

TRAUMA RECOVERY CENTER SPEAKERS BUREAU

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Photograph by Ezme Kozuszek

“Sometimes it’s the scars that remind you that you survived.
Sometimes the scars tell you that you have healed.”

—Ashley D. Wallis

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Crime survivors who have recovered enough from their trauma to talk about their experiences have powerful messages to deliver. A speakers bureau is one way that survivors can feel that they have a voice, that what happened to them matters, and that they can be powerful advocates for other survivors. A speakers bureau is a partnership between survivors and providers that provides education and advocacy to audiences while empowering survivors to speak truth to power.

TRC Clinicians have seen many clients in later stages of recovery benefit from engaging in a “survivors mission” as advocates for violence prevention and the value of trauma-focused treatment. These survivors find that such advocacy helps them make meaning of their suffering. The overwhelming experience of trauma is transformed through the creation of a cohesive narrative of the impact the trauma has had on their lives.

POST TRAUMATIC GROWTH. Post traumatic growth (PTG) describes a psychological process experienced by some trauma survivors in which a survivor’s relationship to him or herself and the world is positively transformed following a traumatic event (Meichenbaum, Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). Survivors who describe PTG as part of the recovery process are changed by the event and can experience the pains and losses of the trauma, but they also report positive shifts in their sense of themselves and others (e.g., a renewed valuing of life or their own capacity or a mission to make change in the world).

A TRC speakers bureau can promote post traumatic growth and provide trauma survivors with support to advocate for trauma-sensitive services and violence prevention. Survivors have important and powerful experiences to share with policy makers, mental health and medical providers, law enforcement, and others in the community. Many trauma survivors have found it is meaningful to use their experiences to advocate for change and social justice and describe this advocacy as a vehicle for continued healing that extends the work done in therapy.

CHATT. Individual TRCs will find their own ways to create and use speakers bureaus. As a resource and potential inspiration, the following is a description of the UC San Francisco TRC’s Speakers Bureau, which is called CHATT (Communities Healing and Transforming Trauma). We also include some general observations and suggestions for making a speakers bureau effective.

In CHATT, members (participating clients) have the opportunity to put together and practice telling the story of how violence affected their lives. Being able to tell their story has helped these survivors feel more confident and capable.

CHATT members educate audiences about:

- ◁ The impact of violence on the speakers' own lives
- ◁ Facts about violence in the community
- ◁ The process of recovery
- ◁ The need for trauma-sensitive services

How CHATT Started

With some uncertainty, the UC San Francisco TRC asked several clients to speak at city council meetings about their experience of TRC services, because clinic funding was in jeopardy. The clients gave incredibly moving and persuasive testimony, and funding was restored. This happened several times over a period of years.

After speaking, the participating clients reported that they found speaking in these settings to be empowering. It was an opportunity to give back to the TRC and to help their communities. It helped to make meaning of their traumatic experiences. The speaking engagements also appeared to promote post-traumatic growth. Inspired by these experiences, TRC staff began the process of creating a speakers bureau for survivors of violent crime, and benefited from the support of the San Francisco Mental Health Association who had their own speakers bureau for mental health consumers. TRC also had the benefit of a proposed guide for creating a speakers bureau for trauma survivors (Blecker, 2010). TRC clinicians adapted these models, with feedback over time from CHATT members, into the trauma-informed model that it is today. TRC's who are considering creating a speakers bureau may find it useful to learn from CHATT's experience as they develop their own approach.

Benefits for Clients

Re-storying the trauma

The speakers bureau allows survivors to author their own story of the traumatic experience, including their story of recovery and healing, not just victimization (Fields et al., 2015). Speaking out can help trauma survivors construct a more healing narrative through seeing the self-transformed or transforming the world in some way. It gives voice to a previously-silenced experience. This process of re-storying has great potential to inspire audiences and it allows survivors to place the trauma story in the larger, ongoing story of their lives. CHATT speakers have reported that—

“It helps continue the healing process and take away self-stigma to be empowered again. I didn’t have to feel so bad about what happened.”

Community building

The experience of surviving trauma is often isolating. Learning to reengage with others is an important part of the recovery process after trauma. Establishing a speakers bureau helps to break isolation by creating a healing community of survivors. At the UC San Francisco TRC, having a “social space” for trauma-telling has been vitally important for CHATT speakers.

