

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AS A BRIDGE TO UNDERSTANDING

Conversations on how sharing experiences can become a
tool for learning, help and support.

How to make experience sharing really help?

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Dear Reader,

You are reading a publication that is the result of a three-year international cooperation supported by the European Union; the cooperation of three renowned organizations from the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland.

The Centre for Mental Health care development (CMHCD) in the Czech Republic established a Recovery college and supports people recovering from mental illness and their loved ones as well as actively participates in the development of the professional support of people with mental health issues.

The Hungarian Association of Community Developers (HACD) is a national non-profit organisation dealing with different kinds of topics connected to community development and the co-creation of solutions to local problems, including the initiation and enhancement of community-based services. In partnership with the Szatmári Sub-Regional Centre for Basic Social Services, HACD has elaborated the know-how of transforming the day care service for elderly people into a community-based service.

The Association Local Activity Support Centre (CAL) is a nationwide organisation which has been supporting community-based methodology in local communities for more than 20 years in Poland. In partnership with the Wolski Cultural Centre in Warsaw, a new approach has been jointly developed to include the community, especially vulnerable groups (e.g. migrants, refugees, the mentally ill and others) in co-creating the activities and services of the cultural house. A place for the community and especially vulnerable groups - Wolska Mosaic has been created and developed. The basis for these initiatives is the notion of inclusive culture and the community cultural centre idea.

Although each organisation focuses on different target groups seeking public service assistance¹, they still share a common approach to offering support. This is to integrate people in difficult life situations into the community and to support community residents in accepting and understanding vulnerable people.

The opportunity to collaboratively develop and adapt a relevant methodological approach (*Recovery College*) was provided by the project "*Open to your communities - Impacts of developing community-based approach in the field of public services*", supported by the Erasmus+ project of the European Union.

It seemed quite a challenge to bring together the aspects of the different target groups/participants and different field types of organization, but during the project process, we found and revealed wonderful possibilities of mutual learning and support, and experienced great examples of synergies.

Our experience has also shown that it is not easy and could take a longer period while one's service could start operating on a community basis. During the transformation processes we have faced many questions and practical challenges. Do people with mental illness have the same needs as refugees or the elderly people? How practical is or can our help be? What are the realistic opportunities (financial, spatial...) for providing help? What are the best practices to involve service

¹ The meaning of 'public service' differs country by country. On the understanding of the term by each team, see the case studies written about the processes implemented during the '*Open to your communities*' project (published on the websites of the three organizations).

users in co-creation? How can we motivate the stakeholders (service users, community members, professionals) to actively participate in this transformation process?

These are just examples of the questions we have asked ourselves as the project implementation team. There were many more. While compiling this handout, we concluded that it was simply not possible to create a sort of “instant cookbook” that is ultimately good for every type of institution and every type of services.

So, we focused on the core values. The things that connected the three organizations and really mattered. What we did not and do not want to deviate from:

- If our service is to be useful, we must co-create it with those for whom it is intended. Co-production.
- We want people (staff, volunteers and users) to feel comfortable in our service. Welcoming.
- We are in the same boat. Sharing personal experiences is a natural tool to help.
- We would like to bring public services closer to the members of the local community.

The Handouts developed by the three participating organizations have been translated into each national language (Czech, Hungarian, Polish) and English. Please find them on the web pages of CMHCD, HACD and CAL.

In the spirit of co-creation, the professional teams welcome all feed-backs and further questions or remarks.

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Welcome to the conversation!

This publication was created in the environment of the Recovery College Prague, founded by the Centre for Mental Health Care Development.

...context

The inspiration for this text came from our collaboration within the international project *Open to your communities - Impacts of developing community-based approach in the field of public services*.

This was a project in which together with colleagues from Hungary and Poland we focused on developing public services to be more accessible to the needs of local communities and service users. In Poland, it was a community centre that helps with the integration of refugees from Ukraine. In Hungary, it was a home for the elderly. We contributed our experience of education as an alternative way of providing services to the cooperation. In fact, we were surprised ourselves at how it can work outside the field of mental health care, which is our domain.

In Recovery College it is important for us to bring different experiences together, to connect them, to talk about them. We see it as a way of support. You may be wondering, as we are, that we are trying to graft something so universally human and natural onto a professional tool of help. We realise that there is something of a paradox in this and we are faced with the dilemma of how to do it. In the text we have tried to deal with this.

We also use the term "recovery" in the text. It may seem that this term is exclusively related to the field of mental health care. In this field, recovery means - "even if the symptoms of mental illness persist, I can live a daily life that I can love and can control". But in a broader sense, we think of 'recovery' as referring to any person who has encountered a situation in their life that has been difficult and challenging for them.

