



Speak My Language

Abortion Storytelling in Eastern Europe from a Youth Perspective

A Practical Guide 

2018

YOUACT

Acknowledgments

YouAct is an entirely youth-led, independent NGO working on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) in Europe. Our mission is to empower young people in their SRHR by joining forces in Europe to make our voices heard.

YouAct envisions a world where sexuality is accepted as a positive aspect of life and where the SRHR of young people are realised. YouAct aims for a world where young people have access to accurate information and youth-friendly services enabling them to decide freely and responsibly about all aspects of their sexuality and reproductive lives. We believe that decisions which affect young people should be planned and formed by young people themselves, in all their diversity.

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Introduction

In 2016, YouAct developed the toolkit: [“Speak My Language” Abortion storytelling in Eastern Europe from a youth perspective](#), with the aim of providing organisations, professionals, individuals, and especially youth with a framework to develop their own strategies to use storytelling to draw out the voices from our bodies, learn to speak a language through which we can satisfactorily communicate abortion stigma, and provide others with the tools to learn to speak our language. This toolkit was created to complement the first, and as a resource which focuses on the practical aspects of developing and running a session using the storytelling technique. It also recognises abortion stigma as an issue caused by many different factors that can affect everybody.

Storytelling is not the only way to combat abortion stigma, but it is a powerful and necessary tool. We believe storytelling can be a form of activism, can contribute to research, can inform policies, and can benefit the person telling the story and others in similar situations. Storytelling can be used in a myriad of different ways, whether it is to raise awareness, to create a space for discussion and reflection, to provide new and diverse perspectives on a sensitive topic, or to challenge the abortion stigma that is still highly prevalent in today’s societies all over the world.

While the first toolkit provided a more theoretical description of storytelling as a method to challenge abortion stigma and raise awareness, this toolkit aims to provide detailed, practical steps to help organisations, individuals and professionals organise their own

storytelling session. This second toolkit has been developed in close collaboration with our local partners. A survey was initially conducted and disseminated to young people and YouAct members by all our partners nationally to assess the gaps in the first toolkit. Based on the results, the second toolkit has been drafted and piloted with activities at the local level, in Georgia, Macedonia and Romania. The feedback from these activities was collected and the practical guidelines have been finalised. The final step is the dissemination of the toolkit and the process of the project via a webinar with the project’s partner organisations, YouAct members and partners, and others interested in working at the national or international level or interested in finding out more about using storytelling to fight abortion stigma.

This toolkit will take you through 6 steps: Brainstorm & Research; Finding & Sharing Stories; Ensuring Safety; Running a Session; Support Provision; and Reporting, with the hope of providing you with the resources and tools necessary to run a successful storytelling session.

Step 1: Planning & Research

The context of the event plays an extremely important role in the ways that stories can be shared, and the goals of the event. It is important to conduct relevant research before you start your project. Before you organise the event, you should investigate the political situation, legal restrictions to performing an abortion and any socio-cultural challenges such as religious beliefs or a conservative environment. [Abortion toolkit 1 is a source of some information on abortion stigma in Eastern Europe \(pages 6 to 9\).](#)

The questions below might serve as a guide for research:

- What is the political situation? Are there any legal restrictions to performing an abortion?
- What data is available nationally? (e.g. statistics on abortion incidence, information on services)
- What socio-cultural challenges are there? (religion, poverty, conservative environment etc.)

It is also necessary to decide on the **purpose** of the event, as there can be more than one goal. For example, it could be an awareness-raising meeting about abortion stigma and its impact, a workshop to challenge stigma and misconceptions about abortion, or a focus group to find out more about the lives of (young) people who have had an abortion. Identifying the purpose of the event will help when making decisions about the storytelling method, the type of event and the way to collect stories. The objectives depend on the activity and the audience. What does the storyteller hope the listeners will get from their story? The

main focus should not necessarily be on “changing someone’s mind” but “offering a different perspective” or just trying to share their story so they feel heard and validated. Here are some objectives you might consider while planning the event:

Is your aim to:

- Raise awareness about abortion stigma and its impact?
- Challenge stigma and misconceptions about abortion in your region?
- Research the real life circumstances of (young) people who have abortions using focus group discussions?
- Other?

Once you have decided on the purpose of the event and the context in which the event will be held, it is time to start planning. Some questions to consider are:

- Who is your target audience?
- Does the event need to be private, or can it be public?
- Can anyone sign up or is it invite-only?
- What is your budget?
- What materials will you need?

