

When peer supporters shift the context of their relationships with women survivors from the question “What is wrong with you?” to “What happened to you?” they emphasize storytelling. Telling another human being what has taken place in one’s life can be an important part of healing from trauma and can lay the foundation for new stories about what the future holds. While some women will want to reveal actual events, others may choose not to. Peer support can be an opportunity for women to explore multiple forms of communicating through performing and visual arts, such as dance, music, or painting. This chapter will describe the function of story, the role of the listener and some of the common challenges that can occur when trauma narratives are shared. This chapter will also examine the role of mutual responsibility in the storytelling process.

### Why Are Our Stories So Important?

Storytelling is an important organizing force in cultures throughout the world. Individual stories become the story of a people or a group. Transmitted over time—from cave paintings of pre-history to folk songs to social media and the Internet—stories reflect who we are and what we believe about the universe and our place in it. Stories are the basis for history, art, religion, politics, philosophy, and more, reflecting the ways in which we are uniquely separate, while revealing our interconnectedness. As Vanessa Jackson writes, “The telling of stories has been an integral part of the history of people of African descent. From the griots (singers/story-tellers who carry the oral history of a local culture) of ancient Africa to the sometimes painful lyrics of hip-hop artists, people of African descent have known that our lives and our stories must be spoken, over and over again, so that the people will know our truth.”<sup>1</sup>

Our personal accounts—what we survived and how, what these experiences mean to us, and what we know now that we did not know before—are what we mean by “stories.” Personal narratives organize experience

<sup>1</sup> Jackson, Vanessa (undated). *In Our Own Voices*. Available at <http://www.healingcircles.org/uploads/INOVweb.pdf>

and help us make sense out of what has taken place. Stories can be true or not true, entertaining or horrifying. Stories can be communicated with or without words. They can be literal or metaphorical, using the language of symbols to convey deeper truths. No two stories are the same, yet every story contains some aspect of the universal.

When violence leads to physical and mental injury, it also engenders a healing response. One aspect of this is the trauma story, whose function is not only to heal the survivor, but also to teach and guide the listener—and by extension, society—in healing and survival.

– Richard F. Mollica M.D.,  
*Healing Invisible Wounds*

In trauma-informed peer support, the story can be the gateway to peer support relationships. When listening to another person’s story, you may catch glimpses of yourself. Knowing what it feels like to be in pain allows people to act when a stranger is suffering. This awareness can cause you to shut down emotionally at times, especially when the magnitude and constancy of suffering feels unbearable. But stories can also create unity and inspire action, as when many individuals come together to find the strength to confront social problems. Sharing personal stories can communicate that it is possible to move beyond the circumstances of one’s life. It sends a message of hope: If you can, I can!

As you talk with women about what happened in their lives and what those events mean to them, remember that your own experiences, including your needs and feelings, are an important part of your connection. Hopefully you are part of a peer community that will determine what your culture of mutual healing and growth looks like. Grow and expand what works. Use the principles of peer support as your guide.

Keep in mind that creating new stories—about who one is, what one is capable of, and what the future holds—can also be a part of storytelling, leading to a sense of possibility and hope. Peer support can create space for women to craft stories about the future; to try out, revise, and build upon what they hope to create in their lives. Through trauma-informed peer support, women can use the strength of their relationships to challenge negative beliefs, re-evaluate strengths, and re-define capabilities.

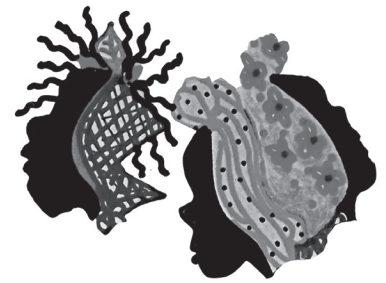
## Supporting Women in Telling Their Stories

Perhaps you ask a survivor “What happened to you?” and she remains silent. Simply asking the question is not enough. Creating safe space, communicating respect, and building trust take time. Ignoring what women say or trying to close down their attempts to communicate what has happened in their lives can create profound disconnection in relationships. As a peer supporter, you may have been taught to re-direct the conversation if intense parts of a woman’s story emerge in your work together—but, tragically, this is likely to reinforce old messages: no one will believe you; what happened to you wasn’t so bad; if you don’t think about it will go away; you shouldn’t talk about those kinds of things. Her feelings of being different may grow if she gets the message that “who she is” and “what she has experienced” is somehow beyond the scope of her relationship with others and requires specialized care.

