

Empowering, Not Exploiting:

Centering the Voices of Individuals
with Lived Experience in Storytelling

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ABOUT US

The National Center for Victims of Crime (National Center) is a nonprofit organization that advocates for victims' rights, trains professionals who work with victims, and serves as a trusted source of information on victims' issues. Since our founding in 1985, we remain the most comprehensive national resource committed to advancing victims' rights and helping victims of crime rebuild their lives. The National Center is, at its core, an advocacy organization committed to and working on behalf of crime victims and their families. Rather than focusing the entire organization's work on one type of crime or victim, the National Center addresses all types of crime.

The National Center developed this report alongside a group of subject matter experts and practitioners whose lives have been directly impacted by the criminal legal system. Their knowledge, insights, and ideas were invaluable in creating this product. We are incredibly grateful to them for sharing their stories and using their voices to create a more healing space for other survivors who want to share their own.



Storytelling, or sharing one's personal experience, has long been an important part of working through trauma, and survivors of violence and those who have been incarcerated often turn to this to connect with others who have similar lived experiences. For decades, especially in communities of color, storytelling has been a method that provides trauma survivors a platform for speaking transparently about their experiences of interpersonal and systemic violence without being judged or further harmed. Unfortunately, trauma survivors are usually reluctant to talk about their experiences due to cultural and social pressure and the adverse effects that may come with reliving traumatic events.

"Storytelling...has been an empowering practice that helps shift mainstream narratives, builds community with other survivors, and promotes healing."

-Richard Smith

Traditionally, storytelling has been organized in safe spaces within oppressed communities/affinity groups to foster healing with others who share similar experiences. Now, the mainstream advocacy field is asking individuals to share their experiences publicly. With this shift in mind, professionals should think of ways to honor the traditional storytelling practices of grassroots organizations by creating brave spaces that empower survivors and reduce the likelihood of re-traumatization.

Organizations in both the victim advocacy and justice reform fields have also begun to feature more voices of individuals with lived experience in their work, by asking people to share their own stories when speaking to constituents. While this can be an extremely valuable tool for organizations, there is an inherent risk of retraumatization and harm to the individual who is sharing their experience. Well-meaning organizations also risk exploiting individuals with lived experience by not recognizing the value of their time, effort, and story.

The National Center for Victims of Crime, along with our panel of experts with lived experience, convened a listening session to talk through these potential issues, as well as how to mitigate retraumatization and exploitation. The men and women from this working group identified eight main takeaways for organizations when working with individuals with lived experience; this is not an exhaustive list, but a starting point for engagement.



“For many people, there is no post trauma. It’s only continuous trauma.”

-Richard Smith

Trauma presents in many ways, and many individuals have experienced multiple forms of harm over the course of their lives. The vast majority of people incarcerated have been victims of violence and crimes. 68% of people surveyed in New York prisons reported some form of childhood victimization. Over 90% of youth in the Cook County (Chicago, IL) juvenile detention facility reported that they had experienced one or more traumas. In a sample of men who are incarcerated, researchers found that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) rates were ten times higher than the rates found in the general male population (30-60% versus 3-6%).¹ In many instances, their unaddressed trauma is directly related to the behaviors that led to their incarceration. Becoming educated in trauma-informed interactions is critical for organizations that want to feature the voices and stories of individuals with lived experiences.

In addition to previous experiences of victimization and incarceration, historical trauma also needs to be considered.

Historical Trauma is an event, or a set of events, that happens to a group of people who share a specific identity and that results in the significant disruption of traditional ways of life, culture, and identity. As an example of intergenerational trauma, the untreated trauma in the parent is passed on to the child through the attachment process and implicit or explicit message about the world. Incarceration is part of the experience of historical trauma for Black and Brown individuals in the United States, and has a direct connection to American slavery. An example of this can be seen in the naming of prisons, including Angola (a plantation) and Rikers (a notorious kidnapper of enslaved people).

1. Jones, A. (2020). Reforms without results: Why states should stop excluding violent offenses from criminal justice reforms. Prison Policy Initiative. Retrieved September 21, 2022, from <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/violence.html#victimization>

Principle 2: Implement Comprehensive and Easily Accessible Compensation for Work

Compensation for personal stories is one of the most important takeaways from our group listening session, financially and through other ways. Individuals with lived experience are the experts in their own stories and deserve to be paid just like any other consultant or employee that an organization engages with. Free labor, especially when asking an individual to discuss a traumatic event, is never appropriate. Organizations should also attempt to make receiving compensation more accessible, implementing policies like providing direct payment as an option rather than using paper checks. In addition to monetary compensation, organizations should consider providing support in other ways. Some examples of this could include assisting with childcare needs, so the individual has time to speak to the organization or funding a partner or friend to travel with the individual so they have someone there for support.