...targeted use of experience

The experience of the authors is reflected in the lines of this publication. We have no ambition to present correct solutions and instructions. Our aim is to offer insights and reflections (sometimes even philosophical) on how sharing experiences can help, how to do it, what to think about and what to avoid. We have also tried to offer practical guidelines that have worked well for us. That's why we've titled this text "PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AS A BRIDGE TO UNDERSTANDING. Conversations on how sharing experiences can become a tool for learning, help and support. How to make experience sharing really help?" When we considered who our readers might be, we concluded that we would like to offer inspiration and tips to anyone thinking about how to support others. This is even though our experience is primarily based in the Recovery College setting and other mental health services.

...method of communication

The publication has an unconventional approach. As an interview, which is not really an interview. That is, not in the sense that we build on each other in the individual parts. However, the background to the texts are the conversations we have in the Recovery College on the topic of sharing personal experiences. That is why we decided to present the publication in this form. In the practice of this text, we have tried to record the themes that we find important and our thoughts on them.

We wish you the empowering experience of supporting others through sharing experiences!

Petra Kubinová, kubinova@cmhcd.cz
Praha, říjen, 2023

Rediscovering the importance of sharing personal experience



Juraj

Personal experience was once indispensable.

Did you want to know how to make a soup starter? What does the word "kudos" mean in English and how is it used? What was the name of that song you heard on the radio?

How to install a router, or start a car with a dead flashlight?

You asked.

Someone who's done the fryer before. Someone who has studied English or lived in an English-speaking country. Someone who listens to that music and knows it. Someone who understands computers. Someone who has started a car with a dead battery.

You asked someone more experienced.

And now? How to install a router: 661,000 results in 0.29 seconds. 22,200 results in 0.32 seconds.

Kudos: 119,000,000 results in 0.37 seconds.

It would seem that information this fast and readily available would create a world in which personal experience cannot survive and in which it has no reason to matter.

With today's options, it's easy to get the impression that you should be able to handle everything, and that it's out of place to turn to someone for something that you can, after all, figure out for yourself. And if you add to that the ease, simplicity, and perfection with which it's displayed (I'm sure you're familiar with those videos) and the multitude of options and opinions offered - frustration or overwhelm are guaranteed.

But we believe that the more accessible the information, the more valuable the sharing becomes.

We see two reasons for this. The first is that it is an experience. Unlike information (which captures what is what) or advice (what ought to be what), experience describes what someone has tried or experienced (and therefore most often takes the form of a story). The latter reason is that it is personal. That it brings out the experience of a particular and unique person, as they have experienced and perceived it (which is why you most often meet it in the first person).



Jana

I'm thinking about the fact that, in addition to what I mentioned, it's important to me that we're talking about recovery support here. One can hardly imagine that such a multifaceted and uniquely personal process could be reduced to informative guides. But to be able to hear from another person how they have been through a similar situation to the one they are in right now can be very supportive and encouraging.

Everyone (me) has experiences in life that can be an inspiration to others. Interestingly, even if we experience the same moments or situations in life, each of us will experience them differently and the experience we form from them will be different. Personal experience is personal, there is not one "good" and one "bad", one "right" or "significant". In sharing experience, we start from the assumption that our experience is as valuable as the other person's experience. We can both contribute and learn from each other, enriching each other. An experience is an experience; we do not evaluate what kind of experience it is, but whether it is useful to share it at this moment.

In a Recovery College environment, we trust that personal experience connects, inspires, and brings hope.

Petra

The way I see it, everyone has some experience that they can use to help themselves and others.

In a Recovery College setting, we use this principle in supporting students and their journey of recovery and personal growth through education.

To fulfil the principle of "experience helps," we strive to see it as a value that permeates the functioning of the Recovery College at all levels. From team communication to course design, to the actual teaching and communication with students. We strive to create a space for learning from experience. Applying this principle brings benefits on several levels.

Students can experience acceptance and appreciation of their experience, find meaning in the experience, feel that they are an asset to others, and ultimately be empowered to take control of their lives.

Team members experience a sense of self-worth, which they are then able to carry forward into their teaching and interactions with students.

Building teaching on shared experiences brings variety. Each course is thus unique, built on the personal themes of the students and co-created through the experiences of the participants.

By purposefully creating a space for sharing experiences, students can find their own path of personal growth, rather than adopting or applying some "instant" approach.

Jana

People live stories. Stories shape our idea of who we are and who we want to become. We live stories in our minds, in our imaginations, we feel them, and we live them every day. Although we create stories about ourselves and our lives within ourselves, they gain power and materialize when we can share them with others. You know how it's only when you say things out loud that you really become aware of how you perceive the thing?

