

How to share your mental health story



Mā te kōrero, ka ora

Through conversation comes wellbeing

We all go through ups and downs in life and that's okay.

Almost half of us (47%) will experience mental distress and/or illness in our lifetime.*

If you have experienced mental distress or illness at some point in your life, there may come a time when you feel ready to kōrero about it.

Sharing your story can inspire others in a similar situation to find a way through. It's also one of the best ways we can challenge the negative judgements and discrimination those of us who've experienced mental health challenges can face.

But, sharing your story is a personal choice, so it's important to think it through. If not done carefully, it could affect your own wellbeing or even impact others who hear, see or read it.

To help you share your mental health story safely, we've put together some tips on what to think about before, during and after you share it. We've also included some helpful resources and things to keep in mind for your safety.



* Te Rau Hinengaro, 2004

Before telling your story

Firstly, good on you for wanting to share your story about mental distress or illness. It's a really brave step, and one that could really make a big difference to someone going through something similar – giving them hope that they too will get through.

Before sharing your own story publicly, consider the following questions:

- **How are you feeling right now? Are you busy, stressed, or not feeling your best for any other reason?** If there's a lot going on for you, it might be better to wait and share your story when things feel a bit more manageable. There is no rush – do it when the time feels right for you.
- **How do you feel when you look back at your toughest times? Do you feel sad, angry, or hopeful? What perspective have you gained over time?** We'd recommend having at least a year between living through tough times and sharing them publicly. Time is an amazing healer and it's important your story is one you will still be comfortable sharing in five, 10 or even 20 years' time.
- **Why do you want to tell your story? What's your motivation? Do you want to inspire hope for others or is there another reason?** If thinking about why you want to share your story brings up tough or negative feelings, it might be worth looking at other ways to deal with what's on your mind. For example, you could send a complaint to the [Human Rights Commission](#) or an email to the [Health and Disability Commissioner](#).

Remember that if a story feels hopeless or full of anger or sadness it may leave others feeling that way too. Sharing an honest account of your mental health story is important, but try to include a sense of hope or information about what helped you – it can make a real difference to the person reading it.

- **Who's already heard your story? Do your close friends and family know about your mental health challenges? How about your acquaintances or colleagues?** Sharing your story publicly will mean many people might read it, so if there's anyone you'd like to personally tell, consider doing this before you share it publicly or online.



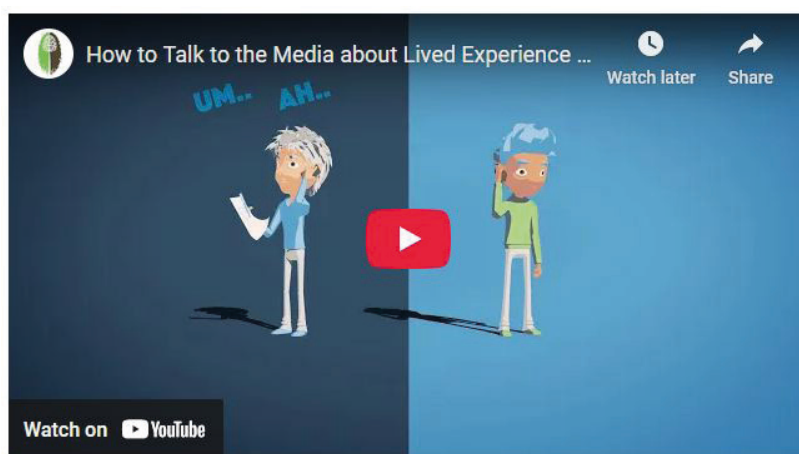
- **How have your loved ones responded to your story so far?** If it's been mostly positive, that's awesome! But, if you've had a tough reaction from a whānau member or friend, it may be worth thinking about how that could affect your wellbeing when you share your story publicly, and what support you might need from others to help you cope with that.
- **Where are you planning on sharing your story? Is it with the media, at an event, or on social media, for example?** Once your story is online, it's important to remember that it can be there for a long time. Some organisations might take it down if you ask, but most won't – especially if you've shared it with media. And if it has been shared on social media, it may be hard to delete it completely. **Please consider this before you share.** You may be able to tell your story anonymously, just make sure this is an option ahead of time.
- **What support do you have around you? Do you have people close to you and/or services, that have helped you through tough times before?** Telling your story publicly can stir up some deep emotions. So, it's important to consider how your support network could be there for you if this happens. You may want to let your support people know where (and when) the story is appearing in advance.

