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Sharing Your Story

This chapter outlines some avenues and key considerations for victim-survivors when deciding whether to share their story with others. It also outlines the obligations of media when reporting on stories of sexual violence and highlights the experiences of a few victim-survivors who have shared their stories publicly.

What's in this chapter?

Warning: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that this chapter contains the names and experiences of people who have passed away.

Content warning:

This chapter mentions sexual violence, stigmatisation and institutional betrayal.

Key terms:

- Disclose / disclosure
- Print media
- Broadcast media
- Social media
- Anonymity
- Defamation

Key organisations mentioned:

- The STOP Campaign
- Reclaim Me Podcast
- This Is My Brave Australia (TIMBA)

Introduction

The STOP Campaign believes that victim-survivors' stories deserve to be heard and have the power to enact change. Sexual violence and trauma is difficult to speak about and victim-survivors are often stigmatised for telling their stories. The STOP Campaign aims to change this.

It can be difficult to share an experience of sexual violence. It may be especially daunting to bring it up with people closest to you. Whether you choose to tell others right away, years later or prefer not to share your experience at all is entirely up to you. Deciding to disclose doesn't mean sharing every detail - it's your decision to share as much as you feel comfortable with.

Sharing Your Story With Someone You Know

A **disclosure** is the act of telling someone about your experience of sexual violence. If you are thinking about disclosing to someone you know about your experience of sexual violence, here are some key things to consider.

Who

You decide who you tell about an experience of sexual violence. Consider whether the person you wish to tell will react in a supportive way. Not everyone will know how to appropriately react to or process the information that you share with them, so it is important to check with that person to see if they are comfortable.

How

Choose a way to disclose that makes you feel comfortable. It can be in-person, over the phone or via message. If you are worried about being interrupted or being asked too many questions, it could be helpful to write a message. No matter how you choose to tell someone, it is a good idea to set some ground rules first. For example, you can say something like, "I'd like to tell you about something that's hard for me to talk about. It would mean a lot to me if you listen and not ask about the details".

What

What information (and how much) you share about your personal experience of sexual violence is completely up to you. If the person you are disclosing to asks for more detail, you don't have to tell them. Only share as much as you feel comfortable.

When

Choose a time that you are both comfortable with, so the person you are disclosing to has time to be present and process what has been shared. For example, if someone is about to go to sleep, is leaving the house or is intoxicated, consider waiting for a time that is more suitable for the conversation.

Where

It is important that you feel safe if you decide to share your story in person. You may choose to meet in a private location, in public and/or alongside someone else you trust, depending on how comfortable you feel with the person you are disclosing to.

Sharing Your Story Publicly

Sharing your experience with sexual violence publicly can be empowering. There are options to do this, such as with a journalist, your personal social media account or through a grassroots movement or platform.

In 2017, journalist and **End Rape On Campus (EROC) Australia** director, Nina Funnell, authored a series of factsheets for the **Full Stop Foundation** on your rights and options when working with media. The following information is reproduced from those factsheets with Funnell's permission. If you are thinking of sharing your experience of sexual violence publicly it may be useful to ask yourself the following questions:

- Are there any family or friends I want to disclose to before sharing my story publicly?
- Am I comfortable with the possibility that media outlets could contact me, even months or years from now?
- Am I comfortable with the possibility that other victim-survivors may want to reach out to me and disclose their own experiences? Do I know where to refer them for support?
- Am I prepared for the possibility that I could experience backlash, trolling, doubt, intrusive questions or comments from members of the public, or from people I know?
- Am I comfortable with my name permanently being attached to this issue in the public domain or would I prefer to remain anonymous?
- In five or ten years, will I still be comfortable for people to be able to search and find this information about me?
- Do I have a solid support network to assist me?
- What strategies or tools do I already have to help me manage any negative experiences or fallout after sharing my story publicly?¹

"The media can be a powerful vehicle for change. Survivor voices matter and deserve to be heard and respected." Nina Funnell, Walkley award winning journalist, survivor and creator-manager of the #LetHerSpeak campaign.²

Print media (newspapers / magazine articles)

Sharing your story through print media and news platforms allows you to reach large and diverse audiences. **Print media** includes newspapers and magazines and is often translated to online platforms (for example, newspaper articles written and shared on Facebook).

