

ADVOCACY 101

USING YOUR STORY



This document is an excerpt from the "Leadership Academy Manual" - developed by the Colorado Mental Wellness Network in 2009, and updated in 2014.

cmwn.org/advocacy

Types of Advocacy¹

- **Self Advocacy** is representing and advancing your own interests;
- **Peer-to-Peer Advocacy** is representing the rights and interests of someone other than yourself;
- **Systems Advocacy** is influencing social, political and economic systems to bring about change for groups of people;
- **Legal Advocacy** is using attorneys and the legal or administrative systems to establish or protect legal rights.

Using Your Story as an Advocacy Tool²

"When you tell a story that touches me, you give me the gift of human attention—the kind that connects me to you, that touches my heart and makes me feel more alive."

- Annette Simmons, *The Story Factor*

What is a Recovery Story?

A recovery story is simply an accounting or recounting of your experiences with mental health or substance use conditions (or that of your experience as a caregiver or parent). Recovery stories are meant to offer hope and inspiration to others who are experiencing similar issues at the same time as celebrating how far you've come. These experiences can also be shared with others to demonstrate the evidence of recovery and to help others understand why behavioral health is so important to overall health.



What's in a Recovery Story?

Before discussing what goes in a story, let's explore what recovery is and isn't. To make things difficult, there is no one single definition of recovery. It has been described as a deeply personal, unique process of changing one's attitudes, values, feelings, goals, and or skills—"the process by which a person overcomes the challenges presented by a mental health and/or substance use condition to live a life of meaning and purpose".

¹ Advocacy Training Manual: Wisconsin Coalition for Advocacy (1996), p.1

² Adapted from the SCDMH Recovery Steering Committee, "We Want You To Tell Your Story," Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, "Telling Your Story," and Jenifer Strauss, "Article for Michigan Dispatch."

It is also important to remember that there are two kinds of stories - an *illness story* and a *recovery story*. Illness stories tend to be more negative, focusing on graphic images or details, anger, feelings of hopelessness, etc. If you decide to try to tell or write your story and it has more negative elements than positive ones, that's okay. Sometimes people find they have to tell or write an illness story first, before being able to move on to the recovery story.

Recovery stories should include not just our challenges but our joys and successes, and all the facets of who we are. Recovering from a mental health condition and/or addiction is not our whole story and it doesn't define who we are, but it is an important part of our story.

How Do I Know if I Am Ready

Deciding if you want to share your story is a very important decision, deserving of careful reflection and thought. On the positive side, the stories are very empowering because your experiences put you in a unique position to offer hope, understanding and information to others struggling in ways no other person can. On the negative side, telling your story when you are not ready can leave you feeling "outed", triggered or cause you to relive traumas you'd rather forget.

Recounting your experiences, good and bad, can leave you feeling vulnerable. It's also important to remember that your story will probably change and grow over time as you change and grow. Combined with the lack of a concrete definition means that it is up to you to decide when or if you are ready to begin sharing your story. Below are some guidelines that may help you decide.

- *Write and leave alone:* Write your story down and leave it alone for a day or two. When you are ready, read it over, is it an illness or a recovery story? If it is an illness story, try recounting your experiences again.
- *You don't have to share everything:* Deciding that you want to share your story doesn't mean you have to report on or detail every experience you've had. Not disclosing more than you are comfortable with is okay.
- *Understand why:* In telling your story, you can offer insight and hope to others struggling to understand what is happening in ways no other person can. But keep in mind what you *can't* do; you can't recover for someone else or tell them how to do it.

Once you are comfortable with your recovery story, it can be a very useful tool in helping elected officials, members of the media, and the public understand; recovery, the need for access to treatment, the elimination of stigma and discrimination, etc.

The average person will remember a story over a bunch of statistics of facts any day!