When telling your story

Once you've thought about what sharing your story might mean for you, it's important to consider how you'll tell your story in a way that best supports you, while also providing hope for others reading, hearing or watching it.

When writing or sharing your lived experience story publicly, ask yourself:

- **What do I need to feel safe and most supported?** This might be having a friend or whānau member with you during an interview or starting and ending an interview with a karakia. What is your preferred kawa or tikanga, and where would you like the interview or story writing to take place?
- **Who am I sharing my story with?** If you're not writing the story yourself, have you met the person you'll be talking with? If you haven't, it can be a good idea to get to know them. If you don't feel comfortable sharing your story with them, you don't have to. If you're sharing your story with the media, watch this [video](#) for some important pointers first.



- **How do I want to describe my mental distress or illness experiences?** You may have your own name for your mental health experiences (such as spending time with 'the black dog'), see your mental distress experiences through your own cultural or spiritual lens, or choose to name your experiences by the mental illness diagnosis you received. Whichever term you prefer, make sure the person interviewing you or editing your story is aware of and agrees to use it.

- **What messages would I like to get across? What are the key points I'd like people to take away from my story?** Whatever way you choose to tell your story, it's important to end it on a hopeful note. That way others reading it can feel hopeful for their futures, too.

- **How much do I want to share?** You may only want to tell parts of your story. Consider what you are comfortable sharing and, if you're being interviewed, be upfront and clear about what you're not willing to share.



- **Am I talking about suicide, suicidal ideation or self-harm in my story?** If your story shares some of these themes, it's important to include a trigger warning at the beginning of your story and some helplines at the end. Helplines are available from the [Mental Health Foundation](#).
- **Have I included any graphic detail that might be harmful for others?** Suicide attempts and self-harm are part of many people's mental distress journeys. While talking about suicide is important, it needs to be done in a safe way so as not to harm others reading, hearing or seeing your story. People who are feeling suicidal are often drawn to stories about suicide and may be looking for ways to end their life. For this reason, it's important you leave out any graphic detail, places or methods around how you have self-harmed or attempted suicide in the past. You can read more about what your story can and can't include [here](#). For ways to talk safely about suicide visit [here](#).
- **Am I using best-practice, thoughtful and respectful language and imagery in my story, and framing it in a way that's safe and supportive for others?** Even with the best of intentions, we can inadvertently reinforce negative stereotypes about other people who have lived through mental health challenges if our own stories use unhelpful words or framing. Read our [media guidelines](#) for the best practice language and framing to use.

- **Have I seen the final draft of the story?** If you're not writing the story yourself, ask the person who is if you can see the final draft of your story before it's published. This helps to make sure you're happy with how your story is being told, and that it reflects your voice. Sometimes journalists won't agree to this though, so you'll need to decide if you're still comfortable sharing your story.



After telling your story

Well done! Telling your mental distress or illness story is a brave, courageous and wonderful step to helping end the judgements that one in five of us can face.

Now that you've finished telling your story, ask yourself:

- **How am I feeling?** If you're feeling great, that's amazing! If not, get in touch with your support network. It's common to have mixed feelings about telling your story publicly, either at the time or a while after you've told your story.
- **Am I happy with the draft or final story?** If yes, share it far and wide! If not, remember you can always ask to have your story retracted or taken offline.
- **If your story is shared on social media, it may be a good idea to avoid reading the comments or at least take a break from them. You could ask a friend or whānau member to look at them for you.** Remember, you can't control what others say, and sometimes it's best for your wellbeing not to look or engage. You can ask for the publisher to keep an eye on the comments or even turn them off to help protect both you and others.

Resources

Want to learn more? Take a look at these resources for more tips and guidance.

- [Safe storytelling video – Rākau Roroa](#)
- [Guidelines for reducing stigma and discrimination – Changing Minds](#)
- [Tips for talking to the media about mental health – Changing Minds](#)
- [Conversations in the workplace – Open Minds/Nōku te Ao: Like Minds and the Mental Health Foundation](#)
- [Helplines – Mental Health Foundation](#)
- [Media guidelines for talking about mental distress – Nōku te Ao: Like Minds and the Mental Health Foundation](#)
- [Nōku te Ao – a nationwide programme to end prejudice and discrimination against people with experience of mental distress.](#)

