

Sharing Your Story

How to Think through
Your Options

A guide for survivors of sexual violence



barcc

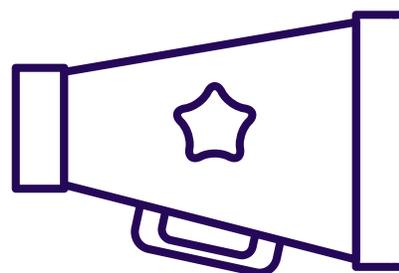
Boston Area Rape Crisis Center

Dedicated to healing. Advocating for change.

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As a survivor of sexual violence, you may be asked or feel moved to speak publicly about some or all of your experience. This guide is a resource for people considering public sharing, drawn from what BARCC has learned from the survivors we work with. This guide will help you think through a variety of things, such as your goals as well as potential risks, to consider in the process.



Sharing your story is up to you, and you deserve to make informed decisions about whether and how you do it.

You are in control of whether and how to share about your experience as a survivor. You have many options in your healing journey, and sharing your experience publicly is just one. Some survivors find sharing their story to be an empowering experience that is part of their healing. At the same time, it is difficult to fully predict how others will respond and some survivors have had negative experiences. If you do decide to share publicly, keep in mind that it's not all or nothing: you can choose how, in what circumstances, and at what level of detail you feel comfortable talking about your experience. Ultimately, what matters most is not what others want from you but what has value and meaning for you.

“Sharing your story publicly isn't therapy, but it is therapeutic; it can be a great part of the healing process.”

—Member of the BARCC Survivor Speakers Bureau

Considerations

Goal

What is motivating you to share your experience publicly? Common goals include raising awareness of the impact of sexual violence and educating people about the many aspects of the issue. You may also want to connect with other survivors, let them know they are not alone, and offer them hope in their own healing. Some people want to share their story to request accountability from an offender; if you want to name the offender publicly or share enough information to identify the offender, a legal consultation would help you navigate the legal implications of this. If you are in the Greater Boston area, you can contact us for legal advocacy services (see back page) to talk through this and other considerations.

In our work, survivors who have experienced the most benefit and had the most positive experiences in sharing their stories have done so with goals of changing policy and educating people for social change. Positive goals can often carry you through any bumps in the road. Sharing is more likely to be positive when you are clear about what you hope to achieve and feel confident that the platform(s) you contribute to will serve that purpose.

Think about how the level of detail you share might affect your goal. If public education is your goal, and you share a very detailed story, some people may be too triggered to take in your message. The most effective speakers share only the key aspects of their experience and journey that convey specific points, such as the harm of self-blame, the impact of a positive response to disclosure, or the challenge of not being believed—to name only a few.

Platform

There are many different ways to share your experience publicly. The benefits, risks, and privacy considerations may be different for you based on what medium you are thinking of sharing your story in. Platforms can include, but are not limited to, social media posts, news editorials or articles, radio and television shows, in-person speaking events, and blogs. Consider whether the platform will permit responses directed back to you and what that will mean for you. Responses can often be supportive, but they might also be critical. Consider what kind of feedback and support you may need before, during, and after sharing.

Safety

Your safety and that of your friends and family is an important factor to weigh in publicly sharing your experience. Will telling your story put your safety or the safety of your friends and family at risk? Consider whether sharing your experience will open up the potential for retaliation. Even if the offender is not named, are other people or entities identified who also hold responsibility and as a result may pose a safety or privacy concern to you or your family and friends? Depending on what information you decide to share, others may be liable for actions they did or did not take at the time they became aware of the victimization.

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Considerations continued

Privacy

How do you feel about your story being out in the world? What details are you comfortable sharing? How might it affect your personal life and professional life, as well as those of your family and significant others, now and in the future?

Remember that there are ways to share your story while remaining anonymous (you can use a pseudonym or your initials, for example), and that all public sharing is not the same. Talking to a group of college students is generally a very different experience than talking to a reporter in terms of privacy, and there can even be a big variation between different publications in the media.

In thinking about sharing your experience online, remember that content on the internet cannot be removed completely. While you might feel comfortable sharing your story now, give yourself time to consider how you may feel differently in the future and why.

