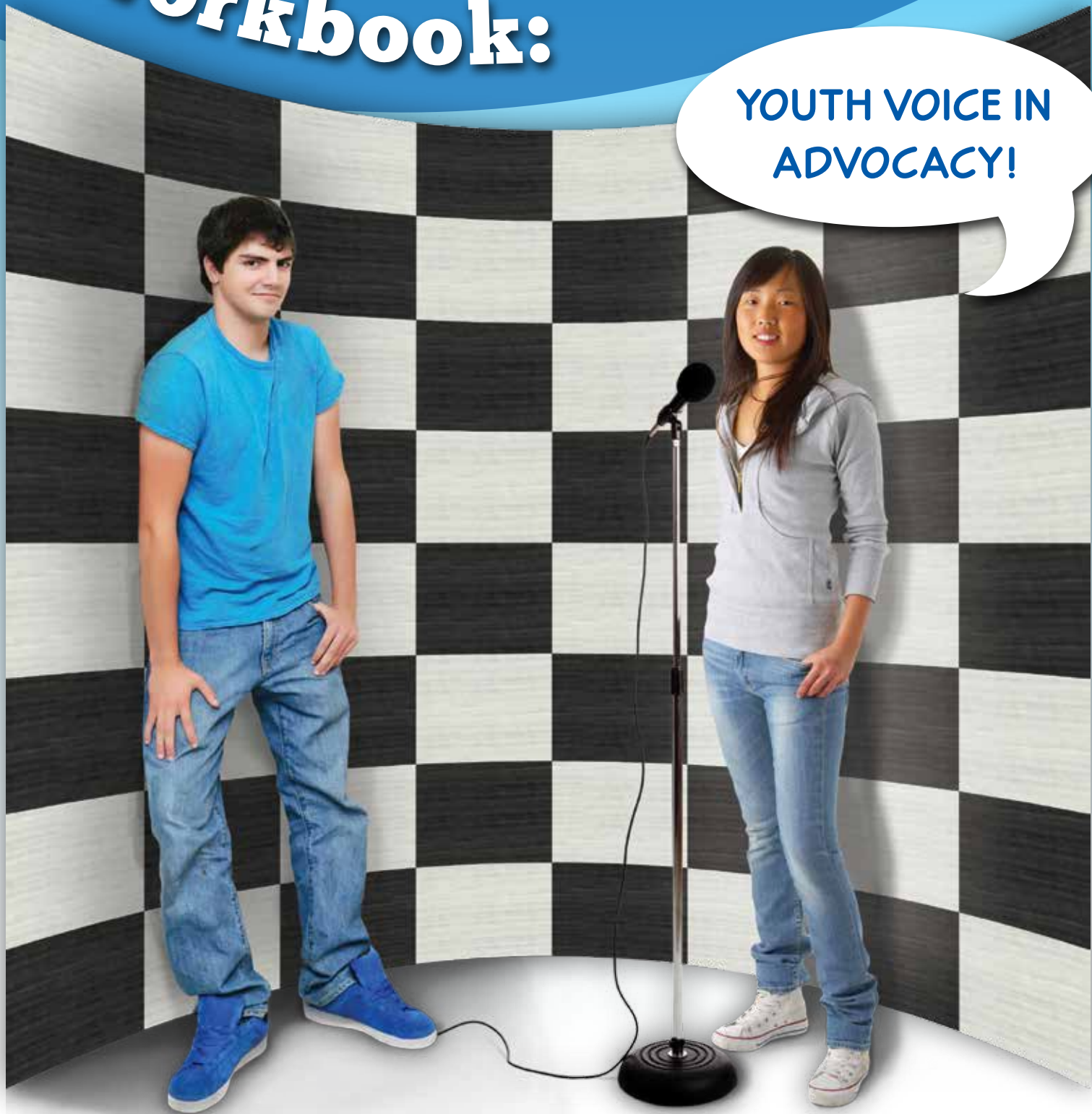


# Strategic Sharing

## Workbook:

YOUTH VOICE IN  
ADVOCACY!



# Strategic Sharing Workbook: Youth Voice in Advocacy

**F**unding for this project was provided in part by the Research and Training Center for Pathways to Positive Futures, Portland State University.

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Lulow, E., & Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health. (2012). Strategic Sharing Workbook: Youth Voice in Advocacy. Portland, OR: Research and Training Center for Pathways to Positive Futures.



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[www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu](http://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu)

**T**his workbook is for individuals who have experienced traumatic life experiences and are interested in sharing their stories in an effort to promote change. Training in Strategic Sharing is an important part of advocacy - we encourage anyone who has experienced traumatic life events and wishes to share those experiences in an effort to promote positive changes for yourself and/or others, to do so with the help of this guide.

As you will see mentioned several times in this workbook, it is really important that you take the time to take care of yourself. This training was not developed to help anyone overcome aspects of trauma; it was created to help individuals avoid re-traumatization when sharing their traumatic experiences with others. So we encourage everyone using this workbook to either continue with your mental health services or to seek out mental health supports.

This guide is also meant to help you better convey your message to others. The whole purpose of advocacy is to inspire change on some level. With Strategic Sharing Training, you will be better equipped to do just that. Learning how to safely and effectively share your story will have a lasting impact on individuals and inspire change in not only your life, but in the lives of others.

If you are an adult ally working with a youth or youth group, it is important that all your young adults receive training in Strategic Sharing and that they complete this workbook before doing any kind of public speaking event. Because doing advocacy work can often bring about reoccurrences of traumatic life experiences, it's important that young people have the skills necessary to better protect their emotional well-being and privacy.

If you are a youth reading through this workbook either on your own or with a supportive adult, please note that this workbook was written by a young person who experienced negative life experiences as a result of sharing his story. Its sole intention is to better prepare you for the field of advocacy. In no way do we doubt your ability or professionalism. We just want to ensure that you have been made aware of the risk factors and been given some tips on how to avoid some of the negative experiences that sharing your story can have.

We also understand that this workbook is long and that it requires a lot of critical thinking. That is why it's important to work on it in sections and not try to do it all in one sitting. Give yourself time to process the information and think carefully about your responses. You will gain nothing additional by finishing it quickly; in fact you might miss something very important.

With all that being said, let's get started! By the time you finish, you will have a better understanding of effective advocacy and feel much more confident in what, and with whom, you are willing to share.

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I am sure that the first question you asked yourself when opening this booklet was, “What is Strategic Sharing?” and the second question was probably, “Why is it important for me to learn it?”

Well, the first question is fairly easy to answer. **Strategic Sharing** is a method of telling your story safely and effectively in order to achieve a goal. Basically, it's a process for sharing your lived experience with others in a manner that keeps you safe from negative experiences, and that teaches you how to share in a way that will help you reach the end result that you are aiming for.

The second question is a little more complicated to answer and requires a brief history of how the concepts of Strategic Sharing came about. So let's take a moment and look at the origin of Strategic Sharing, identify some other resources besides this workbook that are available, and discuss why Strategic Sharing is so important.

The idea of Strategic Sharing resulted from the National Foster Care Alumni movement that started in the 1990's. Child welfare advocates were bringing youth to the advocacy table in a huge effort to promote change. And it worked. Youth stories and perspectives were being heard and valued like never before. However, despite this great success in bringing youth to the table, there were some setbacks. There were many accounts of young people who had negative experiences as a result of sharing their stories. So, in 2000, a couple of individuals from the National Foster Youth Advisory Council, a project of the Child Welfare League of America, developed the concept of Strategic Sharing to provide supports to young people who were sharing their stories. Since then, other organizations have further developed this concept into products, training, and guides, much like the one you're reading now.



The first guide that was published on Strategic Sharing was developed by Casey Family Programs and Foster Care Alumni of America (FCAA) and can be found at the following link:

[www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info\\_services/download/StrategicSharing.pdf](http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/download/StrategicSharing.pdf)

These organizations also offer onsite trainings on Strategic Sharing.



The next guide that was developed on Strategic Sharing was developed by the National Resource Center for Youth Development in collaboration with Foster Club.

This resource can be downloaded at:

[www.nrcyd.ou.edu/publication-db/documents/youth-leadership-toolkit-strategic-sharing.pdf](http://www.nrcyd.ou.edu/publication-db/documents/youth-leadership-toolkit-strategic-sharing.pdf)

Foster Club also has a lot of additional trainings and materials that can be helpful when sharing your story. You should check out their site at [www.fosterclub.com](http://www.fosterclub.com).

In 2009 I was interviewed for a newspaper that wanted to write an article about me advocating for

kids in the foster care system. The newspaper was attracted to me because I had spent almost 7 years in foster care and was now using that experience to help support other youth going through similar life experiences. I did my best to answer all of their questions about my life as honestly as I could. I talked about everything - my mother's drug addiction, my dad being in prison for murder, my step father being in prison for child abuse, me suffering from anxiety and depression.... I held nothing back. I remember when the article came out I was actually very pleased with it and thought it was going to inspire others to become advocates. Two years later, I went out on a blind date with this girl and we both felt it went really well and wanted a second date. That night she went home and told her parents that she had met this really great guy. Her mom was nervous and wanted to know a little bit more about me, so she typed my name in Google. That article was the first thing that came up. After our very first date this girl and her whole family knew my entire life's story/ This was not something I was ready to disclose yet, but because I had said all of it for a news article, they and the entire world had access to it and all they needed to know was my name....

- Foster Care Alumnus

Whenever you engage in an advocacy event, you will need to have the concepts of Strategic Sharing in your mind and be well practiced in them. This is so that you can be effective in getting your message across and keep yourself safe when doing so. It is unfortunate, but many people learn how to share their stories safely and effectively through trial and error. In other words, they make mistakes and have to deal with the consequences. However, all too often the damage is done at this point and it can be hard to recover from. Read the quote to the left for an example of what we're talking about.

Many young people report issues similar to this one, as well as other negative impacts which we will cover later on in this workbook. However, as you can probably guess, it doesn't take making too many mistakes like this before someone hangs up their advocacy hat for good.

So to answer that second question, "Why is it important to learn Strategic Sharing?," the answer is because doing so will give you the skills and abilities to achieve the goal that you want to achieve and ensure that you protect yourself from negative consequences during the process.


