

# From the Front of the Room

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A Survivor's Guide to Public Speaking

Developed by



National Resource Center  
on Domestic Violence

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## Introduction

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Including the voices and real life experiences of survivors is crucial to our work to end intimate partner violence and abuse in later life<sup>1</sup> at the local, state and national level. Hearing directly from survivors about their experiences and the impact of domestic violence on their lives can inspire and energize others to act, as well as help reduce or remove barriers faced by survivors and their children. For survivors interested in sharing their story, public speaking can connect them in important ways to the larger domestic violence intervention and prevention efforts in their community and across the country. Opportunities for survivors to share their stories may include:

- Presenting to community groups at public awareness events
- Speaking before state and local government in support of legislation to enhance protections for victims of domestic violence
- Participating in magazine, television or newspaper interviews (anonymously if desired)
- Joining candlelight vigils, marches, rallies, or speaking at a memorial event for victims
- Being part of a domestic violence program's fund raising event
- Talking with a program's Board of Directors or agreeing to have their story included in the annual report of a local, state or national domestic violence organization
- Speaking at life skills development groups, parenting classes, asset building workshops or other types of empowerment groups for survivors
- Providing encouragement during a victim's support group
- Being featured as a keynote speaker at a conference or Domestic Violence Awareness Month event

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<sup>1</sup> Domestic or Sexual Abuse in Later Life is abuse perpetrated on victims who are 50 years and older by someone with whom they have an ongoing relationship where there is an expectation of trust such as an intimate partner, adult child, other family member or a caregiver.

For the purposes of this publication, the term “Survivor Speaker” will be used to refer to any survivor of domestic violence, adult exposed to domestic violence as a child, a victim of elder abuse or neglect, or a surviving family member of domestic violence homicide victims who wish to speak out and share how domestic violence has impacted their lives, family, and community. Survivor speakers can be female or male, adults of any age, of any race or ethnicity, from any faith or religious tradition, and diverse in a myriad of other ways.

**NOTE:** This Guide often refers to victim/survivors as women victimized by male partners or ex-partners, since women disproportionately represent domestic violence victims. However, men abused by female partners and men and women abused in same-sex relationships also have important stories to tell and deserve both opportunities and support as public speakers.

## Purpose

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*From the Front of the Room (Guide)* provides a basic overview of the issues that face survivors who desire to speak publicly about their experiences with intimate partner violence. It provides guidance for the survivor speaker to maximize their physical and emotional safety and ensure the overall success of the speaking engagement. This Guide is designed to explore the journey of sharing their story with the public.

While every situation is different, the guidelines, considerations, and ideas that follow can help ensure that your public speaking opportunity is as safe and informative as possible. The National Resource Center on Domestic Violence (NRC DV) welcomes any feedback readers have to enhance the guidance and resources provided here.



**I can remember watching fascinated as our mother talked with her mother, sisters, and women friends. The intimacy and intensity of their speech—the satisfaction they received from talking to one another, the pleasure, the joy. It was in this world of woman speech, loud talk, angry words, women with tongues quick and sharp, tender sweet tongues, touching our world with their words, that I made speech my birthright—and the right to voice, to authorship, a privilege I would not be denied.”**

bell hooks, *Talking Back* (1989)

## Tips for Survivor Speakers

As a survivor, are you considering if, how, and when to share your story with the public? Do you wonder what it would be like to step into the role of a public speaker? This section includes frequently asked questions and tangible steps that can help you make some of these decisions and develop a plan for sharing your story if you decide to do so.

### Am I ready to start telling my story?

There are several considerations that can inform a Survivor Speaker's decision to tell her story publicly. Issues related to safety, physical and emotional well-being, and the overall impact on others of sharing a personal story all deserve attention. Questions such as, is it safe to share my story publicly? Do I really want to share my story or am I feeling that I SHOULD? Who could help me figure this out? These are some of the points we encourage you to consider as you decide whether or not to share your experiences with others in a public forum. Sorting through these questions can be challenging. However, victim advocates, other survivor speakers, and often family and friends can help inform your decision. Keep in mind that while others could provide you with support during this process, it is ultimately your personal decision to take this step.