I am convinced that we shape who we are by how we speak about ourselves. We validate our experience by how we share it with others. Stories have the power to bring to light events that are important to us and leave others behind. We can make purposeful choices about which events we give meaning to and which we don't. Have you found yourself telling a particular event in your life a little differently each time, depending on what the moment was and who the listener was? Or did you find that after a while you perceived the event in a completely different way? Yes, our perspectives change, and we can become the hero of our own story.

Zdeněk

Sharing one's own experience is always valuable, but when considered in the context of a professional role, sharing experience is appropriate if it is beneficial to the other party. We offer personal experience when it is relevant to the topic or relates to something close to the other party. It is best when it is solicited by the other party.

When students share their experiences during Recovery College courses, instructors should be able to put these experiences in context, frame or add to them when necessary, so that the experiences can resonate as possibilities and inspiration for others.

In a safe space, we share experiences not only of what helps, but also of what doesn't. For some people, it can be very important and empowering to hear that they are not the only ones for whom, for example, some of the recommended and proven coping mechanisms just don't work and that it is okay to find your own ways.

This includes, for example, sharing experiences of unsolicited, 'guaranteed' advice. People often give them in good faith when they want to help in some way. Most of the time, however, such advice misses the mark, and the person it was meant to help may feel even worse than before. And so when people who have had similar experiences come together, sharing them can have a relieving effect, as well as a comforting one.



Jana

I think one of the pitfalls can be if we give too much importance to sharing experiences or apply them too often. Usually, this stems from staff believing that sharing experiences helps or from a need to be useful and help others. Hearing how another person has successfully handled a situation, what has helped them, how far they have come, can reinforce feelings of failure in some people, cause self-doubt, lower self-worth and increase demands on oneself. Inadvertently, this can create an unequal status and a sense that someone is further along, better off because they are more 'recovered'. We should be aware of this risk and purposefully create a space where experiences are of equal value and not measured. At the same time, we should be very sensitive to whether and how we offer our experience.

Sharing different experiences naturally creates a broader range of possibilities that one can be inspired by. Thus, the usual and recommended solutions will be heard, as well as those that are less common, specific, and unique. This creates space for different possibilities. If a common approach does not work for someone, it is important to look for other, less common but potentially equally effective solutions that are appropriate for that person.

SEARCH:

You made a lot of decisions (big and small) last month. Write them down on a piece of paper and highlight the ones where someone else's personal experience played a role. What were those decisions and how did the experiences of others influence them?

Conscious handling of experience

To really benefit from sharing personal experience, we consider it important to listen carefully to the other person and to reflect on this, to know what we can and want to say and why - what we are sharing, with what aim and what we want to achieve within the context of the collaboration.



Petra

Background

I think it can help to be aware of the context in which we choose to offer our experience. My reasoning is that sharing experiences is a natural tool for learning, helping, and supporting between people that we have and have been using since time immemorial. I learned to cook from my mother and grandmother, who in turn learned from my great-grandmother. My mother taught me to sew. We shared all sorts of techniques and "gadgets" together, but also indignation when something went wrong. It can really annoy you when you've been sewing the same seam for the umpteenth time. We call it the "matching Olympics". Of course, we also share successes. We send each other pictures of finished products and appreciate each other.

In this analogy, the use of personal experience can be thought of in different contexts. From 'ordinary' neighbourhood help to community centres, education and other public services, to social and health services. We can therefore choose to share experiences in different contexts. But the shared experience should be appropriate to the context.

The principle of 'peer to peer', i.e. mutual support between people with the same experience, has a tradition in mental health care since about the 1970s. The profession of peer consultant is now well known and established in mental health services. The development of the profession is contributing to mental health services becoming more participatory. Their clients/patients are moving out of the role of passive recipients and into the role of active agents of the care they receive. However, sharing experiences of coping with illness and recovery is not just about peer counsellors. We believe that workers in a variety of professional roles² can step outside the conventional understanding of the helping role and offer their personal experience appropriate to the situation and context of the collaboration.



Juraj

Targeted use of experience

We have plenty of experience. We know, we have experienced, we have tried, we have seen, we have tasted, we have heard, we have had, we have met. And we could talk about it for hours and hours. It costs nothing, so let's get it out there, you say. But the real "art" in sharing personal experience is to use it consciously and purposefully. Is my goal to encourage the other? Is my goal to help him or her better imagine or understand something? Is my goal to bring something to his or her attention? Is my goal to show the other person an opportunity? Is it my goal to get closer to the other? Is my goal to validate the other's experience? Or to bring about an alternative one? Is my goal to show that sharing an experience is welcome? Or is my goal something else? Whatever. But it is important to ask and answer this question.

