



Sharing Your Story With Dignity and Purpose

By All Rise and the National Treatment Court Alumni Association



Introduction

Stories are all around us. They have the power to deepen our understanding of the human experience, build empathy, change hearts and minds, break down barriers, and advance policy. Stories of recovery are especially important, particularly recovery aided by treatment courts (adult, juvenile, family, impaired driving, tribal healing to wellness, and veterans treatment courts). These stories encourage others to seek treatment, demonstrate that recovery is possible, help improve access to treatment, and support justice reform that better serves individuals impacted by substance use and mental health disorders.



Family treatment court graduation in Washington, D.C.

How can we determine when the time is right to share our personal stories? In what ways should we present and share our stories? Which aspects should we disclose, and which should we keep private? Moreover, as our recovery progresses, how should our stories grow and change accordingly? These are crucial questions to consider. This guide will assist you in answering these questions and will help you:

- Understand that your story will make a difference
- Understand your audience
- Determine when you are ready to share
- Write and structure your story
- Deliver an effective, engaging speech
- Work with the media
- Identify sensitivities to consider
- Access resources to get you started, such as a sharing your story worksheet and recovery story examples

Your Story Will Make a Difference

A story about a person's journey through treatment court and into a life in recovery can inspire hope, encourage others to seek help, reduce stigma, and encourage support for treatment courts and community-based recovery resources.



Sharing my story to an audience has helped me reflect on my own journey, acknowledge my progress, and celebrate my victories.

Kylee Francis-Fowler, 2003 healing to wellness court graduate

Who Might Want to Hear Your Story

There are many groups and organizations that can benefit from hearing the story of a treatment court graduate. Some possible audiences might include:

- A civic organization like the Rotary Club, chamber of commerce, or another group
- A religious organization
- Any community group that would like to learn more about substance use and mental health recovery
- A conference or meeting for treatment or legal professionals
- A conference or meeting for people in recovery
- A graduation ceremony for a treatment court
- Media outlets
- Elected officials who decide policy and funding for programs, such as a county board or commission, state committee or legislature, or governor
- A blog or podcast that shares information about recovery, inspiring stories, or local news

Sharing your story can be inspiring and give you renewed confidence. ***“Sharing my story to an audience has helped me reflect on my own journey, acknowledge my progress, and celebrate my victories. Getting to verbalize my experiences and emotions has given me a deeper understanding of myself and lets others know a little about me.”*** –Kylee Francis-Fowler, 2003 healing to wellness court graduate; member, NTCAA Board of Directors; peer recovery advocate, Penobscot Nation Healing to Wellness Court

How To Know You Are Ready

“I had to think a long time about whether I was ready to share my story. It was a big leap of faith, and I was careful not to rush into it.” –Abby Frutchey, 2006 Washington County, Maine treatment court graduate; member, All Rise Board of Directors; co-founder and vice chair, NTCAA

Sharing your story is not a decision to take lightly.

Only you can know when you are ready to share your story. Some people can take this step within a few months of treatment court graduation. They feel grounded in their recovery and comfortable talking about their experiences. For others, it may be a few years before they are ready, if ever. You should never feel forced or coerced into sharing. This is your decision, and it is perfectly acceptable to decline opportunities to share.

You may also discover that sharing your story takes a mental and/or emotional toll; after sharing your story, you may need a break from public speaking to focus on your recovery. This is totally normal. Your recovery should always take priority. It’s also acceptable to share different aspects of your story in different settings. What and how you share is your decision, and you do not have to have any guilt associated with what you share.



A graduate of the Harris County, Texas SOBER Court shares their story on graduation day.



If sharing my story of how my addiction has equipped me to help others and empower people, I will now gladly share my story with pride!

Ron Wilson, 2010 adult drug court graduate

“Initially, I was very hesitant to share my story. There was a lot of shame associated with where my addiction to drugs and alcohol had taken me. Then one day, my relationship with and faith in God helped me understand that He allowed me to go through those things to help shape me into who I am today. If sharing my story of how my addiction has equipped me to help others and empower people, I will now gladly share my story with pride!” –Ron Wilson, 2010 Anchorage Alaska Felony Drug Court Graduate; treasurer, NTCAA

Writing Your Story

Many treatment court graduates are accustomed to sharing their personal stories about addiction and recovery within the boundaries of a support group or counseling setting. Sharing your story in public through a speech or media interview is very different. You typically do not have as much time as you do in a support group, so your narrative will have to be condensed or shortened, and it will be important to write it down and practice beforehand.