### How might telling my story impact my safety and well-being, my children and others I care about?

#### Impact on your emotional well-being

Speaking about traumatic events that you have experienced may produce strong emotional and physical reactions for you. While many survivors feel strong and empowered after telling their story, some survivor speakers also describe being exhausted and emotionally spent after public speaking events. Some have had flashbacks and nightmares or experience depression in the hours and days after sharing their story. Some have also experienced physical symptoms, such as headaches or stomachaches after presentations. Others have noted how helpful it was to have someone supportive at the presentation or later in the day when they

returned home. Some survivors prefer to clear their schedule before and/or after the event to allow adequate time for processing and reflection. Others plan self-care activities such as being with family and friends, spending quiet time, or going for a walk.

#### Impact on children: respecting your children's boundaries

Depending on their ages, your children may or may not be aware of many of the details of the abuse you experienced. As you contemplate whether or not to tell your story publicly, consider how your children might feel about you bringing this information out into the public arena. Even if they do know the details, hearing about the events again may be embarrassing or upsetting to them. If the person who abused you is also their parent, ask the children how they feel about you sharing that story with strangers. Usually, there are aspects of your story that can be shared even if you leave out specific details that your children wish to keep private.

#### Ongoing risks from the person who abused you

Remember that the person who abused you, or his/her friends and family, may hear about your presentation. As you think about whether you are ready to become a survivor speaker, consider whether it is safe for you to do so. Some survivors who have publicly shared their stories were stalked or threatened by their former partner even though the relationship had ended years ago. Some abusers have threatened to sue organizations that have asked the victim of their abuse to speak. If you have any concerns about current or future safety risks, explore these with an advocate and review the guidance in this guide.

**NOTE:** There may also be a potential impact on family members, friends, co-workers, and community in general of telling your story. Think about some possible scenarios as you are preparing and "walk through them." For example, your family and/or friends may be surprised to learn about your abuse, or upset that you never told them about it. They may feel that you should not be telling "family secrets." The victim advocate working with you would be an important source of support while assisting you with this process.

**TIP** If you have a pending legal case, such as child custody or divorce proceedings that involve the person who abused you, be mindful of how information that you might share as a survivor speaker could be used as evidence.



**We recommend that survivors with an open court case not share their story publicly – the unintended consequences for you or your children could be too great.**

### Visualize a Positive Outcome

As you consider whether to become a survivor speaker, take time to visualize a speaking event unfolding in the way you want it to and the ways that it might make you feel strong and grounded. Remember all of the ways that you have been creative and resilient in your journey of survival, and imagine how inspired you and others will feel after you finish sharing your story. Many survivors have made use of a personal, encouraging mantra, a passage from a faith-based text, or motto as a form of positive self-talk throughout the day and prior to the event.

Another way to help you decide if you are ready to become a survivor speaker is to practice telling your story to a friend or trusted person who may not know too much about your survivor story. As you are telling your story, pay attention to any physical sensations that you may experience like muscle tension in the neck or headaches, pay attention to any emotional experiences you may have (e.g., sadness or anxiety). After you are done practicing, check in internally to see how the experience was for you. Pay attention to any feelings you may have afterwards or if you experience any flashbacks or nightmares. If it felt too overwhelming or intense then this can help you decide whether or not you'd like to become a survivor speaker at this time.

<sup>2</sup> The majority of domestic violence and sexual assault programs require specific training before someone is able to become a volunteer for their organization.

## I am ready to share my story. What's the first step?

Domestic violence victim advocates play a crucial role in empowering survivors who are exploring the possibility of becoming public speakers. Building a relationship with advocates in the community has benefits on many levels:

### Networking Opportunities

Most local programs have a variety of volunteer opportunities<sup>2</sup> that assist survivors in making connections with victim advocates and other survivors. Some have social action groups or caucuses of survivors who meet regularly, lead community awareness activities or act as a speaker's bureau for the agency. This might be a good place to find opportunities to talk with other survivors about their public speaking experiences. When community agencies are seeking information about domestic violence speakers for events, they are likely to contact the local domestic violence program for recommendations.

