



# Guide to speaking publicly about personal experiences of self-harm/suicide/mental health issues

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## 1. What is the purpose of this document?

This document provides advice for people who have been asked to speak in public about their personal experiences of self-harm, suicide or mental health issues. It will help you to consider whether now is the right time for you to share your experience and, if you choose to do so, it will provide you with some useful tips on how to proceed.

## 2. Why have I been asked to speak?

You have been asked to speak because you are the expert in your own experience. Sharing your lived experience will hopefully enrich the audience's understanding of the topic, and can help to reduce the stigma that unfortunately often surrounds these issues.

Hearing your story can encourage people to seek support and treatment early if they are facing similar issues, or know someone else who is.

## 3. Am I ready to share my experience publicly?

Consider whether you are ready and feel comfortable to speak publicly. Give yourself time to heal from your experience. Speak to someone you are comfortable with and trust to get their view about whether this is a good idea.

Consider the potential impact sharing your story may have on your own health and wellbeing. Could this set you back or would it help you in your journey? It might help to discuss this with your GP or a support worker if you have one.

Consider the impact sharing your experience publicly could have on your family, friends and other people in your life including professionals involved in your care. You may want to speak to your family members or friends to find out how they feel about you sharing your experience.

If you are concerned about speaking, for whatever reason, please do not hesitate to postpone to another time or cancel altogether. Your audience and the event organiser will understand, this will not be a problem. Remember, you are in control of this, do not feel any pressure to take part and talk about your experience if you are not fully comfortable in doing so.

## 4. Delivering a talk or presentation at an event/conference

If you are asked to deliver a talk or presentation you will usually be given advance notice so that you have plenty of time to prepare. Carefully preparing what you will say will help you and your audience get the most from your shared experience.

Ask for the contact details of the event organiser and keep these safely so that you can contact them with any questions. You might want to ask the organiser the following questions:

- What is the purpose of the event? How many people will be there? Who will be in the audience? Who else is speaking? It is useful to know who will be in the audience so that you can adapt your talk to suit them. Some audiences might be able to cope with more detail than others. Take particular care if there are young people in the audience as young people can be vulnerable to copy-cat behaviours.
- How long should I speak for? It is important to stick to the time limit given as otherwise you might not be able to finish what you want to say.
- Is there any support in place for me? Remember, you should feel comfortable and supported while preparing and delivering your talk, and following sharing your story. If there appears to be no support in place ask for this to be arranged.
- Do I need to provide a copy to the organiser in advance of the event?

### 4.1 Preparing your talk

Write down a rough plan of what you would like to say. You might find it helpful to have a few headings to start with and then fill in the detail later. Include only the content that you are happy to discuss. You do not need to share everything.

**Refer to section 6 in this document for important issues to consider about content and what to avoid saying. Remember some of your listeners may be vulnerable. Think about how you would feel if you were a member of the audience listening to this.**

Leave your draft for a while and read it again to see if you are still happy with it. If not, redraft it until you are happy with the content. Share it with someone else you trust, to see what they think. Consider reading your notes out loud to them. Listen to their views and, if you agree, make any necessary changes, but remember that it's your story, not theirs.

Once you are happy with the content, write it out again. Consider putting it in bullet points that will help you share it with your audience. Practise reading it out loud on your own.

Leave your presentation aside for another period of time, a couple of days if you have the time, and then read it again. Change anything that you are not happy about or comfortable with sharing.

Prepare your final piece either by typing, setting out on PowerPoint presentation or whatever media you are using. You can handwrite it, as long as you can read what you have written. It is best to avoid having lots of pages of notes, try to limit the length. Secure your pages together to avoid dropping them or mixing them up.

Make a couple of copies of your presentation in case something happens to one of them and share with the event organiser if this is required and you are happy to do so.

## 4.2 Practical issues to consider on the day of the event

- Relax. Get up in good time for departing and arriving at the venue. Arriving early is fine, you decide what you are comfortable with, though allow for delays and avoid rushing and panicking about time.
- Make sure you have the organiser's contact details in your phone or written down so you can contact them if you need to.
- If you are going to be late contact the organiser and explain how long you are likely to be. This can happen, so don't worry about it if it does. You'll get there and things will be fine.
- When you arrive at the venue, have a look at the room that you will be speaking in to give you an idea of what it will be like.
- Keep calm as best you can. You will be nervous, that's fine, many of the best speakers also get very nervous. Take a deep breath, relax and speak clearly and slowly. Your audience will appreciate and value what you are sharing with them, they will be happy with how you chose to deliver your message.