“Knowing there are others who have survived trauma ... gives hope/a sense of community.”

—A CHATT Speaker

Restoring agency and a sense of competency

As trauma removes power and control from survivors, the CHATT speakers bureau model emphasizes the restoring of survivors’ agency. Maximizing speaker’s choice is therefore another key feature. This includes allowing speakers to determine whether and where they wish to speak. CHATT speakers are supported to regularly assess their level of anxiety about speaking and readiness to speak and to let this guide the process for them. This allows speakers to keep their healing process at the center of their participation in the speakers bureau. Eliciting speakers’ “dream audiences” (i.e., groups they most want to speak out to) is another way to gain input from the group.

The speakers bureau provides an opportunity for survivors to practice telling their story. This helps to increase public speaking skills and gives voice to a silenced experience, providing a sense of competency.

“Every time I speak out I feel stronger for having done so.”

—A CHATT Speaker

Containment strategies

Speaking about trauma has great potential for triggering both speakers and audiences. With this in mind, the CHATT speakers bureau integrates strategies to help survivor-speakers speak safely about their experiences. This includes storybuilding guidelines that

limit trauma detail, a strong focus on self-care, and time in each meeting to practice and strengthen affect regulation skills.

Starting a Speakers Bureau

Who Is Involved in a Speakers Bureau?

CHATT consists of 10 to 15 speakers and at least two TRC Clinicians who act as guides and facilitators for speakers bureau events and meetings. TRC Clinicians hold annual trainings for newly recruited members; they also host monthly Speaking Support Meetings.

Speakers undergo two 3-hour training sessions, where they receive support and guidance from both TRC Clinicians and current speakers bureau members. During training, speakers begin preparing their personal stories, detailing the impact of the trauma on their lives.

Protocol for selecting speakers

In order to protect vulnerable clients, clinicians should evaluate the appropriateness of a potential participant and ensure that they are ready to be in CHATT before inviting them to join the speakers bureau. Although a speakers bureau benefits the community by providing education, and may benefit the agency by building support, the primary priority is that participation benefits the clients.

Potential speakers are dealing with profound losses. They will not always exhibit all of the positive indicators listed below. These items are meant to suggest a way of considering where clients might be in their healing, not as a checklist of criteria for where they should be. For many individuals, speaking out becomes a pathway for getting to a place of greater healing.

Have they integrated their trauma into their personal narrative?

Of course, this narrative is never entirely completed. New stressors and different life stages will bring the trauma experience back into the forefront for all survivors.

- ◁ Have they developed, at least to some extent, a cohesive narrative in which the trauma experience is assimilated into their life story?

- ◁ How dominant are sensory images of the trauma, and how likely are they to experience significant re-experiencing symptoms when talking about the trauma?
- ◁ Do they have room for complexity in their narrative—vulnerability and strength, bad and good?

Have they begun to make meaning of their experience?

Although survivors are still likely to ask “Why did this happen?”, they have integrated their experience into something larger.

- ◁ Have they learned that they are stronger than they thought?
- ◁ Have they changed their priorities about what is important?
- ◁ Have they come to a greater appreciation for life or their relationships?
- ◁ Are they looking for something good to come of their loss?

How is their social support?

Support is associated with positive changes after trauma. Also, engaging in advocacy may increase survivors’ need for support.

- ◁ Does the client ask for support when they need it?
- ◁ What kind of responses do they get from their support network?
- ◁ Will they be able to get more support if necessary?

How is their self care?

Self care is important for recovery and for dealing with the secondary trauma and exposure that may come up for speakers.

- ◁ How does this client take care of him/her self?

How is their spiritual life?

Spiritual engagement, both positive and negative, is correlated with post traumatic growth.

◁ How does this survivor address spiritual or existential issues?

Additional questions to consider:

- ◁ Is the client in a stage of physical and psychological *safety*?
- ◁ How are their coping skills?
- ◁ Has the client moved through the *remembrance and mourning* phase and are they able to reconstruct their trauma story?
- ◁ Can they think or talk about their trauma in an individual or group setting without flooding? (“Flooding” means to become dysregulated or overwhelmed.)
- ◁ Do they have hope and energy for engaging with life and community?