Why Our Stories Are Important

1. Stories lend credibility and authority to an issue. They help those who don't have experience with the mental health and substance use conditions understand and empathize with the difficulties.
2. Our stories can also help break through the stigma about causes of mental health and substance use conditions by breaking down barriers of ignorance, prejudice, discrimination, and promoting education, awareness, and action.
3. Your story is real and not an abstract example. Think about and convey how your story affects those in your community.
4. Your story will help others get the care and treatment they need or at the very least inspire and empower others to achieve recovery.

Opportunities to Use Your Recovery Story

There are numerous ways you can use your story to benefit the recovery community, your peers and the system for future generations.

- Write your story and post it on a blog, mental health website, etc.
- Send your story to magazines, newsletters, or other publications that print recovery stories.
- Create a video and post on YouTube with other peers.
- Speak to students at universities and colleges in your community. This is a common practice among medical students and psychology students; it adds valuable information to their training and preparation.
- Participate in an organization's speaker's bureau or NAMI's "In Our Own Voice" program that arrange for individuals to tell their stories on a regular basis.
- Send it to Colorado Mental Wellness Network to use on their website to empower others to share their story!
- Enter your story into a contest, many times local foundations and pharmaceutical companies launch educational campaigns featuring stories (i.e., Bringing Change to Mind and AstraZeneca's "Speak and Be Heard" Campaign).

Let's Put Your Story Together!

Review the questions below and jot down your initial thoughts to get the ball rolling.

What were some of the early indications that you (or your family/friend) were beginning to have difficulties?

How would you briefly describe yourself and your situation when you were at your worst? What couldn't you do (for example, I could not get out of bed, I could not stop crying, I thought people were going to harm me or could hear my thoughts, I could not stop going back to unhelpful, negative or harmful coping skills)?

What helped you move from where you were to where you are now? What did you do (for example, I quit using alcohol and drugs, I took responsibility for my mental health by learning my triggers and early warning signs, I talked to others about my problems, I went to support groups)?

What did others do to let me know they cared (for example, took me to appointments, were honest with me about the way I was behaving)?

What have you had to overcome to get where you are today (for example, the belief I would never get better, to be able to stop drinking, learning to solve problems in a healthy way)?

What have you learned about yourself as a result of your journey (for example, I am stronger than I thought, I can do anything as long as I work at it, I am not meant to go through this alone, there is support out there for me, the process of recovery is worth the journey, I can live well and thrive with my diagnosis or mental health condition and recovery is possible)?

What are some of the strengths you've developed (for example, problem-solving skills, I learned to be a good listener, I had the courage to ask for help/support and that took strength, I learned wellness tools and skills to comfort myself, I have a support system I can lean on, I can face my fears without going back to unhelpful, negative or harmful coping skills and I can do this)?

What are some of the things you do to keep you on the right path (for example, go to a support group; A.A./N.A or other recovery meeting, follow my wellness recovery action plan (learn about what a wellness recovery action plan is), meet with my therapist, Peer Support Specialist, get enough sleep, take my prescribed medication, don't let things build up, ask for help and seek support)?

Miscellaneous: Some people's stories include how long they've been receiving services, if and how many times they've been hospitalized, what their diagnosis is, what they hope to do in the future, etc. Facts and details such as these can help others (providers, policy makers, community members) understand what helps and what doesn't help.

Tips for Presenting

- Speak plainly. Remember this is a personal story. Although it might be used for policy, this is not the time or place for jargon, such as medical or legal terms or acronyms. Avoid complicated policy language and tell your story with clear, everyday language (even the terms “peer” and “recovery” need to be defined).
- Make your story emotional and factual. An effective story is a true story. It’s important for your story to have heart and demonstrate how it makes you feel. This brings reality and authenticity to your story at hand. However, this does not mean it should be a dramatic production - you have to keep it together.
- Keep it Short! You need to keep your audience interested. Aim for 3 minutes for legislation testimony, that is all the time you get and it is timed, and no more than 8-10 for presentations..
- Practice, practice, practice! Make sure you know exactly what you’re going to say and stick to it. This helps avoid an overly emotional telling, wandering off into details that may not be relevant to your audience, and getting off topic.