Now, after reading this, some of you might feel a little discouraged about sharing your experiences, and that is totally acceptable. You have ownership over your story and it's your right to do with it what you want, and there is no reason that you should feel otherwise. But those of you who have decided that you do want to become advocates, or who might be on the fence, should know that your experiences have more power to create change than any law degree or PhD ever could. You bring a very much-needed expertise to the table that no amount of schooling could ever make up for.

**S**o now that you know a little bit about what Strategic Sharing is, where it comes from, and why it's important, let's look at how this workbook is set up to help you learn more about it.

This workbook is designed to give you the opportunity to learn and practice Strategic Sharing concepts in a safe and structured way that will put you at less risk for negative consequences. It is divided into five (5) different sections that first will present you with a concept, and then test your knowledge of that concept through quizzes and other exercises. After you have learned these concepts you will have the opportunity to develop a bio for yourself (which you will need to have when someone asks you to participate in an event). Use the table of contents listed on page 4 to help you navigate through the workbook. However, be sure to do the sections in order since one concept will build off the other.

You may find that the most difficult part of doing this workbook will be the challenge of being honest with yourself. Although it may be hard to admit sometimes, let's face it - we are not perfect people. The good thing is we don't have to be; we should just be open to improving ourselves. This workbook was not designed to determine your ability to share your story effectively; it was designed to help you improve on how you share your story. Therefore, it is our hope that you be honest with yourself while doing it. This book is yours to keep; no one will be collecting or grading it! We do, however, encourage you to use this workbook with a supportive adult who can help you identify needs and supports to meet those needs.

## Important Note



In doing this workbook, it's important to check in on your mental health and well being. During some of these exercises you will be asked to examine your emotions, which can be difficult, and some concepts might bring up painful memories that can be hard to process. We suggest that if you do experience any difficulties you talk to your counselor, parent, or caseworker immediately, and that you take a break from this workbook. This might seem a little intense, but the risks in this book are similar to what you will be facing when you decide to do advocacy work, and these concepts are important to know.

**T**he first question that you should ask when you think about doing advocacy work is, “Why do I want to share my story and life experience with others?”

Maybe you feel compelled to share because you were asked to by an adult who is close to you, or because you want someone to listen to what your needs are, or maybe it’s because you want to make a difference in the world and improve the quality of life of others. Whatever that reason is, it’s important that you identify it and determine if it is a positive reason or a potentially negative one. This can be a very complicated question to answer so let’s break down some of the major reasons why you might be compelled to share and what you can do to address any negative reasons.

## Negative Reasons for Sharing

### Exploitation

If you are sharing because you feel like you have to because someone else told you to or asked you to, then it is possible you are being exploited. Basically, this means that you are being taken advantage of by someone else so that they can accomplish a goal that’s important to them. Sometimes their intentions are bad but not always; they could be advocating for something very worthy but just going about it in an inappropriate way. If you don’t understand what the end goal is or you don’t believe in advocating for that goal then you are being exploited. Strategic Sharing is about weighing the risks and the benefits. If you aren’t sure of the end goal, then how can you know what the benefits of sharing will be? Often people don’t mean to be exploitive but it still happens. Sometimes people in positions of power or authority don’t realize the pressure they are putting on you to share your experiences, and your well-being can be negatively impacted by sharing those experiences before you are ready. You should always be adequately informed as to why you are sharing and you should always be in agreement with the end goal.

### How You Can Address an Exploitation Reason

**Talk to the people or person who is asking you to share your experiences.** Like we said before: often, people don’t realize that they are exploiting you, and a simple conversation can clear the air. Just make sure that you talk to them respectfully; nobody wants to be accused of doing things, especially when they didn’t mean to. Say something like, “I am really not sure why I should talk about this. It makes me kind of uncomfortable to share this experience.”

**Ask questions to better understand the topic.** Ask about things like who is going to be in the audience and what significance your story would have for them,



or what the end result of sharing your story will be. Remember, exploitation is not knowing why you're sharing and/or not agreeing with that reason. Asking questions that help you better understand the reason you were asked to speak will help you know if you agree with it, in which case it is good advocacy effort and not exploitation.

**Walk away.** If you are asked to share something that you don't feel comfortable talking about, simply let the individual or organization know that you are not interested in participating in that event. This can sometimes be a hard thing to do because it might be a parent or close mentor that wants you to share, and you don't want to disappoint them - just let them know how you feel and why.

## Anger

Sometimes people share their stories because they are angry about what happened to them and they want justice or retribution. Maybe you are upset with the way that you were treated by a system or a person, or are just mad about the circumstances that you had to experience or are still experiencing. First off, know that anger is a completely normal feeling to have, and is often felt due to a past hurt or trauma that you have experienced. There are very healthy outlets for anger and aggression, but advocacy typically isn't one of them. Anger can be a powerful motivator and can inspire people to stand up and do something. However, angry advocates are often considered radicals and their message can get lost in their emotions. Anger can create a huge barrier to people listening to and accepting your message. It also tends to make us closed-minded to other ideas and less objective, making it difficult to see other points of view and reach compromises. Anger doesn't only compromise your message or ability to work with others; it can

also negatively affect your health! When people are angry their bodies produce stress hormones. Consistent production of these stress hormones can cause problems like headaches, and even increased anxiety. This is why we should limit our anger when doing advocacy.

## How You Can Address an Anger Reason

**Wait it out!** Have you ever said things when you were angry that you later wished you hadn't? Anger can cause us to have a loss in our self-monitoring abilities. Basically what this means is that we can either say things that are meant to hurt the other person, or say too much and end up hurting ourselves. So what should you do? I'm sure that most of us are familiar with counting to ten when we are angry so that we can calm down before we speak. Waiting until we calm down will prevent us from damaging our relationships with others, our well-being, and our message. Waiting until you calm down can take minutes, days, or even years. Whatever it takes, remember it's important to control your anger and not let it control you.

**Seek help from a professional.** A professional counselor can often help us work through difficult issues that we are having a hard time processing. As we mentioned above, anger is often a response to a past hurt that we have experienced. Sometimes it's clear as to what that hurt is and sometimes it's not. A counselor or therapist is trained to help us find what that hurt is and how to address it appropriately. Remember, mental health is part of overall wellness, and we can better help others when we learn how to help ourselves.

**Check the facts.** As we mentioned before, anger can often make us closed-minded or give us tunnel vision, making it difficult to see things objec-

tively. If you are angry about something a good strategy can be to obtain objective information about it. Sometimes, if we've had a bad experience with something, we think that it's always a bad thing. For example, let's say that you were in foster care and you were adopted when you were 15, and that your adoption failed after only a few months. You might feel like your adoption was rushed or forced so you decide to advocate that young people shouldn't be adopted after they reach a certain age, and that they should just start receiving independent living services. Well, if you took a look at the facts, you would see that overall youth have much better outcomes when they are adopted than when they age out of foster care on their own. Even if your experience was horrible and something happened that shouldn't have, others might have a very different experience, so it's important that we look at the facts and remain objective.

## Attention Seeking

People do not usually start off sharing their story because they want attention. Attention seeking usually happens later, while you are unaware of it. Being the center of attention can feel really good because it often raises your feelings of self worth and self importance. You can begin to crave that feeling. However, the effects are temporary and there is often an underlying issue that needs to be addressed. These issues could be feelings of jealousy, low self-esteem, or even conceitedness. There is nothing wrong with using attention as a little confidence booster, but it shouldn't become your reason for wanting to share. The attention you get can be very addictive. You can start competing with your peers for the spotlight; needless to say, this can damage your relationships with your fellow advocates and friends. In addition, you may start telling more

and more of your personal story than you had intended, in order to keep people interested in you; this can lead you to sharing information that can damage relationships or cause you to be re-traumatized by past events that you have not had time to work through yet. Just be aware that as an advocate your relationship with your audience is a one way street and is not therapeutic.

## How You Can Address an Attention Seeking Reason

**Refocus your thoughts.** As stated above, there is often an underlying reason that you are seeking attention. Jealousy is a common reason people seek attention - they want to pull the spotlight off of someone else and onto themselves. Because jealousy can be detrimental to building relationships with others and even to your well-being, it is important to address it quickly. Please note that jealousy is a completely normal feeling and does not make you a bad or weak person. To get over feelings of jealousy you should refocus your thoughts away from the negative qualities about the other person, and instead think of their good qualities. How are they helping the mission or goal that you are also working towards? Remember you are on the same team working to make positive changes in your community and improve quality of life for others. Also be realistic about your thoughts. Ask yourself, "How does feeling this way benefit me or others?" or, "Is what this person is doing really a threat to me?" If you find that you are having trouble refocusing (again, this is normal: jealousy is a survival tactic to protect your ego), try writing out your feelings, both the good and the bad. You might be surprised how much in common you have with the person you are jealous of.

**Take a break and seek help.** You might find that you are seeking attention because you have low

self-esteem or a poor self image and the attention and empathy you get from people makes you feel better about yourself. If this is the case, take a break and seek help from a professional. Sharing your story can make you feel better for a little while, but it is like doing drugs. It can feel great at first, but the feeling does not last long and can tear you down emotionally after a while. When we share our stories we often talk about past traumas, relationships, and emotions. The feelings that we experienced during those times in the past can often resurface causing a negative trigger to our emotional well-being. Take it from the guy who is writing this: I became addicted to sharing my story because it made me feel important. I was not seeing a therapist and I thought I was doing fine. On the surface it looked like I had my stuff together. However, I was having panic and anxiety attacks. Then one day on a panel where I was talking to a group of about 50 people, I had an emotional breakdown. After that experience I took some time off from sharing my personal experiences and started seeing a counselor. So, remember to take a break and seek help from a professional when you need one. You have to take care of yourself first.

## Positive Reasons for Sharing

Now that we have looked at some of the negative reasons why people might share their stories, let's look at some of the positive reasons people share. There are many good reasons to share your story with others, but they typically fall into one of three categories: Self Advocacy, Stigma Reduction, and Community Advocacy. These are all good reasons to share your story but you still need to be cautious, as it is easy for a positive reason to slip into a negative one.

## Self Advocacy

**Self Advocacy** refers to an individual's ability to effectively communicate, convey, negotiate or assert his or her own interests, desires, needs, and rights. It involves making informed decisions and taking responsibility for those decisions.<sup>1</sup> This is the foundation of advocacy for individuals that have lived experiences in the system that they are advocating to change. We must remember that we cannot take care of others if our needs are not met. Advocating for what you need should always be your first step. Even though most of us have done some form of this before, it is important that we **learn how to be effective at self advocacy**.

