
Victims as Speakers

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The Experience

Many murder victims’ family members make a choice to speak publicly about their experience. Whether it is part of their journey of healing, because they are pulled to a particular issue, or both, it is a distinctly personal choice. In that choice there are both benefits and challenges to the experience. As no one victim experience compares to another, the benefits and challenges are unique to the individual survivor. There are however, themes that arise in the experience of victims speaking publicly. These themes can assist you in working with victims to ensure their readiness for the specific experience, to ensure that they have the support they need during the experience and to make sure they are provided with appropriate support in the aftermath of the experience.

Story telling is an important part of healing for many survivors. Story telling can provide some steps toward healing as it assists survivors in gaining some cognitive control over the emotions attached to the experience. The more control they can regain, the more control they have in moving forward in life, Each and every time a survivor tells their story they take it out, share it with the audience and reincorporate it into the fabric of their being They weave and reweave this experience over and over.

Public speaking is not for every victim. It is a personal choice that is unique to that individual. It is hard to determine whether or not someone is ready to speak. However, most clinicians and or victim service providers would agree timing of public speaking has to do with how much the survivor has dealt with their own safety and how far they are in integrating the trauma into their lives.

Benefits:

- Sharing the pain may mitigate, at least for the duration of the speech, some of the loneliness of the overall experience.

- The audience has the potential to provide affirmation and acknowledgment of the loss.
- Retelling the story gives the victim the opportunity to redefine their response to the experience.
- Public speaking gives victims an opportunity to put order to the story/to weave their story together from the moment of the death notification until the current day.
- Public speaking gives victims an opportunity to hold on to the memories of their loved one and bring that person alive to a new group of people.
- Speaking publicly gives victims an opportunity to work toward finding some meaning to the overall experience.
- Helps rebuild the low-self esteem, empowers the speaker and helps to reduce the helplessness that often accompanies victimization.
- A victim speaker provides affirmation and support to silent victims in the audience.
- Provides an opportunity to reconnect to people, which is a phase of trauma recovery.

Challenges:

- The experience may exacerbate the loneliness of the experience if there is no affirmation, acknowledgement of the loss, or validation of the experience by the targeted audience.
- Victim speakers take a risk by exposing their emotional vulnerability and the rawness of their pain.
- Speaking publicly requires some degree of reliving of the event, reconnecting to those traumatic memories.

- A personal toll... the individual price each victim pays for the experience.
- The experience may not turn out the way the victim speaker expects and or their voice failed to move the agenda forward.
- If the timing is not right the experience will be negative. Timing in terms of the victim's readiness - have they dealt with the safety issues and have they incorporated the trauma into their life.

Ensuring the Benefits and Mitigating the Challenges

When working with survivors there is a responsibility of the organization that makes the request for a speaker. The rule of thumb in working with survivors as speakers is to obtain as much information as possible and to provide as much information as possible. Asking questions demonstrates an interest in the speaker and begins a process of building trust. Building trust requires good communication skills which can be practiced using these basic techniques: Active Listening; Paraphrasing; Affirmations; Observation and nonverbal communications; Asking open-ended and close ended questions; Awareness of cultural styles of communication. (NVAC 2010, 5-4) As with all work with survivors we must all do whatever we can to empower them to regain control over their lives and the experience.

Preparation, support and follow-up are three elements of working with victims as speakers. This is best understood within the content of the basic elements of crisis intervention (reference SHARC material) skills of safety and security, ventilation and validation, prediction and preparation, and information and education. Below you will find potential guidelines for use in working with victims as speakers.

Preparation

Preparation starts with predicting anything and everything you can think of before the event. This provides an opportunity for the survivor to

think through what they believe their reactions might be. This is significant in that reducing/minimizing the surprise element will secure their sense of safety. Remember obtaining information and providing information is at the heart of their process.

- The logistics:
 - How will the victim get there?
 - What arrangements will be made if the event goes over a meal time?
 - What expense is there for the victim to attend? Are there babysitting or travel expenses? Can they afford them? Is there a way to off-set them?
 - What is the layout of the physical space?
 - Where will they sit, stand etc.
 - Who else will be physically near?
 - Will there be other victims present?
 - Will they be speaking for the same reason?

The focus:

- What is the amount of time they have to speak?
 - What do you know about the audience? Is there something you can predict for them about the potential audiences reaction?
 - What if any information can you provide them on the broader issues in terms of educational materials etc.?
- Their personal needs:
 - What do they think that they will need to be comfortable?
 - Do they want to show a picture of the deceased?
 - Is there something about their experience and or the death of their loved one that they feel they must say?
 - Is there something they do not want to talk about?
 - You might say:
 - Are there any concerns that you have that I might be able to address right now?

- If you have any questions or concerns that arise between now and the presentation feel free to contact me so that we can talk them through.

Support:

Support is addressing the issues important to the speaker during their presentation. The issues to be addressed should have been raised during the preparation.

- Where will the people they know be located?’
- Where will you be sitting?
- Do they feel they need to bring a support person/friend/family member? Where will that individual be located?

Follow-up

For many survivors public speaking is a mixed blessing. No matter how long it has been from the crime or how well an individual has incorporated that experience into their lives revisiting that experience requires revisiting the trauma they experienced. Revisiting this experience can leave survivors exposed and vulnerable. How that manifests itself in their particular situation is unique to them. It is the price they pay for participation. Follow-up with a survivor after they have made a presentation is important to ensure that they are effectively incorporating that experience into their lives. Suggested time frames for follow-up are immediately after the presentation and within 72 hours after the event.

- Immediate Follow-up
 - Make sure someone is available to attend to the survivor speaker.
 - How are they doing?
 - Was the experience as they thought it would be?
 - Do they feel comfortable now? (Safety)

- What, if anything, do they need?
 - Can you or someone else spend a few minutes etc. with them do that they can begin to process the experience?
 - What surprised them?
 - What was as they expected?
 - What surprises them about their own reactions?
- 72 hour Follow-up
 - Did their expectations meet the experience?
 - How do they feel about the experience?
 - What surprised them?
 - What was as they expected?
 - Repeat of the above questions
 - Acknowledgement of the event their contribution
 - Would they do the same thing another time?
 - Would they change anything?