Sharing your story through traditional print media will often involve working with a journalist.

Important considerations:

- Traditional print media are often distributed in a specific area or location. However, articles that are shared online can often reach a much larger audience.
- Journalists in the ACT cannot legally identify you as a victim-survivor without your express permission. This means that you can choose to remain anonymous. However, speculation around your identity may still occur.

- Journalists and editors may ask to work with you to edit your piece for publication. This might mean that your story is edited for length and clarity.
- Depending on the type of publication, or if you are choosing to self-publish, there may be a publishing fee.
- Traditional news media outlets are subject to ethical guidelines which may restrict the type of content they can, or are willing to publish. Journalists must also fact check information and may seek comments from other sources to hear other perspectives.
- The media cannot always deliver outcomes that meet a victim-survivor's expectations. Journalists may also bring their own agenda or objective to the story.
- Traditional media tends to platform stories from white, cisgender and able-bodied perspectives.

Broadcast media (radio / interviews / television)

Traditional forms of **broadcast media** include radio and television. It is increasingly common to engage with more informal platforms such as podcasts and social media videos. Stories shared using broadcast media most often take the form of an informal interview. There are also options to share more structured content, including through written statements.

Important considerations:

- Broadcast media can reach large audiences.
- It may be difficult to remain anonymous.
- There are limited options to share creative pieces such as art, poems and/or opinion pieces.
- Interviews may be edited significantly to meet time limits.
- Sharing your story live on television or radio can be nerve wracking.
- There is often little time to prepare due to radio and television interviews being organised on short notice.
- There may be less autonomy to receive questions in advance and you may be put on the spot to answer questions live.
- Television or radio interviews often require a large production team (meaning there may be more people present when you share your story).

Social media

Social media platforms are a popular choice for victim-survivors who choose to share their stories. Victim-survivors can also share their stories using their own personal social media accounts or through other creators' platforms.

Important considerations:

- Social media can allow more creative freedom in sharing your story.
- Social media posts can be widely shared. This may make it difficult to target a specific audience.
- It may be difficult to maintain anonymity if sharing through your own personal platform.
- Audiences can respond directly to social media posts, increasing the risk of negative feedback and/or online harassment.

Grassroots organisations sharing victim-survivors' stories

Many **grassroots organisations** in the sexual violence space provide platforms for victim-survivors to share their lived experiences. We have highlighted some of these organisations operating in the sexual violence space that allow for victim-survivors in the ACT to share their stories publicly below.

The STOP Campaign

Uses print media and social media

The STOP Campaign believes in the power of storytelling as a way to raise awareness and destigmatise conversations on sexual violence and sexual wellbeing. It does this by providing avenues for victim-survivors to share their stories safely using creative mediums. This includes through organisational publications such as The STOP Campaign Zine and Video Series, engagement with media, online blogs and public events.

Zine and Video Series: One of The STOP Campaign's core projects is the Zine (short magazine) and Video Series, which aims to showcase a collection of anonymous stories of victim-survivors and their supporters through various creative mediums. The Video Series is a version of the Zine in video format. This is facilitated safely and anonymously. The director of the project will communicate with you via text to keep you informed throughout while ensuring your identity is protected.

Blogs: The STOP Campaign is always looking for submissions to publish as blogs on their website and social media. To publish a blog, you can contact The STOP Campaign on social media or via their website. There are options on the website to share while remaining anonymous. Once you contact the The STOP Campaign, you can work with a team member who will proofread your blog and offer editing suggestions as required. Like the Zines, your story can be shared in any form, including (but not limited to) poem, prose or artwork.

Sharing through The STOP Campaign means that:

- You have the option to remain anonymous, not only to the public, but to the Campaign team as well.
- You can use many forms of expression such as prose, poems and artworks.
- You will be sharing your story with The STOP Campaign audience (generally advocates, activists and allies for victim-survivors).
- You are in control of which platforms your story is shared on, such as the website and various social media sites.
- You can opt to have your story proofread and edited by team members of The STOP Campaign.

