



STRENGTH OVER TRAUMA

HOW TO TELL STORIES OF TRIUMPH OVER ADVERSITY

Strength-based storytelling: A toolkit

Let's start by reviewing a common formula for impact stories used by social/human services and healthcare organizations:

Person A was in a very poor state. Maybe they were addicted to drugs, or homeless, or chronically ill. Person A had no one to turn to for help, and had just about lost all hope.

Person A was referred to Organization X for services. Org X saw Person A's condition and immediately rushed them into an intervention, where Person A received high quality care. It was dicey for a while, but eventually Person A began to recover.

Now, thanks to Org X, Person A is doing great. They have their health back, and they're looking forward to the future.

Here's a brief real world example of this type of story with the org's name redacted:

Hannah had always been anxious, but at age 13 it became overwhelming. She was terrified of failing in school, and sure that her friends didn't like her any more. She lashed out at her friends and fought with her mother constantly: "The smallest of things would make me scream and cry."

Finally, her mom, Jill, took action. She discovered [name of clinic], which offers services for teens experiencing chronic anxiety. Treatment with DBT — dialectical behavioral therapy — enabled Hannah to learn to manage her emotions and become a confident, positive person. "I'm a hundred percent a happier person," she says. "I'm a better student, I'm a better friend, I'm a better daughter, sister — everything, really."

And here's the opening paragraph of a story from the Washington Post about the long-term impact of intergenerational trauma on one particular family:

15 August 1989. It was late, a knock at the door, a police officer's voice. She was there to inform my mum that my father had taken his own life. Had they not divorced it would have been their 13th wedding anniversary. He had called her earlier that afternoon, barely lucid. She had known something was horribly wrong. Even given his history of violence, instability and alcohol abuse, my mother could never have imagined what he had just done, or what he was about to do.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION/REFLECTION:

- In each of these examples, what do we know about the individuals whose stories are being told?
- What emotions are evoked when you read these? Are these emotions that you might feel toward individuals you know personally? Why or why not?
- Consider the power dynamics at play in these examples. Who (including the reader) seems to have the most agency?

Guidelines for crafting a strength-based narrative

Establish inherent strengths first



- Begin the story with a description of the things that are most important to the person being discussed.
- Trauma/adversity can then be treated as an obstacle on the path to well-being and self-actualization, rather than the starting point.
- Talk about values, hopes, dreams, or recent accomplishments. What is meaningful to this person? What makes them who they are?
- If you start with strength, consider ending with strength, too! Come full circle to create a “story arc”.

An example: let's say you're telling a story about a mother who overcame substance abuse using your org's services. Substance use disorders create very real and urgent challenges for individuals, but they do not define those individuals. In the case of this mother, what defines her? Maybe it's her love for her children. Maybe she's passionate about her community, or education, or her faith. It's likely that these values have been consistent throughout the mother's life.



Use this passion to create a story arc. How was the mother involved with her community, or education, or her faith as a child? How is she involved now? What were some of the formative experiences that shaped this value? These details will give the mother a life outside of her addiction in the story, and can provide helpful narrative “bookends”.

To illustrate how powerful it can be to re-structure a story about trauma with a strength-based lens, let's return to the example about Person A and Org X. We can think of narrative structure in terms of “Acts,” like in a stage play.

ORIGINAL STRUCTURE

ACT I

Person A is experiencing adversity. Person A is referred to Org X for services and receives high-quality intervention.

ACT II

After considerable struggle, Person A begins to recover.

ACT III

Person A has their health back, and they're looking forward to the future.

STRENGTH-BASED STRUCTURE

ACT I

Talk about a hope, dream, or value that Person A has, and how they discovered it in early life. Introduce the adversity they've faced as an obstacle to this hope, dream, or value.

ACT II

Discuss how Person A was introduced to Org X, and their first impressions. Describe how trust was built between Org X and Person A. Make the climax of your story the point at which the partnership between Org X and Person A emphasized the power Person A has over their adversity.

ACT III

Don't tie everything up with a Hollywood ending—leave it a little open-ended! But return to Person A's hope, dream, or value from Act I and show how *it* will define their future, rather than the adversity they've faced.

Never let the trauma define the storyteller



- The individual who had the experience must make all the decisions about what is shared, what is omitted, and the level of detail provided in the story.
- Focus less on traumatic events/situations and more on the storyteller's internal experience and resilience.
- When trauma is discussed, don't simply describe it—reflect upon it, and use it as an occasion to celebrate the person's resilience.

An example: If you're telling a story about an individual who was physically abused as a child, disclose the nature of the abuse quickly and then focus on the emotions that characterized their experience.

