

Sexual Assault within University Communities: Working with Media

A FACTSHEET FOR VICTIM-SURVIVORS

For some people who have experienced sexual assault, sharing their story with the media can be a potentially cathartic or empowering experience. The media can also serve as a powerful vehicle for change.

But media stories also carry risks and it is not always possible to control every element of a story.

If you are contemplating speaking to the media, and you wish to talk that decision over with someone first you can speak to a confidential counsellor any time on [1800 572 224](tel:1800572224).

This factsheet will also provide some general information about the media process.

“The media can be a powerful vehicle for change. Survivor voices matter and deserve to be heard and respected.”

Karen Willis, Executive Officer of Rape & Domestic Violence Services Australia

When deciding to do media

What is my objective in speaking to media? What do I hope to achieve?

Survivors who are contemplating sharing their story with the media often wish to do so to highlight a particular issue or push for a particular outcome. Every survivor is different and all will have different motivations and objectives in speaking to media.

Some of the common objectives include: wanting to prevent sexual violence by raising awareness about the issue; challenging victim-blaming attitudes; highlighting barriers to reporting; expressing concerns around the judicial system or low conviction rates; holding a perpetrator to account; pushing for primary prevention and consent education; breaking down silences and stigma; and empowering other survivors to come forward and seek support.

It can be helpful to take some time to reflect on what your objectives are. Having clarity around your goals can also help you identify what your expectations are, and whether they are realistic.



Be aware that the media cannot always deliver outcomes that meet a survivor's expectations and journalists may bring their own agendas or objectives to the story. Talking this issue through with a support person or counsellor first may be helpful.

Do I want to remain anonymous or be identified?

If a survivor decides to share their story with media, the decision to be named or remain anonymous is entirely up to them. (Although be aware that there are some circumstances where for legal reasons the media is not permitted to name a survivor, even with their consent.)

Choosing to be named:

Choosing to be identified can send a strong message by helping to break down silence and stigma surrounding assault, while letting offenders know that a survivor has not been intimidated into silence.

Being identified can also inspire other victim-survivors to come forward and speak out. Stories where survivors waive their right to anonymity also tend to have more reach and impact with audiences and can be a powerful way in which survivors reclaim ownership and control over their experiences.

However, there are several questions to consider first:

- Is there anyone in my family or friends who does not already know of my experience/s, who would need to be told first so they do not learn about it via the media?
- Am I comfortable with the possibility that other media could contact me, including months or years from now?
- Am I comfortable with the possibility that other survivors may want to reach out to me and may disclose their own experiences? Do I know where to refer them to 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?
- In five or ten years, will I still be comfortable for people to be able to search and find this information about me?
- What supports do I have around me?
- What strategies or tools do I already have to help me manage any fallout?

Choosing to be anonymous:

Choosing to remain anonymous could mean a story has slightly less reach but it also affords a survivor far more safety and protection. When survivors choose to remain anonymous they are also free to change their mind later on and speak out under their own name if they wish.

Speaking anonymously significantly reduces the likelihood that survivors will be contacted by other media or by members of the public.

However there are also important questions to ask:

- Am I comfortable with the possibility that there may be people who already know my story who recognise the details of my story in the media?
- Am I prepared for the possibility that these individuals may attempt to make contact or ask questions?
- Am I prepared for the possibility that my offender may recognise the details of the story?
- Am I prepared for the possibility that others who know my story may disclose their own experiences to me? Do I know where to refer them for support?
- Am I prepared for the possibility that members of the public may debate and discuss details of my story in public forums?
- What supports do I have around me?
- What strategies or tools do I already have to help me manage any fallout?

What sort of media am I interested in doing?

If you are contacted by a journalist, or if you are contemplating speaking to a journalist, it can be helpful to research their body of work first. When assessing a journalist's work: Have they reported on sexual assault in the past? How have they handled this and other sensitive topics?

Knowing who you are speaking to is important. Survivors are not obliged to speak

to the first journalist who makes contact. Different types of media present different opportunities, benefits, and constraints.

Television: TV tends to have the largest audience but be aware that an hour long interview can be cut down to under ten seconds of air time. You may also not know what the final story will look like until it goes to air. Be aware that deadlines can differ significantly depending on the outlet. News programs will often have a tight daily turn around while other programs may have days, weeks or months to compile a story.

Print and online: Print and online media may have less reach, but can often explore complex issues in more detail and tease out the complexity.

Radio: Radio allows survivors to remain anonymous, but retains high impact because of the immediacy of hearing someone's voice. Live radio can be nerve-racking for some, but in many ways it affords more control, since it can't be edited down.

Student news: Some survivors prefer to break their story themselves, or may entrust it to a friend working in student news. This option often allows the survivor to retain more control over how their story is told. Be aware, that student news is often read by members of the mainstream media, and in the past, some survivors have been surprised when their own articles are picked up by mainstream journalists.

Social media: It is increasingly common for survivors to break aspects of their own story on their Facebook or Twitter feed with posts about what they have experienced. This can be a powerful and personal way to get a message across. However, survivors should know that sometimes these posts are shared with journalists who may make contact or republish the post.

Are there any legal constraints I need to know about?

If a survivor's case has been reported to police it is important to ensure that media coverage will not jeopardise any forthcoming trial or investigation. In certain situations, journalists are unable to name survivors for legal reasons, even if the survivor consents. If in doubt you can ask the journalist, police or a legal representative.

Is this good timing for me?

Survivors who wish to share their experiences should be encouraged to do so in their own time. The process of doing media can take days, weeks or even months. Forecasting forward and scanning for periods of increased stress (for example, student exams) can help in planning.