Deciding whether or not to invite clients to participate

The team should discuss the points raised above and carefully consider whether a client seems ready to be invited to participate in the speakers bureau. Many clients will not be ready during their time of receiving TRC services, and many will. Clients should not be hurried into this role, and the team should reach consensus that an individual is ready before he or she is invited. It may also be appropriate to invite clients to participate in the speakers bureau near the time they are terminating their own TRC support services.

Suggested language for introducing the speakers bureau to clients:

“We have a group of current and former TRC clients who speak about their trauma experiences and the services they received to different groups of people, such as service providers, students, or government officials. Speakers attend an initial training and also receive ongoing support. We think you have an important story to tell. If you’re interested, telling it could be powerful for you and for the community.”

You can explain that survivors will be speaking about the impact of the crime on their life and things that were helpful to their recovery, rather than the details of their trauma.

If the client is not interested, staff should not press the point. If they are interested, staff can explore their expectations and motivations by asking questions like:

“What would you want to get out of speaking?”

“How might it be helpful to you?”

Clients who are ready for the experience are apt to answer: “I want to give back,” “I want to prevent future violence,” or “I want to protect others.”

Speakers can address questions such as:

- ◁ How did your traumatic experience change you?
- ◁ How have you gotten to where you are now?
- ◁ What did receiving therapy do for you?

INTRODUCING THE SPEAKERS BUREAU TO CLIENTS. You can use language such as: “We provide speakers with training and support. After you’ve had a chance to participate in the training, the speakers bureau holds a monthly Speaking Support Group to give members a chance to develop and practice sharing their story with the group first. After practicing with the group, members use meetings to sign up for speaking events and to prep their talks for specific audiences.”

Speakers Bureau Training and Support

CHATT speakers bureau training

The six-hour training is the next step in preparing clients to become part of the speakers bureau (Fields et al., 2015). The CHATT Training takes place over two days and includes the following components:

- ◁ Group Guidelines
- ◁ Why Speak? Benefits of Speaking (Appendix 1)
- ◁ Writing Your Story with Storybuilding Structure (Appendices 2 and 3)
- ◁ Small Group Practice Telling Your Story and Giving Structured Feedback
- ◁ Challenges of Speaking and using SUDS (Appendix 4) for Distress Monitoring (Wolpe & Lazarus, 1973)
- ◁ For Survivors, from Survivors: Ideas for Coping and Telling Our Stories (Appendix 5)
- ◁ Evaluation/Feedback

CHATT speakers bureau resources

Each participant in the CHATT training receives a binder of the training curriculum materials and other resources that will help them learn the CHATT speaking format and speak at public events.

CHATT monthly support groups

The CHATT speakers bureau has a monthly meeting, facilitated by two TRC Clinicians (Valdez et al., 2015). Speakers attend the group to practice speaking, to learn about and sign up for new speaking events, to prepare for events, and to practice self-care and affect regulation skills. Part of the activity in the monthly meeting is for the speakers to do self-monitoring of their level of distress and anxiety and readiness to speak, as well as for clinicians to monitor clients' readiness to speak. The focus of the group is on building and supporting speakers' presentation skills; it is not a therapy group.

Guidelines for training and monthly meetings

Guidelines are established and reviewed at the start of each training and at each monthly meeting to establish a sense of safety.

CONFIDENTIALITY. To maintain a trusting environment, staff and speakers are asked to maintain confidentiality about personal information shared at trainings, meetings and speaking events. This allows participants to share more freely and to access as much support and feedback as possible. Speakers are, of course, free to share their own stories outside of CHATT activities.

GROUP SUPPORT. Members are encouraged to attend monthly Speaking Support Group meetings to remain up to date on speaking opportunities, to build speaking and self-care skills and to access support about speaking experiences. Members are also encouraged to contact CHATT Staff Facilitators regarding emergencies, scheduling conflicts, or for speaking support.

RESPECT. Members are encouraged to be open and honest with each other and with Staff Facilitators and also to maintain a positive, safe and supportive environment for each other. This includes being respectful of the varying perspectives, approaches and healing journeys of other members. Members are encouraged to access support from Staff

Facilitators as needed to discuss strong reactions to stories or actions of other group members.