Step 2: Finding and Sharing Stories - Storytelling as a Technique

Sharing personal stories is an extremely effective tool used to reflect on the realities of abortion experiences in a safe and sensitive way. It creates a space for a discussion of what is usually an unspoken topic and gives an opportunity to share and reflect on personal decision-making, emotional experiences, and ways of coping. The use of personal stories is recommended for its potential to evoke empathy with the people in those stories and to understand their reasons for choosing abortion. Furthermore, it helps to shape one's attitudes towards abortion and consider access to it as a reproductive right, as part of a human rights framework. Thus, it is important to bring together the different voices and experiences of people from different backgrounds with diverse experiences. While it is important for people to tell their own abortion story, it is also interesting to hear partners, family members or friends tell a story from their perspective.

Choosing a format

Storytelling is an extremely versatile tool which can be used in many diverse settings. Here we will provide you with various methods to look for and share stories, and different platforms where stories can be shared.

Ways to Share Stories

There are an infinite number of ways that stories can be shared. This is where you can get creative to use the materials and tools that you have available. Here are some examples of ways to communicate stories:

- *Open mic / public reading: people can choose to come up to present their stories in front of an audience*
- *Speeches / Presentations: a more planned approach, where you know who will be speaking in advance.*
- *Open focus-group discussion: an intimate space where a similar group of people get together to share stories and discuss.*
- *In writing, through an article, blog post or book (see: My Black Protest): this is a good method to ensure anonymity, and to have a story shared more publicly as it can be published in a book format or online, which is much more accessible to a wider audience.*
- *Online Q&A or live streaming (through social media): this is a platform used to have open discussions online, where storytellers are available answer questions from a large audience.*
- *Voice recording (e.g. podcast)*
- *Video with subtitles*
- *Art: poetry, spoken word, visual art, theatre, music*
- *At university level, eg. a lecture*
- *Animation*
- *Social media, through images & short posts*
- *One-to-One/Interview*
- *Film Screening*

Step 3: Ensure Safety

Looking for Stories

Here you will find information to help you find stories from your community. The first step is to make a public call for stories. This can be through making a poster, or writing a letter. It is important to make clear who your audience is, what type of stories you are looking for and why you are looking for stories. Remember that abortion experiences are extremely personal and sensitive, and thus you need to establish trust, and ensure that these stories are going towards a good cause.

These are spaces to look for stories:

- *SRHR and Family Planning organisations that serve young people*
- *Speak-outs: Hold a workshop with an “open stage”, people can come up and share their story if they want to*
- *Contact friends: personal messages and calls are more intimate and better to gain trust*
- *Social media*
- *Clinics that provide abortions for young people*
- *Universities*
- *Online questionnaires/surveys*
- *Using mailing boxes (might be suitable for older generations)*
- *Legal organizations that help young people navigate barriers to abortion*

Ensuring safety of individuals who are sharing their stories is a crucial. Particularly in a contexts where abortion is still not fully legal, and abortion stigma is still very prevalent, it is essential that the stories shared do not put people in any form of danger. In order to avoid any unwanted situations, it is important to prepare for any possible risks. Here are some steps for risk assessment:

Make a consent form, and ensure that you have every storyteller’s full and explicit consent. Make sure that the consent form is thorough and covers everything that the storyteller will be involved in. Some examples include:

- Consent to participate in the event
- Consent to use or not use their name, ask how they would like to be referred as (name and pronoun)
- Consent to give other details: country/city, name of hospital, etc.
- Consent to use the story after the event (social media, printed publication, blog post, news articles)
- Consent to having their photo taken
- Make it clear that they have the right to opt out of the event at any moment.

With the research that you have done on the political and socio-cultural context, assess the risks that the participants may face if they share their story. Have a conversation with them about these risks and potential backlash, and remind them know they can opt out whenever they want. Ask about their family values, whether they’ve shared these stories before, what the cultural context is, whether they have a support system (partner, parents, friends who can provide support before and after the event).