## 5. Doing a radio or TV interview

If asked to speak on TV or radio you may have less time to prepare than if asked to speak at a conference. Do not feel you have to agree to speak just because you have been asked to do so. It is your choice and there is no pressure to take part unless you feel comfortable and confident in doing so.

Remember the impact sharing your experience publicly could have on you and other people in your life. It's a good idea to let your friends and family know in advance if you are planning to do an interview. Refer to section 3 above.

Some questions you might want to ask the journalist/researcher are:

- What topics will be discussed?
- What questions are you planning to ask me?
- Is anyone else being interviewed? This might help you understand what else will be discussed and what angle the interviewer will take.
- Will the interview be live or recorded?
- Where will the interview take place? Often there are options so think about where you would feel most comfortable.
- When will it be broadcast?

**Refer to section 6 in this document for important issues to consider about content and what to avoid saying. Remember some of your listeners may be vulnerable. Think about how you would feel if you were in the audience listening to this.**

Think of three key points that you want to get across and focus on these. Believe that you are in control of the piece and how it is heard and understood. Always try to bring the interview back to these three key points if it starts to head in another direction. Only respond to what you are comfortable with and try to stick to your three key points.

Practise your responses several times before the interview.

If you are not happy with the questions being asked, ask to move on. If you don't have the answers to questions, just say so. You do not need to be an expert on everything that you are asked about.

If you are uneasy with where the interview is going and you are struggling to bring it back to what you want to focus on, just excuse yourself and say that it is all you wish to say for now and thank the interviewer politely.

## 6. Cautions about content

- While you might wish to discuss your personal feelings of distress, your piece should aim to remain positive, offer the audience hope and provide supportive information.
- Never include detailed descriptions of the method of suicide or self-harm or location where this took place, as this can be upsetting for the audience and can prompt some vulnerable people to harm themselves in a similar way.
- Use appropriate language:
  - Certain ways of talking about suicide can be unhelpful, particularly to people who are vulnerable (see box).

### Phrases to use:

A suicide  
Take one's own life  
Person at risk of suicide  
Die by/death by suicide  
Suicide attempt  
A completed suicide

### Phrases to avoid:

Commit suicide  
Cry for help  
A 'successful' or 'unsuccessful' suicide attempt  
Suicide victim  
Suicide 'epidemic', 'craze' or 'hot spot'  
Suicide-prone  
Suicide 'tourist'

*Samaritans and IAS'*

*Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide, 2016.*

- Certain ways of referring to mental health problems and treatment can be unhelpful and can add to the stigma, eg labelling people as schizophrenic rather than a person who has schizophrenia.
- There are links to more information on words and phrases to use or avoid in section 7.
- Stick to your own experiences and perspective, and avoid criticising what other people did, especially if they are not there to defend their actions.
- Be respectful and sensitive to other people's beliefs and perspectives as they may be different from yours, in particular when it comes to discussing spirituality or faith. If faith or spirituality has helped you in your recovery you can mention that, but be aware that if you focus heavily on this issue you may lose the interest of some members of your audience.

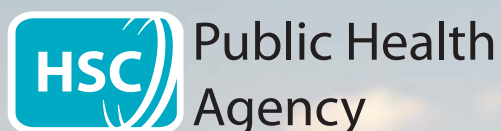
## 7. Useful resources

You will find more detailed information and guidance on sharing personal experiences at the websites below:

- Mindframe: Media and public speaking – a guide for consumers and carers (includes more detail on appropriate content/language and media interviews)  
[http://www.mindframe-media.info/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/8039/media-and-public-speaking-for-consumers-carers.pdf](http://www.mindframe-media.info/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/8039/media-and-public-speaking-for-consumers-carers.pdf)
- Suicide Prevention Australia: Suicide Prevention Lived Experience guidance  
**Your personal readiness to be involved**  
<https://www.suicidepreventionaust.org/sites/default/files/resources/2016/Thinking%20about%20your%20personal%20readiness%20to%20be%20involved%20FINAL.pdf>  
**Guidelines for sharing stories**  
<https://www.suicidepreventionaust.org/sites/default/files/resources/2017/Guidelines%20for%20submitting%20story%202017.01.10.pdf>
- United States Suicide Prevention Resource Center: Best Practices for Presentations by Suicide Loss and Suicide Attempt Survivors  
<http://www.sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/library/Best%20Practices%20for%20Presentations%20by%20Suicide%20Loss%20and%20Suicide%20Attempt%20Survivors%20-%20FINAL%202012.1.pdf>

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### Public Health Agency

12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.  
Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).  
[www.publichealth.hscni.net](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net)

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