ATTENDANCE. Attendance at monthly meetings and signing up for speaking events is voluntary. Speakers are encouraged to attend the group for support and self-care, but there is no attendance requirement. Speakers are asked to arrive at training sessions, group meetings and speaking events on time, and to notify Staff Facilitators if running late.

SUPPORT AND SELF CARE. Speaking about trauma and hearing others' experiences can bring up strong feelings or reactions. Speakers are encouraged to practice self-care before, during and after events. If members feel triggered at trainings, meetings or speaking events they are also encouraged to access one to one support from CHATT Staff Facilitators.

SHARE HEADLINES, NOT DETAILS. Speakers are encouraged to talk about the kind of trauma they experienced and the impact it has had on their lives but to avoid sharing the overly graphic details in trainings, monthly meetings or at speaking events. This increases safety and decreases anxiety for speakers and audiences. Speakers are encouraged to only share information they feel comfortable sharing. We acknowledge that that may vary from talk to talk and day to day with variations in a speaker's distress level.

5 B M H < = B ; 9 Members and Staff Facilitators are encouraged to add to the guidelines and tailor them to the needs of the group. It is considered a "living list."

Story-Building Process

The primary focus of the CHATT Training and monthly meetings is supporting speakers in telling their story of the trauma. CHATT guides speakers to use a Four-Step Story-Building Process for drafting their written story and in preparing their presentation.

1. HEADLINE. What was the trauma that you survived? 1-2 lines. No graphic trauma details.

2. IMPACT OF THE TRAUMA. How did the trauma affect you (mind, emotions, body, relationships, work, school)? How did it affect the way you view yourself, others, the world?

3. YOUR RECOVERY PROCESS. What helped your healing, and what didn't? Was there a turning point? What was the role of therapy?

4. WHERE YOU ARE NOW. How are things now compared to before? What have you learned, discovered? What are your goals for the future?

Giving Feedback

In the training and in monthly meetings, members practice telling their stories in front of each other and give each other feedback. In giving feedback members are encouraged to: 1) Focus on what worked in the story they heard; 2) Take care to avoid judgments of the content of someone else's story; 3) Remember that all CHATT members have good intentions.

Three-step structured feedback model

Please share feedback with speakers, including:

- ◁ One thing you liked about the way the speaker told their story
- ◁ One suggestion for improving their story
- ◁ One thing that moved or touched you about their story

Speaking Out

Most speakers participate in about four presentations per year, but there is a range and the TRC does not require any kind of minimum speaking events for participation. We have found that the freedom to choose seems helpful to speakers.

In this model, members decide when they are ready to speak publicly. Some clients are ready to speak sooner, some later, and some participate in monthly meetings but never elect to speak. Clients are never pressured or required to speak when they do not feel ready.

Audiences

Many audiences for speakers bureau speakers are service providers such as mental health clinicians, but CHATT speakers have also addressed audiences of law students, social work and psychology students, other survivors of crime, and state legislators. CHATT speaking engagements increase audience members' awareness of violence, decrease stigma, and positively impact beliefs about trauma treatment (Valdez et al., 2015).

In preparation for arranging speakers and audiences, a TRC Clinician screens the venue and matches speakers with the audience. Speakers have a choice in whether they wish to address the audience and have permission not to speak if they do not feel comfortable or ready to speak to a particular audience.

Varying the speaking event structure

The agenda—topics and their order, speakers, facilitators—can be changed to fit different situations. Here are the four main structures we have used at the UC San Francisco TRC.

INDIVIDUAL TALK

- ◁ 1 to 3 speakers share their trauma stories using the storybuilding structure (Headlines, Impact, Recovery, Now)
- ◁ Q & A moderated by TRC staff facilitators.

PANEL PRESENTATION

- ◁ 2 to 5 speakers respond in turn to prepared questions which follow CHATT storybuilding structure.
- ◁ Q & A moderated by TRC staff facilitators

CLINIC COMMUNITY PRESENTATION

- ◁ 1 speaker accompanies a TRC staff presenter
- ◁ Speaker story is integrated into a broader presentation on a related topic (e.g. on Traumatic Loss or Domestic Violence)

LEGISLATIVE HEARING TESTIMONY

- ◁ 1 or more speakers share their trauma story, w/o facilitator introduction.
- ◁ May use CHATT story-building structure or modified version based on venue protocol

Providing support for speaking out

The UC San Francisco TRC CHATT speakers bureau uses a three-part structure for providing speaking event support to speakers.