### Assistance and Support

For most survivor speakers, preparing and giving a public presentation will trigger strong emotions, and complex memories about the person who abused them, whether it be their former partner, a partner with whom they are still in contact, an adult child, an adult caregiver, or their parent if they are an adult speaking out about the abuse they were exposed to as a child. Victim advocates can provide support in preparing your presentation and can help in processing the range of feelings that might arise for you.

### Gaining Perspective

The local domestic violence program will have a wealth of information on domestic violence, its impact on families and communities, and current intervention and prevention efforts within your community, state, territory or tribe. Volunteering<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See note at 2.

with the program can help you place your own individual experiences within a broader context of domestic violence as a public health and public safety issue. There may be opportunities to connect your story to a specific project, legislative effort, or event that is being planned in the community.

If you do not know how to contact the domestic violence program in your community, the state domestic violence coalition can help you. A complete list of contact information for all domestic and sexual violence coalitions across the United States and its Territories can be found at <http://www.vawnet.org/links/state-coalitions.php>. Some state coalitions coordinate a Speaker's Bureau and this might be a good way to find opportunities to talk with other survivors about their experiences as survivor speakers.

## How do I prepare to tell my story?

### Remember: It is your story

Tell about your experience with intimate partner violence – what happened and how it affected you and the people you care about. Perhaps you can describe how the violence and abuse affected your daily life and the factors that influenced the choices you made. If you are still in contact with the person who abused you, it may be helpful for the audience to hear about those dynamics and understand your motivation for remaining in contact. Share as much or as little as you feel comfortable. The audience wants to hear your story.

As you choose what to say, think about who helped you. What did they say or do that made a difference to you? What created obstacles for you? Find a way to describe how things could have been improved in the way others responded to you, without blaming or accusing the audience.

Don't feel that you need to include statistics, unless you are asked to do so. It is always appropriate to defer to or refer your audience to the local domestic violence program or state coalition for information that you do not feel prepared to address. If, however, you would like to be able to provide some statistics or general

information about the local domestic violence program's service levels, talk with the program to obtain this data. Be sure to periodically obtain updated information.

### Outline what you want to say

You will likely have much more material than may be necessary for one presentation. Think about the most powerful experiences you have had, situations that represent a point of learning for you (possibly an "aha moment"), and details that might speak specifically to the audience you will be addressing. Too much information may cause an overload for the audience or they could become lost in the story.

You may want to prepare an outline of a full presentation, including all that you think you may be comfortable sharing. You can use the outline to prioritize what aspects of your story you will want to share for different types of events. For example, a 30-45 minute address to open a conference will look very different than a 10-12 minute presentation as part of a panel during a workshop.

As mentioned above, it would be useful for you to practice your presentation; this can be in its entirety or only parts of it. Practicing will help you see if any intense emotions or physical reactions may come up for you. During the practice, you can take time to plan how you will cope with intense emotions (e.g., taking long deep breaths or holding onto something that is soothing while you speak). Also, practicing will help you feel more confident for the "real" presentation.

**NOTE:** If you share custody of your children with the person who abused you, be mindful of saying anything that could be used against you in a future court action. Once something is stated publicly, or quoted in the newspaper or on television, it might be introduced in court proceedings. As you think of what you want to include, consider "is it safe for me to say this?" Depending upon how likely it is for the person who abused you to hear about your role as survivor speaker, and any fears you may have in this area, it may be helpful to have your comments reviewed by a legal advocate from a domestic violence program.



It is generally better not to publicly identify the abuser or describe the abuser in a way that makes him/her easily identifiable unless that person has been convicted of domestic violence or a court has issued a protection order or other finding that the abuser committed violence against you. For example, if the abuser is the chief surgeon at the local hospital, it is better not to reference that position, because some people in the community could quickly identify them. If the abuser has not been found to have committed abuse by a court of law, and you name them publicly, an abuser might accuse you of libel or slander or claim intentional emotional harm. Again, it can be very helpful to have your comments reviewed by a legal advocate or attorney to be sure you are not exposed to retaliatory actions by the abuser who is still a threat to you.