There are many tools out there that can help you effectively take control of your own life. I would suggest *The Youth Guide to Treatment and Treatment Planning: A Better Life* by Eileen Mary Grealish, M.Ed. to help you achieve your self-advocacy goals, and help prevent you from turning your positive reason for sharing into a negative one:

[www.cmhnetwork.org/news/youth-guide-to-treatment-treatment-planning-a-better-life](http://www.cmhnetwork.org/news/youth-guide-to-treatment-treatment-planning-a-better-life)

A lot of times when we are working towards our goals we will come up against obstacles that will take time and determination to overcome. Maybe you feel like people are not listening to what you are saying, or that they are going against what you want. It is easy to get frustrated and that frustration can quickly turn to anger.

If you find yourself getting angry, follow the suggestions that we talked about previously in the Anger section of this guide. One of the most effective

1. Van Reusen, A. K., & Bos, C. S. (1994). Facilitating student participation in individualized education programs through motivation strategy instruction.

things that self advocacy can do is help you develop a better sense of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is defined as people's beliefs about their abilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave.<sup>2</sup> As you effectively advocate for yourself and start achieving your goals, you begin to feel in control of your life and that you can overcome any obstacle.

## Stigma Reduction

**Stigma** is when someone judges a person negatively based on a personal trait. Unfortunately for people who have experience in child welfare, mental health, and/or juvenile justice systems, being stigmatized is a common occurrence. Stigma can result in many horrible things like bullying and discrimination, and can lead people to feel alone and ashamed of themselves. Therefore, it is important that we all do everything that we can to reduce stigma. Choosing to share your story with others normalizes those experiences and dispels those negative beliefs and presumptions.

Did you know that according to the Surgeon General, 21% of youth and adolescents access services in the mental health system?<sup>3</sup> That's basically 1 in 5 of all youth in America. How about this: almost 700,000 families come in contact with the child welfare system every year.<sup>4</sup>

When the general public can see young people

who have experiences like the ones listed above, working to make a difference in their lives and the lives of others, it can alter perceptions and inspire others to start making a difference as well. This can go a long way to reducing discrimination and bullying around your community. In addition, when you share your story for this reason, you let other youth know that they should not be ashamed of themselves or their experiences.

It is important to remember that when you share your story for any reason you are opening yourself up to be stigmatized. We will get into this more in the next section (Benefits & Risks of Sharing), but it is important to mention here as well. Make sure that you are ready to start publicly telling your story to reduce stigma before you start sharing. I am sure that you have a desire to create changes in your community; otherwise you would not be reading this workbook. But if you are not ready or feel really uncomfortable, then do not share. There is **NOTHING WRONG** with that. You should never feel pressured to share your story or any parts of it; that becomes exploitation, which as you now know, has many negative consequences. If you feel that you are being exploited in any way, refer to the previous section on how to address the Exploitation reason.

## Community Advocacy

**Community Advocacy** is using your voice as an advocate to create changes in your community! This could range from advocating on an issue in

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2. Bandura, A. (1994). Self-efficacy. In V.S. Ramachandran (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of human behavior* (Vol. 4, pp. 71-81). New York: Academic Press. (Reprinted in H. Friedman [Ed.], *Encyclopedia of mental health*. San Diego: Academic Press, 1998).

3. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1999). *Mental Health. A Report of the Surgeon General—Executive Summary*. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Mental Health Services, National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Mental Health.

4. Trends in Foster Care and Adoption. (2011). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. Retrieved March 9, 2012, from [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats\\_research/afcars/trends\\_june2011.pdf](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/trends_june2011.pdf).

5. American Humane Association. (n.d.). About Us: History: Mary Ellen Wilson. Retrieved March 15th, 2012, from <http://www.americanhumane.org/about-us/who-we-are/history/mary-ellen-wilson.html>.

your school or even a federal policy issue that affects the entire country. It might seem like your story could not have that much of an impact on creating change on such a large level, but nothing could be further from the truth. People who have the power to create change are greatly influenced by the stories and the experiences of the people they are there to serve.

In fact, the child services field is built on youth advocacy efforts. The first reported case of youth advocacy happened on April 10, 1874. A 10-year-old girl named Mary Ellen Wilson testified in a New York court room against her caregivers in a case regarding their abusiveness towards her. At this time in our country there were not a lot of laws protecting abused and neglected children, but after Mary Ellen's story, that all changed. The newspapers provided extensive coverage of the trial, raising public awareness and helping to inspire various agencies and organizations to advocate for the enforcement of laws that would rescue and protect abused children.<sup>5</sup>

There really is no greater reason to share your story than to promote positive changes in your community and improve the lives of other youth that have experienced similar difficulties. You

just need to make sure that you are adequately prepared for this kind of work. This guide is only a part of the process. There are still many other trainings that you should have as you begin doing community advocacy. Some of the trainings that you should consider are:

- Public Speaking
- Policy Advocacy
- Leadership
- Youth/Adult Partnerships
- Social Marketing
- Strategic Sharing... yep, even this one

Once you start doing this work, you will find that you become a mini celebrity of sorts. Many people will start asking you to speak at various events and conferences and the attention can become addicting. It is really easy to slip into attention-seeking as the main reason you continue to share your story. Once you get into the spotlight it can be hard to let it go, so you might find yourself sharing more than you intended. If this happens, take a break and follow some of the guidelines that we have listed for addressing Attention Seeking.

## Trainings

There are many places that you can obtain these trainings and resources. We would suggest checking out:

### **The National Resource Center for Youth Development**

[www.nrcyd.ou.edu/learning-center/  
publications/Youth%20Leadership%20Toolkit/All](http://www.nrcyd.ou.edu/learning-center/publications/Youth%20Leadership%20Toolkit/All)

### **Youth M.O.V.E. National**

[www.youthmovenational.org/  
youth-advocacy-and-policy](http://www.youthmovenational.org/youth-advocacy-and-policy)

### **Research and Training Center for Pathways to Positive Futures**

[www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu](http://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu)

# Exercise 1

The following questions will provide you with the opportunity to test your knowledge of why people might share their story. This is not a pass/fail exam. If you do not answer all these questions correctly, don't worry: just go back and review this section and review the explanations in the answer section in the back of the booklet. At the end of these questions you will have the opportunity to identify your own reason for sharing, as well as come up with a strategy for addressing a negative reason for sharing your story.

**1.** Thomas has been asked to speak at an event about adoption. He really wants to speak about this issue because he had a negative experience with adoption and is against older youth being adopted. He feels that older youth should get more assistance with independent living services rather than adoption services. Thomas's reason for sharing is most likely:

- a. Community Advocacy
- b. Exploitation
- c. Attention Seeking
- d. Stigma Reduction
- e. Anger
- f. Self Advocacy

**3.** Jason is going to see his doctor to receive a common but necessary outpatient operation. Because of his history of drug abuse with prescription medications he is worried about being given pain medication but is also worried about constantly being in pain while he heals. Jason decides to tell his doctor about his concerns and struggles with addiction. Jason's reason for sharing is most likely:

- a. Community Advocacy
- b. Exploitation
- c. Attention Seeking
- d. Stigma Reduction
- e. Anger
- f. Self Advocacy

**2.** Kavita is asked to speak before a legislative committee that is meeting in a few weeks. The committee wants to cut funding for a juvenile justice diversion program that she used to be a part of. Kavita plans to share her experience in the program and how it benefited her and kept her out of the prison system. Kavita's reason for sharing was most likely:

- a. Community Advocacy
- b. Exploitation
- c. Attention Seeking
- d. Stigma Reduction
- e. Anger
- f. Self Advocacy

**4.** Molly is finishing up her classes for the day when she gets a call from her case worker. Her case worker asks her if she can swing by the office and share her experience about the services she receives in a meeting with some of the organization's funders. Molly has a really good case worker and does not want to disappoint her, so she agrees to come over. Molly's reason for sharing is most likely:

- a. Community Advocacy
- b. Exploitation
- c. Attention Seeking
- d. Stigma Reduction
- e. Anger
- f. Self Advocacy

5. LaShawn has been working with a youth group for over a year. She has shared several parts of her story at various trainings and events. Lately though, she has been promoting another young person and has supported him in his advocacy. Although she is proud of the work this young person is doing she is also a bit jealous. Recently, however, Lashawn was asked to speak at an event that is happening in just 2 days. She is excited about this opportunity and has decided to share some additional aspects of her life that she has never talked about before. LaShawn's reason for sharing is most likely:

- a. Community Advocacy
- b. Exploitation
- c. Attention Seeking
- d. Stigma Reduction
- e. Anger
- f. Self Advocacy

6. Monique is walking down the hall at her school when she sees a fellow classmate crying in the hallway. When Monique asks her what's wrong, the girl says that she was being teased about having a panic attack due to her anxiety issues, and that she was ashamed of herself. Monique then tells the girl that she also suffers from anxiety and actually sees a counselor at the school to help her manage it. Monique's reason for sharing is most likely:

- a. Community Advocacy
- b. Exploitation
- c. Attention Seeking
- d. Stigma Reduction
- e. Anger
- f. Self Advocacy

In the space provided below identify what you feel your overall reason for sharing your story or experience is. Try to do this for each event you are asked to speak at just to make sure that you that you are continuing to share for a positive reason. Remember to be honest with yourself!

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If your reason for sharing is a negative reason what strategies are you going to use to address that issue?

