

Tips on sharing your story of suicide loss from campaigner Jon Salmon

The decision to share personal trauma such as bereavement by suicide in the public sphere, whether in the media, as part of a creative project or just to a wider circle of acquaintances in your personal life, is not an easy one. The following practical guidelines are based on a talk given at the 10th [Suicide Bereavement UK Conference](#) held in Manchester on 23rd September 2021. The speaker was Jon Salmon, a mental health campaigner who, among other accolades, was asked to collaborate with The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and Prince Harry as part of the high-profile [Heads Together](#) campaign. He regularly recounts his personal story of mental health struggles in the years after the death of his father by suicide. He can be contacted via his [website](#) or found on [Twitter](#).

1. Whatever you decide, centre your own wellbeing

Clichéd but true: Take care of yourself before helping others. Consider carefully how much of your story you are ready to share and to whom. You are the only person that knows if you are ready or not: do not be guided by externalities. Remember, you can also withdraw your readiness to share whenever you want, no matter what you have agreed to previously.

2. Think through possible implications of speaking out

Be selfish. If complete strangers contact you for support, will you be ready to offer it to them? If you aren't, consider waiting or sharing anonymously. Have you considered the consequences of people in your personal life knowing this information? If any friends or acquaintances are hurt that information was kept from them, or distance themselves from you due to the information you share, how would you deal with that? Only share when you are sure that you can face possible unintended consequences.

3. Tell your story with a focus on a positive, practical message or goal

Think through what you want to achieve by sharing your story. Are you trying to inspire? To educate...? To reduce stigma? To encourage others to seek help? Tell your story with a focus on this key message.

4. Make sure you inform those closest to you and anyone impacted by your story of your decision

Your decision may affect others too. Where possible, obtain informed consent of family members and anyone else that may be impacted.

5. Be clear that you are speaking from your own lived experience only, not as an expert in the field

Every story is different, and what is true for you may not be true for others, even those in a nominally similar situation. Overstating your expertise or claiming to speak for others could have a negative impact on those still grieving.

6. Be aware that that your words may trigger difficult emotions in some people.

Be careful with your language. Consider adding a trigger warning before any particularly difficult or graphic parts. Refer to a guide like the [Samaritan's media guidelines](#) to get an idea of best practice in discussing issues related to suicide, and to find out what words and phrases it may be best to avoid.

7. Practice speaking and carefully consider your pace, pitch and tone while speaking

Sharing your personal story via a talk or event is just like any other form of public speaking: Your body language, pitch and tone, and pace can strongly influence how your story comes across. Practice with someone you trust beforehand or even record yourself speaking to be as prepared as possible.

8. Signpost your audience to specific, relevant support services

Include any service or resources that has helped you personally and clearly guide your audience to them, either immediately before or immediately after the main part of your story. To find more specific resources and support services in Cumbria, [this page](#) on the SBS website might be a good place to start.

9. Arrange a debrief afterwards with someone who was there

Sharing your story may bring up some unexpected and difficult feelings, no matter how prepared you were. A debrief with someone who was there may be an effective way of processing your feelings and understanding the audience reaction, including any parts that didn't go as hoped.

10. Plan for the possibility that you will be contacted afterwards

Depending on the platform, it is possible that sharing your story may expose you to media attention, requests for support, or further questioning. Consider carefully how people who find out about your story might be able to contact you and consider how you might react to different types of requests.

11. Be proud of yourself and don't underestimate the power of your actions.

Talking about personal trauma such as suicide loss is difficult and complex, but it can be incredibly valuable, effect real change in society and be a great source of comfort to others that are suffering. Don't underestimate the value or the magnitude of what you are doing.