Telling one’s story is not always a literal event and, even when it is, the story may not flow from beginning to middle to end. She may share pieces and parts of her story over the life of her relationship with you. You may know parts of her that others do not and vice versa. As women open up and share traumatic life events, the most important things you can do may be the simplest. Bearing witness to another person’s grief, rage, or anguish is a powerful way to stand with someone in the immensity of their pain. Listening from a place of deep attentiveness and caring and asking questions can demonstrate that you honor what she is giving of herself and that you want to know more about her life.

There are three characteristics of trauma that may be expressed through one’s story: the event (what happened, where, when, and how), the meaning of the event (including its cultural meaning and the woman’s personal interpretation of what happened), and the impact of the trauma on her present life.

You may be more comfortable with certain parts of the process than others. The hardest part for a listener is often the factual accounting of events. It is easy to get hung up in the details. But you might find that you are frustrated with the meaning a survivor makes of traumatic events: “It happened to me because I am bad and deserved it.” Or you may witness women trapped by the impact trauma has on their lives, repeatedly returning to jail, or losing hard-won jobs, or dropping out of sight. These issues are not indicators of irreparable damage. What may look like “relapse” or perceived “failure to recover” may be a woman who is still trying to figure things out, or trying to explain what has happened to her, or how it feels. Looking at the meaning and the impact of trauma—not just the event itself—is often where the real work of healing takes place.



While in jail I was put in isolation and all my clothes were taken . . . Saying that I was depressed got me punished worse. I learned that day not to tell the system your real feelings.

– M.E., a Peer Specialist

## Common Challenges and Solutions

Telling one’s story is often difficult. Hearing a painful narrative can be a reminder of one’s own painful experiences or can push supporters beyond their ability to listen empathetically to horrifying details. Knowing how to respond respectfully in these circumstances is crucial to effective peer support.

### Stories That Are Difficult to Hear

One of the dimensions of a trauma story is the factual accounting of events. The powerful details of what a woman has survived may include images and experiences that evoke strong feelings or memories in a listener. It is very hard emotional work to stay with another person in pain, to listen to her story without shutting down.



Not everyone wants or needs to go into detail, but for some, this is a vital part of the healing process. Why are the actual events important? Richard F. Mollica of the Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma writes that, “when survivors begin to tell their stories, they are struggling to create something whole from the physical and psychological destruction that has happened to them.”<sup>2</sup>

Some aspects of the story may shock or numb you, creating a sense of distance between you and the woman telling her story, despite your best intentions. Stories may be chaotic. They may lack order or be anxiety-producing. They may not sound like stories, but may be a series of images that may be literal or symbolic. Literal interpretation may not be as important as relating and responding to the emotional content.

Mollica suggests that there is a vital, reciprocal relationship between storyteller and listener when the survivor is viewed as teacher, as someone who knows about coping with human violence or surviving

<sup>2</sup> Mollica, Richard F. (2006). *Healing Invisible Wounds*. New York, NY: Harcourt, p. 122.

the impact of natural disaster. This idea of survivor as teacher lends itself to the role of the listener/peer supporter who benefits from the survivor’s knowledge about how to cope and live beyond the extremes of human suffering. The peer supporter is also a co-learner, exploring other dimensions of a trauma narrative with the survivor, such as its meaning and its impact on her current situation. This can become an incredible mutual exploration, as both people use their relationship to examine who they are, how they make sense out of their lives and the events that have impacted them, and to explore new possibilities based on what they discover together.

It is likely that you will find yourself in some difficult places doing this work. It is okay to communicate what you need in respectful ways. You can suggest a short break, or take a silent walk together—whatever feels necessary at the time. You can cultivate a community of healing by opening up your relationship to include others who can support a woman in areas that may be too difficult for you. Healers, other peers, friends, and supporters can be part of her healing. This is how trauma-informed relationships can grow into trauma-informed communities.