Organizations should also make sure that individuals with lived experiences are being credited with the hard work that they do. As an example, this report lists all individuals who participated and shared their experiences and feedback as co-authors. This allows people to use the product that was created with their story as a tool to further their work.

Another way organizations can provide comprehensive compensation is by continuing to work with the individual, and connecting them with other organizations or people doing relevant work. In addition to providing more opportunities for the individual to share their expertise, organizations can also work to identify different non-monetary ways to provide support. Some examples of this could include connecting the individual with legal assistance, victim services, mental health resources, or other relevant assistance.

Principle 3: Create a Collaborative Environment

When featuring the stories of individuals with lived experiences, organizations should not try to control their narratives. Instead, collaborative discussions should occur at the beginning of planning to ensure that all parties agree on a shared goal. Below are four main ways that an organization can create a collaborative environment:

“Individuals need to be able to share their whole story, not just parts.”

-Tanisha Murden

1. Be open minded and transparent.
2. Ensure that your idea sharing environment is judgment free.
3. Provide, and ask for regular feedback.
4. Don't attempt to control the conversation.

Principle 4: Culture is Essential

Organizations must account for how culture may affect the experience of individuals with lived experience. For example, two survivors may have experienced the same form of victimization or trauma, but responded in completely different ways because of their culture, background, or previous life experience. This cultural difference may also affect how the individual with lived experience discusses their story - some people may be more comfortable with sharing details, while others prefer to speak in generalities (such as not providing specific facts of their stories). Similar to principle three, organizations should ensure that they are not attempting to control the narrative by imposing their own culture or beliefs onto the person's story with lived experience.

When considering culture, organizations should also acknowledge intersectionality- recognizing that everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression and we must consider everything and anything that can marginalize people. For example, when thinking about an individual's experience with trauma and incarceration, one should also think about race and gender as contributing factors, specifically considering the ways that they both influence the experience of incarceration as well as the conditions before incarceration.

Principle 5: The Many Faces of Trauma

In addition to putting in safeguards against the retraumatization of the individual with lived experience, organizations must have plans in place to mitigate vicarious trauma within their organization and the audience hearing the story. If trauma and victimization are being discussed, trigger warnings should be prominently displayed before the session, and quiet spaces should be provided for people to decompress. While the organization should speak with the individual sharing their experience before any engagement to make sure it would be appropriate for your audience, it is not the responsibility of the person sharing their story to censor themselves to protect the audience - the organization must take on this job. This can be done by:

1. Displaying trigger warnings before the engagement.
2. Making verbal announcements prior to sessions that may be triggering.
3. Offering quiet rooms or areas that both the audience and the individuals sharing their stories can use.
4. Providing an opportunity for the audience to connect with staff members or others to decompress after the session.

"I often say that for me addressing the trauma of my sexual abuse as a child was overshadowed by the other forms of violence and trauma in my community."

-Richard Smith

Principle 6: Provide a Space for Healing and Connection

It can be extremely valuable for survivors to connect with other individuals who have similar experiences, and organizations should make every effort to provide space for connection. Providing space could be as simple as literally having space available for conversations, where individuals with lived experiences have the freedom to talk freely with each other, without observers or restraints. Organizations should be mindful about creating this space by allowing room for free conversation.

"We don't want to keep all the resources to ourselves. We want everyone to have access to them and win."

-Portia Williams

Principle 7: Don't Look for the "Perfect" Story

"We always celebrate the butterfly, but don't appreciate the journey of the caterpillar."

-Dr. Bruce Purnell

When speaking with survivors and individuals with lived experience, organizations should keep in mind that there is no such thing as a "perfect" story. While there may be components that are important for the organization to highlight, like specific types of crime or experiences with trauma, it's vital that the stories are not seen as one size fits all. Speakers should be encouraged to share all parts of their story that feel comfortable for them, instead of certain sections being cherry-picked to further a specific message.

Principle 8: Highlight Hope and Healing

Storytelling is a heavy experience, and organizations can sometimes focus too much on the trauma and bad experiences of the storyteller. This should be avoided to not only mitigate retraumatization but also to give the individual with lived experience the opportunity to share parts of their story that give them hope. A focus on healing and hope centers on the whole person and allows organizations to show that they care about more than just the previous experiences of the storyteller.

"My whole life, I was told that misery loves company. I pick joy, and believe that joy loves company."

-Dr. Bruce Purnell

We recognize that organizations may not be able to immediately implement all of these guiding principles, specifically those around more extensive compensation. However, these changes to institutional policy around working with those with lived experience should be a top priority of any organization who wants to engage in this work, as part of a commitment to equity for all survivors of violence and trauma.

Organizations should support storytelling that gives a voice or a platform to individuals with lived experiences, and provides them with a way to author their own stories. Hopefully, in doing so, we create trauma-informed spaces for those who have experienced trauma and violence, and those listening.