BEFORE EVENTS. Before speaking events, staff facilitators coordinate and set up speaking venues. At the Monthly Speaking Support Meeting, members are invited to sign up for specific events. Events are sometimes tailored (e.g., to survivors of particular kinds of trauma or crime). Staff facilitators provide an overview of the event and audience, the structure of the talk (e.g., panel, legislative testimony, or individual talk), provide related handouts/panel questions and explore key messages with potential speakers. Speakers are invited to use meeting time to practice their talks for upcoming events and get structured feedback from the group. Members are invited to contact staff facilitators with additional questions or scheduling changes/emergencies.

DURING THE EVENT. Staff facilitators often introduce CHATT and/or the speaking topic as appropriate. They facilitate panel questions and Q & A periods after the talk. Speakers have the right to pass on questions and are supported in this by staff facilitators.

AFTER THE EVENT. Staff facilitators debrief with speakers to explore their reactions to the event, provide direct support, lead grounding or breathing as needed, and check in with speakers about their post-talk self care plans.

In Summary

TRC Clinicians can further clients' healing, posttraumatic growth, and sense of empowerment by supporting them to participate in a speakers bureau. With initial training and ongoing support, survivors of violent crime can choose to share their stories for the benefit of others, while also benefitting from the process themselves.

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Appendix 1 to TRC Speakers Bureau: Benefits of Speaking Out Worksheet

For a worksheet on the benefits of speaking out about trauma, see the following page.



BENEFITS OF SPEAKING OUT

1. Some ways I might benefit from sharing my story:

2. Some ways the community (including individual people, groups, agencies) could benefit from hearing my story:

3. My unique motivations or special purpose for speaking out:

4. My dream audience would be:

Appendix 2 to TRC Speakers Bureau: Storybuilding Questions, First Draft

For a first draft worksheet on storybuilding questions, see the following page.

Storybuilding Questions First Draft

The questions below are to help guide you as you do a first draft of your speech. Take a moment to look over the questions. Think about what you want San Francisco communities to know about your story of surviving and recovering from trauma. What key message do you want to share? The questions are intended to help you to develop your story. You do not have to answer the questions in too much detail at this point, unless you want to.

HEADLINE (What was the trauma? How did it affect your life? What do you want to share?)

PART ONE: What was the IMPACT of the trauma on your life?

1) What was it like for you right after?

2) How did your exposure to violence change you?

3) How did it affect your emotions, thoughts, behaviors, and day to day life?

4) How were your beliefs changed?

PART TWO: Next write about the process of your RECOVERY

1) How have you gotten to where you are now?

2) What was helpful in the recovery process?

3) What was the most difficult part of the recovery process?

4) What did therapy or the TRC do for you?

PART THREE: Write about where you are NOW.

1) Where are you now?

2) What goals were you able to achieve?

3) How have you grown since the trauma experience?

4) What have you learned about yourself from your recovery experience?

5) What are your hopes and goals for the future?

Appendix 3 to TRC Speakers Bureau: Storybuilding Questions, Second Draft

For a second draft worksheet on storybuilding questions, see the following page.

Appendix 4 to TRC Speakers Bureau: Subjective Units of Distress (SUDS)

For a SUDS handout, see the following page.

Subjective Units of Distress Scale (SUDS)

100 = Highest level of anxiety, distress, or agitation. Overwhelmed or out of control.

90 = Extremely anxious or distressed; feeling that you are losing control.

80 = Very anxious or distressed. Bodily signs (increased heart rate, shaking, sweating, gastrointestinal distress) are present.

70 = Quite strong anxiety or distress. Bodily signs may be present.

60 = Somewhat strong anxiety or distress.

50 = Moderate anxiety or distress. Unpleasant feelings are still manageable with some effort.

40 = Mild-to-moderate anxiety or distress. Tolerable but unpleasant.