One goal may be to share a personal experience to support the recovery of others. So, in thinking about what that experience should be, how to grasp it, and how to share it, let's help ourselves with the values/principles of recovery colleges that Julie Repper and Rachel Perkins emphasize: hope, control, and opportunity. Only when hope is part of the shared experience or story, only then can it inspire hope in another. Having the story (or part of it) in your hands can encourage and empower others. And the more attention you pay in the story to the opportunities that allowed it to happen, the more others will be able to see and take advantage of the opportunities around them because of it.

² Alie Weerman & Tineke Abma (2019) Social work students learning to use their experiential knowledge of recovery. An existential and emancipatory perspective, *Social Work Education*, 38:4, 453-469, DOI: 10.1080/02615479.2018.1538335


Drink up!

And don't you want a drink?


It helps me when I take a drink.

What do you need now? Is there anything I can do for you? Would you like to hear what has helped/what others have tried in this situation?

Dressing up advice in experience seems much better than not dressing it up at all, or dressing it up in a question. Yes, on the face of it, it sounds good. It's just a bit of a trap when things are more complicated. When you share an experience to give advice, it will make that ambition of yours feel and you may lose the trust of the other.

 The considerations about the purposeful use of experience might, I think, give the impression that we as workers "know more or even better" than the person themselves what might be good for them. That we should have the skills to make good guesses about what to say, or that we could achieve our own intentions in working with another person through the communication of an experience. That would, of course, be very misleading. What is at the forefront is connection on a human level, genuine concern for the person, respect for their experience and a willingness to look together for what the person needs for their recovery at this moment and what and how we can help.

Openness to our own vulnerability and personal experience should help to be sensitive to the uniqueness of personal experience and keep us from making our own assumptions about what the other person needs. For me personally, purposeful work with my own experience is all about my reflection. When I listen to another, it is a tool for myself. I reflect on how do I understand what the other is saying to me? What does it speak to in me? Have I experienced something similar? Is there something in the narrative that connects with my personal experience? What was it like for me to feel what the person is talking about? Can I really imagine what it feels like? How does it approximate what I know myself? What did I need most in a similar moment? What opportunities do I have to support the person in this moment? What is the person communicating that they expect from me? Etc.

 **Method of communication**
Now that we are clear on the context, I think it's good to think about the manner of communication. For sharing experiences to be useful, it is important for me to remember that we want to avoid giving advice and instructions. We want to open space for the other person to reflect and find their own personal solution to the situation. Finally, we want to strengthen hope and awareness of our own resources. In fact, one of the useful goals of sharing experiences can be to encourage the person to share their experiences. He or she can then begin to better sort out his or her own thoughts and name things and circumstances that are important to him or her.

With this in mind, I choose the form in which I communicate my experience. The other person should clearly perceive that this is an offer of opportunity and that they can refuse it. This means using open wording and avoiding words such as "you must", "do" or generalising statements such as "always", "all people", "for women/men it's like this...", "it's..." etc...

I can think of examples of phrasing that may be more sensitive to acknowledging personal experience: 'Everyone has their own way of...', for example, 'it worked for me...', 'it's not easy to go through this, when I've spoken to people in a similar situation they've talked about how it helped them../that the most important thing for them was...', how do you feel about that?



I don't think you can do this without a basic trust in the person and the recovery process. If we are convinced that a person has their own resources and strengths to build on, it naturally leads us to reach out to them instead of taking over the worry of how the other is living.

SEARCH:

You can try reformulating some "well-meaning advice" you may have encountered.

Well-meaning advice is advice given with the intention to help and encourage, or to suggest a solution based on generalised experience.

The question is whether such advice is really helpful or whether, on the contrary, it may even make the person worse off. Think for yourself.

- You should start practising. It will help you.
- Get a grip! If you start doing something, it will settle down.
- You must think positive!
- Don't take it so personally. It can happen to anyone.
- You must try harder.
- It's best if you get a good night's sleep. Just get off social media, you've got a lot on your mind.

You might think of other well-meaning advice and what you actually need to hear.



So far, we are talking about sharing experience mainly in the form of conversation. But I can think of many situations where I have been able to feel the power of story and experience through other forms of sharing, through poetry, song, paintings, photos, dance, and movement. I think about how we can offer different forms to bring and share personal experiences, especially when words are hard to find or not enough to capture what is important.

SEARCH:

Try to choose a certain period in your life and write a short story about your experience during that period. If you have more space, you can try writing your recovery story.

