



YOUTH MOVE NATIONAL™ PEER CENTER ISSUE BRIEF

What is Strategic Sharing?

INTRODUCTION

“Strategic sharing is a method of telling your story safely and effectively to achieve a goal. Basically, it’s a process for sharing your lived experience with others in a manner that keeps you safe from negative experiences, and that teaches you how to share in a way that will help you reach the end result that you are aiming for.”

- Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health and the Research and Training Center for Pathways to Positive Futures, 2012

Can you relate?

You’re meeting someone new and getting to know them a little bit, asking questions and sharing a little bit about yourselves. You notice the other person is sharing a lot of personal, intimate details about certain situations, and you start to feel a little uncomfortable with how in-depth the information goes. Maybe it’s about personal family details, past relationships, trauma, political or religious topics, or other subjects that may be better shared once you get to know someone else.

This scenario demonstrates someone who could have shared in a more appropriate manner for the situation they were in.

The stories and experiences of youth peer support providers are valuable and essential to fostering connection, especially when they are used strategically. When sharing strategically, someone who is speaking can feel a sense of accomplishment by connecting with their audience, and the audience is more likely to feel comfortable- welcoming the message being delivered. The audience and the speaker have a chance to walk away feeling more connected. This type of sharing can be therapeutic or healing for some. When we share part of our story, risk is involved, both for ourselves and those hearing our story. Either party can end up feeling uncomfortable, disconnected, or activated (acutely reminded of past trauma).

The Youth MOVE National TA Center is a program of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) under grant 1H79SM082658-01 and, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Interviews, policies, and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of SAMHSA or HHS.

Sharing in Peer Support Settings

Everyone engages in strategic sharing (even when they don't realize it), but not everyone gets it right every time. Youth peer support providers have the opportunity to be some of the most compelling storytellers. They can use storytelling to support others in their path of self-discovery, growth and healing. By building bridges crafted on a foundation of thoughtful connection and mutuality, peer support providers have the chance to master the art of strategic sharing.

How to “Get it Right”

“When a Youth Peer Support Provider talks about their lived experience, they only share parts of their story that are relevant to the young person, and do so in a way that helps to advocate with and/or for the youth, make them feel like they are not alone, or show them that there is hope.”

– [Pathways RTC Achieve My Plan](#)

Most people, including youth peer support providers, do not get strategic sharing right the first time or even the second time; it takes practice. Before sharing their story, a youth peer support provider might ask themselves:

- “What is the ***purpose*** of me sharing this?”
- “What is the ***benefit*** to me sharing this thing at this time?”
- “What do I believe this young person ***will gain*** in hearing this?”



When working with young people, sharing with purpose and intent goes a long way. Knowing and understanding the relationship with a young person helps determine how peer providers approach sharing. *Take a look at the scenario below to get a better sense of this.*

Brian is Sam's youth peer support provider and today they are working on completing a college application together. Brian notices that Sam is behaving differently than usual and asks if everything is alright. Sam responds by saying "the other day my friends asked me if I wanted to have a drink with them. I've never drank alcohol before and I said no, but what if they ask again? I don't want to get into any trouble. My mom would flip out!"



Brian's Response 1: "I remember the first time I drank. It actually wasn't all that bad, but you shouldn't try it if you don't want to because it could make the experience unpleasant."

Sam: *Pauses* Looks over and says "oh....well, maybe it's okay to try drinking...at least one time."



Brian Response 2: "That's a really tough situation to be in. It's hard when people you care about put you in that position. When I've been asked to do things that might upset my parents, or are new to me, I try to weigh out the pros and cons and see if it's actually worth it. I also like to ask myself, 'is this something that is going to benefit me?' Whatever doesn't benefit my wellbeing, I usually just toss aside."

Sam: "Hmm, yeah, that makes sense. But I have no idea where to start."

Brian: Would you like to make a list of pros and cons together?

Brian's initial response is honest and on topic; however, it does not inspire hope or demonstrate personal growth. Brian's second response has strategic sharing in mind. In his second response, Brian affirms that Sam's situation is tricky. He also goes on to share that he's been in similar situations that may have been new to him or upset his parents. Finally, he offers a strategy that has been helpful to him. When Sam replies positively but is a little unsure, Brian offers to try writing a pros and cons list together.

Even though Brian didn't directly express going through the same exact situation, he found the similarities in their struggles and built trust by keeping the topic about Sam. Sam felt that Brian was genuine and trustworthy. He also heard that Brian wouldn't push him one way or the other; Sam could make his own decision. This built a sense of safety and paved the way for Sam to seek more connection and support from Brian. Strategic sharing is a good strategy for harm reduction and co-creating safety!

"When I first started working with my peer mentor, I thought, "What a joke...", but then I found out that they were just like me. They knew things about my life because they had also gone through it... they didn't force me to do anything I didn't want...and I could be myself around them"

- Geo, Youth Served

There's Always Room for Improvement

One way to get better at strategic sharing is to practice. Moments that put youth peer support providers on the spot can be challenging. Sharing part of your own struggles can be done in a context that provides strategies, tools, and possibilities. Thinking about these strategies before or reflecting after conversations can help peer providers improve their strategic sharing skills over time. More importantly, youth will leave meetings feeling confident and connected to their peer provider. It's not necessary for a youth peer to have everything from their story memorized or planned out, but practicing how you talk about important moments of your story ahead of time can help to feel prepared and grounded.



When practicing strategic sharing:

- Create a sense of connection based on empathy
- Access trainings to improve and practice skills
- Rehearse and practice sharing your story on your own
- Use journaling and writing to practice your story

Good strategic sharing often leads to more questions and conversation. It is okay if a youth peer support provider is concerned that something they shared will prompt follow-up questions they may not be comfortable sharing at that moment. Strategic sharing is also about sharing in a way that makes you feel safe, so consider what parts of your story you are and are not comfortable sharing. That comfort may change over time, so revisiting what you are willing to share is important.

Strategic sharing is different when communicating with different audiences. Youth peer providers may, on occasion, also share their story with colleagues such as clinicians, family members, or program staff.

Keep in Mind



Some people may not understand why youth peer support is so important, or how it works. Don't feel discouraged! This is why it is important to consider **who** you are sharing your story with. Some guiding questions to use when crafting a story or message for your listeners may be:

- “What does this person need to know about my experiences?”
- “What unique wisdom or experience do I have to share with this young person that will ultimately support them?”
- Am I adjusting my language, tone, or formality to match my

“What we do is unique... because I know for sure that the youth out here ain’t listening to no teacher... They come to me because they trust me and I know what it’s like to be facing what they’re going through. When I talk about... everything that has happened to me, it’s like a lightbulb clicks and we get it. We are on the same page.”

- *Cristina, Youth Peer Support Provider*

Strategic sharing is a nuanced skill set that requires passion, skill, and vulnerability. You can learn more about strategic sharing and find tools to help you hone your skills here:

Resources

- **Tip Sheet:** [#Things2Consider: Strategic Sharing](#)
- **Workbook:** [Strategic Sharing Workbook](#)
- **Videos - Young Adult Peer Mentoring:** [Sharing Your Story](#) & [Professional Boundaries](#)
- **Toolkits:** [National Resource Center for Youth Development: Strategic Sharing](#) & [Respect Youth Stories: A Toolkit for Advocates to Ethically Engage in Youth Justice Storytelling](#)
- **Article:** [Why is Strategic Sharing Important to Me?](#)