### MAKING MEANING OF TRAUMATIC EVENTS

- What makes you unique? Is it a talent, a perspective on living, a strength, your family, or how or where you were raised? Or is it something you’ve experienced—something that happened to you?
- If someone else has experienced the exact same thing, how would you define your uniqueness? Do you know something now that you did not know before? What?
- How have you dealt with loss/grief/rage? How have others responded to you as a result of what you’ve gone through? What has that been like for you?
- Do you have a personal philosophy of life based on past trauma? How has this philosophy helped you survive?
- What got you from your darkest hour to where you are now? What did you do? Did someone do something that helped you?
- What is the cultural meaning of the event for you? How does your culture see you due to this traumatic experience?
- If you were able to reject cultural (family, neighborhood, job, community) evaluation of yourself, how were you able to do this?
- Based on what you learned as a result of your experiences, what would you want to teach others about survival and suffering?
- How does what happened to you play out today? How do you know if the events still affect you? Is this something you would like to change? If so, what would you like from others to support you in taking risks around change?

## Competing Trauma Stories: Outdoing Each Other

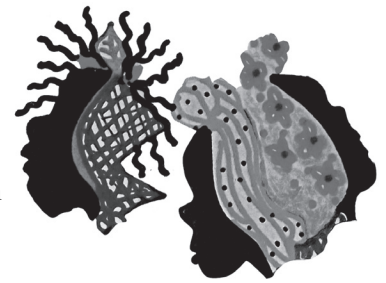
One of the most bewildering challenges in telling trauma narratives in a group has to do with competing stories, or what appears to be an effort to “outdo” one another by describing the extremity of traumatic experiences. Peer support groups can easily be derailed if the focus shifts to “who had it worse.” The tragedy of competing stories is that some women may readily agree that they did not have it as bad as someone else, thereby invalidating their own experience of pain, grief, and outrage.

While on the surface this kind of behavior may seem self-serving or “attention-getting,” it often has a deeper meaning. Trauma often annihilates personal boundaries, rupturing the survivor’s sense of herself and what makes her unique. For many women who have experienced violence, their personal identity becomes defined by what happened to them. The statement: “You think that was bad, let me tell you what happened to me!” may be her way of asserting her unique place in the world, an attempt to show how she is different from all others and, therefore, uniquely herself.

Peer supporters can help groups that get bogged down in “who had it worse” scenarios by engaging the group in an exploration of meaning behind the traumatic events. The exploration of meaning will likely reveal how each individual is unique. This can include examining the impact of trauma, as participants see how past events may be informing their current experiences. The exploration of meaning and impact validates whatever experience a survivor brings to the group or names as traumatic. The sidebar Making Meaning of Traumatic Events offers some possible questions for group discussion.

## Telling the Same Story Over and Over

Sometimes professionals have asked women to tell their stories over and over again, and sometimes women seem to be unable to move beyond endless repetitions. Recounting the details of what happened can be re-traumatizing, especially if the woman relives the feelings she experienced during the traumatic events. This has led some people in the trauma field to question whether telling trauma stories is even a good idea, or whether it reinforces destructive and traumatic memories.



For some women, repeating their story may help them to get a handle on the impact of trauma in their life. An often-repeated story may act as a kind of exclamation point on experience, delivering the message: “I know what happened to me!” A story that is frequently repeated may also be a rehearsed event—a version of the story that the survivor feels she has the best control over, even if it incites the same intensity of emotion.

### **HMONG STORY CLOTHS: TALES OF A COLLECTIVE TRAUMA**

The Paj Ntaub Tib Neeg or “story cloths” of the Hmong women depict their experiences during the Vietnam War and their flight to Thai refugee camps. Elaborate and difficult needlework was a long-standing tradition of their culture. The patterns were symbolic events that preserved tribal culture and identity in the place of a written language or history. Persecuted for aligning with the United States during the Vietnam war, the Hmong fled to Thailand where they found themselves in a kind of limbo—neither starting a new life or nor able to return to their own life, Hmong women began to embroider their stories, especially stories of survival and flight, into their traditional craft. These story cloths have become a means of economic survival.

In peer support, being curious is a wonderful way to connect with women and encourage them to think about what they can teach others about healing. Beginning a new conversation might be as simple as asking: “What does this particular story mean about you?” or “How does this story explain who you are?” It may be helpful to ask, “How were you able to survive?” In some cases, women may have overlooked their own heroism, the smallest act that preserved them. Women who have seen themselves as victims may welcome a chance to reconstruct their narrative.



