

# How to tell your mental distress or illness story safely

Mental Health Awareness Week 2023

## Mā te kōrero, ka ora Through conversation comes wellbeing

Mental Health Awareness Week (MHAW) is an important reminder that we all go through ups and downs in life and that's okay. One in five people in Aotearoa have experienced mental illness and/or addiction, and 50% to 80% of us will experience a mental illness and/or addiction at some stage in our lives. For those who have experienced mental distress or illness, MHAW can be an inspiring time to share kōrero about their mental health challenges. Sharing your lived experience story can inspire others in a similar situation to find a way through. It's one of the best ways we can challenge the negative judgements and discrimination those of us with mental health challenges can face.

But, sharing your story is also an important personal decision, and one that should be well thought through. Without due care, sharing your story can have negative impacts on your own wellbeing, or on the wellbeing of other people reading or watching it. To help you share your mental health story safely, we've put together a few pointers on what to prepare before, during and after sharing it, along with some best-practice resources and safety aspects to consider.

Lastly, don't be put off by the number of points in this document! It might be a refresher and something you have a quick skim through for peace of mind, or it might be something you want to take a bit more time over. This advice is for you and it's up to you how you use it.

## Before telling your story

Firstly, good on you for wanting to step up and share your mental distress or illness story. This is a brave step and could really help other people experiencing something similar to bring 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 on your plate right now, we'd recommend waiting to share your story at a time that's more convenient 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 you're experiencing negative feelings when you think about why you want to share, it might be helpful to consider other ways that you can address your concerns, such as [sending a complaint to the Human Rights Commission](#) or an email to the [Health and Disability Commissioner](#). Stories that feel hopeless or full of anger or sadness aren't likely to impact people reading them in a positive way – they're likely to make them feel hopeless, too.
- **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.
- **What has your loved ones' responses to your story been so far?** If mostly positive, great! If you've had some trouble with a whānau member or friend when telling them, consider how their reactions might impact on your wellbeing when you share your story publicly, and what support you might need from others to process their reactions.

- **Where are you planning on sharing your story?** Is it with the media, at an event, or on social media, for example? Once stories are online, it's important to consider they can remain there forever. Some organisations will take down your story if you ask them to, but most will not (especially if you have shared your story with news outlets) and if it has been shared on social media, deleting your story entirely might not be possible. Consider this before you share. Telling your story anonymously is also an option in some cases (but not all) – check this in advance.
- **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 lived experience story in a public way can stir up some of our deepest emotions, so it's important to consider how your support network could help you if this happens.



## When telling your story

Now you've had a chance to consider what sharing your story might mean for you, this section is about how to tell your story in a way that best supports you, while providing hope for other people reading 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, for example. What is your preferred kawa or tikanga, and where would you like the interview or story writing to take place? Take a [look at this resource](#) for more ideas.
- **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 might 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 have 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 you'd like people to take away from your story? Whichever way you tell your story, it's important to end it on a hopeful note, so that other people 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 which parts you are comfortable sharing and, if you're being interviewed, be 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, but sharing those experiences publicly without due care can be very harmful for other people reading about them. 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](#).
- **Am I using best-practice language, imagery and framing in my story?**  
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 draft?** If you're not the person writing the story, ask to see the final draft of your story before it's published. This will ensure you're happy with it, and that the narrative your story is telling is your own. Sometimes journalists won't agree to this – you'll need to decide if you're comfortable sharing your story anyway.



## 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, spread it far and wide! If not, remember you can always ask to have your story retracted or taken offline.

## Resources

Want to learn more? We recommend taking a look at these resources for more tips and guidance.

[Tikanga for storytellers resource - Mahitahi Trust and Mind and Body](#)

[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](#)