least three self-care acts to practice. Chose something you already do to take care of yourself, so self-care doesn't become an additional burden.
- Who are the people who you don't want to hear your story?
 - Take steps to prevent them from hearing your story. For example, you may want to adjust your social media settings, change privacy settings on FB, etc. But also understand that once your story is out there, it's out there.
- Is there anyone you may want to share your story with before they hear it from the media or from another source second-hand?

General advice on sharing your story to achieve a specific outcome:

Unless you are a part of a tribunal or court proceeding, keep the details of what you endured to a minimum. Reliving those details is not only difficult for us as survivors but also can flood the person listening to us with their own emotions (and, given the ubiquity of sexual violence, often their own past memories). Share the facts that are relevant to the thing you are asking them to do, and no more. Spend more time talking about what you want them to do than about the details of what you've endured.

Always remember, it's your story and your life and you get to decide what you do with it. Above all else, thank you for surviving, whether or not you choose to share your story publicly. ~sujatha baliga