Reclaim Me by Madeleine Heather

Uses broadcast media and social media

Reclaim Me is a podcast hosted by Madeleine Heather that shares the stories of victim-survivors in a safe and trauma-informed space to remove the stigma surrounding conversations of sexual violence. Reclaim Me is available on platforms including Spotify and Apple Podcasts. Madeleine also shares snippets of episodes on the Reclaim Me social media accounts.

Each podcast episode shares the story of a victim-survivor to help them reclaim their narrative, their voice and educate the wider community. Victim-survivors who speak on the podcast are usually named and pictured. Episodes are recorded using video. You can express your interest in sharing your story with Reclaim Me by messaging their Instagram account. Madeleine has also started sharing victim-survivor stories on the Reclaim Me Instagram account, for those who want to remain anonymous.

Sharing your story through Reclaim Me means that:

- Your story will be shared to the Reclaim Me podcast's audience (generally advocates, activists and allies for victim-survivors).
- You are sharing your story through broadcast media and can speak directly with Madeleine about your experiences.
- You can choose to share your story anonymously in written form via their social media pages.

This Is My Brave Australia (TIMBA)

Uses print media, broadcast media, theatre and social media

This Is My Brave Australia (TIMBA) shares the stories and experiences of victim-survivors of violence and those experiencing mental illness through live performances. TIMBA was created by activists Jennifer Marshall and Anne-Marie Ames in the United States and was launched in Australia in 2017 with the help of mental health advocate Tim Daley. TIMBA's vision is to allow people who have experienced things such as depression and anxiety, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, alcoholism, substance misuse and sexual violence to share their personal stories with the wider community. These highly stigmatised topics are reframed to emphasise the bravery, dignity and healing of victim-survivors.

Stories are told through poetry, musical performances, film and spoken word. These stories are also shared through TIMBA's live stage performances (with recordings also available as a podcast), the TIMBA blog and Youtube channel.

Sharing your story through TIMBA means that:

- Your story will be shared to TIMBA's audience (generally mental health advocates, activists and allies).
- You have creative freedom to create and share a spoken word piece, poem, or short musical piece about your experience of sexual violence, healing and recovery.
- It may be difficult to remain anonymous if you choose to share your story.

Considerations When Sharing Your Story

Personal safety considerations

Sharing your story publicly after experiencing sexual violence may carry a risk to your personal safety. Looking after your personal safety might require you to remain anonymous or keep your personal information (such as your name and/or face) private to prevent people from knowing your identity. This can protect you from being targeted by people who hear or see your story.

If you would like to share your story but are worried about repercussions from someone you know, or if you are experiencing violence or threatening behaviour as a result of sharing your story, you may be able to apply for a **Personal Protection Order (PPO)** against the person harming you. For more information about specific types of protection orders and applying for protection orders, see page 74. If it is an emergency or you are worried about your immediate safety, contact police on Triple Zero (000).

If you are experiencing harassment or threatening behaviour online (such as threatening or violent texts, emails or social media messages) after sharing your story, you can report to the police or the Office of the eSafety Commissioner (eSafety). For more information about reporting sexual violence, see Chapter 5.

Legal considerations

Sharing a victim-survivor's identity

Some jurisdictions in Australia have sexual assault 'gag laws' which make it illegal for victim-survivors of sexual violence to identify themselves in the media (especially if they are involved in sexual offence court proceedings). However, victim-survivors in the ACT can consent to being identified in the media in all cases, unless doing so would directly or indirectly identify another victim-survivor. It is illegal for a person (including a journalist) to publish the name, identity information (including residential or business address, email address or phone number), or any other information that could be used to identify a victim-survivor involved in that proceeding, without the consent of that victim-survivor.³

Victim-survivors in NSW can also consent to being identified in the media if they are over 14 years of age, and if other victim-survivors are not directly or indirectly identified as a result.

