



**Truthteller**  
Consulting

# Storyteller Well-being

This document is a primer for storytellers and people who want to work with storytellers while ensuring that they do no harm. Centering storyteller well-being is essential to ethical storytelling practice.

## Getting Started

In our lives, we are all storytellers so the word “storyteller” will be used throughout this document. This document describes five domains to consider when storytellers are interested in making and potentially sharing a true, personal story. The domains cover a range of topics including the benefits of **developing** a story and possible risks that should be considered prior to **sharing** a story. Some domains contain questions that were developed to help storytellers think about how to safely share their truth. Footnotes provide additional information or definitions that are explored in each domain. This document ends with a brief list of resources that are not included in the footnotes but connect to the concepts explored.

## 1. Potential Benefits

Developing a true story about an experience is powerful and can feel like a relief, particularly when the experience being shared is something a storyteller has struggled with. It can be helpful to get thoughts out of our heads and create a narrative that allows us to better understand and name our experiences. The process of creating a story is different than sharing a story, and storytelling can be powerful regardless of how broadly or narrowly a story is shared. With that said, sharing a story may also allow other people to better understand the storyteller and their life, which can feel validating for the storyteller.

- a. Do you have a story that you want to make? Will making it support self-understanding and/or healing?

**b.** Do you think telling/ sharing your story will support self-understanding and/or healing? Why?

## **2. Ways of Telling a Story**

Stories can be shared in a variety of ways. Storytellers may have natural talents that make one type of story telling more comfortable than another. In addition, some story methods allow the storyteller greater privacy than others. Below is a brief list of ways to build, communicate, and share a personal story. Some of these methods are used together to build a story.

**a.** Narrative Storytelling<sup>1</sup>- A person telling a true story about themselves. This is often done in front of a live audience (ex. The Moth<sup>2</sup>).

**b.** Digital Storytelling<sup>3</sup>- Involves a storyteller telling a true, brief story using a combination of images, narration, and sound. It is usually presented in a video format.

**c.** Documentary- A non-fiction film created to document reality in order to educate or improve/maintain the historical record.

**d.** Interview- One person asking questions of one or more other people. This may be used as a component of podcasts, written stories, documentaries, and videos.

**e.** Podcast/ Audio Segment<sup>4</sup>- A general category that primarily uses audio to share information about a topic or tell a story.

**f.** Writing- This includes everything from including a quote in a report to writing a memoir.

**g.** Visual arts- A picture, painting, collage, or sculpture designed to communicate experiences and/or feelings.

**h.** Music- A piece of music that, in conjunction with one of the other story vehicles, could help a listener understand the experiences and/or feelings of a storyteller.

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1 I learned about and performed narrative stories as part of Tell Me Another. <https://www.tellmeanotherstories.com/>

2 <https://themoth.org/>

3 <https://www.storycenter.org/stories>

4 <https://www.truthtellerconsulting.com/podcasts/>

### 3. Audience

Creating a story is valuable even if there is no audience. If a storyteller wants to share their story they should consider why this is important and who they want as their audience. Telling stories to accepting audiences can be fun. Telling stories to people different from us can also foster greater understanding and result in changes for the better. Some storytelling methods (Domain 2), allow a storyteller to not be present when their story is being heard. This can be more comfortable for some storytellers.

- a. Do you want to share your story? Why or why not?
- b. Who do you want to share your story with? Why?
- c. Do you want to tell a story in person or would you prefer to have your story told when you are not physically with your audience (ex. audio recording)?
- d. Do you want your story to be used to forward a cause?<sup>5</sup> If so, who has the power to make the change? What is the change you want? Does your story relate to this change? How?

### 4. Potential for Harm and Planning for Safety

When storytellers consider sharing a story it is important to think about their readiness to be vulnerable. Only the storyteller can know if it feels right. These questions bring up different elements of mental and physical safety that storytellers should consider. In particular, think about the answers to questions b and d, below – and trust yourself. The storyteller may want to go slow and think about if and how to share their story in a way that keeps them safe.

- a. Are you ready to tell your story? Are you able to share your story with a friend?
- b. How do you feel in your body when you think about your story? When a story relates to trauma<sup>6</sup>, do you feel safe and able to share the story without feeling triggered<sup>7</sup> and/or hurt?
- c. What support would help you feel safe and comfortable telling your story?

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5 Storytelling should focus on the needs of the storyteller. With that said, be aware that not all stories and messages change the perspectives and behaviors of all audiences. If you are working with a group and are using storytelling as a strategy to forward change. It is worth doing research on what messages will move your audience in the direction that you want. I recommend starting here: <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/>

6 Trauma results from exposure to an incident or series of events that are emotionally disturbing or life-threatening with lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, and/or spiritual well-being. (<https://www.traumainformedcare.chcs.org/what-is-trauma/>)

7 A trigger is a stimulus that sets off a memory of a trauma or a specific portion of a traumatic experience. (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/>)

- d. Are there systems or people (ex. child protective services, law enforcement, immigration, any open legal proceedings including divorce, etc.) that could use your story to hurt you or your family?
- e. Are there some forms of telling your story that would feel more comfortable than others? Please see Domain 2, *Ways of Telling a Story*, on the page 2.
- f. Do you want to keep your identity private while sharing your story? Is this possible with the story you want to tell?

## 5. Power and Consent

Storytelling can happen in number of ways. The questions below are intended to help storytellers think about what they want and deserve related to telling and sharing their story and having control over it in the future.

- a. Who has the power? Are there power differentials between you (the storyteller) and the person asking for or producing a story. What is being done to minimize or equalize power differentials?
- b. Have you given consent for your story to be recorded? Shared? How has this consent been recorded, and can it be revoked?
- c. Who owns/controls the completed product? I recommend that the storyteller own their story and/or that the story is covered by a Creative Commons License<sup>8</sup> that limits the ability of others to commodify or alter the story.

## Additional Resources

Saffran L. Public health storytelling practice. *The Lancet*. 2021;397(10284):1536-1537. doi:[10.1016/S0140-6736\(21\)00841-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)00841-2)

StoryCenter. Ethics in Storytelling, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55368c08e4b0d419e1c011f7/t/579134a05016e13dde264720/1469133984611/Ethics.pdf>. Accessed: April 20 2022.

StoryCenter. Addressing Trauma, [http://static1.squarespace.com/static/55368c08e4b0d419e1c011f7/t/57911f75ff7c509cb123c5a5/1469128565487/SS\\_Trauma.pdf](http://static1.squarespace.com/static/55368c08e4b0d419e1c011f7/t/57911f75ff7c509cb123c5a5/1469128565487/SS_Trauma.pdf). Accessed: April 20 2022.

**For more information contact Isabelle Barbour at [isabelle@isabellebarbour.com](mailto:isabelle@isabellebarbour.com).**

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