Identify whether participants will need further support after sharing their story, and see how you can provide this support. Take the time to plan how you will minimize risks. Here are some tips:

- For public speaking it is better to have small groups (peer-support groups), where people can feel more comfortable, and there is less chance of unwanted comments.
- Ensure Anonymity, if necessary
- Make sure you have permission to share a story, ask the participant how much information they would like to share, and whether they want to write/tell the story themselves or if they would prefer someone else share it for them
- Ask people to share stories through a one-on-one interview, over the phone, or through an anonymous survey
- Avoid using names, if desired
- use pseudonyms / only first names / initials
- Changing/avoiding personal details that could give away their identity: age, address or reference to the location of their residence or the clinic and so on
- Avoid using photographs/images/video with the person or their environment; instead you can use cartoons/illustrations or neutral pictures
- Supporting storytellers in removal of their information from publicly available databases, like data brokers and telemarketers, to decrease harassment incidences. More here under [Preventing Doxxing](#)
- Decide whether there will be an open discussion during the event. Remember that in open discussions people can share their personal opinions, and you cannot prevent negative comments from being shared (Check Step 4

for information on handling negative comments)

- If you decide to have an open discussion, prepare questions beforehand

Once you have assessed the risks, and understand the challenges that you may face, come up with specific and clear plans of how to face those challenges. Examples of challenges:

- Storyteller might perpetuate stigma towards other reasons for having an abortion, other reproductive decisions, or internalized stigma (maybe they do not agree with people who use abortions as a contraceptive method, or who have abortions even if they are in a stable situation in which they could possibly care for a child). How could the story of one person impact other persons who have had an abortion?
- Participants are not sure what their opinion is about this topic. It's possible to have heard opinions about abortion from many directions and to not have formed opinions about this topic yet; or to not have enough information. It is important to clarify with yourself that during any activity involving storytelling or not, your values and what you think are personal and should stay this way; nobody should share more than what they feel comfortable with, including yourself as the organizer
- You are afraid people will think you yourself had an abortion (in the case that the person wants to remain anonymous and someone else is telling the story in their place). Address why they might fear this, and assess whether the participant is ready to share, or if the medium is a good fit for the storyteller. Again, this is something

you don't have to clarify for anybody, regardless of your situation. These are all personal experiences people might feel comfortable sharing, but if you don't, then don't do it.

- You think some participants might share completely opposite values and feel offended or uncomfortable. You need to clarify nobody is or should be obliged to share anything they don't want to share. Anybody can opt out at any point and there are no consequences. Give people clear explanations of how to end a conversation they're uncomfortable with and how to ask a support person to step in when they need to opt-out.

Step 4: Running a Session

Create a safe space

Ensuring the participants' safety is an essential issue while conducting a storytelling session. [Best Practice Toolkit: Abortion Education](#) developed by Education For Choice provides an explanation of a safe space, safe environment:

It is important that young people who have had – or who may go on to have – experience of unintended pregnancy or abortion do not feel isolated, alienated or judged by group discussion, visiting speakers, or the use of inappropriate teaching resources and materials. These include those that are: judgmental in their tone or language (for example that favour one pregnancy outcome over another, that promote marriage to the exclusion of other forms of committed relationships, or stigmatise alternative models of family life), that utilise distressing or graphic images (such as pictures of aborted fetuses), that contain images that are used out of context (for example images of late gestation fetuses when early abortion is being discussed) or that utilise images or models of babies when discussion is about abortion.

In order to ensure that a safe space for a storytelling session is provided, it's helpful to think of a way to establish rules and give an explanation. If it's a small group, it's a good idea to include the audience in rule-making. If a group is bigger or it's a public event, then the facilitator can explain the rules at the beginning of the session and ask for the public's agreement and any other suggestions.

Rules can include:

- *Be Respectful.*
- *Phones off.*
- *Do not criticise, do not disrespect, do not judge.*
- *No violent or hurtful language.*
- *Listen and do not interrupt.*
- *Raise your hand if you would like to talk.*
- *Questions can be raised at the end of the workshop/at the end of each speaker*

Role of the Facilitator

As a facilitator, your role is to make sure that the event runs smoothly. Your role is to provide assistance when needed, to ensure safety among participants, and to mediate discussions. As a facilitator, you should give a proper introduction to the event. Introduce the project and let people know what the purpose of the event is. If it has been decided that no photos are allowed, make sure you remind people at the beginning of the event and keep an eye out to make sure nobody takes photos with their phone camera. At the end of the event, make sure you thank everybody, remark on the conclusions of the event, and maybe ask people to fill in a feedback form asking them what their experience was, and what they learnt from the event.