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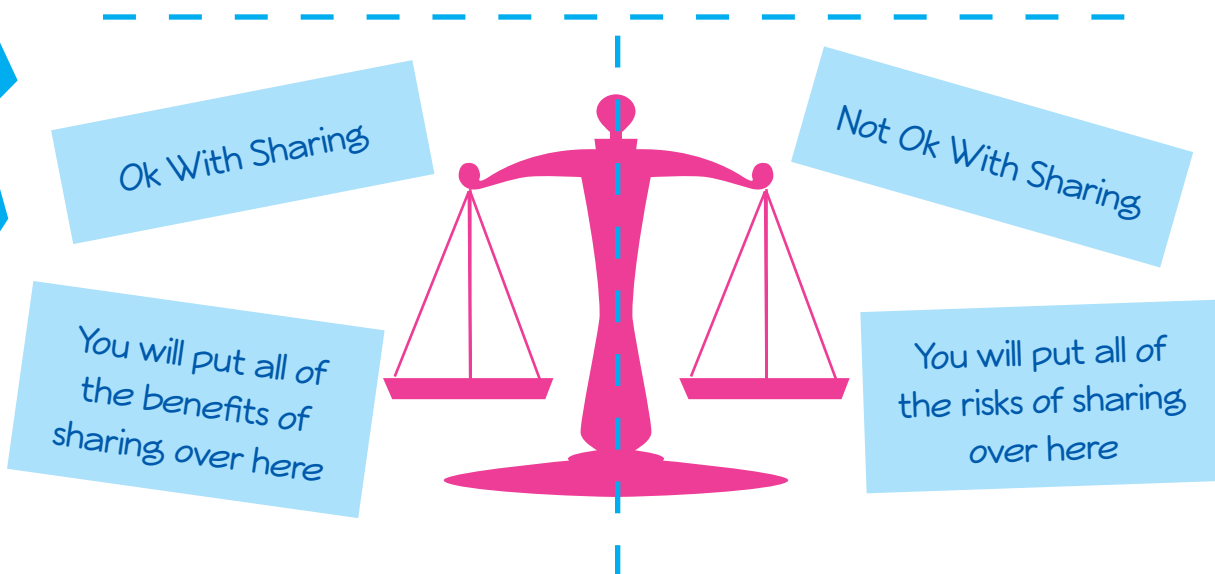
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# BENEFITS & RISKS

Once you have determined the reason you want to share your story, you will want to take a look at some of the benefits and risks of sharing. Understanding the risk factors and the benefits of sharing your story is an important aspect of keeping you safe and healthy. It better prepares you to determine if you want to share your story in certain situations or not. Think of it as a balance or scale:

Basically when there are more benefits there is more of a reason to share, and when there are more risks there is less reason to share. Your objective is not to make the scale swing one way or another. Your objective is to add up all of the pros and cons and see what the outcome is. There will be times when the risks are really high but you still feel that it's important to share; don't worry - there are ways to address this. We cover some strategies you can use in these situations so that



those risks aren't so dangerous. With that said, let's look at some of the benefits and risks of sharing.

## Benefits of Sharing

There are probably a thousand benefits to sharing your story, but in order to save time we are going to consolidate them into three categories: **Education**, **Positive Change Promotion**, and **Personal Growth & Development**. Let's take a look at these three categories.

### Education

You have amazing life experiences that are unique and allow you to reach out to others and inform them of issues that not many people could. **Education** like this



is incredibly valuable and beneficial to individuals that are working with young people. Imagine for a moment that you are a teacher at a local high school. Your job is to teach math to a classroom full of students, but you have one student who never has his homework done, has a hard time staying awake in class, and doesn't seem to be paying attention to the lessons. You might think that this student is just lazy or is uninterested in his own education, so you get on the young man for not getting his work done, or call him out in class for not paying attention. But imagine now that when you were first becoming a teacher that you had been trained by a group of young adults who had experienced traumatic life events. Your attitude toward that student might be different. You might consider that he is struggling with depression or is worried about being removed from his current foster home. When service providers (people like teachers, case workers, counselors, etc.) can hear stories from the population of young people they serve, they are better educated and prepared for engaging and working with that population. So one benefit of sharing your voice is that you help to create a workforce that is better educated in meeting the needs of young people that have had systems experiences. This benefits you in that the providers you train may one day be working with you, or already are. This also benefits other youth that will be working with those providers so that they can be engaged and supported in more effective and appropriate ways.

In addition to service providers, there are individuals who might want to get involved and help support young people just because they feel it's the right thing to do. These allies or volunteers will need training just like service providers, but they need to be recruited first. Sharing your story in certain venues can serve to recruit potential

volunteers and mentors. When people hear how a caring adult or friend helped you get through a challenging time in your life it can really inspire them to step up and be that support for someone else. Educating people about how they can help change the life of a child or young adult is important, and there is no one better qualified for that than you. Sharing your story can also help individuals realize whether or not they are ready to be a volunteer. Some volunteers might not realize everything that they are signing up for. One of the worst mistakes that caring people can make is getting into something that they weren't ready for, and then becoming inconsistent in a young person's life. If these people had the opportunity to listen to a young person talk about positive and negative relationships with adult or peer allies, then they would be better educated about what it means to be a volunteer.

As you know from reading above, it's important to educate people who work with children; however, it may be even more important to educate people who don't. Because there is so much stigma around youth involved in mental health, juvenile justice, child welfare, and special education systems, it is important that we work to educate the general public to dispel those negative stereotypes. Stigma reduction is one of the best reasons for sharing because it is one of the most beneficial things you can do for your community. By reducing the stigma that youth with these backgrounds face, you reduce discrimination that they often endure. Discrimination can prevent individuals from getting hired, and/or finding and building caring relationships with others. Sometimes people assume that youth, young adults, and even adults are unstable because they have a mental health diagnosis or a traumatic past. That's why it's important that the general public see youth and young adults

giving back to the community in positive ways.

## Positive Change Promotion

Remember the story in the community advocacy section about Mary Ellen Wilson? Well she is a perfect example of how someone's story can inspire and promote change. There are many cases in which youth have shared their stories and brought about **positive changes** on a legislative level. Youth voice and participation are becoming more and more important and valued at this level. There are many ways that you can participate in this process, whether it's on a local, state, or national level. You could write, call, or visit your elected officials and inform them how current legislation would impact you. You can also attend committee meets and provide testimony on a bill that is up for hearing.

There are many different things that you can do to influence legislation. If you are interested in learning more about how you can better partici-

partate in this kind of advocacy then check out one of our other guides:

Youth Voice in Policy: A Guide to Shaping History

[www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/pdf/pbYouthVoiceInPolicy.pdf](http://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/pdf/pbYouthVoiceInPolicy.pdf)



It doesn't always take an act of Congress to affect positive changes in the lives of young people. In fact, most changes happen on a program or system level. To make changes on a system level, you would want to talk directly to directors of state departments or non-profits. Sometimes it's just as simple as making them aware that there is an issue or concern about how services are delivered to children, youth, and families. You could start at your local school and inform school boards about how teachers should receive additional training on supporting

youth in crisis. You can also participate in local youth groups and on advisory boards to ensure that youth voice is present for every decision that is made that would have an impact on their lives. Helping to guide these decisions not only benefits you but also benefits the hundreds or thousands of youth that will come up in those systems behind you.

## Fostering Personal Growth & Development

Sharing your story can be very beneficial in fostering your own **personal growth and development**. In addition to the benefits you see that come from advocating on program, system, or policy levels, you also help make people aware of your individual needs. For example, at an event where I shared my story of being homeless and putting myself through college, my state's Independent Living Director, who was in the audience, made me aware of additional funding resources that helped pay for my last two semesters of school. When people are made aware of what's going on in our lives and what our goals and aspirations are, they can often help us achieve them. This is why it's so important that you take an active role in your own case management. More than likely you will experience these things during self-advocacy, but not always. It can happen on any level!

Are you familiar with the phrase "It's not what you know, it's who you know?" Well, that's true to a certain extent; knowing the right people can really help you advance your career, develop positive relationships, and meet your needs. Networking is important for any youth regardless of his or her background and circumstances. When you share your story in a public forum you may often be asked to speak at other events. This allows you to meet new people and to make a

name for yourself. Soon you might be asked to serve on boards or committees and provide your input and expertise there. Next, you might be encouraged to apply for an internship by someone you met, and before you know it you are a well-respected professional in the field of advocacy. What if you don't want to do advocacy? Well, if you have been telling people that you're interested in culinary arts or computer programming then you will more than likely find educational or internship opportunities doing those things, thanks to the people that you have met through your advocacy work!

As you are doing advocacy work and sharing your experiences, chances are you will receive additional education and training which help develop your skills and build your resume. We have talked about and shared resources for additional training in policy advocacy, leadership, public speaking, etc. Having all these skills will make you more attractive to employers and colleges. Having experience in a leadership position and/or having presentation skills will put you a step above most of your peers when applying for a job. In addition, you will have a greater sense of self-confidence, helping you to interview well and land a job; to better respond to emotionally difficult situations; and to cope appropriately when triggered by life's challenges. Having these skills is invaluable to having a stable and successful educational or work force experience.

## Risks of Sharing

Sharing your story is a double-edged sword. Just as positive things can come from self-disclosure, many negative things can also happen. This is the reason that Strategic Sharing is so important. If you are aware of some of the negative repercussions of sharing, then you can better prepare

yourself for dealing with them. Now, it would be impossible to predict all of the negative things that could happen with sharing who you are, but we have included the most common things that young people report having happened. These things fall into 4 basic categories: **Personal Relationships**, **Professional Relationships**, **Stigma Exposure**, and **Emotional Well-being**. Let's take a look at them.

### Personal Relationships

Most of us didn't grow up in the deep forest having been raised by wolves; in fact, I'm willing to bet that no one reading this has. At some point, your life was impacted by, and shared with, others. So naturally we often mention those relationships when we tell our stories, whether they were good or bad. However, sometimes the people we mention can become upset with what we have said about them, thus negatively impacting our personal relationships. Many young people who are systems-involved have had negative experiences with others, and part of their advocacy work is talking about those experiences. For example, let's say that you had a parent who struggled with addiction issues and that's what caused you to come into foster care. That parent might not want you telling people about their addiction. This is difficult because a very common part of telling people your story is giving them a history of how you started accessing services. So, you share that your parent had drug abuse issues. This can cause a rift between you and that parent, making it more difficult for you to reunite. You might currently already have a negative relationship with that parent and not care about putting their information out there, but that could change in the future so be mindful of what you want to say. Also remember that it doesn't always have to be a negative experi-

ence that you're talking about. You could talk about how your sister really helped you through a difficult time, because of the example she set when addressing her own mental health needs. However, she might not be okay with people knowing about her mental health condition. So just make sure that you consider your relationships and how they could be impacted before you share. Here are some tips that can help you when considering what to share:

1. **Talk it over.** Talk with the people that you want to mention in your stories. See what they are okay with you sharing and what they are not.
2. **Leave out names.** Don't give out the names of people like your case worker, or relative even if you want to share something good that they did (believe me, they didn't do it for recognition; they did it for you)
3. **Be strength-based.** If you want to maintain a relationship, or think that you will in the future, be more strength-based in what you say. For example, instead of saying, "My mother was a drug addict and couldn't take care of her kids," say, "My mother suffered with some addiction issues at the time and had a difficulty meeting our needs."