Now try to look at the story again and choose a way that is close to you to portray your experience or story in a different way. Some people find words close to their heart and write a poem, some find photos helpful and create a collage, some paint a picture, some make a list and excel spreadsheet, some create a dance solo or compose a song. Allow yourself to be approached through different means and see what new things this form brings to sharing your experience.

**Reasonableness**

If we want to help with our personal experience, I think it is also appropriate to consider proportionality.

Reasonableness means a satisfactory degree, adequacy or balance in relation to a particular situation, standard, value or norm.

It sounds complicated, but I don't think it's such a big deal. Let me try to explain it with an example:

Mental illness is often associated with situations that are very challenging to cope with for both the person in recovery and their loved ones. We can also think of them as traumatic. As a lecturer in the Recovery College courses, I like to be paired with a peer tutor. This gives me the opportunity to experience the power of sharing experiences in practice. These are often extraordinary experiences of belonging, epiphany and finding pathways.

At the same time, I sometimes wonder to what extent it is possible to go into the painful details of individual experiences. For example, thoughts of suicide; separation from children; depictions of the impersonal environment of psychiatric hospitals, etc. My experience is that it is these details that course attendees respond to, and therefore I do not yet have a clear answer to this question.

However, I do know that it is these painful details that provoke the most lively debates. They are certainly important. But if they are not balanced by the sharing of experiences of how the person coped (what enabled me to cope, what I did myself, who helped me through it, and how it turned out), they can have rather the opposite ring. They are not focused on recovery and coping, but on the illness. From my point of view, then, they are more of an affirmation of hopelessness and mental health care becomes an environment that ordinary people (including those whose mental health is ill) want nothing to do with. More broadly, this reinforces distrust of the mental health care system.

Balance then also relates to considering the depth of sharing within a given context of collaboration and the time we have together. We will consider sharing differently in a psychotherapy group, differently in a one-off counselling session, differently in a Recovery School or self-help group. We should be aware of the space we have together and the purpose that brings us together.

And another example from elsewhere

I remembered a math-physics trick my dad caught me with in elementary school.

"Peťo, what's heavier? A kilogram of feathers or a kilogram of iron?"

Without much hesitation, I answered that it was a kilogram of iron. Of course, a lengthy explanation followed, the gist of which was that if something is a kilogram, it's a kilogram no matter what the material weighs. And every kilogram weighs the same. And a suggestion that I could concentrate more.

In my defence, I never really enjoyed math and physics. I much preferred running around outside with others who didn't care about iron and feathers as much as I did. In physics, I had a good grasp of Newton's Laws. Especially the one about the earth's gravity, because I was always falling somewhere.

But why am I talking about this?

If we try to imagine dropping a kilogram of iron on someone from a height of one metre. What happens? There's probably going to be some bruising, and it's definitely going to hurt. He'll try to get rid of the weight (the pain) quickly. And if we throw a kilogram of feathers at someone? Pain and bruising is not an option. Plus, only the feathers that have found their target will stick.

I think this is very similar to how we should treat sharing personal experiences. If we overwhelm someone with our difficult experiences, they're likely to feel crushed by the weight. If we treat them with respect and "dose" the experience with respect to their situation, they will find their way. Less is more.

My conclusion is: Never throw anything at anyone! Respectively: I think of throwing any objects at other people with restraint. I would avoid it.

And, Dad, a kilogram of iron really is heavier. Especially if the iron body is set in motion. But I think that's another Newton's law. The law of action and reaction.



Zdeněk

We learn from each other

In sharing our own experience, we handle it in a way that is as focused as possible on empowering, reassuring, and generally supporting the other person in their recovery process.

Personally, I think our goal in sharing is an equal exchange.

It is not simply a balancing of dialogue, but an active effort to allow the other party to experience a valuable mutual exchange with us. The more we get to know the other's experience, the better we can offer our own for sharing together.

We also offer reflections on how the other person's challenging experience may have been not only one of loss and pain, but also one of some empowerments. By sharing our own experiences, or those of others, we can help to make sense of the experience so that the person can process it for themselves.

The challenge in using our own experience can be if it is too one-sided, sharing too much information at once, thinking that we have to tell everything that is relevant. And we want to say it in as much detail as possible because we believe that is the only way to help the person in the best way we can. We can overwhelm the other person and easily get lost in our own story and experience. Our sharing then may not be supportive to the other person at all, quite the opposite. So, it is important to be aware of these phenomena and to remember that our sharing should be appropriate, conscious and purposeful.



And one more such, one could say almost natural-physical, regularity. The more space you take, the less space is left for others. And the less space you take, the more you create for others.

