

Making Effective Use of Your Personal Recovery Story in Professional Peer Support Relationships

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Learning Objectives

- Discuss the important role of peer specialists' self-disclosure in providing peer support services in VHA.
- Distinguish between personal illness and recovery stories.
- Outline the benefits and risks associated with sharing either a personal illness or recovery story.
- Discuss components of an effective personal recovery story.

Related VHA Peer Support Staff Competencies

Here are some of the expected knowledge and skills for peer specialists in VHA that are related to effectively sharing their personal recovery stories as part of their work.

Peer Support Practices Domain

- Conveys hope that change and recovery are possible.
- Develops collaborative relationships with Veterans as part of a treatment team to assist Veterans' engagement with services that are beneficial to their recovery.
- Demonstrates understanding of the role of a peer specialist at each stage in a Veteran's recovery.
- Shares stories about personal recovery experiences in relation to current struggles faced by the Veteran health care service users that the peer specialist is supporting.
- Demonstrates capability in determining when and how much of one's personal recovery story to share and with whom to make the self-disclosure in order to be helpful and not triggering for a Veteran.
- Models effective coping techniques and self-help strategies.
- Describes own personal wellness practices and assists Veterans to discover wellness practices that work for them.

Cultural Competence Domain

- Tailors services and supports to meet the preferences and unique needs of Veterans and their families.

Communication Domain

- Recognizes when to ask questions or share personal experiences and when to listen.

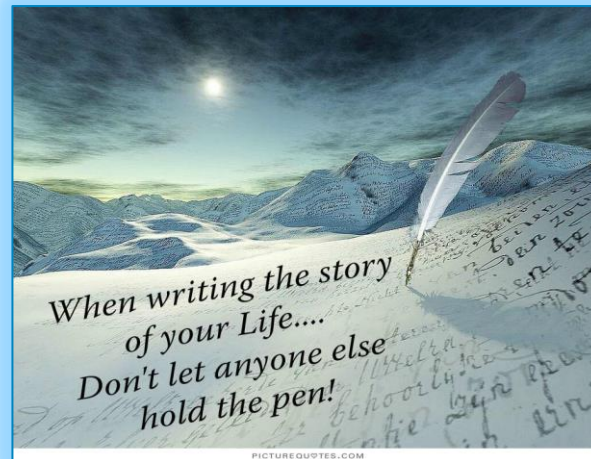
Whole Health Approach to Services Domain

- Actively resists re-traumatization of others by being mindful of what the peer specialist shares about his/her personal experiences, working to create a safe environment, and collaborating with others in a honest and trustworthy manner.

Activity #1: Personal Recovery Story—First Things First

Please think about your answers to the following questions and write your responses on the provided worksheet labeled, “Making Effective Use of Your Recovery Story 1st Activity.”:

- What have you learned about yourself and your recovery that could inspire others working on their recovery if you share the information?
- How would you communicate your personal recovery story to others?



Lived Experience is a Valuable Recovery Tool

- One of the major recovery tools that peer specialists bring to VHA health care services is sharing your own personal recovery stories.
- The recovery story is a powerful tool because it is your own personal story shared about the challenges that you have experienced and how you have overcome them to accomplish your goals and achieve successes in your life.
- Veteran health care service users who you are supporting can be inspired by hearing the truth, hope, and possibilities implicit in your personal recovery story.