A media interview is not as structured as a speech, because you respond to questions. Typically, a reporter will take excerpts from your answers to the questions asked. Even if you are scheduled for a press interview and not a speech, you will still benefit from having your story written out beforehand.

Special Sensitivities to Consider

“I think it’s important to not include information about other people unless they know you are including it. When I am going to include details about my family, I make sure that they know beforehand. I’ve talked about my father being an alcoholic and the impact it had on my family. My father is not here, but my mother needed to know that I was planning to share that information.”

–Abby Frutchey, 2006 Washington County, Maine treatment court graduate; member, All Rise Board of Directors; co-founder and vice chair, NTCAA

It is a brave thing to share your story. With the internet and social media available today, stories have staying power. Unlike what you share in a therapy or support group setting, a speech or press interview is not confidential.

Anything you say in a speech or press interview should be something you are comfortable sharing in public and with being read, watched, or listened to by many people for the foreseeable future. Your story will not just be received by other treatment court participants or people in recovery; if it is on social media or in publications, it will be free for anyone and everyone to see.

While it is important to consider all these things and the people in your life, your story of recovery and how you got there is part of who



A veterans treatment court graduate shares his emotional story on graduation day.

you are today. You should not spend much time worrying about others' reactions to your story. Unless your story involves the personal details of others, you should tell your story in the way you feel most comfortable.

- **About families** – Families often feel immense pride in your successful journey into recovery and are supportive of efforts to educate the community about treatment options. But some families may be uncomfortable by what they consider to be too much information being made public about your experience with addiction. Sometimes family members are not fully aware of the circumstances you were in before entering treatment. They may not know the charges you faced in court or why. Some of the information a person in recovery might be accustomed to sharing in a support group may surprise or shock family members. If you're going to share your story publicly, it's important for your family to know what you are sharing and be comfortable with it. If your story includes family members, it's important

to discuss what you plan to share beforehand. After all, they may have been profoundly affected by you and your journey. Talking with them in advance about what you want to share publicly is key.

- **About treatment court staff** – What you say about treatment court in an interview or speech reflects on the work of treatment court staff in the present, even if you graduated a decade ago. It's important to include information that is accurate and up to date.

Talk with the staff about court activities and keep the lines of communication open. They can be a valuable resource for you. Treatment court staff might be able to help you structure your story or offer ways to involve other people in supporting the court. For example, perhaps a new alumni group has formed, the court is seeking peer mentors, or donations from the community could help provide presents for children of treatment court participants during the holidays.

- **About others in your life** – Attitudes about addiction and recovery have improved vastly in the last decade, to the point that you should feel comfortable sharing your story without negative consequences. However, your life has many touchpoints that could be affected by your decision to share your story publicly, and you should prepare each accordingly. As you are making your decision, consider individuals in these and other categories who might be surprised by hearing your story:
 - Close friends
 - Current and future employers
 - Your landlord
 - Those with whom you do business

Structuring Your Story

It's important to lend focus to your story by writing it down. The act of writing your story can help you think through the details and sum up your experience. Writing can jog your memory and help you consider any sensitivities as noted above. You will want to take time to reflect on your experiences and craft the words and phrases you will use to describe them.

First, take the time to write your entire story. Don't worry about length; just get it down. In the back of this publication is a worksheet to

help get you started. Once you have your story written, you will find that it's much easier to adapt it to fit the audience and the time available. A second worksheet at the end of this document will help you identify your key messages before a speaking event or interview.

An easy way to put together your story is to think about the following five elements:

1. The introduction – what do you want the audience to know about you?
2. Your life now in recovery after graduating from treatment court
3. How you came to treatment court
4. What happened to you in treatment court
5. An ending

1. Introduction – Sometimes we assume that we must introduce ourselves as someone in recovery. After all, this is how many stories in a recovery setting begin. But this is your story, and you get to decide how to introduce yourself. Consider introducing yourself from a position of strength by talking about who you are today and what you are most proud of. You might be a parent, a grandparent, a sibling, a leader, a responsible employee, an author, an entrepreneur, a student, or any other number of identifiers not based on



Recovery does not happen in a courtroom; it happens in communities. I am a firm believer in this. Treatment court was the bridge to a community I had no idea existed.

— **Abby Frutchey**, 2006 adult drug court graduate

addiction or recovery. This will get the audience's attention and build your confidence. For example:

“Good afternoon; my name is Dina, and I am a proud mom, an advocate for treatment and recovery, and a grateful treatment court graduate.”