Defamation

Defamation means causing serious harm to a person's reputation by saying or publishing material about them that changes the way people feel about them. A person can be 'defamed' even if their name isn't used or even if the person defaming them didn't mean to cause any harm. A person who claims to have been defamed can go to court to get compensation for the harm caused. Compensation could be money and/or a public apology. In the context of sexual violence, this includes publishing an allegation that someone is a perpetrator of sexual

violence, which may give rise to them claiming you defamed them. This may also happen if you publish your own Victim Impact Statement, should your matter have been finalised in court with a not-guilty verdict.

It is important to consider whether you want to identify the perpetrator when sharing your story publicly. This also applies to if you want to share about your experience of disclosing or reporting to a person in an institutional setting, such as a workplace or school. In some cases, these people may also bring about defamation claims against a person who has spoken publicly about their response or handling of a sexual violence incident. **If you have concerns about defamation or other legal issues that might arise for you if you choose to share your story publicly, it is important to seek legal advice first.**

Cultural, family and community considerations

Sexual violence is a highly stigmatised topic in Australia. Young people are often isolated and unwilling to speak about their experiences of sexual violence. Even when victim-survivors have the language to explain their experiences, victim-blaming can deter people from disclosing.

The reaction of supporters to a disclosure of sexual violence can have a profound impact on a victim-survivor's mental health and recovery. It is important that victim-survivors who wish to share their stories with friends, family or members of their community feel safe and supported while doing so.

Sex and sexuality can also be highly sensitive or taboo topics within some family, cultural and religious groups. This may require unique considerations for victim-survivors who wish to share their personal experiences of sexual violence. For example, people from **culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD)** backgrounds or in the **LGBTQIA+** community may face additional barriers when sharing their story or seeking help. These may include:

- Language
- Culture and 'cultural etiquette'
- Immigration status
- Fear of the perpetrator
- Mistrust of authorities and the media, due to harmful and discriminatory reporting
- Judgement from the community and fear of community shame
- Negative family responses.

Some people may find it easier to seek help or disclose to professionals who identify with their own culture or community. Others find it easier to seek help from someone outside their own community so that victim-survivors do not feel that their story will be exposed to their community.

If you are a person from a diverse background seeking support, your safety and comfort is extremely important. Legal Aid ACT, the Domestic Violence Crisis Service (DVCS) and the Canberra Rape Crisis Centre (CRCC) are available to help. For more information about these services and for their contact details, see chapter 8.

Victim-survivor experience from a culturally diverse background - Anonymous

"Ana said that she would never report her sexual assault to police. This is largely due to the cultural stigma associated with reporting in a migrant community. In a small migrant community, it is very isolating and shameful to report. Values about marriage, supporting your family, and the taboo about sex, interferes with victim-survivors' ability to report, disclose or seek support. When there is no trust that the system is set up to support culturally and linguistically diverse women, it really deters you from reporting. Services lack cultural competency and often do not recognise the societal or community pressures surrounding why CALD women do not report. They don't feel safe at home and they don't feel safe in their own community. Language is a huge barrier. There is huge power in language. How do you translate your experience? There are sometimes, no similar words to even describe, there may not be a word for sexual assault in their language which means we lose the understanding of what has happened to them.

Despite the victim-blaming Ana experienced at home, she decided to disclose to a trusted friend who had no connection to her community or family. She felt this provided her with a different avenue and gave her access to support. She felt believed and was grateful to have that experience. Ana expressed that grassroots organisations were the most beneficial in navigating her journey after sexual assault."

Reporting Victim-Survivor Stories

When reporting on the experiences of victim-survivors of sexual violence, there are important guidelines that the media must follow: ⁴

- 1** Media reporting must not compromise the safety of the victim-survivor. If the victim-survivor has not consented to having their identity made public, the report must not contain any information that could identify them.
- 2** Appropriate terminology should be used to explain acts of violence. For example, an incident of family violence should not be characterised as a 'domestic dispute'.
- 3** Reports must maintain respectful and appropriate language and tone. They must emphasise the seriousness of sexual violence, uphold the privacy and dignity of the victim-survivor, not use dramatic language that trivialises a violent incident and not identify the people involved by their race, ethnicity or other status unless necessary.
- 4** Reports must not use language that justifies violence or blames the victim-survivor for what happened.
- 5** Reports must not describe violence as being fuelled or caused by alcohol, drugs, stress or mental health issues.