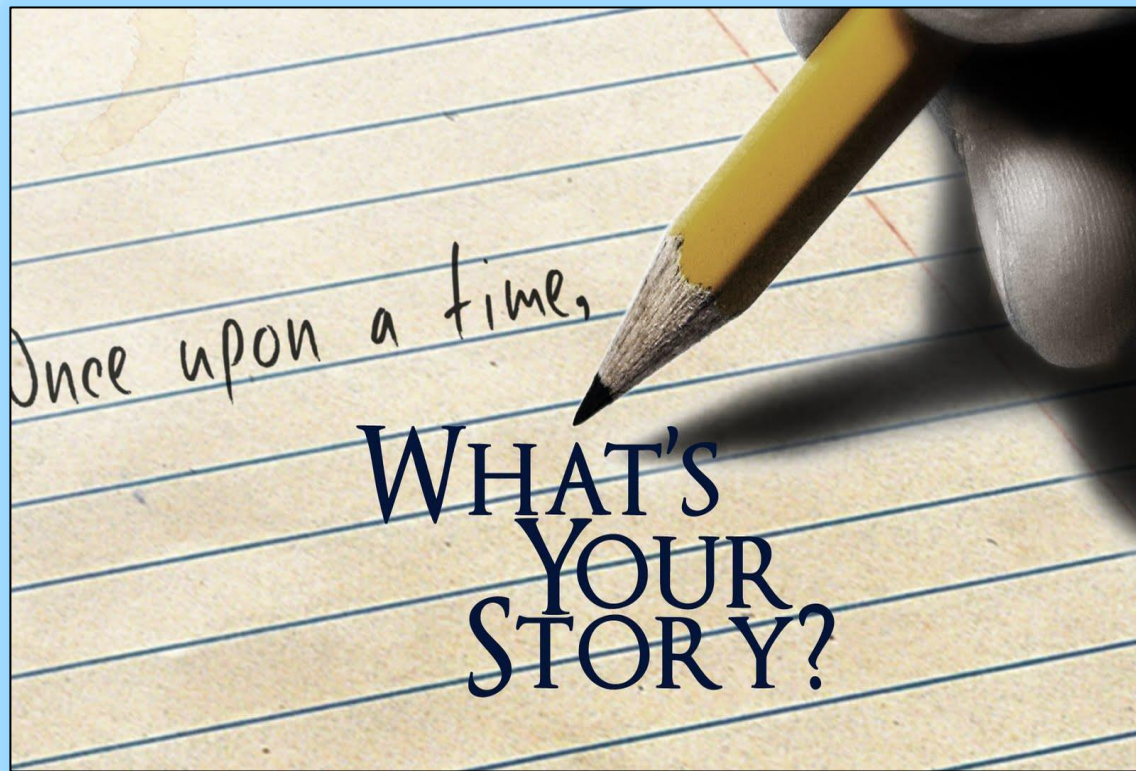
Self-Disclosure is Important

When used appropriately, self-disclosure:

- Creates a climate of mutuality in peer support relationships.
- Fosters trust between peer specialists and the Veteran health care service users who they are assisting.
- Promotes hope that things can change—that life can get better.



Illness vs. Recovery: What is your personal story?



Focus of a Personal Illness Story

- Focuses on the impact and disabling effects of a diagnosis.
- Limits the conversation to the sharing of war stories related to the illness and its negative impacts on one's life.
- Promotes the reliving of difficult times.
- Supports thinking of life as limited.
- May lend itself to a pervasive hopelessness—the belief that this is the way that life will always be.