Also keep in mind that there are ways to take action to end sexual violence, to pursue greater healing, and to connect with other survivors that don't involve publicly sharing about your experience.

Criminal and other cases

If you are engaged in a criminal, civil, grievance, or other formal proceeding, consider that public sharing could interfere with your goals in that process. It is possible that what you share publicly could become part of the formal proceeding and may disrupt what you hope to achieve in that process. You may want to speak with someone—such as your local rape crisis center, district attorney, or lawyer—about the possible effects of publicly sharing your experience while engaged in a formal process such as a criminal, civil, family court, employment, immigration, housing, or campus case.

Emotional well-being

Do you feel emotionally prepared to share your story? Talking about your experiences publicly may be difficult or painful. Keep in mind that societal attitudes, while shifting and improving, still often unfairly blame survivors and excuse offenders. Ensure that you have support to draw on if you decide to move forward.

Legal liability

Will speaking publicly have legal implications? When you publicly share identifying information, it could give rise to someone taking legal action against you. This issue is complex, and we recommend consulting with an attorney about potential legal liability and how to navigate those risks if this might be of concern.

Guiding questions

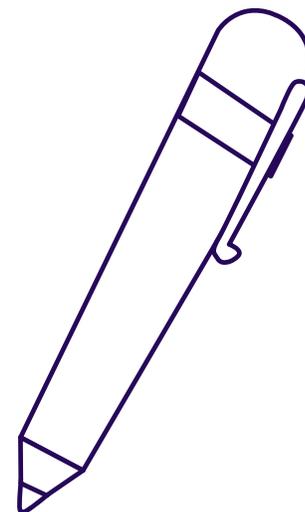
What are your main goals in sharing your story?

What concerns do you have for yourself? For your family and significant others?

What are you comfortable sharing? (Think about your goals and concerns, whether you want to remain anonymous, what identifying details you do or do not want to include.)

What channels or outlets are you comfortable with (e.g., public speaking engagements, written materials, online communications, speaking with the press)?

What support do you have or can you seek out in this process?



Things to remember

- Whether and how you share your story is up to you.
- There are many aspects to consider when publicly sharing your experience.
- If and when you decide to tell your story, you deserve support in doing so.

I decided not to share publicly, because I don't like the idea of people picturing the rape happening to me or judging me; resilience is part of my persona, while vulnerabilities are difficult for me to share.

—Survivor

More to explore

Additional resource

Your Voice, Your Choice: A Survivor Media Guide, by CounterQuo, available from the Victim Rights Law Center at bit.ly/CQsurvivormedia.

Further exploration

- If you're in the Greater Boston area, you can call the BARCC office at 617-492-8306 to get connected with a legal advocate, who can help walk you through the legal and privacy implications of sharing your story, or with a counselor.
- If you're in the Greater Boston area and interested in joining the BARCC Survivor Speakers Bureau, visit bit.ly/BARCCSSB.
- If you're elsewhere, check out the RAINN Speakers Bureau at rainn.org/speakers-bureau.
- If you have received BARCC services and would like to share your story to help BARCC raise awareness and show the impact of our services, please contact stories@barcc.org to explore options.

A quote is presented inside a large, rounded orange speech bubble. The bubble has a tail pointing to the left. The text inside is centered and reads: "Sharing my story really made me more comfortable with my story and in my skin."

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—Member of the BARCC
Survivor Speakers Bureau

About BARCC

The Boston Area Rape Crisis Center (BARCC) provides free, confidential services to survivors of sexual violence ages 12 and up and their loved ones, as well as other providers. We support survivors of all genders from the immediate crisis after sexual violence to years and decades later. Our goal is to empower survivors to heal and seek justice in ways that are meaningful to them. We create the social change needed to end sexual violence through educational trainings and legislative and policy advocacy.

Programs and services

- 24-7 Hotline
- 24-7 Medical Advocacy
- Case Management
- Counseling
- Legal Advocacy

Education and advocacy projects

- Access to Forensic Information Project
- Community Awareness and Prevention Services
- Movement for Access, Safety, and Survivors (MASS) Collaboration
- Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) Project
- Survivor Speakers Bureau
- Youth Leadership Corps

"What you gave me was more important than services. It was the unquestioned sentiment of 'I believe you' and that left a lasting impact."

—Survivor

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