- 6 Reports must not include images that support harmful stereotypes about sexual violence, perpetrators and victim-survivors (for example, images that show or suggest that the victim-survivor was intoxicated when the incident occurred).
- 7 Reports should include appropriate content warnings and support services for readers who may find the content distressing.
- 8 Reports must be culturally appropriate and sensitive in line with cultural protocols, particularly when reporting on the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

More information on media guidelines when reporting on sexual violence can be found on the **Our Watch** website.

Personal Reflections

Mahalia (she/her)

Content Warning: Sexual violence, victim-blaming and trauma.



"I first shared my story publicly as a poem through a university publication a few years ago. I write poetry often, so sometimes it just feels like the right time as the words trickle, or gush, onto the page.

The first time I made my story clear was in The STOP Campaign's Reclaim the Narrative Zine, where it was also made into a spoken word video for their video series. My poem detailed a few of my experiences that were related to the Australian National University, either places or people or both. I decided to make this work anonymous. There were quite a few reasons for this - it was a mixture of not being ready for my family to know specifics, or even that it had happened, and self-doubt and blame about the experiences themselves.

While I have experienced victim-blaming, I have been extremely privileged in the opportunities and support I've received. Of course this doesn't change my experiences, but sharing my story through writing, speaking aloud and having my voice heard is so important to me. I am heard. I am seen. I am believed. The choice to share my story is empowering and encouraging. Sharing is a personal choice. You do not need to share your trauma for you to be an advocate, but there should be the option to. Sharing your story should be in an environment that is safe, trauma-informed, and done in a way where you have control over when, where and how it is shared."

Khadija Gbla, Human Rights Activist (she/her)

"Speaking up enables me to take back power I lost. I've channeled my anger into making sure that [Female Genital Mutilation] doesn't happen to another little girl." ⁵



Brittany Higgins, Survivor-Advocate (she/her)

"I spoke out because I wanted the next generation of staffers to work in a better place. To take up a dream job like I did. And for it to live up to their hopes and not betray them. And above all, I decided to speak out because I hoped it would make it easier for other women to speak out too." ⁶



EL (pseudonym) (she/her)

Content Warning: Sexual violence, victim-blaming and trauma.

"In my third year of university, I decided to share my story through The STOP Campaign's first zine: *Revealing Truths and Breaking Stigmas*. At first, I just wrote out my story on a piece of paper and I felt an overwhelming sense of emotions – relief, sadness and hope. For the first time, I felt in control of my story and I knew sharing my story would be a positive step toward healing and accepting what happened. From this experience, I then shared my story through The STOP Campaign's second zine, *Reclaim the Narrative*, and had it adapted to their video series.

I never felt that I would have the option to share my story. I always felt like I would be shut down and not believed. Sharing my story anonymously gave me a way to communicate my experience and not feel ashamed. Part of me is still not ready for my identity to be known. I am still scared of the ramifications and what people around me will think. However, sharing my story has given me closure. When I read other stories of sexual violence, I do not feel alone. A key reason for sharing my story was to help others feel like they are not alone and show that not all experiences are the same.

To promote safe and trauma-informed storytelling, I think it is vital to ensure victim-survivors are comfortable every step of the way. This includes ensuring they have adequate support during the process, are able to ask questions, are involved in the process of sharing their story and have control to tell their story. It's important to remember that healing takes time and victim-survivors don't have to share their stories before they're ready, if at all. Victim-survivors deserve the chance to reclaim their story in a way that makes them feel validated and heard, and sharing can provide them with opportunities to speak out and influence community change."

**Madeleine Heather (she/her), victim-survivor
and founder of the Reclaim Me Podcast**

Each and every story matters. We see you, we hear you, we believe you.

You won't just survive, you will thrive. Trust Me.