In other cases, asking women what's right with them or pushing them to focus on positive aspects of their behavior or future goals may miss the point she is trying to make: that healing is about being seen. Healing is about validation. Healing is about being recognized for who and what she is and what she survived to tell.

### Stories Told Through the Language of Behavior

You are probably familiar with women who try to communicate their pain and distress through the language of behavior. For example: A woman runs out of your peer support group after she got close to painful or distressing feelings. Even though she is no longer present, she is still communicating powerful messages. What is going on, and how do we support a different way of telling the story?

Instead of dismissing what this woman is doing as “acting out,” keep in mind that, while this behavior may be disruptive, it is an attempt to say something important. Language is not just what one says, but also what one does. What she does may be her best attempt to explain who she is and what she knows. For many people, trauma is literally unspeakable. This failure of words can create a need for communication based on behavior.

Often, the system sends the message that trauma survivors are fragile and that it is important to avoid “triggering” them. Maybe you expect that women will not be able to handle difficult material or their own sudden, intense, and distressing feelings. These expectations teach women to put a lid on their own narratives, preventing them from tapping into their own sources of resiliency. If people continue to get messages about their inability to handle difficult encounters, behavioral reactions can take the place of words in communicating just how painful the past is.

When the language of behavior keeps the group from moving forward, peer supporters may want to engage the group in a discussion about the failure of words to communicate distress. The group may be able to help individual members begin to try to reconnect events, feelings, thoughts, and perceptions to words as survivors' attempts to articulate their unique truth.

### Talking About the Taboo

Stories are about one's internal experiences, including the feelings, ideas, and perceptions about events. In the case of violence and abuse, the internal experience can be devastating, creating a sense of shame, humiliation, embarrassment, and dread. These feelings are hard to talk about and hard to listen to. It is not just the abuse that can separate a survivor from others, but also the tragic meaning she has made out of the experience: I am damaged. I must not let anyone know. Similarly, women trauma survivors who have been violent to others, including their own children, are often extremely isolated and face great internal shame.

Care should be taken to create safe space for women to explore taboo areas of their lives, especially for women who have perpetrated violence in the past and now seek help through peer support. Creating a healing community requires preparation, such as letting prospective group members know what kinds of topics will be explored. This will allow women to make decisions about whether they can support each other, and ensures that when survivors reveal certain facts about their experiences, they are with a group that can accept them.

### Group and Individual Identity

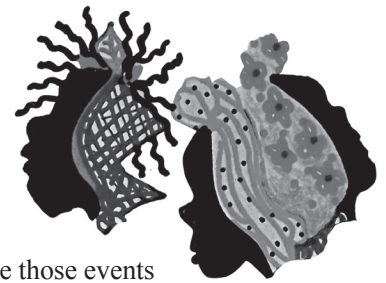
Some cultures strongly value group identity and, in some situations, there may be a complex relationship between one's individual story and the story of the group. For example, by law, refugees must establish that they are fleeing a situation because of a “well-founded fear of persecution.” The individual's story must therefore be consistent with the overall narrative of the refugee group, or both the individual's and the group's future may be in jeopardy. In situations like this, women may feel more comfortable talking about their group's historical journey than about their individual experience. They may find it possible to heal completely without ever revisiting what happened to them as individuals, if they can focus on the survival narrative of their people. Holocaust survivors who vow “never again” and survivors of the bombing of Sarajevo who tell stories of their city's heroism are two examples of collective historical healing.

## Supporting Women in NOT Telling Their Stories

It is a choice, not a problem, if a woman chooses not to divulge her story. We all participate in healing in different ways, and telling one's story is NOT a requirement of healing. Women who experienced abuse very early in their lives, before they were able to talk, may not have words to describe their experience. Not everyone will want to tell their trauma story. Many survivors have faced negative consequences in their attempts to get help. They have learned not to divulge their truths. Perhaps the story is too painful to revisit or there are cultural constraints on self-disclosure. Women may remain silent because they feel unsafe in their current environment. Some women may relate to their stories internally without sharing them, needing to maintain some space around personal events that might feel too big for words. Some women may feel that their traumatic experiences were so extreme that remembering has worse consequences than forgetting. Others may simply prefer to keep their stories private.