“I remember the first time I was advised to start my story differently. I was actually offended! For years, I had introduced myself the same way, by saying I was an addict in long-term recovery. But as I thought about it, I realized I am so many things. And why shouldn't I get to choose how the people I am speaking to view me? It became a source of strength to start my story with who I really am.” –Deena Davis, 2010 family treatment court graduate; secretary, NTCAA; certified peer support specialist

2. Your life now – Your introduction will lead into your life now in recovery. Expand on the positive things in your life. For example:

- a) What are you most proud of? It may be your relationship with family, your education, your job, or being of service to your community or others in recovery.
- b) Paint a picture of the differences between your life experiences now and the life you had before going to treatment court.
- c) What are your plans for the future? Are you in school? Saving to buy a home? Starting a business? Taking a vacation?
- d) Consider a lead-in to the next section such as, “None of this would be possible without treatment court...”



Treatment court alumni take the stage during a celebration of recovery at RISE22 in Nashville, Tennessee.



Recovery continues to empower me and place me on platforms I never dreamed I'd be on. I want to talk about those accomplishments and use them to bring hope to those just starting out.

Deena Davis, 2010 family treatment court graduate

3. Getting into treatment court – This section should be brief. For many people in recovery, it can be more comfortable to talk about the difficult times that preceded getting help. While the audience needs to know what you have been through, the most important part is where you are today. You do not need to go into all the details of your life in active addiction. Instead, consider detailing one experience that you are comfortable sharing to paint a picture of life before recovery.

4. During treatment court – Next, talk about what happened to you in treatment court. Keep the story centered on your experience, and consider highlighting how treatment court differed from other interactions with the justice system you may have had. You may want to:

- a) Describe what treatment felt like for you
- b) Talk about why it worked
- c) Talk about the court team and how they interacted with you
- d) Discuss the services you received

5. Ending – Close with a sentence or two that sums up your experience.

- a) This might be as simple as, “Without treatment court, I would not be here today.”
- b) This is also where you would make your ask. For example: “I am living proof that treatment courts work, and I ask that we continue to support/fund this lifesaving program.”

Revisit your story periodically. We all evolve, and your story will change as your life blossoms and new things become important to you.

“I look at my story as a living, breathing, document. Although I never want to forget where I came from, recovery continues to empower me and place me on platforms I never dreamed I'd be on. I want to talk about those accomplishments and use them to bring hope to those just starting out.” –Deena Davis, 2010 family treatment court graduate; secretary, NTCAA; certified peer support specialist

Your Audience

Think about the audience you'll be speaking to. What two or three things do you want them to know when they walk away from your speech or interview? Is there an action you want the audience to take after hearing you speak? Do you want them to talk to others who might need help? Do you want them to feel encouraged?

It's important to consider the age of the audience you are speaking to, as well as their interests. Find out what you can about your audience in advance of sharing your story, and adapt it as needed. It's also important to empathize with your audience and recognize the situation they are in.

“Knowing your audience is a critical part of sharing your story. How and what I would share to my peers in recovery is not exactly the same as what I would share to my state legislature or the press. When you prepare to share, know your intended purpose. What are you trying to influence or change? That will help guide your message.” –Abby Frutchey, 2006 Washington County, Maine treatment court graduate; member, All Rise Board of Directors; co-founder and vice chair, NTCAA

Tips for Polishing Your Delivery

Be yourself – You want to let your personality shine. It may be tempting to feel as though you have to speak a certain way, but you will be most effective and compelling by remaining your authentic self. Be honest about your journey.

Stay relaxed – Do something that calms your nerves if you need to. You could go for a walk, say a prayer, listen to music, take a shower, go for a drive, meditate, or exercise. Find what works for you.

Rehearse, but don't memorize – Do not try to memorize your entire story word for word. Learn the key points and highlights, but do not commit what you have written to memory. All good public speakers benefit from practicing before delivering their speech. Practice sharing your story with the help of a friend. You can record yourself and watch the video to see how you look and how your words carry. If you are particularly shy or nervous, visualize yourself delivering your speech successfully by dressing in the clothes you plan to wear and practicing in front of a mirror.

Arrive early – If giving a speech, plan extra time to get to the location for the speech or interview. Being late and rushing can make you nervous.



Your message will change slightly depending on your audience. When you are speaking to your recovery peers, one important message they should walk away with is having a sense of hope; that help is available, and recovery is possible.

–**Sherry Foust**, 2000 recovery court graduate

Go slow – When you're telling your story, it's easy to get wrapped up in trying to go fast so you get through all of your talking points. Slow down; concentrate on what you're saying and how the audience is reacting to it.

Accept imperfection – Don't get upset if you don't deliver your remarks exactly as planned. No one except you will know if you deviated from your planned remarks. Even the most seasoned public speakers sometimes struggle to deliver their remarks the way they intend.