## Professional Relationships

The field of children, youth, and family advocacy is very rewarding, but it's not for everyone. You might decide to start doing things around community advocacy or stigma reduction work while you are younger, but maybe that's not the work you want to keep doing as you move on in your career path. Maybe you want to get involved in the music industry, or you love cooking and want

to be a chef. Whatever it is, you should always pursue what you love. So please understand that there is nothing to feel guilty about if you want to stop doing advocacy work and pursue other goals and dreams. What you do and say can make a huge impact on the lives around you! However, be aware of **how** what you are saying about yourself can affect future employment opportunities. Know that, Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 prohibits private employers, state and local governments, employment agencies and labor unions from discriminating against qualified individuals with disabilities in job application procedures, hiring, firing, advancement, compensation, job training, and other terms, conditions, and privileges of employment.<sup>6</sup> However, just because this type of discrimination is against the law doesn't mean it doesn't happen. Although there is not much research on the issue, youth often report that their disclosure of mental health experiences, and/or juvenile justice and foster care backgrounds, has prevented them from getting a job. This issue is important to be aware of, especially in today's social media age, as it is easier to get information than ever before. Look at your Facebook page; type your name into Google and see what comes up. Are you OK with the fact that potential employers have access to that information about you? Let's say that you have a history of involvement in the juvenile justice system. Now that you're an adult, your record has been sealed and nobody can access it. However, if you have shared your juvenile justice experiences with the media, there could be a news article online somewhere that shares that story to your possible new employer. This is one of the ways that advocacy can be a double-edged sword: it can help you develop skills and

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6. U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. (2012). Facts About Americans with Disabilities ACT. Retrieved April 30, 2012, from <http://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/publications/fs-ada.cfm>

experiences that would make you a more attractive job candidate but it also opens you up to being judged and stereotyped.

Here are some steps you can take to help avoid workplace discrimination issues.

1. **Protect your information.** Make your Facebook, Twitter, and other social media accounts protected and discreet. There is no reason that complete strangers should have access to your information.
2. **Ask if the media will be present** during the event that you are speaking at. The information will help you decide if you want to do that event or not.
3. **Ask how long the article or event information will be posted online.**
4. **Have the media use only your first name.** It is a lot harder for people to find you that way.

## Stigma Exposure

In the last section we talked about positive reasons for sharing, remember? One of those reasons was to reduce stigma. Stigma is a very damaging and powerful force. So it's important that we all work together to reduce stigma. However, in order to do that we have to risk being judged and stigmatized. People's judgment of you can cause you to miss out on opportunities like work, housing, education, or even relationships with significant others. Think about it from this perspective: you're on a date, and the girl or guy you're with asks what you do in your free time. You tell them that you advocate for children, youth, and families that are involved in a system like child welfare, mental health, or juvenile justice, etc... Well, typically they follow up that first question with another: "What caused you to get involved with that?" Now you have to decide what

you want to tell them about your past. It's a tricky situation, and what makes it more complicated is that many things about your personal life can be found online. When we advocate in the public sector our stories get out there... and that's the point: we can't fight stigma if we are afraid of it ourselves. We set positive examples and can break those preconceived notions that people have about youth with systems experiences. However, I'm not going to lie; it's sometimes easier to keep our private lives private. So many young advocates start sharing their stories to change their communities and when they start facing the stigma, many burn out. Everyone needs to decide for themselves if they are willing and ready to face this stigma; you just simply have to weigh the risks and benefits. To better prepare for this issue:

1. **Talk to a counselor or therapist.** Stigma can often affect our emotional well-being.
2. **Utilize this guide** and really weigh the risks and benefits of sharing.
3. **Decide what you are okay with people knowing** - remember, there is no reason you have to tell your whole story. You can still be an effective advocate without going into too much detail.

## Emotional Well-Being

There are a lot of ways that sharing your experiences can impact your emotional well-being. One of the most common things young people report feeling after sharing their story is **remorse**. Remorse is often viewed as a good thing, and in a lot of cases it can be. Remorse may signal that one is suffering psychologically because of their negative behavior toward another, which leads to empathy for the harmed party who then will express forgiveness.<sup>7</sup> However, remorse

becomes negative when we have trouble forgiving ourselves. Let's say, for example, that sharing your story caused your sister to become upset with you because you shared information about her that she didn't want people to know. You might begin to feel so bad about this that you condemn yourself (or punish yourself) for what you have done. Self-condemnation is said to be associated with poor psychological well-being.<sup>8</sup> This can cause significant negative effects on your mental well-being, such as low self-worth; or at the very least, cause you to never again want to share your experiences. If you are having feelings of remorse it's important that you:

1. Talk with a counselor, therapist, or trusted adult to help you process those emotions more effectively.
2. Ask for forgiveness of anyone you might have hurt and forgive yourself. Remember, communication is key to solving problems, but we are all human and all of us make mistakes.
3. Identify what you shared that caused you to feel remorse and change how you talk about that experience. Simple changes in wording can sometimes avoid conflict.
4. Avoid negative coping mechanisms like drinking, illegal drugs, etc. These things only worsen outcomes in the long run; plus, they feed into negative stereotypes.

Did you know that youth in foster care are

diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) at twice the rate of U.S. war veterans? Approximately 25% of youth in foster care have a PTSD diagnosis.<sup>9</sup> Many youth that are in systems have faced trauma in some form or fashion. This doesn't make you broken or less than normal. In fact, epidemiological research suggests that as many as 70% of individuals living in the United States have experienced one or more traumatic events during their lifetime.<sup>10</sup> Trauma is a risk factor in advocacy because as much as we would like to avoid reliving past experiences, we often have to when we advocate. Sharing our experiences will often **bring up painful memories** that can be difficult to process and can trigger emotional instability. PTSD can cause people to withdraw from participation in significant activities; have difficulty falling or staying asleep; and have difficulty controlling emotions and/or difficulty concentrating, among many other things. Because of these risk factors, it is crucial that we identify potential triggers that could come up when advocating. Sometimes it's easy to figure out what will trigger us and other times it can be next to impossible. Many youth, including the one writing this guide, have broken down in tears during panel presentations and speeches because we became overwhelmed with emotions and didn't know what was causing them. Being triggered on a regular basis can quickly wear us down and cause us to burn out, or even worse, have an emotional breakdown. Think of it

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7. Davis, J., & Gold, G. (2011). An examination of emotional empathy, attributions of stability, and the link between perceived remorse and forgiveness. *Personality and Individual Differences* 50(3), 392-397.

8. Exline, J., & Fisher, M. (2006). Self-forgiveness versus Excusing: The roles of remorse, effort, and acceptance of responsibility. *Self and Identity* 5, 127-46.

9. Pecora, P. J., et al. (2005). Improving family foster care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni study. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Program.

10. United States Department of Commerce. (2002). PTSD Basics. Retrieved April 13, 2012, from NTIS National Technical Information Service: <http://www.ntis.gov/pdf/ptsdbasicstext.pdf>

as being out in an extremely cold environment. With the proper protection you can handle it, but still not for very long. You need to have a chance to recover from the elements. The same is true for exposing yourself to past traumas; you need to protect yourself and also recover from the elements. There are a variety of ways that you can do this:

1. Identify possible triggers and avoid talking about those things until you're ready.
2. Develop and follow your safety plan (we will cover this in the next section).
3. Take a break. Even the President of the United States needs to take a break every now and then. You deserve one too.

Many times, youth have strong connections with adult and peer supports in their life. Because we have such a tight bond with these people, it is often hard to disappoint them. We might have feelings of guilt if we turn down an event that they asked us to speak at, or if we felt we performed poorly during an event. This feeling of guilt can also be accompanied by feelings of anxiety, especially if the person who asked for your participation is someone who is in a position of authority over you, like a caregiver or caseworker. We talked in the previous section about how exploitation was a negative reason for sharing. Well, many youth tend to share despite that because they want to make that person happy and because of the feelings of guilt and anxiety that they want to avoid. Feelings of guilt can often lead to excessive worrying and think-

ing things like, "Are they upset with me because I didn't come through for them?" or "Do they think less of me now because I did badly on that panel?" You might even start to worry about whether those people will continue to be there for you as the result of your performance. This worry is unnecessary and can lead to stress, then to prolonged anxiety issues that, I'm sure we can agree, no one wants to deal with. Plus, these feelings can cause you to over-share, and say things that maybe you aren't ready to talk about yet, in an effort to make up for past events. First off, you should never feel guilty about not sharing your story. Putting out that very personal information is not an easy thing to do. Second, we feel the way we feel. It's easy to say "don't feel this way," but it takes a long time and a lot of practice to prevent those feelings from happening. What we want to focus on is how you can address the feelings when they arise.

1. Communication! Just talking to the individual who is asking you to speak and sharing your concerns with them can prevent a lot of unnecessary guilt and anxiety.
2. If you find yourself anxious a lot, then some underlying issues might need to be addressed. Talk to a counselor and/or therapist about these concerns.
3. Debrief after every event that you do. Use events that go poorly as learning opportunities and identify areas for growth. Don't look at them as failures.

# Exercise 2

The following scenarios will provide you with the opportunity to test your knowledge of the risks and benefits of sharing your stories. There are multiple right answers, so explain your answer in the space provided. If you are having trouble with a question, check out our answer section in the back for an example. At the end of these questions, you will have the opportunity to identify some of the risks and benefits that you have seen or that you think you will see in your advocacy work.

**1.** Peter is in foster care and is about to attend his case planning meeting. He really wants to go on a school trip to a leadership camp, but he doesn't have the funds to pay for it. He also knows that his biological mother doesn't have the money to spare. He is concerned that asking his foster parents for money will hurt his mother's feelings. He is torn because he knows this trip would be a great experience for him, but he doesn't want to upset anyone. Now he has to decide whether or not to bring this issue up with his case planning team. Name one benefit and one risk that Peter should take into consideration.

Benefit:

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Risk:

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What is one way that Peter could address his risk(s)?

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Justify your answers:

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**2.** Ashley has been asked to speak at a congressional briefing. The briefing is addressing issues around suicide and substance abuse. Ashley has a very moving story about her struggles with substance abuse and thoughts of suicide, and how mental health services are helping her cope and manage her needs. Ashley has some uneasy feelings about speaking at this event. Name one benefit and one risk that Ashley should measure before doing this event.