We offer a checklist to help you:

- Is this my experience? Did this story happen to me?
- Do I know with what purpose I want to share this story or experience?
- Do I really know with what purpose I want to share this story?
- Is there hope in the story?
- Did I have things in my own hands (at least a little) in the story?
- Can I name the opportunities that allowed this story to happen?
- Am I telling the story in the first person?
- Am I being specific in telling the story?
- Is my intention to support the other?
- How can I check to see if it is helpful to the other?

How to grasp sharing?



Originally, this chapter was going to be called "Story Construction" or something like that. It looked good for a while too, but then we stopped and thought:. Are we really going to keep the theme of sharing experiences framed in stories? Isn't this just an opportunity to go beyond the established framework of recovery stories? An opportunity to look for varied and diverse ways to use personal experience to support the recovery of others?



In professional mental health services, we often talk about recovery stories in the context of the work of peer counsellors. The same is true in the case of the profession of peer educators. However, this is not quite accurate.

When we say 'story', we probably think of a coherent narrative on a particular topic. Compelling storytelling has a certain narrative structure. The structure has several phases that provide the dynamics of the story and thus maintain the attention and interest of the audience (or readers). The phases of the narrative structure are described by many terms. But the gist is simple - introduction (what is going on, who is the actor in the story), plot (a vivid description of what is going on in context) and conclusion (how it ended, what it implies).

Reflecting on what has been described in the previous chapter, this way of sharing experiences is more suitable for activities such as audio or video recording or for text-based formats. In interaction-oriented activities, it is more appropriate to think of the term personal experience.



This is where I see the trap: if we work with personal experience only and exclusively as a coherent story of recovery, we are not making the most of the potential that experience has in relation to supporting others.

For one thing, in relation to content: a story of recovery usually brings a more holistic view of what a person has experienced. However, by definition, it does not create enough space for the pieces of the story (sensations, experiences, situations) that make up the mosaic of the story.

Also in terms of form: a story is written, a story is told, a story is listened to. The story does not engage and enter into the story. Stories are (as a rule) not interactive.

Moreover, a story has a beginning and is expected to have an ending. Or, in a mosaic picture, it will have its final shape. But what if it doesn't? What if it is not yet distinct enough to be a story?



Therefore, the term "shared personal experience", in my opinion, better captures the essence of why and how we use it.



But what will we be left with if we give up this anchor in the form of a story? Exactly what happens when we pull up the anchor on the ship - the voyage can begin. And in order to not just let ourselves drift, but to work consciously and purposefully with personal experience, let's put together some ideas on how to do that.



...Specifically

It occurs to me that sharing personal experience should be CONCRETE.

If we want to use our personal experience for the benefit of another, we should strive for concreteness. This means that we think about the message not only in terms of what we want to achieve (goal, intent), but also how clear and precise we are. To avoid generalising or even scaremongering, I think it is important to communicate our experience in the context of several aspects:

- Behaviour - how I behaved in the situation.

- Important people - what they may have observed about my behaviour and how they reacted to it.
- Experiencing - how I felt, what was important for me to experience.
- Self-effort - what I was doing to cope with the situation.



Zdeněk

... Knowingly

If our personal experience is to support the recovery process, we should use it consciously. This means that we choose to share what we think may be beneficial for the other party to hear, and we can explain why.

... Transparently

We will support the content of our message with an appropriate formulation. It is beneficial to be as transparent as possible when sharing personal experiences. For instance, when I talk about how the symptoms of depression completely paralyzed me years ago, I can note that it surprises even myself how much it has improved since then (that it's different now). I can openly explain why I am talking about it now. This way, my experience may not evoke pity or sadness in the listeners; on the contrary, it can provide them with hope and inspiration.

... Currently

Sharing the challenges I currently face often has an even greater impact than sharing experiences from the past, no matter how difficult they were. This can provide the listener with encouragement and the belief that they are currently not alone in facing life's difficulties. It doesn't necessarily have to be the same challenge; the awareness that we are both dealing with something right now is enough.

This type of sharing is particularly effective in debunking the myth that helping professionals do not face any difficulties in life, that as professionals, they have everything figured out and fully under control.

Such sharing naturally contributes to building a connection with the listener, creating a sense of equality.

... Applicably

In addition to the shared topic being relevant to the other person, it is also important to consider its applicability in the individual's life. I can share my experience, and if the client is interested, I can describe my own supportive mechanisms and everything that helps me, to the extent that I feel safe and comfortable sharing. But I want to emphasize that I understand this approach may not suit everyone, and alternatives can be explored in different areas.

Applicability does not mean prescribing. When we share what works for us, it may not be applicable to someone else, as they have different experiences, interests, possibilities, and assumptions – my experience with depression is not the same as someone else's, and this must be kept in mind.