Dress comfortably – Wear clothes that make you feel confident. Pick out what you will wear in advance. Solid colors usually look best on camera, if you are doing a television interview or know your speech will be recorded.

Watch others – ***“Listening to the shared experiences of others and how they share their stories provides the speaker with additional guidance when preparing to share their story.”*** –Sherry Foust, 2000 Mecklenburg County, North Carolina recovery court graduate; membership chair, NTCAA; retired recovery case coordinator

Prioritize your own recovery – *“Remember, your work is not your recovery. Your recovery needs to be separate from the recovery work you do. Do your best to find meetings and support separate from those you work with and serve. It is true we do not recover in isolation. We recover in community; however, recovery is at the same time a very personal journey. Nurture it; your work is not your recovery.”* –Michael Mooradian, 2003 Anchorage Felony Drug Court graduate; lead trainer, NTCAA; substance use counselor

“Being able to encourage others to get connected by hosting sober activities in my community gives me a sense of purpose and helps me be a part of something bigger.” –Kylee Francis-Fowler, 2003 healing to wellness court graduate; member, NTCAA Board of Directors; peer recovery advocate, Penobscot Nation Healing to Wellness Court

The bottom line: Be honest about your journey – *“It’s important to know that your story is powerful and so is your recovery. Remember to consider what you are sharing and how it*

might affect you afterward. We lead by example, and that includes self-care being paramount to wellness in life. When you get up to speak, remind yourself to stand with pride, chin straight, knowing you are about to make a difference in someone’s life just by being you.” –Carlos Gonzales, 2001 1st Judicial District Adult Drug Court graduate; chair, NTCAA; licensed alcohol and drug addiction counselor

The most compelling stories are authentic. Be you; that is enough.

Messaging and the Media

Reporters and audiences can seize upon one element in your story and focus on it. So be careful about even the smallest details you plan to share. Also, be sure that what you say won’t hurt people you care about.

Be careful with your phrasing. Sometimes fewer details can get the point across while avoiding calling out anyone specific. For example, instead of saying, “I used to steal money



National Treatment Court Alumni Association leadership attend a meeting during RISE23 in Houston, Texas.



Mother and daughter after sharing their story at RISE19 in Washington, D.C.

from my grandmother’s purse to support my addiction,” say, “I used to steal money from people who loved me.” This subtle change prevents unnecessary attention from being brought to your grandmother while accurately highlighting the challenges you faced.

Pick one great detail and help the audience visualize it. Think about the experience in treatment court when things started to change for you. How did you feel? How was it different from every other experience in court you have had? When you looked at the faces of the team, what did you see? As you progressed through the program phases, how did your daily life start to change?

When giving an interview, a reporter may ask a question you are uncomfortable answering. It is perfectly acceptable to let them know that you are not comfortable talking about a certain subject. They may also ask you to

comment on something you have no expertise in or ask you to represent all treatment courts. In these situations, it is often helpful to pivot back to your own story. For example:

Reporter: “Some people argue that treatment courts are too lenient and not as effective as jail. What do you say about that?”

Alumni: “I can speak to my experience. Treatment court saved my life and the lives of many in my community. I would not be speaking with you today if I had not had the opportunity to participate in treatment court, and I am grateful for it every day.”

It is also true that the person interviewing may not be familiar with person-first or recovery-focused language, and they may say things in their story that you may or may not have said or meant. Be sure to communicate clearly to prevent incorrect translation by the interviewer.

Resources to Help

Stories by treatment court graduates



NTCAA



Share your story: Digital storytelling guide (SAMHSA)



About All Rise

All Rise is the leading training, membership, and advocacy organization for advancing justice system responses to individuals with substance use and mental health disorders. All Rise impacts every stage of the justice system, from first contact with law enforcement to corrections and reentry and works with public health leaders to improve treatment outcomes for justice-involved individuals. Through its four divisions—the Treatment Court Institute, Impaired Driving Solutions, Justice for Vets, and the Center for Advancing Justice—All Rise provides training and technical assistance at the local and national level, advocates for federal and state funding, and collaborates with public and private entities. All Rise works in every U.S. state and territory and in countries throughout the world.

All Rise has been at the forefront of justice system transformation for nearly three decades. As the leader of the treatment court movement, All Rise helps prove that a combination of evidence-based treatment and accountability is the most effective justice system response to individuals with substance use and mental health disorders. All Rise has trained over 800,000 public health and public safety professionals, and the number of treatment courts in the United States has grown to more than 4,000, helping more than 1500,000 people access treatment each year.