Benefit:

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Risk:

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What is one way that Ashley could address her risk?

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Justify your answers:

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**3.** Joy has been doing advocacy work on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) issues for a few months now. She was recently approached by her school's guidance counselor about creating a GSA (Gay Straight Alliance) group in her high school. Joy is open about her sexuality with her parents and a few close friends and mentors, but her sexual orientation isn't common knowledge amongst the community. Name one benefit and one risk that Joy has in creating a GSA in her school.

Benefit:

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Risk:

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What is one way that Joy could address her risk?

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Justify your answers:

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**4.** Marcus is a strong speaker and advocate. He grew up in foster care as a result of abuse and neglect, and has told his stories at many different venues. He is given the opportunity to attend an internship program that would require him to travel around the country to share his story of overcoming trauma at many different venues. Marcus is excited about this opportunity but a little nervous about leaving his friends and family for the summer. What is one benefit and one risk for Marcus?

Benefit:

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Risk:

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What is one way that Marcus could address his risk?

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Justify your answers:

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**5.** Let's take a moment to identify some of the risk factors you have seen or think that you will see when you are doing your advocacy.

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**6.** What are some steps that you can take to address these risk factors?

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**A**nother way you can avoid negative sharing experiences is by preparing for each and every engagement. It is very rare that you will share the same experiences with the same audiences throughout your advocacy career. During this section we will cover some of the common practices that you should apply before sharing your experiences. There are certain steps that you will want to take to “Target the Tasks” that you have been asked to do. First you want to **Target your Audience**; next, **Study Your Topic**; and finally, **Develop Your Safety Plan**. Following these 3 steps will help you avoid common pitfalls and create a more positive and effective sharing experience overall.

## 1) Target Your Audience

There are many reasons why you want to target your various audiences: it helps establish your credibility; saves you time when developing your presentation; helps you avoid negative aspects of sharing; and many, many more. We are going to divide these reasons into two categories: The first is **Effectiveness** and the second is **Safeguarding**.

### Effectiveness

So how does targeting your audience increase your effectiveness? When you know who the audience is and what information is relevant and important for them to hear, it shows that you know what you’re doing. This increases your credibility, and the more credible people find you, the more likely they are to listen to you. By providing only the relevant information, you decrease the chance of confusion and make the most effective use of everyone’s time. For example, let’s say you are asked to attend an event talking to child welfare directors about the need for increased family-finding program funding. Your focus at this event should be on how family-finding programs have been, or how they would have been, impactful in your life. You wouldn’t want to focus on how post-custody services have been helpful; that would be counterproductive. Let’s look at another example. Say you’re attending your IEP (Individualized Education Program) meeting. It would be more productive to talk about your educational needs than it would be to talk about your pending court date. This is because your teachers and school counselors are not as able to help you with your court hearing as much as they are able to help you with your educational needs. Be aware of what influence your audience has and what they need to hear from you so that you can guide them to influence things the way you think that they need to.

### Safeguarding

There are parts of our life experiences that we feel more comfortable telling certain people than others. You might feel more comfortable talking with your parents about your depression issues than you would a friend. On the other hand,

you might feel more comfortable talking to your friend about the guy or girl that you have a crush on. We naturally make these choices in our private lives but we typically know who our audience is in those settings. Imagine that you are asked to speak in front of two hundred people in your community about your personal experiences in a child serving system, and you didn't know who they were going to be. That makes it really hard to decide what it is you want to say. That's why it's always important to know who is in your audience.

Check out the diagram below. The center circle is all the pieces of your story and the circles around the outside are some of the people you might share your story with.

Now think about the different parts of your story. What do you feel comfortable telling a group of new attorneys? What do you feel comfortable telling your mentor? Would you feel comfortable telling your caseworker that you really like your foster parents? How would you feel if your biological parents knew? What if you were doing a training for mental health care caseworkers,

and you talked about a negative experience with your caseworker, not knowing that their supervisor was in the room? These are the questions that you need to ask yourself. Knowing who is in your audience will help you preserve your personal and professional relationships. Choose carefully what you are okay with them knowing, and think about some of the potential risks when sharing. Keep in mind that what you share with the media and the general public can potentially be shared with anyone. So be very careful what you share when media are present.

Also make sure that you can relate to your audience. For example, if you are asked to speak at an event around the importance of diversion programs in the juvenile justice system but you have no experience in these programs or in the juvenile justice system, then this really isn't the event for you. Avoid talking in terms of theory, like "If I had been involved in the juvenile justice system I would have liked to have had the opportunity to participate in a diversion program." If it's not your experience then it isn't entirely ethical to talk about it; this can also make you look less credible.



Before each event ask these questions:

1. Who is in my audience?

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2. What is the purpose of the event?

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3. How does my experience relate to the purpose?

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4. What do I hope to influence by speaking at this event?

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5. What parts of my experience do I feel comfortable speaking about in front of this audience?

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6. What are the risks of sharing with this audience?

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7. What steps can I take to avoid any of these risks?

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Asking these simple questions will go a long way in helping you target your audience and prepare for your event.

## 2) Study Your Topic

Just like getting ready for a test, you will want to study and prepare for each and every event. Knowing your audience is important, but knowing your past and how to talk about it effectively is even more important. Now you might think that you know your own story and how to tell it, but you might be surprised at what can happen. Imagine you went to an event unprepared and you were asked a question, like how old were you when you first came into foster care. You tell people that you were nine years old, but at a later event you say that you were eight. This is because you were two weeks away from your 9th birthday when you came into care. This might seem like a small issue, but any inconsistency in your story will decrease your credibility. What if you told people that you were adopted but had a failed adoption? People might assume that your adoption failed because of your behavioral issues, when in fact it failed because of the physical health needs of your adoptive parent. It's important that you know how your audience might receive or interpret your story. This way you can better avoid any type of confusion and/or negative stereotypes and stigma.

Another great reason to study your topic is so that you can use data and statistics along with your personal story. To say that you have a diagnosable mental health need is one thing, but to say that you, like 20% of all youth in America, have a diagnosable mental health need is another. When we can use our stories as an example

of a much bigger issue to be addressed then we can be truly impactful. Remember, when we advocate on a community level we are sharing our stories on behalf of hundreds of thousands of other youth.

When studying your topic, it is important that you choose your boundaries carefully. Let's say that you are at an event and are speaking about when you first came into foster care. You pause because talking about the fear you felt while the police were taking you away triggers emotional memories in you and you have to take a moment to regain your composure. If you had studied your topic and what you wanted to say, you would have known if talking about this was something that would trigger you. When choosing your boundaries, remember what the purpose for the event is and how your story relates to your audience. Is it necessary they hear information that is difficult for you to talk about? The best advice for making this decision is: don't use this speech, presentation, or event to talk about difficult emotional issues that you haven't previously addressed in a therapeutic setting. This is one of the quickest ways to burn out, or worse: be re-traumatized. However, sometimes you might feel that despite the risk, it's worth sharing for the sake of the audience learning. In this case you need to get prepared, and incorporate this into your safety plan. You can always talk to a trusted adult beforehand if you have any questions as to whether something is appropriate to share. We will talk about how you develop a safety plan in a minute; first you should ask yourself these questions:

1. Out of my diverse personal experiences, which ones best relate to my audience and purpose?

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2 How might my audience interpret this information?

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3. What data and statistics support or relate to my experiences?

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4. Am I comfortable sharing these experiences?

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5. Will anything that I'm sharing be a trigger for me?

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### 3) Develop Your Safety Plan

What is a strategic sharing safety plan and why is it important to have one? A safety plan is a process that you have in place just in case you are triggered or have an emotional health need during your participation at an event. You never know what might trigger you. You could have told the same story time and time again and never had an issue, then one day it just hits you differently. Maybe the stress from school is overwhelming and that pressure triggers you as you are talking about the lack of appropriate intervention programs in schools for mental health crises. How people respond when they are triggered is as varied as each individual. Some might start crying while on stage; others might turn to a negative coping skill like drugs or alcohol. Only you and those close to you know how you respond to triggers. To avoid the negative impacts

of triggers on your life, it is important to develop a safety plan for when they occur.

What should you do if you feel like something you say or hear might trigger you? First and foremost, talk to a mental health provider or a supportive adult that knows your story. Speaking to a counselor is the first option, but if one is not readily available or it will take time to get an appointment, the second best option is talking with your supportive adult. After you have done that, the next step is to communicate this issue with your event support. This person could be the moderator of the panel you're on, the youth leader of your youth group, or even the co-presenter. Talk to them about what they should say and do if you have a breakdown on stage. Next, develop "safe stories" or stories that you know you are comfortable sharing. This way, if on the day of the event you are feeling overwhelmed, you can fall back on telling your safe story; this decreases the likeli-



hood that you will be triggered. There is nothing that you will advocate for that is worth disrupting your emotional well-being. Finally, identify positive supports that you can access to help you recover and keep you from using negative coping skills.

Remember, your social and emotional stability are the **most important priorities**, so take the development of your safety plan seriously. Ask these questions when you develop your safety plan:

1. Have I talked about the experiences I want to share with a therapist or counselor?

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2. Who is my event support?

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3. What do I need my event support to say and do if I am triggered?

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4. What experiences do I feel more comfortable sharing if I'm nervous or stressed on the day of the event?

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5. What are my signs that I need my support to step in and take over?

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6. What are the positive supports and coping skills that I can access after the event?

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When you prepare for your next event - and every event after that - read through this last section, "Targeting the Task," to help you better prepare. If you answer all of these questions then you will have a much better and much more effective experience.

Another important part of preparing is practicing your presentation. Take every opportunity you get to run through your presentation and analyze how you can make it better, more effective, and safer.

**G**ood news!! You are in the home stretch! There are just a few more general tips on being strategic that we want to cover. First is **Limiting Emotions**, second is **Answering Difficult Questions**, and third is **Debriefing the Event**.