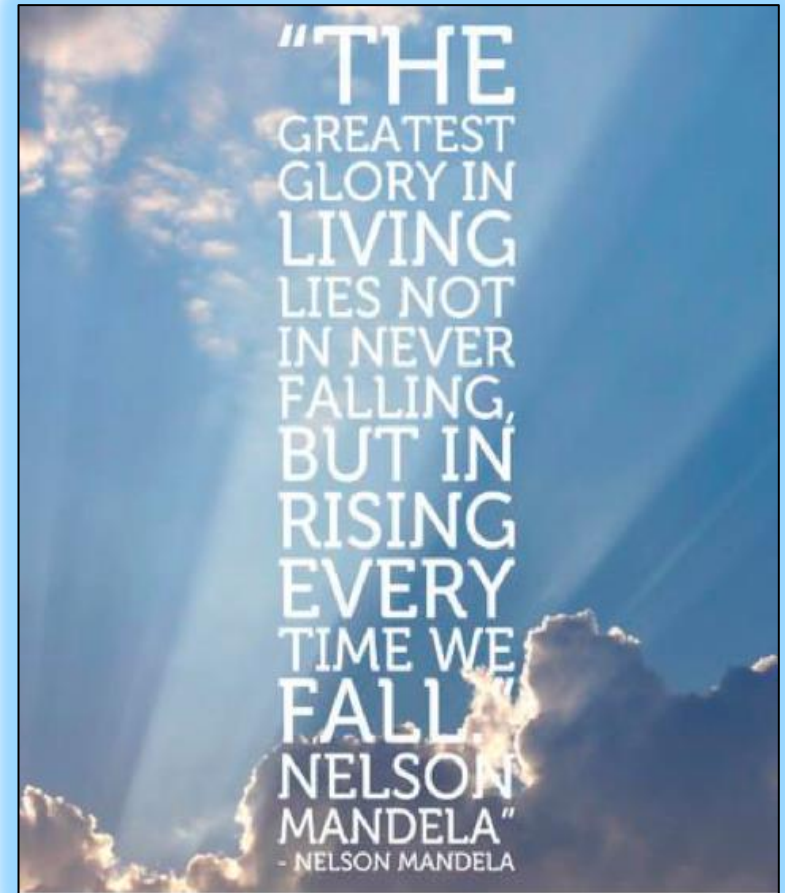


Risk & Benefits of Sharing a Personal Illness Story

<u>Risks</u>	<u>Benefits</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• May keep a Veteran health care service user stuck in thinking of him/herself as being ill and disabled with limited options for the future.• A Veteran hearing the peer specialist's illness story may believe that the peer specialist's illness story is not as bad as his/her own story and therefore the peer specialist cannot really relate to him/her.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can promote connectedness between the peer specialist and Veteran health care service users—Shows that the peer specialist has “been there.”• Promotes empathy and demonstrates understanding about challenges that a Veteran health care service user is experiencing at present time.

Focus of a Personal Recovery Story

- Highlights that change is possible.
- Focuses discussion on personal strengths and resilience.
- Promotes health and wellness.
- Features overcoming barriers.
- Supports the sharing of what has worked for you in overcoming challenges and maintaining your wellness.



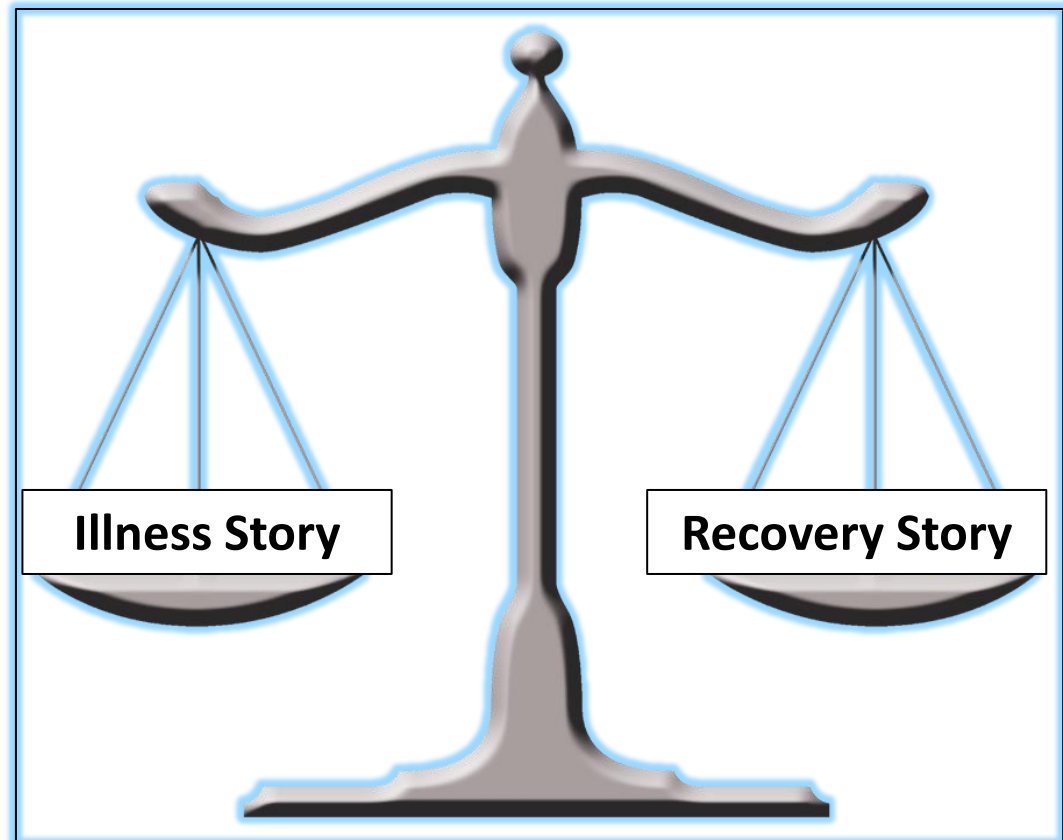
Risks & Benefits of Sharing a Personal Recovery Story