"The Reclaim Me platform was started to provide victim-survivors with a platform to share their stories and reclaim their voice, their story and their narrative. When I began sharing my own story on social media I was overwhelmed with the response I received. People were messaging me from all over the world, sharing their personal stories and those of their loved ones. It opened a door for me. I had been speaking about starting a podcast for a long time, I just wasn't sure what it would look like. From these experiences of connecting through shared vulnerability, I was set on my path to provide an intersectional platform that would reach more communities while pushing against stigma and shame.

I believe everyone's experiences of trauma are important. So many survivors have expressed to me that their abuse is not worthy of space, as their experiences don't match the 'horrific sex crime' stories that the media uses to define sexual violence. I make the process of sharing stories as trauma-informed as I can and I ensure that all guests on the show have autonomy at every stage of the process.

My platform has also prompted those who have not experienced sexual violence to think about ways they can help further the conversation and spark community change. I believe there are so many benefits for those who engage with the platform to get a sense of this conversation they don't know much about. But, sadly, as with any advocacy; there will be some you can educate and who will become allies, and there will be some that no matter what you do – they will fight against the conversation.

Unfortunately, one of the key difficulties of sharing a personal story is the legal implications of defamation. Sadly even those with convictions face many barriers legally with sharing stories. If you are able to tell your story, do so on your terms. Don't add in details you aren't comfortable with, don't share it with a space, person or agency you don't feel comfortable with, make sure you are implementing practices of self-care, and have a support system in place for during and after you share your story. Reaching out to survivor networks is a really great way to gain insights, advice and help from those who have experience with sharing their stories."

RECLAIM:ME
Podcast

Anna (she/her), Brenda (she/her), Erin (she/her) and Kate (pseudonym) (she/her), victim-survivors and founders of The Survivor Hub

When I was in the middle of my trial I was approached by another survivor who was further along in her trial than me. For the first time ever, I felt like someone understood what I was going through. Within hours, we went from complete strangers to as close as I've ever been to anyone in my life. Without her, I don't know how I would have survived the legal process. It was retraumatising, exhausting and painful, but I knew that she knew exactly how I was feeling.



Being a survivor can be an isolating experience. For years I did not know if I even knew other survivors, let alone those who had experienced court and everything that comes with that. While professionals without lived experience can do their best to understand and empathise, knowing that you are sitting with another survivor is an unmatched feeling.

"The four co-founders and directors of The Survivor Hub, a survivor-led initiative aiming to provide a space for victim-survivors to connect and share through peer support, Anna, Brenda, Erin and Kate (pseudonym), believe in the power of storytelling. Their approach is that connecting with others with similar experiences can help those within the community understand and navigate the legal system, avenues for support and knowing that we are not alone. The Survivor Hub achieves this through fortnightly virtual and in-person meetups.

Despite our lived experiences, we also appreciate that there are still a myriad of challenges in navigating how we can provide a safe space for all survivors. We recognise that the participants at our meetups may be at different points in their trauma recovery; thus what may be appropriate or needed for one survivor may not be for another.

In the survivor-advocate sphere, like everywhere, marginalised voices are underrepresented. This is particularly important when considering that the survivors whose voices are not being represented are those who disproportionately experience sexual, domestic and family violence. As a community, we need to elevate the voices from First Nations communities, those living with disabilities, gender diverse people, people of colour and people of diverse identities.

"Your story is important, and will be just as important in two days, two weeks, two months or two years from now. Take all the time you need." This quote from Nina Funnell perfectly reflects The Survivor Hub's message - that you should never feel pressured to tell your story."

Brittany Higgins and Grace Tame's voices helped me to face my own story

(an excerpt from a Women's Agenda article)

by Aleysha Cullen

“The only way out of this current state of being is to continue to take up space. Start the conversations. Challenge where you feel safe to do so. Use your voice, use your power, use your privilege – to seek justice for all. Raise the voices of those who aren't being heard. Make space for the voices which aren't represented. And know that there will be days when it feels like you are failing and making no impact at all. But let me assure you, even on those days – someone is watching, growing, gaining the confidence to use their own voice. And that is how change happens. It's messy. It hurts. But it is possible and it requires all of us coming together, raising each other up as we unite to create a better world where those in power reflect and represent us all.”⁷



Endnotes

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