



PART ONE:
A Guide to
Publicly
Sharing Your
Story



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If you have had a personal experience with abortion and are thinking about publicly sharing your story, such as to a journalist or in your own words online, this quick guide will help you consider your options so you can make the best decision for you, your family, and your goals.

A GUIDE TO PUBLICLY SHARING YOUR STORY, PART 1

YOU ARE NOT ALONE. SHARING STORIES BUILDS SUPPORT AND CONNECTIONS.

The most common thing women and men describe on our after-abortion talkline is feeling isolated. Women often feel alone after abortion, even though one in three of us will have an abortion in our lifetime. That said, no simple statistic measures up to the chance to talk to another person who has been through something similar. We started our private online community to help women do just that. In fact, we found that telling a story to give support is just as big a motivator as is the need to feel supported. Many of us at Exhale have taken the step to tell our story to a journalist, create a digital story about our experience, write about it for a blog or a zine, and speak on panels at conferences or schools. A few of us have gone on TV to talk about our abortions.

Benefits to Sharing Your Story Publicly

After sharing your story, you might feel empowered and more connected to others, like your family, or those who have had abortions, too. The family members and friends you least expected to support you might reveal their own experiences with abortion or simply wish to encourage you in their own way. A new community might form around you. Sharing our stories publicly can strengthen our bonds with family and friends; it can help us not feel so alone; and it can generate more social support for other women and men who have personal experience with abortion. If more of us talk about our personal experiences, it's more difficult to stereotype us, and we create more social respect for all of us.

Risks of Sharing Your Story Publicly

Sharing your story can come with great personal and professional risks. We live in world that can be very judgmental toward women who have had abortions and our loved ones. After telling our stories, we may feel vulnerable or more alone than before. Others may try to shame or hurt us or use our abortion experiences against us. Rather than strengthening family ties, sharing can threaten the stability of our relationships and our jobs. Exhale community members have lived through these challenges. Be aware that lots of political and religious organizations are interested in your story as a way to influence people toward their position on abortion. However you align politically, remember that your story is yours to keep. Share as you choose. You should never feel pressured, coerced, or shamed into telling your story, even if it's to promote a cause you believe in.

And Remember...

Telling a personal story about your experience with abortion will probably have an impact on you. The act of sharing something that's been private can change the way you feel about yourself, your family, and your own abortion(s). This can feel good, empowering, and exciting, or scary and intimidating. Often both. All of these reactions are common. There's support for you at Exhale. We are a community of women and men who understand what you're going through, and we will be there with you as you shape what's next.

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WOMEN ON THEIR STORYSHARING EXPERIENCES

Ronak Dave, former Exhale volunteer peer counselor, describes sharing her story at an Abortion SpeakOut.

“ In my own experience with having had an abortion, there were very few places where I felt I could speak about my experience free from judgment. The most healthy, healing experience I had was at an abortion speakout. It was a really empowering moment for me to tell my story in front of hundreds of people and to hear myself over the sound system. That moment really made me understand how important having a voice and being heard is in the process of healing.

Natalia Koss-Vallejo, appeared on MTV’s “No Easy Decision.”

“ Talking about my story in public has made me even more confident in the power of storytelling. I always knew, though I couldn’t quite articulate how, that when I told my story to someone else it had a strong effect. The most common reaction I have gotten from women who I’ve talked to openly about abortion is, ‘Oh my god, I had one, too, and before now I never felt that I could tell anyone!’ When I tell my story, it has a ripple effect, making it okay for other women to open up.

Lauren Gard, Exhale volunteer peer counselor, told her story to a reporter for *The New York Times*.

“ I told a *New York Times* reporter about my own abortion for an article about Exhale, and when the story came out, with a mention of my abortion included, I felt so fortunate to have supportive people in my life. I have to admit I was a little nervous that I’d receive hate mail or some such, but although it’s easy to find my email address, I didn’t receive a single negative comment. As a counselor on the talkline, I’m so glad I can help women understand they are not as alone as they often think they are. It’s a rare person whose life hasn’t been touched by abortion.

Kassi Underwood wrote about her own story in the *New York Daily News* and *The New York Times*.

“ Before I wrote about my abortion for *The New York Times* and the *New York Daily News*, I prepared to accept criticism with love. Believe me, opportunities presented themselves. But I also heard from complete strangers, as well as acquaintances from my past, who said that identifying with my essays made them feel just a little less crazy. Storytelling is collaborative like that. So sharing my story has given me the opportunity to help other women, and for me, helping has been healing.

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YOUR STORIES, YOUR WORDS, YOUR GOALS, YOUR WELLBEING.

Use these questions to assess your readiness and to create a plan so you can publicly share your story in a way that helps you achieve your goals. Ask yourself the following questions. (It can help to write down the answers or to say them out loud.)

– What are the reasons I want to tell my story?

Examples: “I don’t want to feel like my abortion is a secret that I’m hiding;” “I want other young women out there to know they aren’t alone;” “I believe this should be something that gets talked about.”

– Whom do I want to hear my story?

Examples: “I want to tell the world so people stop talking about this as something that happens to other people and understand how personal and intimate it is.” “I want to tell elected officials because this experience has made me more political.” “I’d just like to talk with other women like me, and I need to go talk publicly to find them.”

– How do I want to share my story?

Examples: “I will search online for resources that want to hear from women like me.” “I will start a book club with my friends and read books that have abortions in them.” “I will start tweeting about my feelings after abortion.” “I want to show others that abortion is something you can get through, survive and thrive.”

– What do I want to say?

Examples: “I want to say that this abortion made me come alive again.” “By tweeting each day, I want to express every emotion that I feel, even if it’s embarrassing, and others won’t understand.” “The truth of my messy feelings.”

– How will I share about my experience of storysharing so that other women and men can learn with me?

Examples: “I will call the Exhale talkline.” “I will participate in the Exhale online community.” “I will sit down and talk with friends.” “I will respond to every single person who sends me a heartfelt email regarding my story.” “I will tweet and blog about how it felt to tell my story.”

– Here is how I plan to share my story:

A GUIDE TO PUBLICLY SHARING YOUR STORY, PART 1 YOUR STORIES, YOUR WORDS, YOUR GOALS, YOUR WELLBEING.

As a community of women who have had abortions, our hope is that this guide will help you think through your options when it comes to sharing publicly your personal story with abortion. Whether you find the act of sharing to be personally healing, desire a chance to influence the general public or the government, or want to make sure other women never feel alone after an abortion, know that you deserve to be heard with dignity and respect. Remember that Exhale is a community of women and men who are here for you. We know your story is powerful and intimate and we're rooting for you every step of the way. We're right here with you as you shape what's next.

Share Your Experiences with Exhale

We need your input in order to publish Part 2 of this guide. Please share with us what you found most useful, most confusing, and what you need more or less of in our next guide. Exhale is a learning organization that develops programs and strategies in direct response to the needs our community members. Your voice and experience matter, and we want to make sure you have the tools and information you need to succeed. Email info@exhaleprovoice.org with your feedback.

Join our community at www.ExhaleProVoice.org.

Thank you

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