## HELPFUL CONTENT THAT EDUCATES LISTENERS

“What didn’t help in my healing? It didn’t help when people looked away and pretended that the abuse wasn’t happening. One of my most painful memories was when my husband was beating me in front of some of his friends and they didn’t do anything to help. They just sat there in my living room watching some game on TV while my husband assaulted me. That was an extreme example, but there were others. My family and friends knew what was going on, but they didn’t ever say anything to me like, ‘You don’t deserve this.’”<sup>4</sup>

“What helped me most? The battered women’s program helped me build up my self-esteem, and they helped me find what I needed to begin to think about my needs and well-being. I got into a support group, and I found out that other women have had the same experience and they have survived. I got back into school at the tribal college, and I’m studying to be a teacher.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> North Dakota Council on Abused Women’s Services/Coalition Against Sexual Assault, “Women are Sacred”, booklet, p.12.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Women Helping Battered Women, Domestic Violence Program in Chittendon County, Vermont. <http://www.whbw.org/a-survivors-story/>

“There is a stereotype that intimate partner violence occurs only in low-income, poorly educated, minority, or ‘dysfunctional’ families. The fact is, intimate partner violence occurs in every community, among people of every age, religion and race, sexual orientation, and at every economic level. This is my story.

Five years ago, one week before my thirtieth birthday, I was living in a desirable neighborhood in New York City. I had a high-ranking position working for the State of New York. I had experienced physical and emotional abuse from my husband over the course of three years. There were risk factors early on in the relationship including: a push for quick involvement, jealousy, unrealistic expectations, and isolation, blaming others for problems, sudden mood swings, and threats of violence. The violence was not an isolated, individual event. One battering episode built upon past episodes and set the stage for future ones. There were a wide range of consequences, some physically injurious and some not; all were painful, especially the emotional abuse and humiliation.”<sup>6</sup>

“I think you have to have people around you that know the same thing that you’re going through because people don’t understand... It would be nice if a social worker came with the police, because when the police take your son, and they handcuff him and take him out of the house, there’s nobody there for you to put their arm around you and say it’s going to be alright, what can I do for you? You’re left in a kind of empty situation.”<sup>7</sup>

## Create notes that you can use when you speak

Even though you know the details of your story well, having notes will help you if you lose your train of thought. Once you have told your story repeatedly, you may not need them, but as you begin speaking, the notes may help you feel more confident. Remember that when you speak, your notes will most likely be on the podium, so you will need to write or print them in a font size large enough for you to read from a distance.

<sup>7</sup> “In their Own Words: Domestic Abuse in Later Life”, Disk 2: Topical Segment and Interactive Workshop. Office of Victims of Crime and National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life. 2008.

## What do I need to know about the event?

### Know your audience

Seek information about the audience to whom you will speak. How many people will be there? Will the audience include primarily other victims/survivors, only women, people from a particular age group, law enforcement, court or health care professionals, general community members, or be a mixed audience? For example, you may tell your story in a different way when speaking to youth than when telling your story to a group of experienced advocates or faith leaders, or when speaking to a particular cultural group.

Relationships that involve abuse are often complicated. In the course of identifying and addressing domestic violence issues and through the course of your experiences, you may have had contact with many different people and service providers such as community agencies, clergy or health care professionals. Including details about these interactions can be beneficial to audience members and can increase the impact of your story. The more you know about your audience, the better you will be able to choose which components of your experience to include.

**TIP** If you had negative interactions with individuals, community agencies, clergy or health care providers, be thoughtful about how you include these details. Share how these interactions made you feel and the effect it had on your decision-making, but do not use this public speaking opportunity to criticize or denounce the individual, community organizations or agencies, clergy or health care providers. That type of feedback is best presented in a private meeting between you, the individual, organization or agency in question and local advocates who can help identify and resolve a problem and improve response to future victims.

