



# Sharing Your Treatment Court Story: A Guide to Help You Prepare

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## INTRODUCTION

Sharing your treatment court story in a public way—at a treatment court graduation ceremony, at a community organization event, or with the news media—can be a challenging but rewarding experience. The purpose of this guide is to help you think about the audiences that might want to hear your story, assist you in constructing your story, help you think through the personal impacts of sharing, and provide tips on speech delivery and talking with the press.

### **Your story can make a difference**

Individual stories can be powerful. A story about a person's journey through treatment court and into a life in recovery can inspire hope, nudge others to seek help and encourage supporters and volunteers to assist the

treatment court program. Helping an audience understand how your life changed through treatment court can give that audience a greater appreciation of treatment courts and the thousands of people they have helped. Your story can make a difference in the lives of so many people.

## Who might want to hear your story

Community and civic organizations can benefit from hearing the story of a treatment court graduate. The news media may also report on or record your story, and share it with a broad audience. Some possible audiences might include:

- A civic organization like the Rotary Club, the chamber of commerce, or another group
- A religious organization
- Any community group that would like to learn more about addiction and recovery
- A conference or meeting for treatment and justice professionals
- A conference or meeting for people in recovery
- A graduation ceremony for a treatment court
- Media outlets
- A blog that publishes information about recovery, inspiring stories, or local news

Sharing your story can be inspiring and give you renewed confidence. “What has helped me the most, in trying to share my story, is being asked to share my story different places. It gives the people in drug court a glimpse of hope,” said Chelsea Carter, a treatment court graduate and treatment provider in West Virginia.

## How to know you are ready

Only you can know when you are prepared to share your story. Some people can take this step within a few months of treatment court graduation. They feel ready, are stable in their recovery, and are comfortable talking about their experiences. For others, it may be a few years before they are ready, if ever.

It’s not a decision to take lightly. “I had to think a long time in recovery to consider if I was ready to share my story,” said Abby Frutche, who graduated from a drug treatment court in Maine and is now a treatment provider. “It was a big leap of faith.”

## 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 from sharing it in a recovery or therapeutic setting. You typically do not have as much time as in a support group, so it will have to be condensed or shortened.

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

## Structuring your speech

It’s important to focus your story and write 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 carefully think through any sensitivities you need to consider. You will want to take time to reflect on your experiences and craft the words and phrases you will use to describe them.

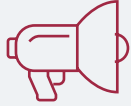
Once you have your story written, you will find that it’s much easier to adapt it to fit the audience and the time available.

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

1. The introduction
2. How you came to treatment court
3. What happened to you in treatment court
4. Your life now in recovery after graduating from treatment court
5. An ending



## STRUCTURING YOUR SPEECH



**1.**

**START OFF YOUR SPEECH WITH AN INTRODUCTION THAT GETS THE ATTENTION OF THE AUDIENCE.**

Describe 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 child, a grandparent, a sibling, a leader, a responsible employee, an author or something else. This will get the audience's attention and build your confidence.



**4.**

**DISCUSS WHAT YOUR LIFE IS LIKE NOW IN RECOVERY.**

Talk about the blessings and positive things in your life now. It is OK to include some of your struggles too. Recovery is a process that is lifelong, so it's OK to share (if you are comfortable) how you sustain your recovery now. You could highlight the differences between your life experiences now and the life you had before going to treatment court.



**2.**

**BEGIN YOUR STORY WITH HOW YOU CAME TO TREATMENT COURT.**

Talk about the circumstances that led you to treatment court, and what your life was like. Select an experience or experiences that you are comfortable sharing that show where your life was during that time period.

For many people in recovery, it can actually be more comfortable to talk about the difficult times that preceded getting help. While it is important for the audience to know what you have been through, the most important part is where you are today. You may not need to go into all of the gritty details of your addiction. Instead, think about one or two anecdotes that capture how difficult that part of your life was, and then transition into how things got better.



**5.**

**CLOSE WITH A SENTENCE OR TWO THAT SUMS UP YOUR EXPERIENCE.**

This might be as simple as "Thanks to treatment court, now I'm in college and the proud parent of a baby" or "My life is different today because I got help in coping with addiction. Now I have a job, a home, and a family."

When writing your story, try to keep sections 2, 3, and 4 about the same length. The "My Story" worksheet at the end of this guide will help you structure your story.

"People want to hear what helped you get over this and how you maintain that recovery. So think about the present. Don't focus so much on the past. Talk about what you do today to maintain recovery," said Patricia Sams, a DWI court graduate in Missouri who also runs a treatment court alumni support group.

What you say should support your own recovery. "If you talk about bad things, don't compensate for that by talking about things about your recovery. It leaves your brain in that fog state," said Sams. "There's some stress in that. The goal is to share your story in a positive way."



**3.**

**NOW TALK ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU IN TREATMENT COURT.**

You may want to emphasize themes of accountability. You may want to describe what treatment looked like for you, and talk about why it worked. You may want to talk about the staff and the judge and how they interacted with you. Keep the story centered on your experience.