We should not attempt to offer the same experience every time, regardless of the conditions in which the person we want to support lives.



Juraj

... Minimally - experience as a mini-story

Present the shared experience as a mini-story that can "stand" on its own and doesn't require broader context or explanation. It is precisely these mini-stories that form the fragments in the mosaic of your recovery story. Each of them has a color, shape, and substance that contributes to the overall mosaic, but they are equally valuable and powerful independently.

... Responsively

The experience you are sharing is content-wise and substantively given and essentially unchanging: it happened somehow and had a certain outcome. However, that doesn't mean you have to share it the same way every time. You still have the opportunity to highlight or pay more attention to certain aspects of how it happened or how you experienced it. You can do this directly "on the spot" (adapting what you focus on and how you share it to the situation, atmosphere, purpose of sharing, and the participants' needs) as well as from a more long-term perspective (where, through sharing, you not only discover and reflect on various aspects of your experience but also the meaning and benefit of the shared experience evolves).

Try sharing it in different ways. Be curious about how the sharing resonated with the audience and what it brought to them. Pay attention to it, look for connections, and work with them. Let your experience and the way you share it evolve.

Moreover, it's an opportunity to grasp something for yourself: a chance to handle your experience more, get to know it more, and reflect on it. It's okay to seize this opportunity, even though you're not sharing your experience for yourself.

How not to harm oneself through sharing



When you get into the car, do you buckle up?

Most of us do. Some might do it to avoid a fine, others perhaps due to a seatbelt sensor, but we likely agree that we do it primarily for safety. We do it automatically - the decision to fasten the seatbelt is not preceded by a consideration of the level of risk during that particular journey. We simply acknowledge the risk and our vulnerability on the road. We expect that there might be a situation where seatbelts keep us alive and contribute to our safety.

That's why vulnerability and safety deserve their own chapter: expect that sharing an experience can always touch upon the topics of vulnerability and safety. As automatically as when you get into the car.

Sure, you may say, my vulnerability and my safety. And you're right. Opening up to others, sharing a personal experience, putting ourselves out there, makes us vulnerable. However, it's equally important to consider the vulnerability and safety of the people with whom you share your story or experience.

Let's take a look at that.

 Zdeněk

When sharing a personal experience, I consider why I am engaging in sharing. It is because I want to support others, not to evoke an emotional reaction (sadness, anger, pity) or to burden them in any other way.

When I sense that our sharing could be challenging for others (for example, hearing about difficult events I have gone through), I thoroughly consider whether to engage in sharing at all.

In the event that we decide it makes sense to share a personal experience at that moment, we must be prepared for the other person's experience and keep communicating with them. We inquire about what the person is experiencing based on our sharing, whether the sharing of our experience was helpful for them and ensure that they are okay.

After sharing challenging personal experiences, it is also useful to reassure the listener that we are okay and emphasize what we have taken from the situation, how it ultimately strengthened us. Thus, we transform sharing about tough times into sharing about growth, empowerment, resilience, and development.

Personally, I have found it beneficial to talk about why I chose to bring a particular experience, what my intention was, within the context of sharing. I believe this helps prevent potential misunderstandings. People should not feel that the experiences we share are meant to guide them down the same path as us. It reassures them that it's not about us, but that we are thinking of them and trying to support, empower, and perhaps inspire them.

In addition to considering the vulnerability and safety of the people we are talking to, we should, of course, also consider our own sensitivity when sharing. We only share personal experiences that we have processed and feel comfortable sharing.

It is important that we can speak coherently when sharing experiences. When we begin to lose ourselves in our own memories or let emotions take over, there is a risk of losing control over the entire situation. This is a specific skill that we can learn and continually need to develop – being in connection with ourselves, delving into our experience, and at the same time being "above it," reflecting on it and simultaneously being connected with the other person, perceiving them, and responding to them.

For this reason, a valuable aid in sharing is the ability for self-reflection and ongoing personal development.

 Petra

Safe situations for me are those I understand. Where I have enough information to make decisions. And when I lack information or struggle with making decisions, I need someone nearby who will think with me and possibly provide the missing information. Essentially, it's a matter of boundaries for me, primarily related to respect. Nothing unusual or groundbreaking.

 Jana

When students share their experiences during the Recovery College courses, it is the responsibility of the instructors to create a safe space where various experiences can

be heard, treated equally, without judgment. We establish safety not only through collective agreements on meetings but also by clarifying the context, reflection, and framing of experiences. We consider it important to acknowledge the significance of the experience, bridge the shared to common interest or theme, highlight gained experiences and strengths of the person bringing that experience. We strive to give an educational character to their experiences by framing/rephrasing or providing context if it has not been explicitly expressed or named.