## Know your time frame and stick to it

When you are invited to speak, those inviting you will have a specific time frame for your presentation. Your presentation will most likely be one part of a larger program, and it is important to honor your assigned time frame and not delay the remainder of the agenda. Practice and time your presentation using your notes, so that you can complete the story you want to tell in your allotted time. As a guest speaker, if you do not stay within your allotted time, that may impact whether you are invited to speak again. Going “over time” may also affect the time remaining for other speakers, some of whom may also be survivors. When initially discussing the presentation with the organizers, don’t be afraid to ask if there is some flexibility in the time frame if necessary.

### ABOUT THE MEDIA

It is important to ask if media outlets will be at the event and what the implications are of such involvement. If media are there or have been invited, personal safety concerns may arise due to the increased exposure that media coverage might generate. A journalist may want to do a one-on-one interview with you before or after an event. Think about the confidentiality-related issues that might arise for you and ask an advocate to help you negotiate with a journalist if necessary. Do you need your name and address withheld from any stories about the event? If it is a TV or radio outlet, do you need them to blur your face or distort your voice to protect your identity?

**REMEMBER:** You can always say ‘NO’ to a request for an interview.

## After the speaking event, what happens next?

Following the speaking engagement, follow-up with the advocate that asked you to speak. If you cannot do that right after the speaking event, request a meeting. If the advocate is not immediately available then it is strongly recommended that you have a trusted friend or counselor that you can debrief with. If no one is available,

then plan a self-care activity (e.g., going for a walk, practicing to yoga, participating in a spiritual activity, etc.). It is important that you allow yourself some time to have a period after the presentation where you can reflect on the experience of presenting and care for yourself emotionally if necessary.

When you do meet with the advocate to debrief, be honest about what this experience was like for you, both positive and negative. Let the advocate know if you'd be interested in speaking again or if you need more time to process your thoughts and to consider whether you want to be on their list of speakers. Retelling your story many times over can be emotionally difficult. Sharing your experience with abuse once does not commit you to retelling your story every time an opportunity presents itself. You should also say no to public speaking requests unless you feel completely comfortable saying yes.

### **Should I expect to be compensated for sharing my story?**

Asking for compensation is a reasonable request. However, be aware that local domestic violence programs and other non-profit organizations that typically organize these speaking engagements operate on small budgets and may not be able to afford to pay for speakers to come to their events. Where possible, domestic violence programs or other event sponsors will try to provide a small monetary stipend as compensation for survivor speakers. In the case of a national or statewide conference or other similar venues, the event sponsors may be able to provide an honorarium and pay for travel related expenses, including mileage reimbursement or transit fares, help with meals while you are there to speak, and accommodations.

Prior to agreeing to speak at the event, confirm with the event organizers whether you will be compensated and how, particularly if your ability to speak at the event is contingent upon financial assistance or compensation (that is, if you need help with gas money, transit fares, or other types of travel to/from the event). Often times, event organizers will do all they can to work out an arrangement that is agreeable and fits within their budget.

## **In Conclusion**

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The tips, scenarios, and related information offered throughout this guide are here to assist you in thinking through each step involved with the sharing of your story publicly. It takes courage to stand before others and speak about the intimate details of one's life; we hope that this guide is useful to any survivor speaker preparing to tell their story, or for those supporting someone else who will embark on that journey.

Audre Lorde is well-known for saying, "I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood." This statement can at times be mighty and inspiring, yet daunting and disquieting. Giving voice to the pain and suffering, as well as to the strength, resilience and recovery that many survivors experience is powerful, and also a risk for many reasons. It is our hope that this guide has helped to quell any lingering questions, concerns, or uncertainty you may have experienced when considering whether or not to share your story. Whatever you decide, we wish you the very best in life, love, health, wellness, and peace of spirit.



**The Beginning.  
Now, go forth and do good."**

*Teresa Ellis, National Red Cross Volunteer*







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