## Art and Healing

Art is another source of healing that may not use words. Creative expression allows women to take painful experience and reconstitute those events into visual and performing arts. When an audience participates in this event, it bears witness to a survivor's transformation. Whether alone or in a group, with an audience or without, the power of creativity defies the destructive force of trauma. Creative projects can also bring women together to re-interpret their abuse experiences through art. For others, creative self-expression such as writing or journaling provides personal time and space to reflect on their experience. No matter what form it takes, art is a way to make a world that the artist controls entirely, a world infused with the meaning she gives to it. Involving traditional healers and cultural modes of expression such as drumming or traditional dance can also be a way for a woman to reclaim cultural experiences that she may have lost or never had the chance to experience.



### WORDS OF HOPE

Most of my adolescence was spent in and out of institutions: I am a survivor of trauma and multiple suicide attempts. I was forced to take a series of harmful psychiatric drugs that made me feel like a shadow of myself. At eighteen years old, coming out of my final institution, I hazily remembered that I once loved to write. When I was fourteen, Mrs. McAuliffe wanted to groom me as editor of the high school paper, but I never got to realize that dream because I ended up in a long-term "treatment facility." In the psych ward, words had been used against me—to label me, define me, and to silence my spirit. As a young woman, I never felt safe keeping a journal because there was no secure place to hide it—I was always under surveillance in the psych ward.

In the end, it was more painful for me not to write than to write. I started with small scribbles that might have been poems. I began to journal again. I laughed as I put my thoughts on pages smeared with tear-stained ink. After several years, I joined workshops and nervously started sharing my work with others. Eventually, I hesitantly admitted that I might just be an artist! Words were slowly working their healing magic on my spirit.

The first time I read a poem in front of a live audience, my whole body trembled. Then the applause came. I was heard! I knew that I was home. In spoken word poetry, I found a healthy outlet for all the years of pent-up rage and pain. I could finally use my anger and hurt constructively, instead of turning them against myself or others, or suppressing them.

Today, I look down at the criss-cross of pale, jagged scars on my wrists, inflicted by a mentally tortured, traumatized young woman, and I wonder how I will explain them to my young son if and when he asks about them someday. When he is old enough to understand, I will read him my poetry and hope it tells him everything he needs to know: his mother was once without hope, but words gave her new life.

– Leah Harris



## CHAPTER SUMMARY: KEY POINTS

- Storytelling has always been a part of human interaction and is the foundation upon which religion, history, philosophy, law, and the arts are built.
- Women heal in many different ways. Self-disclosure is essential to healing for some, and others wish to keep their stories private. Either approach is fine.
- The listener-storyteller relationship between peer supporters and survivors is a mutual, reciprocal process in which both people benefit and both explore how they have come to know what they know based on what they have lived.
- Listening to someone else's pain can be difficult. Peer supporters can develop trauma-informed communities by cultivating other supporters in the survivor's healing journey.
- Peer supporters can navigate the challenges of addressing trauma in a group by helping members explore the meaning and impact of events rather than the events alone.
- Art is an important healing tool for many women.

### Resources

Bluebird, Gayle (undated). *Reaching Across with the Arts*. Free download available at <http://www.alteredstatesofthearts.com/Reaching%20Across%20with%20the%20Arts.pdf>

DeSalvo, L. (2000). *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives*. Beacon Press.

Frank, Arthur W. (1995). *The Wounded Storyteller*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

The Glass Book Project, <http://www.glassbookproject.org/>

Penney, Darby & Stastny, Peter (2008). *The Lives They Left Behind: Suitcases from a State Hospital Attic*. New York: Bellevue Literary Press. [www.suitcaseexhibit.org](http://www.suitcaseexhibit.org)

Jackson, Vanessa (undated). *In Our Own Voices*. Available at <http://www.healingcircles.org/uploads/INOVweb.pdf>

Mollica, Richard F. (2006). *Healing Invisible Wounds*. New York, NY: Harcourt.

Pillows of Unrest, [http://www.alteredstatesofthearts.com/index\\_files/Page1455.htm](http://www.alteredstatesofthearts.com/index_files/Page1455.htm)

Poetry for Personal Power, <http://poetryforpersonalpower.com/>

Women's Work, [m-amandamillis.com](http://m-amandamillis.com)