## Your audience

Think about the audience you'll be speaking to. What 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 treatment and 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, and adapt your story as needed. "I adjust my story based on the audience. I can't be as blunt about my story when I'm sitting in front of a bunch of sixth graders. I have to water it down," said Carter.

It's also important to empathize with your audience and recognize the situation they are in. "Know that you are speaking to a group of people who have asked you to speak. You were once right in the seat of the people who need to hear your story. They could be suffering themselves or they could have a loved one who is dying from this," said Carter.

## Tips for polishing your delivery

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.

Be yourself. "Bring your own character out. Don't be so proper all the time. That's not always who you are. I have a southern twang, but I don't try to hide it. Be who you were meant to be," said Carter.

Keep your cool. Do something that calms your nerves if you need to. Some graduates say a prayer before they speak at an event. Others go for a walk the day before a speech, listen to music, take a shower, go for a drive, or take a bike ride. Do what works for you.

Rehearse if you need to. Some people benefit from practicing 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. Plan extra time to get to the location for the speech or interview. Rushing can make you nervous.

Slow down when you are telling your story. It is easy to get wrapped up in trying to go fast so you get through all of your talking points. Slow down and concentrate on what you are saying and how the audience is reacting to it.

Do not get upset if you don't deliver your remarks exactly as planned. No one will know if you deviated

from your planned remarks, except for you. Even the most seasoned public speakers sometimes struggle to deliver their remarks the way they intend.

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 share their stories and look for tips to help you. "Hearing other people's stories and hearing how they speak helps. Then you can think about how you talk," said Carter.

Do what you need to do to support your own recovery. "Helping in recovery is different than working your own recovery. I still have to work my recovery in order to maintain wellness in me. They are two different things. It's not just a story you are telling, it's a life you are still walking and dealing with," said Sams.

Be rigorously honest about your journey. "Whether you are speaking in front of five thousand people or six, the message is the same. It's only when you get outside of the reality of what you've gone through that you get into trouble. You can't lose, as long as you are honest," said Robert Williams, an adult drug court graduate in Washington, D.C.

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## Messaging nuances

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 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 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. "Be very detailed, but be brief," said Williams. Sometimes a great speaker can transport the audience to a moment in time by sharing one great detail. How does this work? Describe an ordinary object, a smell, a feeling, a sight, a taste, or a sound.

Williams uses great detail to engage the audience when describing his life during his addiction. He often compares the silence of coming home to an empty house during the height of his addiction to the sound of his child's excited footsteps greeting him after he achieved sobriety.



## Special sensitivities to consider

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 that you are comfortable sharing in public. “Be comfortable with anything you are putting out there. It’s not just seen by other drug court participants. It’s on social media, in publications, and free for everyone to see,” said Frutchev.

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 you are today. You should not spend much time worrying about others’ reactions to your recovery. 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 “too much” information being out in public about your experience with addiction. Sometimes family members are not fully aware of the circumstances the graduate was living in before entering treatment. They may not know the charges the graduate faced in court, or what the graduate did. 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 are going to share your story publicly, it is important for your family to know what you are sharing and be comfortable with it.

Your story might also include some of your family members. After all, they may have been profoundly affected by you. Talking with them in advance about what you want to share publicly is key.

“I think it’s important to not include information about other people unless they know you are including it,” said Frutchev. “I wrote just a little bit about

my family, but I made sure that they knew. I 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.”

**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. Perhaps a new alumni group has formed, the court is seeking 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 in the United States have improved vastly in the last decade, to the point that you should feel comfortable sharing your story with no 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 appropriately if necessary. 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 who you do business with

## Resources to help

**Stories by treatment court graduates**

[www.ndci.org/resources/graduate-stories](http://www.ndci.org/resources/graduate-stories)

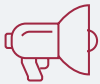
**Share your story: Digital storytelling guide (SAMHSA)**

[www.samhsa.gov/brss-tacs/recovery-support-tools/share-your-story](http://www.samhsa.gov/brss-tacs/recovery-support-tools/share-your-story)

# MY STORY

## Name

Start off on a positive note by introducing yourself from a point of strength. Are you a mother? Father? Grandmother? Grandfather? Daughter? Son? Sister? Brother? Worker? Giver? Partner? Counselor? Living proof of second chances? Student? Graduate? Learner? Reliable leader in the workplace?



**I am a** \_\_\_\_\_

(Introduce yourself from a point of strength with an identifying word or a few words.)



## 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?



## What happened after leaving treatment court?

Where did your life go after graduation from treatment court?  
What are you doing now to support your recovery and lead a productive and happy life?



## Summation

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

Helping others is part of my recovery because treatment court \_\_\_\_\_

Treatment court made a difference in my life because \_\_\_\_\_

Because of treatment court, I can \_\_\_\_\_



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