<u>Risks</u>	<u>Benefits</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• May seem as if the peer specialist is promoting that “my way” is the only way toward recovery.• Could set up unfair expectations for Veterans’ recovery; setting the bar too high or too low.• Focuses on the successes of the peer specialist and not on the Veteran health care service users who are being supported.• Your level of success may seem unattainable to a Veteran health care service user who is currently in distress.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Supports positive beliefs about recovery and that change is possible.• Shows that recovery is a non-linear process.• Promotes hope.• Includes discussions about strengths, resilience, and support systems.

Activity #2:

Personal Illness Story or Recovery Story—You Decide

Please refer to the provided worksheet labeled, “Making Effective Use of Your Recovery Story 2nd Activity.” Read each scenario and answer the related questions.



Components of a Personal Recovery Story

- What were some of the early indications that you were beginning to have difficulties?
- Describe yourself and your situation when you were at your worst.
- What helped you move from where you were to where you are now?
- How did you accomplish this? What did you do? What did others do to help you?
- What have you had to overcome to get where you are today?
- What have you learned about yourself and your recovery?
- What are some of the strengths that you have developed and used?
- What types of supports have you developed and used?
- What are some of the things that you do to remain on your path to wellness and recovery?

Effectively Communicating a Personal Recovery Story

What is the other person willing to hear?:

- Use where the Veteran health care service user is in his/her own recovery journey to guide which part(s) of your personal recovery story to share.
- Give careful consideration to the part(s) of your recovery story that may be helpful to the Veteran at this time in his/her recovery.
- Be mindful—Are you involving the Veteran in the conversation or are you talking at him/her?
- Use brief snippets of your personal recovery story when applicable.
- Remember—The purpose of self-disclosing is to *benefit others*. The focus should not stay on *you* for long.

Contexts Where Sharing Your Personal Recovery Story Could Occur

- Individual peer support interventions with Veteran health care service users
- Facilitation of peer support groups
- Presentations for other VHA health care professionals
- Presentations for community organizations
- Essentially, sharing your personal recovery story could occur anywhere!

****Remember****: Use brief snippets and make sure that what you share about your personal recovery story is relevant to your audience.



Activity #3: Group Role Play --Deciding What to Share/Not Share in a Personal Recovery Story

Please refer to the provided worksheet labeled, “Making Effective Use of Your Recovery Story 3rd Activity” for instructions for the role play and group discussion.



Final Thoughts about Sharing Your Personal Recovery Story

- Is the personal recovery story that you are telling from the past? Ideally, your recovery story should include what is going well in your current life.
- Are the details that you are sharing relevant and relatable to the Veteran health care service users who you are helping? This is key!
- Are the brief snippets that you are sharing about your personal recovery story focused on tragedy or *transformation*? The positive, transformative experiences that you have had should have a key place in your personal recovery story.

"It's important that we share our experiences with other people. Your story will heal you and your story will heal somebody else. When you tell your story, you free yourself and give other people permission to acknowledge their own story."

- Iyanla Vanzant

References

- Harrington, S., Dohoney, K., Gregory, W., O'Brien-Mazza, D., & Sweeney, P., (2011). *Department of Veterans Affairs peer specialist training manual— Instructor edition*, Washington, DC: United States Department of Veterans Affairs.
- Transformation Center (2007, March). Using support groups to promote and sustain recovery. *Peer specialist certification training* (Session 21, pp. 1-6). (Available from the Transformation Center, 98 Magazine Street, Roxbury, MA 02119).

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