

# MindForward Alliance



*How-to guide:*  
*Breaking down mental health stigma in the  
workplace by sharing lived experience stories*

# Overview

**Every time a lived experience story is shared, it helps to normalize the mental health conversation and break down the stigma that often acts as a barrier to employees seeking support.**

Sharing lived experience from volunteers in your workplace is a powerful way to:

- Reduce stigma around mental health illness
- Impart messages of hope, recovery and resilience
- Increase awareness of mental health issues
- Encourage open and honest conversation
- Promote positive help-seeking behaviour

Whether you're a business leader, HR professional or enthusiastic mental health champion, we hope this resource offers some valuable advice to support you in sharing lived experience in your own workplace.

Thanks to our BHP and Beyond Blue for their contribution to this resource.

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# *Four steps to sharing lived experience stories effectively*

## **Key messages:**

The way we speak about mental health matters. The narrative and very language we use can help to break the stigma.

## **Storytelling tips:**

While volunteers must all be free to tell their stories in their own individual way, there are ways of approaching storytelling that respect 'personal perspective'.

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**4 STEPS**  
to sharing  
lived experience  
stories effectively

## **Supporting the volunteer:**

The psychological safety of the volunteer telling their story must take priority at all times, with appropriate support put into place.

## **Who to involve in the process:**

Make sure a range of colleagues (leadership, HR, communications, line manager) are engaged in the process from the beginning to support the volunteer in telling their story.

# Step 1: Key messages

The way we talk about mental health matters. The very words we use can help to break down stigma by educating workforces on mental health, the impact it can have on a person, and how support can be sought to aid in recovery. Here are some key messages you could include in your own communications.

## ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

- Mental health issues are common and can significantly affect how a person thinks, behaves and interacts with other people.
- Like any other medical condition, you need ways to manage mental illness – these can range from medication and self-help, to talking therapies and CBT.
- Mental health issues are not a sign of weakness, and people should never feel ashamed to seek help.
- With more serious mental health issues, such as Generalised Anxiety Disorder, Depression, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Bi-Polar Disorder and Schizophrenia, you can't just 'snap out of it' or 'pull yourself together'. These are illnesses, and they usually require treatment.

## SEEKING HELP

- If you think you may have a mental health issue and want to take action, start by talking to someone you trust; keeping it to yourself only makes things worse. By talking about mental illness, we can help to raise awareness and reduce stigma.
- Help is always available, and it's really important to reach out as soon as you feel able.
- There's a whole range of mental health professionals and helplines that can offer advice and support if you're experiencing mental health issues.

## RECOVERY

- There is no one proven way that people recover from a period of poor mental health. However, there are a range of effective treatments and health professionals who can help on the road to recovery.
- What works is different for everybody. The important thing is finding the right option for you.
- There are also lots of things that people with mental health issues can do to help themselves recover and stay well.

# Step 2: Storytelling tips

While volunteers must all be free to tell their stories in their own individual way, there are ways of approaching storytelling that respect the 'personal perspective'.

## This tends to mean that the storyteller:

- 1** Will have first-hand experience of mental illness, or be linked in some way with other people who have experienced a mental health condition, or the associated mental health community/movement
- 2** Will not automatically and unquestioningly use the language of psychiatric experts – instead reflecting on whether or not this language makes the best sense of their own experience
- 3** Will avoid making themselves look good by making other people who have experienced mental health conditions look bad (e.g. by pitting one diagnosis against another, or making it seem as if they worked harder than other people to 'recover')
- 4** Will not pretend that there is a magic wand, or simplify a complicated situation to inspire others
- 5** Will not adopt judgmental and divisive language such as 'high functioning'/'low functioning', 'dependent' etc. unless there is a very good reason for doing so



# Step 3: Supporting the storyteller

Offering support to the person volunteering their story is critical. You'll find some top tips for how to do this below.

## PRIOR TO SHARING THEIR STORY

- It's important that the volunteer is "in a good place" in terms of managing their mental health condition, with a strong support network in place. This may include family, friends or a healthcare professional.
- Prior to confirming their participation as a volunteer, they should meet with your HR team (or equivalent) to confirm this.
- It's also important to ensure their story is appropriate to share, and aligns with the key messages and storytelling tips set out above.

## DURING THE PROCESS OF TELLING THE STORY

- Consider that an emotional reaction could be triggered for the person sharing their story.
- It's recommended that the first time this is done, a supportive internal representative is present (i.e. line manager, HR representative) or external representative (family member, doctor). This individual should be identified in consultation with the storyteller ahead of time.

## AFTER SHARING THEIR STORY

- It's possible that co-workers will wish to engage with the volunteer once the story has been shared. It's important that the storyteller considers this, and that adequate support is in place. This should include potential strategies, which are listed on the next page.
- You should also consider that someone reading the story may be triggered, so always include information on support at the end of the story.

# Other considerations



## Key elements to consider prior to the volunteer sharing their story

- 1** Ensure the volunteer is clear on the purpose of the storytelling, and how their story is to be used.
- 2** Ensure the volunteer has obtained the support of their line manager.
- 3** Ensure signed consent from the volunteer is obtained.
- 4** It is recommended that the volunteer discuss the sharing of their story with their family or healthcare professional.
- 5** Ensure an EAP or alternative support is available to both the volunteer, and any colleagues who may be triggered by the story.

# Step 4: Who to involve in the process

## In telling their story:

It's important to seek storytellers from different organisational levels, functions, operations, and geographies who are willing to share their personal experience of mental health. This helps to reach and connect with a wider group of colleagues by ensuring there are relatable characteristics or existing relationships between the storyteller and audience.

If the concept of talking openly about mental health is new to an organisation, it can be particularly powerful to begin with a senior volunteer, such as a C-Suite representative, who can share their lived experience story. This can have the effect of 'giving permission' to other employees to speak more openly about their own mental health.

If this isn't possible, try to ensure that the volunteer receives visible support from at least one senior leader during the process of sharing their story.

## In communicating the story:

If you have access to communication specialists, involve them in the process early on. They can support in helping to build the communication materials (in line with the guidance set out above), and advise on the best way to disseminate this within the organisation.

For some companies it may work better to share a video, and for others a written story. Above all, it's important that the comfort of the volunteer takes priority (for example, they may not want to be filmed).



# About MindForward Alliance

MindForward Alliance was created to support organisations to build mentally healthy workplaces where both people and business thrive. As a non-profit, we provide impartial expertise, insight and guidance, as well as the latest data to help businesses build more resilient, high-performing teams and sustainable, inclusive cultures. We partner with businesses to assess their approach to workplace wellbeing, identify the challenges their people face, and design targeted, evidence-based action plans that drive measurable impact. Our expertise and guidance ensure efforts are focused where they matter most – are always informed by best practice and are aligned with evidence-based standards.

## CONTACT US:

Please get in touch with us at [contact@mindforwardalliance.com](mailto:contact@mindforwardalliance.com) to discuss [membership](#), [workplace assessment](#), [training needs](#), [support with events](#) and/or sign our [Leadership Pledge](#).