About The National Treatment Court Alumni Association

The National Treatment Court Alumni Association is a 501(c)3 membership organization, founded to expand the access for treatment courts to the valuable lived experience of treatment court alumni; connect alumni from across the country to engage in fellowship, leadership, and advocacy opportunities to bring forward the powerful voice of treatment court graduates; and to support alumni group development and sustainability to meet the needs for extended recovery support for all treatment court graduates nationwide.

The organization was conceptualized in Washington, D.C., at RISE20, when a small group of alumni from around the nation gathered with a desire to support other graduates across the country. Through hard work and dedication, NTCAA is paving the way so that treatment court alumni have a seat at the table.

Membership is open to treatment court graduates, professionals working in court programs or related fields, and allies who align with and want to support the mission of NTCAA.

My Story Worksheet

Name

Start off on a positive note by introducing yourself from a point of strength using an identifying word or phrase. Are you a mother? Father? Grandmother? Grandfather? Daughter? Son? Sister? Brother? Worker? Giver? Partner? Counselor? Practitioner? Living proof of second chances? Student? Graduate? Learner? Reliable leader in the workplace? Introduce yourself with a powerful statement.

I am a

What is life like in recovery?

How has recovery transformed your life? What are you most proud of? This is your chance to talk about your accomplishments.

What led you to treatment court?

Describe how you got to treatment court. What was your life like? What did it feel like to be you during that time period?

What happened while you were in the treatment court program?

Describe what treatment court was like for you. How did you feel? Why did it work for you?

Conclusion

Conclude by returning to life today. Sum up your experience with a powerful statement.

(Pick one and fill in the blank or come up with your own way to sum up your experience.)

Treatment court made a difference in my life because _____

Because of treatment court, I can _____

Example

"My name is Aaron Shaw, and I am an NTCAA board member, an Iraq War veteran, and a proud father. I am a grateful recovering heroin addict who has learned how to live life again through the 12 steps and peer support. Active recovery has given me the courage to live out loud and give back what was so graciously given to me. In 2016, after many years of addiction, I ended up in the Indianapolis Veterans Treatment Court with a long list of charges and a few high-speed chases through the city. I was broken down, completely lost, and sick and tired of being sick and tired. Thankfully, treatment court taught me patience, persistence, accountability, and how to trust in a team. It also improved my ability to be resilient and stay sober through difficult situations with my head held high. After graduation, I returned to be a veteran mentor and eventually became the mentor coordinator for the program that saved my life. Today, I look for ways to improve as a father, find growth in recovery, and am blessed with the opportunity to give back to the community as the CEO of a nonprofit that focuses on serving veterans all over the city. Thanks to the veterans treatment court, I found my calling in life working with others. I live by two rules: love God and love people!"

Aaron Shaw, 2019 Indianapolis Veterans Treatment Court graduate; board member, NTCAA

Messaging Box

A simple messaging box is a handy way to help organize your thoughts and identify your key messages in a succinct way. This can be useful for media interviews or speeches.

PRIMARY MESSAGE

I am a dedicated parent and productive member of my community because of the recovery I achieved in treatment court. We must ensure that more people have access to treatment and recovery services in our community.

Introduction

I am a parent, small business owner, advocate, and person in long-term recovery.

Life in Recovery

I am happy, healthy, and dedicated to giving back to my community.

Before Treatment Court

Addiction nearly took everything from me. I tried so hard to change but I could not do it on my own.

How it Helped

In treatment court, I found a team of people who really cared about me and wanted to help me succeed.

Conclusion/My Ask

I am living proof that treatment and recovery work. Investing in treatment will not only save lives but will make our community stronger and safer.



Graduation day at the 36th District Adult Drug Court in Detroit, Michigan. *Max Ortiz, Detroit News/Reprinted with permission.*



**Treatment
Court Institute**
↑

**Impaired
Driving Solutions**
↑

**Justice
for Vets**
↑

**Center for
Advancing Justice**
↑

This project was supported by Grant No. 2019-MU-BX-K005 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the SMART Office. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

Copyright © 2024, All Rise

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of All Rise (founded as the National Association of Drug Court Professionals).

Printed in the United States of America.

Treatment courts perform their duties without manifestation, by word or conduct, of bias or prejudice, including, but not limited to, bias or prejudice based on race, gender, national origin, disability, age, sexual orientation, language, or socioeconomic status.

All Rise

625 N. Washington Street
Suite 212
Alexandria, VA 22314

703.575.9400 phone
703.575.9402 fax

 facebook.com/allrise.org/

 x.com/_allrise_

 linkedin.com/company/weallrise/

 youtube.com/@AllRise_org

 allrise.org