30 = Mild anxiety or distress that does not interfere with functioning.

20 = Minimal anxiety or distress.

10 = Feeling basically good; able to think and concentrate well.

0 = No anxiety or distress. Total relaxation.

**Appendix 5 to TRC Speakers Bureau:
For Survivors, From Survivors: Ideas and Tips on Telling Our
Stories**

For a survivors' tips handout, see the following page.

For Survivors, from Survivors:

Ideas for Coping & Telling our Stories

Sharing our stories is a vital part of healing and community, but it is important to notice how these powerful stories affect us and others. Being a victim or survivor of crime may cause psychological pain or *trauma*. The story may be *re-traumatizing* for a survivor to tell or cause *secondary trauma* for people in our audiences. Below are a few tips from other survivors on coping with these possible reactions.

• • • • • **“SELF-CARE”**: taking care of yourself today and after today

Stories are important - but so are *you*! Your most important responsibility in our survivor community is to take care of yourself, especially if you feel distressed. Here are a few ideas.

- Always make sure you feel safe first before sharing your story
- Be kind in the way you think or talk about yourself - don't be hard on yourself
- Give yourself permission to cry or "let it out" if you need to
- Give yourself permission to take a break, take a nap, or do nothing at all
- "Treat yo'self!" / give yourself a treat
- Eat healthy foods, drink plenty of water and get enough rest or sleep
- Get some physical activity (e.g. stretch, walk, dance, or go to the gym)
- Hang out with or reach out to a friend - call, text, email or write them a letter
- Find a way to laugh or smile (e.g. a funny movie or internet meme, a favorite song)
- Share your experiences with someone who supports you
- Share your favorite self-care tips with others!

• • **“GROUNDING”**: getting back to the present moment if you feel distressed

The idea of "grounding" is to keep yourself from feeling overwhelmed by painful thoughts or memories by doing simple physical or mental activities. Don't worry if you feel shy - most of these tips are activities no one will notice.

- Push your feet into the floor, grab the sides of your chair, or touch a nearby object
- Carry or hold a meaningful or soothing object (e.g. a "worry stone")
- Wear a meaningful piece of clothing or jewelry
- Practice breathing exercises (e.g. take a deep breath and let it out slowly)
- Look at photos that make you feel happy or enjoy a beautiful view
- Take a break with sound (e.g. listen to music or try noise-canceling headphones)
- Try eating something with a very strong taste (e.g. tart berries, minty gum)
- Enjoy a strong scent (e.g. mint, sage, palo santo, coconut)
- Do something diverting (e.g. sketch on an art pad – or just doodle on this page!)
- Take time out for grounding to "resurface" after hearing stories or telling your story

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“HEALTHY COPING”: ideas for dealing with trauma in the longer term

Everyone dealing with trauma will find their own ways of coping, but it is important to remember that there are "healthy" (e.g. grounding) and "unhealthy" (e.g. alcohol abuse) ways of coping.

- Identify the safe places and safe people in your life
- Let the people who support you know what you need from them
- Take care of your physical well-being as well as your mental health
- Develop a “support network” of people you can turn to if you need help or feel distressed
- Develop a “team” of professionals to help you deal with all aspects of how this crime may have impacted your life – physically, financially, legally, medically, etc
- Find a doctor or primary care provider
- Explore therapy or other psychological healing options if you feel like it and do not be discouraged by other people's opinions about this - it can be a private decision
- Find a therapist or other healing care provider that works for *you* The first solution you try may not be the best - keep trying until you find what works!
- Explore meditation (e.g. guided imagery meditation, progressive relaxation meditation or a more physical meditation such as yoga)
- Explore a spiritual connection as you define it
- Seek out communities of people who have been through similar experiences to yours and remember: you are not alone
- Take time to be social and take care of your relationships
- Take time to reflect on your healing progress and remember your accomplishments
- Take time to reflect on things that make you feel grateful
- There is no “schedule” for healing - you will find it in your own time

These tips came from survivors on the Communities Healing and Transforming Trauma (CHATT) Speakers Bureau at the Trauma Recovery Center in San Francisco.

There are many paths to healing. These are just a few ideas we learned from many different from our own experiences. We wish you all the best on your healing journey. Whatever y