## Limiting Emotions

One of the strongest assets that a young person has to create change is their ability to evoke an emotional reaction from their audience. This is because our stories are so compelling that they inspire and motivate people to take action. Even though our goal is to invoke an emotional response, it's important that we limit our own emotions while presenting. Of course, this can be a hard thing to do when we are talking about very personal experiences and how we feel/felt during those times of our lives. There are two reasons why we want to limit our emotions. First, we want people to focus on what we are saying, not on what we are feeling. Have you ever listened to someone while they are crying? It can be hard to understand what they are saying, and it also makes you think about what you can do to make them feel better in the moment, like wondering where the nearest box of tissues is. How about listening to someone who is angry? It can be really difficult to focus on someone who is really mad. It typically makes people feel uncomfortable and that can cause them to tune out and think of other things.

In addition to making it difficult for your audience to listen to you, letting your emotions go can diminish your credibility. People prefer a speaker who is poised and prepared; when your emotions are not under control, you do not look prepared. A lot of times when our emotions are not under control, we tend to spiral down, causing our emotional well-being to be compromised. We don't want our purpose to get lost in our presentation. So the best thing to do is prevent this from happening altogether. You can do that by:

- Avoiding audiences that you feel strongly about.
- Sticking to the facts and avoiding talking about your emotions on the subject.
- Utilizing your safety plan when triggered; don't try to power through something.

## Answering Difficult Questions

One of the biggest issues that young people come across while sharing is people asking inappropriate or difficult questions. Someone from your audience might ask specific questions about the abuse that you faced, or they might make judgments and ask you why you acted a certain way when in crisis. You would be surprised at the kinds of questions you might get. For example, one time I saw a youth speak on a panel where he talked about his experiences with abuse. After

the panel, a woman in the crowd told him of the abuse that she faced growing up and informed him that the best way to move on is to forgive the people who abused him. She then asked him if he had forgiven his abusers yet. Whether you agree with this or not, a panel presentation in front of your peers and professionals is not the best place to have this discussion. What should you do when questions like that arise? Here are a few strategies that you can use to handle questions like this:

**Redirect** - try redirecting the question back to your purpose. For example, let's say you are in a foster home and you are advocating that more people become foster parents. At the end of your speech an audience member asks you what you did wrong to be placed in foster care. You came in to foster care due to abuse and neglect like most young people do, so you find this question offensive. But you don't want to offend anyone in the room as your purpose is to recruit them to be foster parents. So you would take the question and relate it back to your topic. "There are a variety of reasons that youth come into care; very few youth are placed in foster care because of bad behaviors. Most are placed due to abuse and neglect." This response would inform your entire audience that the preconceived notion that youth in foster care are there because of their behavioral issues is false. When these potential foster parents hear this, it helps change their perception of youth in care for the better.

**Open to the Audience** - Let's say that someone asks you a question that you don't feel comfortable answering because of the emotional impact it has on you; something like "Does your mental health diagnosis affect your relationships with significant others?" This question is difficult for you to answer because you have recently experienced rejection after sharing your per-

sonal story with someone you were dating. So you decide to open this up to the group by saying "It has its impacts... what does the rest of the group think about this?" This tactic gives the audience the chance to put themselves in your shoes for a moment, and can be very effective.

**Politely Decline** - This isn't a political debate; you never have to answer any question you don't want to. I know we feel like we are supposed to answer every question asked, but remember, you have the right to pass on any question you don't feel like answering. It is important though, that you decline politely if you don't want to answer a question. Remember, we want to make the best impression possible, and getting emotional at an audience member's question is never good. If you are ever asked a question that you feel uncomfortable answering, simply say, "I don't really feel comfortable answering that question."

**Rely on Event Support** - Most times you are presenting, you will have someone supporting you at that event. Either they are moderating the panel, or are hosting your event. If you have taken the time to develop your safety plan, they will know with just a simple glance from you that you don't know what to say or don't want to say anything and they can step in and deflect the question for you.

Following these tactics is a great way to be an effective presence and influence change, while protecting your own emotional well-being.

## Debriefing the Event

Debriefing after each event with the event support is one of the most important things that you can do. It might be hard to do at first because you just finished and you feel like relaxing and celebrating, but don't skip over this. Debriefing allows you to review the good and the bad from

each event and provides the opportunity to process the information that you received. There are many things you will want to cover during your debriefing session. Below is a checklist of the questions you should ask during your debriefing.

1. Was there any trouble with logistics (finding the location of the event, travel, hotel, stipend, etc.)?
2. Do you feel like you accomplished your objective?
3. Was there anything that surprised you?
4. Did anything go poorly?

5. Think back on your trainings: Was there anything that you improved (speaking too softly or too quickly, etc.)?
6. Do you feel like you were triggered and need support?

Asking these questions will help you identify strengths and needs so that you can continue improving on your presentation skills. As you improve as an advocate so will the impact you have on your community. In addition to that, it's just more fun to do things well, and the more fun you are having the better your social and emotional well-being will get.

## Exercise 3

The following questions will provide you with the opportunity to test your knowledge of the General Tips on Being Strategic. Again, this is not a pass/ fail exam. If you don't answer all these questions right, don't worry - just go back and review this section and review the explanations in the answer section in the back of the booklet.

**1.** Rebecca is a youth advocate in her community and is really involved in her youth group. Three months ago Rebecca had an adoption fail and is really upset with the entire adoption process. She has decided that she is going to go into post custody services. She is now being asked to speak at a commission meeting on the importance of funding the adoption assistance program. Rebecca feels that adoption assistance money could be better spent on getting youth ready for independence. Rebecca should:

- a. Do the event anyway
- b. Avoid this audience

Justify your answer:

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**2.** Arisa is a youth advocate who talks to other youth in schools about managing anxiety and depression. She has recently lost her mother, who she was very close with. While she is speaking at

an event she starts talking about the strength her mother gave her, is triggered, and begins crying. Arisa should:

- a. Try to power through it; this information is powerful
- b. Use her safety plan

Justify your answer:

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3. You are on a panel and are asked, "Do you feel like a broken person or 'damaged goods' because you have experienced a child-serving system?" Let's pretend that you find this question really offensive and are not sure how to answer it.

What is one tactic that you could use to address this question?

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Using that tactic what would your response be?

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4. Corey is speaking to a group of case workers and mentions during his presentation that his father is serving life in prison. At the end of the presentation he is asked about how growing up without his father has impacted him. Corey is currently working on his relationship with his father and has started writing him this past year and is still trying to figure out how he feels about

how things have impacted him. Corey answers the question by saying, "I think that a lot of youth struggle when they are lacking in family supports, which is why family-finding programs are so important to youth in care or at risk of coming in to care." What tactic did Corey use to answer this question?

- a. Redirecting
- b. Politely declining
- c. Opening to the audience
- d. Relying on event support

5. Mary, Sandra, and Becky just finished a panel discussion on some policy issues in their state. When they get back to their youth group's office, they decide to debrief the event. Sandra had a very difficult time at the event with some of the comments that were made about juvenile justice youth not deserving a second chance. Since Sandra is the only one in the group with juvenile justice experience she decides not to talk about it. Sandra:

- a. Did the right thing; everyone else is satisfied with the event; why break the good mood?
- b. Was triggered by the event and needs to talk about it in case she needs support

Justify your answer:

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One of the best ways to be prepared for an event is to have your information ready for people to see before the event even takes place. The first thing someone will ask you for when you are invited to speak at an event is a biography, or bio. This is basically a brief profile of your life. A bio should have all of the important and relevant information that you want to share with people. It's good to have a standard bio that you can use at a moment's notice for various events, but it's even better when you can tailor your bio to fit different events. A good bio should be short, roughly 4-5 sentences. It should contain both personal and professional information, and be a highlight reel of your life. When you write your bio, you want to ask yourself some of the same questions that you would when targeting your task:

1. Who is the audience?
2. What is the purpose of this event?
3. What parts of my story relate to this event?

So, for example, let's say that you are speaking at an event and your purpose is to talk about the need for more employment program opportunities for youth with mental health needs. Your audience is state legislative members and state program directors. A bio for this sort of event would read something like:

“ My name is Jessica Doe and I am a sophomore at State University. I currently have a 3.2 GPA and I am majoring in biology and have a depression diagnosis. Despite my efforts and academic success, I am currently unemployed. I have faced issues around stigma and discrimination as a result of my mental health diagnoses and believe more supports are needed for youth like me. ”

## Writing Your Bio: Practice

Write your bio based on the various event descriptions below. If your story doesn't relate to a particular event, then leave that one blank.

1. You are asked to speak at an event training police and emergency response crews about how to engage youth that are in a state of mental health crisis.

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2. You are training judges and lawyers how to better support young people that they serve.

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3. You are asked to speak at a briefing in front of the Senate Ways and Means committee about cuts that they are making to post custody services for youth aging out of foster care.

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4. You are speaking with school board officials about the need to increase teacher awareness and ability to support youth in their classes with mental health needs.

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**G**ive yourself a pat on the back: you did a great job finishing this workbook! There are a lot of challenging topics that Strategic Sharing causes us to think about and process; it's not easy information to digest. Hopefully you feel better prepared now as you begin, or continue, in the wonderful work of advocacy. The important things to remember are to:

- **Identify what your reason for sharing is and what you can do to address any negative reasons.** Self Advocacy, Stigma Reduction, and Community Advocacy are all very positive reasons. Just make sure that you don't start out or slip into sharing because of an Anger, Exploitation, or Attention Seeking reason.
- **For each and every event make sure you weigh out the risks and benefits of sharing your experiences.** Follow some of the steps that we outlined to avoid some of the risks. Just be true to yourself and do what you think is best for your future.
- **As you prepare for your events, remember to target your task.** Ask all of the appropriate questions about who is in your audience and what your purpose for sharing is. Analyze your life experiences and choose those that best relate to your audience and purpose. Use all of this information to develop your safety plan and safeguard yourself from triggers.
- **Remember to limit your emotions and work hard to ensure that your purpose doesn't get lost in your presentation.** Also, remain positive when asked difficult or offensive questions. Use the tactics discussed to address any issues around inappropriate questions. Take the debriefing process seriously; use it as an opportunity for personal growth as well as to gain the supports you need.
- **Finally, at almost every occasion that you will be asked to share your story, you will be asked for a bio.** Have a standard bio prepared for when people ask to see that information, but try to tailor your bio for the various events that you are asked to do. Make sure everything in your bio is something you're fine with people seeing.

It is so important that young people step up to the plate and bring forth the information that affects so many lives across the country. We are counting on you to pave the way for the youth that are coming up through the systems behind you.

“ Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has. ”

–Margaret Mead



# APPENDIX

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## Exercise 1

### Question 1

**Answer:** Anger

Thomas is upset because of his personal experiences with adoption. He should check the facts around adoption and see if youth have better outcomes when adopted or when they age out of care. If he can't be objective, then this might not be the right presentation for him.

### Question 2

**Answer:** Community Advocacy

Kavita is sharing her experiences in order to preserve the program that was beneficial in her life. She wants to make sure that programs like this one stay around to help other youth like her.

### Question 3

**Answer:** Self Advocacy

Jason shares information with his doctor about his past drug abuse so that he and his doctor and any additional supports can help him work out a plan to avoid any relapse.

### Question 4

**Answer:** Exploitation

Molly was asked at the last minute to speak at an event for which she had no time to prepare or even learn what the meeting is about. You should always be prepped before each event.

### Question 5

**Answer:** Attention Seeking

LaShawn has developed some feelings of jealousy towards her peers' presence in the spot light. She is going to make the mistake of over sharing if she isn't careful in her attempt to get people's attention again.

### Question 6

**Answer:** Stigma Reduction

Monique decides to share her experience to let a fellow classmate know that there is nothing to be ashamed about in seeing a therapist or seeking help for a mental health need. Her reason for sharing was to reduce stigma around mental health.

## Exercise 2

In this exercise there may be more than one correct answer, so if you chose a different answer don't worry: as long as it's well justified, it's correct. This exercise was designed to test your ability to assess the benefits and risks of different situations.

### Question 1

#### **Benefits: Personal Growth and Development**

*If Peter attends the Leadership Camp he will have the opportunity to gain valuable skills that could help him in the future, and acquire some great experience he can add to his resume.*

#### **Risks: Negative Impact on Personal Relationship**

*If Peter asks his biological mother for the money, he could risk making her feel guilty that she couldn't provide it for him. On the other hand, if he asks his foster parents, his mother might feel bad that he wouldn't come to her for what he needed.*

Peter could talk to his mother, explain to her how beneficial this camp would be and how much he would like to attend, and see how she felt about him asking his foster parents for the financial support to attend. If Peter communicates openly with his mother, the risks to his personal relationship with her are reduced.

### Question 2

#### **Benefits: Education/Positive Change Promotion**

*Ashley has the opportunity to educate policy makers on what it's like to struggle with substance abuse issues and thoughts of suicide. Based on learning her story, these policy makers could vote to support programs that benefit individuals with life experiences similar to Ashley's.*

#### **Risks: Emotional Wellbeing/Professional and Personal Relationships**

*As Ashley is sharing, she might talk about and remember feelings that she had when she was suicidal, or remember some of the people that she hurt while she was abusing drugs. These feelings could become very overwhelming. Another risk is that, if her story is made public, it could affect things like employment, or people's opinion of her when they look up her story online.*

Ashley could talk to a therapist about her concerns and develop a way to say only what she feels comfortable saying. In addition, Ashley could talk to the people that she hurt during this time and work on forgiving herself for some of the things that happened in her past. These things can take time and Ashley shouldn't talk about these difficult experiences while they are still so emotionally raw. If she feels compelled to do so anyway, because of the benefits, she should set up a safety plan so that she can access positive coping mechanisms and avoid negative ones.

### Question 3

#### **Benefits: Positive Change Promotion/Personal Growth and Development**

*If Joy decides to start up a GSA in her school she will be creating a safe place for other LGBTQ youth to socialize and help fight stigma. In addition to this, she will have the opportunity to take on a position of leadership which can help her develop skills that employers find attractive.*

#### **Risks: Stigma**

*By leading a GSA, Joy will open herself up to possible stigma from members in her school and community. She needs to be ready to face this stigma before she accepts this position.*

Joy can talk to her parents and friends about the situation; she can also seek out a counselor

to help her process issues that might come up while she is working on and with the GSA. It can be difficult to fight stigma when you are facing it yourself. Joy should develop a safety plan and remember to take breaks when she needs them.

## Question 4

**Benefits:** Education/Personal and Professional Development

*Marcus has a great opportunity to educate people all over the country about how they can help other young adults who have experienced trauma. He will also have an opportunity to network and develop his professional speaking abilities, and have a great experience to put on his resume.*

**Risks:** Emotional Stability/Stigma/Personal and Professional Relationships

*There are many preconceived notions about young people in foster care, and if Marcus takes this internship he will have to face many of them. Also, Marcus will be leaving his natural support network while he continually shares his story and brings up possible painful memories with strangers.*

Marcus should speak with a counselor or therapist before he makes this decision. He could have a very difficult time being separated from his supports while talking about emotional life experiences. Because of this, he should also set up his safety plan to make sure that he can meet his emotional needs while he is traveling. Marcus should also communicate with his family and friends about the parts of his story that reflect his experience with them to make sure that they are okay with what he is saying.

## Questions 5 & 6

There really are no right or wrong answers to

these questions; this is just an opportunity for you to identify some additional risk factors and how you can overcome them as they relate to your personal experiences. Maybe you are working on building a relationship with your biological family and don't want to risk upsetting them by talking about your experiences with them. Or maybe you are worried about how sharing your story might impact future job opportunities. Whatever the reason is, this is your chance to identify potential risks and how you can overcome them.

## Exercise 3

### Question 1

**Answer:** Avoid this audience

Rebecca is struggling with limiting her emotions because her failed adoption was so recent, and she has not had time to effectively process her feelings around the subject. Rebecca runs the risk of not meeting the needs of the people who invited her to speak; she also might be triggered by this event since this audience would be more pro-adoption. Rebecca should do some research on the outcomes of young people who are adopted and on those who enter into post-custody agreements to see the effects of both. She should also talk to her counselor and work out her feelings around her own failed adoption. If Rebecca can do these things effectively, then she could participate in similar events and help inform people as to why some adoptions fail and how to strengthen the adoption process, so that youth adoptions don't fail.

### Question 2

**Answer:** Use her safety plan

Arisa is going through a very difficult time and has lost a lot of stability in her life. Although she

is very passionate about her advocacy work, she needs to take care of herself first. If Arisa tries to power through speaking, it could make people focus on her emotions rather than her message. Arisa should follow her safety plan and then take a break from her advocacy work until she has time to manage her own emotional needs.

### Question 3

**Answer:** Redirecting/politely declining

Remember, you can always politely decline to answer a question. If you decide to redirect the question you might say:

*"There are a lot of different feelings that youth have to process while they transition through a system. We could spend the next three weeks talking about them, but I want talk about why we are here today - which is creating effective Individual Education Plans for youth" (or whatever your event is about).*

### Question 4

**Answer:** Redirecting

Corey effectively took the audience member's question and made the focus about all youth in care and not about his relationship with his father. He even made a point about supporting programs that help youth obtain and maintain relationships with family.

### Question 5

**Answer:** Sandra was triggered by the event and needs to talk about it in case she needs support

The debriefing process is the time for individuals to talk about the things that were upsetting. Sandra's peers might not have picked up on the comments that were made because of their different experiences. If Sandra decides not to say anything because she doesn't want to be

a complainer, then she runs the risk of burning out or relying on negative coping mechanisms because she does not have the proper supports.

## Writing Your Bio: Practice

This exercise is designed to help you practice writing your bio for different events. Because everyone has different experiences, each person's bio will look different. There are common themes that you will want to see through the different bios, but some details will be different depending on the purpose of the event and the audience. Take a look!

### Bio 1

This bio should relate to your involvement with law enforcement and your mental health needs. You might have a lot of powerful stories about education or foster care involvement, but this is not the time and place to discuss those things. You should stick to your involvement with the juvenile justice system and list some positive things about yourself, too. Remember, we are always fighting stigma. An example of what you might say would be:

*"My name is Jessica and I spent 2 years involved in the juvenile justice system and have a bipolar diagnosis. Despite these challenges I am currently a high school senior and on track for graduation and plan on attending college in the fall. During my experiences I have had several interactions with law enforcement - some positive, some negative. I now serve on my local youth council as the Vice President, promoting changes in law enforcement interaction with youth."*

### Bio 2

In this bio you will be presenting to people who work in the court system. As such, your bio should

relate to the experiences you had in court and with the people involved with your case. Remember to always include some positives about yourself to help reduce stigma and any stereotypes people might have. Here is an example of what you might say:

*"My name is Eric and I have spent the past 8 years in foster care. I'm also employed and maintaining my own place. During my time in care I have had multiple lawyers and judges as well as case workers and volunteers that have advocated for me and my best interests. I have, for the past 2 years, been a member of my local youth group recruiting volunteers and training staff who work with youth that have court involvement experiences."*

### Bio 3

The audience for this bio is policy makers who are thinking about making cuts to independent living services. In this bio you will want to quickly establish your credibility (your personal/professional experience) and talk about how post-custody services have helped you; this way the audience can immediately see the value of the program. Here is an example on how you would do that:

*"My name is Bethany and I am currently enrolled in the English Communications and Technology program at my university. I am also an alumna of the foster care system. I spent 16 years in foster care due to abuse and neglect, ultimately aging out at 18. Through the support of my community and independent living services, I was able to finish high school and successfully transition into college. With continued support I plan to obtain*

*my degree in the next 2 years and obtain a job in the communication industry."*

### Bio 4

Here you are speaking to individuals that are responsible for how schools in the community run. The topics relevant to this meeting include things like staff trainings and policies on how things like discipline are handled. Your bio for this event should talk about your school experiences (both positive and negative) and your mental health needs. Here is an example of what that might look like.

*"My name is Nick and I'm a recent graduate of Lincoln Middle School. During my time at Lincoln I struggled with issues of depression and suicide ideation. As a result of my mental health needs, I had several negative experiences with teachers and school resource officers. However, thanks to one well-informed teacher, I was able to get connected with appropriate resources, overcome these challenges, and successfully transition to high school. I am now doing well and effectively maintaining my social and emotional wellbeing."*

Well there you have it, just compare these answers to your own and see how you did. Some answers will be different; just make sure you got the main concepts. Remember this is not a pass-fail test, so if you didn't get the main concepts, just refer back to the guide and use these answers to help out.

The Youth Advocacy field is very rewarding - but also very challenging. When you take the time to better train and prepare yourself, you will have a much better experience.

# Best of luck to you all!





Produced by the Federation of  
Families for Children's Mental Health  
and the Research and Training Center  
for Pathways to Positive Futures, 2012.