So, was it useful to dedicate a whole chapter to it?

SEARCH!

Consider the PROs and CONs:

IDENTITY:

Reflect on yourself... Okay, you've been diagnosed with a mental illness, maybe you're currently struggling with substance dependence... But is that part of your identity? Do you want to pigeonhole yourself into some category? The decision to frame yourself this way or not is entirely up to you.

PROs and CONs: List the pros and cons of sharing your story so that you can decide whether and how much to share. CONs include reasons why you might regret sharing your story, while PROs encompass reasons why sharing could help you or others.

GOALS: What do you want to achieve by sharing your story? Write down these goals.

EXPECTATIONS: What do you expect to happen when you share your story? In what positive or negative ways do you anticipate people reacting? How will you handle their reactions?

SUPPORT: Sharing a recovery story is a big deal, especially for the first time. With so many emotions involved, it can be a significant decision for one person. Is there someone in your circle who can support you in this decision?

Source: The Honest, Open, Proud Program (comingoutproudprogram.org), in SAMHSA: SHARE YOUR STORY A How-to Guide for Digital Storytelling

...In conclusion



I have just read our interviews as a whole after editorial revisions. I think we have really delved into the topic in detail, and it might seem like sharing experiences is rocket science. This may appear in contrast to our reflection that sharing one's experience is a natural tool for learning, help, and support among people, which we have had and used since ancient times.

For my part, I hope that after reading the text, you have plenty of "buts," "this isn't quite right," "what if...," or "I disagree." If that's the case, then I'm glad. Our intention was to captivate and stimulate thinking about the topic of sharing experiences. If you have found answers to your questions, then we are sincerely pleased.

In any case, we wish all readers that the topic of sharing personal experiences is connecting, inspiring, and brings hope to you.

About the Authors



Zdeněk

I am a person who values intentional expression and thoughtful consideration of things. I strive to have a good reason for everything I do and the way I do it, aiming to have control over my life. Electronic music have always been a passion for me, serving as a significant source of support during challenging periods, along with playing PC games. I consider myself fortunate to have become a peer counselor and later a lecturer after years of mental struggles. This has allowed me to leverage my experiences in overcoming difficulties and self-development, which were crucial for my survival. Thus, having the opportunity to share my perspective on sharing personal experiences to support others has been very valuable to me. Sharing personal experiences with others is always enriching for me, as there is always something to learn from one another. When sharing occurs with the intention of providing equal, safe, and supportive interaction, it always brings a profound sense of fulfilment to me.



Petra

I am a mother, partner, sister, daughter, granddaughter, seamstress, and an enthusiastic cook. I am an unwavering fan of the breed of dogs known as the cocker spaniel. In our family, we have welcomed several of them. Their stubbornness and eagerness to dive into everything "headfirst" resonate with me. My entire professional life is connected to the field of mental health care. I have worked as a social worker in community services for people with mental illnesses. I was part of a team that provided assistance to victims of mass disasters, whether it be floods or fires that took away people's loved ones and homes. In these situations, more than ever, I realized the limits of methods and recommended procedures I learned at university or in therapeutic training. I do not question their significance. At the same time, facing the people I talked to, it was more important to be together. Together as human beings. Sharing.



Juraj

I am a facilitator, social worker, husband, father of two amazing children, and a member of our furry dog's pack. In everyday life, I am not very talkative, and I don't share much about myself. The reasons are varied, most commonly perhaps because I prefer listening to speaking. I also need to feel that here and now is the right space and time for sharing. I often contemplate the purpose and benefit. Indeed, purpose and benefit are criteria that I weigh most when it comes to sharing personal experience in the courses and trainings I

am part of. This conversation has given me the opportunity to reflect on how I approach sharing personal experience. Sometimes, I feel like I take away more than I bring into it.



I enjoy being close to others; it fulfils me to listen to people and share things about myself while continuously learning. Since high school, I have been interested in the field of mental health care, dedicating my studies to this area and maintaining a career in it. As an occupational therapist and rehabilitation leader, I worked in a training café. I am actively involved in the education and supervision of helping professionals. In my life, I hold many roles – I am a mother of three, a wife, a dog caretaker, a daughter, a granddaughter, a sister, a friend, an occupational therapist, a colleague, a facilitator, a supervisor. Movement is my passion, and I engage in dance, the martial art of Aikido, and I love art, music, poetry, fashion, contemplation, and gazing at the landscape. I am delighted to be invited to the Recovery College, as I find great meaning in it. In life, I have learned the most from people who have gone through challenging times and had the courage to bring their experiences to the surface and share them. I highly value these moments of personal closeness and sharing and look forward to meeting you in person.