Thousands of children are physically abused, but every victim's perspective and healing process are unique. Acknowledging this uniqueness is what humanizes the victim—what protects them from becoming a mere statistic. An emphasis on emotional content and reflection will also allow storytellers to connect more deeply with audiences and avoid being "othered". Abuse isn't a universal experience, but the feelings of shame, disappointment, confusion, and anger that stem from it *are* universal.

Here's a mock paragraph describing an instance of maltreatment that illustrates the above concept:

When I was a teenager, my father would physically abuse me frequently, sometimes multiple times a week. I felt incredibly guilty every time this happened—what could I have possibly done to deserve this? It took me a long time to realize that I was not being punished for anything I did, that it wasn't my fault. I was afraid of my father, of course, and angry with him, but I was also very lonely. I really felt let down by my father. I have longed for a father figure for most of my life as a result. And it was only through work with a therapist where I learned how to "father" myself that I was able to resolve some of this longing.

In the opening sentences, we review the nature of the maltreatment. (Please note that this would not make a very strength-based opening paragraph for a story!) But in the third line, we counteract this by introducing the storyteller's "adult" reflections on their childhood experience. This helps the speaker reinforce the primacy of their recovery and their strength over the trauma they've gone through: they are turning backward and **viewing the trauma through the lens of their resilience**. This takes the audience on a journey toward meaning, wherein the storyteller is allowed to "own" and make sense of what has happened to them.



A side note: How to talk about your org and its supporters

In strength-based care models, service providers bring resources to the table, and clients bring their goals and their capacities. Positive change is made through partnership. This is the story that a strength-based narrative structure allows you to tell.

When you talk about your org, focus on the partnership you established with the client. And don't be afraid to get specific! What services did the client use (and which ones weren't used, or weren't successful)? How did the client interact with the community around them while receiving services? Getting specific in these areas will help underscore the fact that there's no "one-size-fits-all" approach to helping individuals who have faced adversity.

Too often, human services agencies describe their work using "savior" language wherein either the org itself, or its

donors, or both, are heroes. This reinforces an inequitable power dynamic wherein your org and its supporters seem to be helping people who do not have the strength to help themselves.

When used in fundraising, this messaging style is sometimes referred to as “donor-centric” communications. These tactics are effective at raising money, because they focus on making donors feel good—in the same way that advertising focuses on enhancing the satisfaction of consumers by aligning a product with a target market’s self-image. But these narratives do not educate donors on the systemic realities driving today’s social issues, and do not emphasize the humanity of clients who have faced adversity.

So how might you talk to or about donors within a strength-based framework? **Emphasize words like “partnership”** rather than words like “hero”. Don’t treat donors like saviors. Treat them like peers who you’re inviting to help you solve a problem. Communications that keep your org, your supporters, and your clients on equal footing will suggest a common humanity between all of these groups.

Give space for historical and social context



- Have honest, open discussions internally about systemic marginalization, racism, etc, and develop an organizational-wide “point of view” on these issues.
- When discussing marginalization in stories, focus on individual, felt experiences to ensure the audience stays connected. Use the opportunity to put a human face to statistics.

Adversity doesn’t happen in a vacuum. Many forms are intergenerational; most occur as a result of environmental risk that is outside of the control of the individual experiencing it. Those of us who are lucky enough to have access to resources that can buffer us from crisis can sometimes take a judgmental view of individuals facing significant adversity. The subconscious thinking might go like this: “It was easy for me to avoid becoming homeless, and I’ve had to work every day of my life, with nothing handed to me. Homeless people must have something wrong with them.”

Overturing these misconceptions can be very difficult. Privileged people often need a lot of time and patience to internalize truths about systemic marginalization. But I do know that when stories dare to take opportunities to educate about community- and system- level issues and advocate for solutions, it can make a real difference.

Once again, however, maintaining a focus on the human emotions that characterize an individual’s experience of systemic marginalization is what keeps the audience engaged. **What does being the victim of racism feel like?**

The core of marginalization is the feeling of being left out—of being denied something. Everyone in the world has felt like this. We all inhabit the same continuum of belonging and outsidership. Using this common experience as a starting point will forge a connection between the individual in the story and the audience reading or hearing it. The trick is to ensure that the narrative also does justice to the full extent of the inequity that’s occurred to specific groups.

I’ve had the privilege of helping to tell the stories of some trauma-affected individuals who belong to indigenous populations. The best of these speeches struck a balance between personal reflection and social commentary that could speak to the experience of the community as a whole.

“Because of what’s happened to us,” one woman’s speech went, “trauma is a part of Native American life. It’s in our DNA. But no one talks about it. We carry it silently.” She then set the historical context for her experience by describing not only her own marginalization, but that of her direct ancestors. In a few instances we were even able to show photos of these family members. In front of a mostly white audience, the speech managed to directly confront the oppressive realities faced by indigenous populations in the United States across multiple generations.

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