“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.”

Nina Funnell, public survivor advocate

Informing others before a story comes out:

If a survivor is contemplating speaking to the media, it is useful to think through whether there are any family (including extended family) or friends who should be told first. It is always the survivor's decision who to tell and when.

What should I expect during an interview?

- Journalists will often want to conduct interviews over the phone or in person.
- In any media interview you are entitled to bring a support person with you. This person can help advocate for you and speak up if you are feeling uncomfortable.
- Regardless of whether an interview is via the phone or in person, you have the right to request that it takes place in a location where you feel safe and comfortable and where privacy is assured.
- Ask for breaks if you need them.
- Interview quotes will often be drastically cut down and it's not uncommon for a lengthy interview to be shortened to a few powerful sound-bites or grabs. You can ask to have quotes read back.
- If you are contacted by a male journalist but would prefer to speak to a female journalist, this can usually be arranged but it may take more time.
- Be aware that most television camera crew are male.

Filming and photography:

- Sometimes journalists will ask you to pose for a photograph. They should ask this ahead of time.
- If you are uncomfortable posing for photography or would prefer to submit your own high-resolution photos instead, you may request to do so.

- If you agree to photography but there are certain angles or shots which you would prefer to avoid, communicate this upfront and ask your support person to back you up.
- Photographers will often ask their subjects to stand in poses which may feel unnatural or uncomfortable. If you need to take breaks, say so.
- On occasion current affairs television programs have been known to do re-enactments of survivor assaults. This can be very triggering for some survivors. If you are sharing your story with television, ask if they intend to create any re-enactments.
- Be aware that television journalists will often use the most powerful footage because of the impact it has on viewers. Unfortunately this sometimes means that more sensational footage is used, such as survivors crying.
- A note on safety: With any filming or photography, avoid locations which give away private information such as the area you live in.

What to expect before a story comes out

Stories being held over: Journalists will often tell you when a story is scheduled to be run, but stories often get held over for reasons which are usually outside of the journalist's control. If this happens it is not an indication that your story is not important or was not believed. Most journalists will try to keep survivors in the loop about when a story will run, but this does not always occur. Ask a journalist to keep you as informed as possible. If working with television, be aware that promos and teasers are often put together by a different department and the reporter is usually unaware of when they first run so you may not be informed.

Right of reply: In putting together stories journalists will often have to speak to multiple different sources. In some cases, the journalist may need to approach an opposing party to offer a 'right of reply'. This gives the other person or institution a chance to respond to any allegations and is required as part of the journalist's role.

Fact checking: Journalists may also sometimes seek to contact other people involved in the story to corroborate aspects of a survivor's account. This is a routine and essential part of the journalist's role and is not an indication that they did not believe a survivor's account.

Organising support: Once you know the scheduled release date of a story it can be helpful to develop a plan for that day and to arrange support ahead of time, including a support person to debrief with. You might also plan to do something nice for yourself to mark the achievement in some way.

Some survivors ask a friend to monitor social media and online comments and send along screenshots of any nice comments.

Anticipating other media contacts and locking down social media accounts: Sometimes a media story will be picked up by other outlets. There is no easy way to control this. If you have concerns about being contacted by other media, Google yourself to see what information will come up if other journalists or members of the public go searching. You may wish to lock down social media and strengthen privacy settings. This includes Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. Some survivors also use social media to alert their friends that a story has run.

WHAT TO ASK A JOURNALIST BEFORE PUBLICATION:

Can you read back my quotes?

What sort of images will be used?

Will comments be turned off?

Will there be a trigger warning on the story?

Will a support hotline be provided at the end of the story?

There are no silly questions. If you're unsure of anything, just ask.

a trained professional, it is not your role.

Perhaps a response may be something like:

Hi _____,

Thank you so much for contacting me. I am really sorry that you have had such an experience. There is nothing OK about what you have gone through.

One of the things that I have learnt on my journey is the importance of talking to a skilled trauma counsellor. There will be sexual assault services near you. In the first instance you can contact a specialist counsellor at any time on [1800 572 224](tel:1800572224).

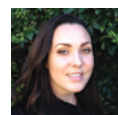
The counsellors there can assist you right now. They can also work with you to make plans including providing you with information on your options.

I encourage you to consider contacting them.

By contacting me you have shown how brave and resourceful you are. One of the many things I know about what you have experienced is that while the responsibility for what happened is totally with the perpetrator, you are the one who has to heal you. In doing this you are not alone. Seek help and use the strength in you to recover. Make your life what you want it to be. Don't for a minute let it be defined by others.

Warm regards

This factsheet was prepared by Full Stop Foundation Ambassador and journalist Nina Funnell with support from The Hunting Ground Australia Project and the Full Stop Foundation.



THE
HUNTING GROUND
AUSTRALIA PROJECT

Nina Funnell is an author, journalist and sexual assault advocate.

Once a story is released

What to expect: There is no one normal way to feel after a story is released and every reaction is valid. Some people experience a massive high, while others feel numb or unsure of their reaction. Others experience a rollercoaster of different emotions.

The important thing to know is that whatever you feel is valid and legitimate. It can also be helpful to debrief with a support person or counsellor to process your reaction, and to talk through any responses from others. You can speak to a specialist counsellor at any time on [1800 572 224](tel:1800572224).

What should I do if I receive disclosures? Those who speak out publicly – especially those who use their full name – often receive disclosures from other survivors. Sometimes strangers make contact, while at other times disclosures can come from people already known to the survivor.

It is never easy to hear a disclosure and it is important to remember that if you are not