

# LEPT Toolkit: Sharing Your Story for System Change

## Purpose of This Toolkit

This toolkit was co-created with members of the Great River Ontario Health Team Lived Experience Partners Table (LEPT) to support individuals in sharing their lived experiences in ways that are safe, respectful, and meaningful. It is intended to help people prepare for storytelling opportunities, protect their emotional well-being, and support system-level learning and change.

Sharing lived experience can be powerful, but it can also be personal and emotional. This toolkit reflects what LEPT members identified as helpful, challenging, and necessary when stories are shared to inform healthcare and community systems. Sharing lived experience is always voluntary, and you can change your mind at any time, including during or after a conversation.

## Why Sharing Your Story Matters

Participants identified several reasons why sharing lived experience is important:

- It helps others learn what has worked and what has not for them, within the health system
- It validates feelings and experiences, both for the person sharing and for others listening
- It supports advocacy and can help improve processes and services
- It creates connection and a sense of belonging
- It helps people feel less alone
- It can motivate change for someone else, even if the change is small

Sharing stories is described as a way to pass along knowledge, not just emotion, and to support better understanding of real experiences within the system.

## What Helps People Listen With Empathy, Not Pity

LEPT members identified several factors that help audiences listen in a respectful and meaningful way:

- Active listening, listening to understand rather than listening to respond
- Non-verbal communication such as eye contact and open body language
- Honesty without condescension
- Respect for everyone in the room
- Understanding the audience and their role
- Sensitivity training and lived experience awareness
- Cultural awareness and cultural safety
- Recognizing that someone may not relate personally but can still show care and support

Participants emphasized that empathy does not require having the same experience. It requires respect, openness, and a willingness to listen.

## What Good Sharing Looks Like

LEPT members described “good sharing” as sharing that is:

- Safe and judgment-free

- Purposeful and connected to the topic or goal
- Focused on key takeaways rather than every detail
- Honest and respectful
- Validating and empowering
- Grounded in empathy
- Aimed at learning, improvement, or change

Good sharing was also described as staying on topic, knowing why you are sharing, and understanding how the story may help others or inform decisions.

### **What Might Go Wrong**

Participants identified several risks when lived experience is shared without adequate support:

- Feeling tokenized or not taken seriously
- Being retraumatized by revisiting difficult experiences
- Oversharing and later regretting what was shared
- Feeling judged or misunderstood
- Losing confidence if the story is dismissed or ignored
- Being overwhelmed by emotions during or after sharing
- Sensing that the audience is bored or disengaged, particularly if the seems unfocused on the discussion
- Lack of follow-up or integration of feedback into actual change

These risks highlight the importance of preparation, boundaries, and support.

### **How to Protect Yourself Emotionally When Sharing**

LEPT members shared many practical strategies for emotional protection:

- It is okay to say no, pause, or stop sharing at any point, including during a conversation
- Practice self-care before and after sharing
- Know your audience and deciding what you are comfortable sharing with them
- Share information in pieces rather than all at once
- Start slowly until you feel safe
- Know when to pause or leave a conversation
- Seek peer, community, or professional support
- Process the experience for yourself first before sharing publicly
- Remind yourself that you do not need to share every detail to make an impact
- Strong emotions may show up later. This is normal, and support is available at [www.accessmha.ca](http://www.accessmha.ca)

Participants emphasized that there is no obligation to share more than feels safe.

### **What Makes It Easier for Others to Share Their Stories**

Participants identified several conditions that help people feel safe and willing to share:

- A welcoming, respectful audience. If the sharing is taking place virtually, this means cameras on and audience looking at the screen.
- Open discussion rather than rigid or overly guided formats
- Clear information about where and how stories will be used
- Options to share anonymously
- Access to resources and supports
- Culturally safe spaces
- Language accessibility (for example ability to share in French if it is their preferred language)
- Awareness of cultural and family dynamics that may affect sharing
- Reassurance that people are not alone

Meeting people where they are was identified as a core principle throughout the discussion.

### **Additional Supports LEPT Could Build**

LEPT members generated several concrete ideas for supports and tools, including:

- Tip sheets for sharing lived experience safely
- Pre-briefs before speaking opportunities
- Debriefs after sharing experiences
- Peer-to-peer mentorship
- Resource lists accessible to LEPT members and other tables
- Guidance on preparing and writing your story
- Open forums or discussion spaces within the community
- Practice opportunities in safe environments

These ideas will inform the development of a practical toolkit and resources to support LEPT members and others engaging in storytelling for system change.

### **Key Takeaway**

There is no one right way to share a story. There is no wrong feeling to have. Sharing lived experience should always be voluntary, supported, and grounded in respect, safety, and purpose. You are allowed to share only what feels manageable - in the moment and over time.