If someone voices a disrespectful statement, remind the person of the rules and let them know that their comment was inappropriate. Remind them that the purpose of the workshop is to challenge abortion stigma. Keep calm and be respectful towards the person: don't single them out or judge them; don't get emotional or raise your voice. It's a good idea to redirect your attention from the person to the comment and situation – ask the person why they think what they said. Don't start an argument and refrain from telling a person that they're wrong and should change their mind. Your role as a facilitator is not to push a specific agenda.

If the comment was really out of line and disrespectful/rude, the facilitator should let them know that this is not the right place for such a comment and that if

they do not agree with the purpose of the event they should leave. Maybe this could be the first warning. And if it happens again the facilitator can politely ask them to leave.

If someone has a question or makes a comment, you may choose to open it up for discussion, so that others can provide their opinion as well. Let people provide reasoning for their opinions, and remind everyone to remain respectful and understanding. If someone raises their hand or makes a comment and it is not the right time to discuss, ask them to hold on to their comment until the end.

Note! Be careful when using social media, you may receive a lot of harassment and negative comments. People need to be willing to delete comments, or use filters so that any negative comments aren't visible. For example, Facebook has a setting where you can add a list of words and if anyone posts one of the words from the list, their post is automatically hidden, thus it cuts down on the harassment. Twitter allows you to mute certain words creating the same effect.

Recognizing the Intersectionality of Identities

Having an abortion is one piece of someone's full life experience. Other issues and identities often influence how someone processed or understands their experience of abortion. These issues might include, but are not limited to: their race, ethnicity, or nationality; their sexuality, gender identity or expression; their class background, family, citizenship status, mental illness, disabilities, intimate partner violence, sexual assault or abuse, substance use, and their other pregnancy experiences. As an advocate, you can help storytellers frame the elements of their story in the context of their abortion, but you should not censor it. These are identities that people who have abortions inhabit, and it's important to acknowledge the full breadth of who they are.

Guiding Questions to help you share your story:

- What has your experience with abortion been?
- How did you make the decision to have an abortion? What was the decision process like?
- Were you supported by others when making the decision or having the procedure?
- After the abortion experience, how did you feel?
- How have you been personally affected by laws restricting access to abortion care?
- Why are you sharing your story?
- How does it feel to share your story with other people?
- What would happen if more people told

their story?

- What kept you from sharing your story? Have you had reservations? Why do you think more people do not tell their stories?
- Why do you think it is important for abortion to be accessible in your community?
- What do you wish the public knew about people who have abortions? What's a myth or misconception you want to correct?
- What do you want people to do to create a more supportive world after hearing your story?

Step 5: Support provision

The participants sharing their stories are vulnerable; they are opening themselves up to the public, they may face trauma and have probably experienced a lot of stigma and harassment from their community. As a facilitator, you need to make sure that they are safe, and that they have access to all the support that they need. Prior to sharing, talk with the storyteller about their community care plan; Who will they bring as their support person? Who will they reach out to for support? How will they take care of themselves after the sharing event? The storyteller should come up with a personal plan of what they're going to do to relax and unwind after sharing, and who they will lean on for support. The support person should be contacted ahead of time, and ready to be on call.

Story sharing can be an exhilarating experience. Often, storytellers get nervous just before sharing and then have a bit of a high afterwards once the nerves wear off and they receive an outpouring of love and support. Sometimes feelings they didn't know they had rise to the surface, either while sharing or once they get home and are alone, away from the energy of the event. Storytellers can express that energy through tears, which may feel unnerving to them if they don't feel sad about their abortion but wonder where the tears are coming from. Remind them that it's the body's way of relaxing after a strenuous experience, it's completely normal because they're processing leftover emotions and sometimes joy from shedding the stigma so publicly, and that they should drink a lot of water to rehydrate and replace the water the body loses through tears. It's a good idea to have the contact

information of trained psychologists or counsellors and make sure there is one on site to support participants (where possible and if needed). Also, give the contact information to the participants so that they can seek extra support before or after the session as necessary.

Tips for participants who are going to speak publicly about their abortion:

- *Let them know they are not alone, that many women have experienced something similar and that they are still the same person whether or not they go through an abortion*
- *Make sure the person feels safe and comfortable before speaking to an audience*
- *Rehearse before the event*
- *Practice on their own and with a friend before the event*
- *Be confident, be calm, be neutral.*
- *Explain the importance of their message to other women who have been through the same problem. Make a breathing exercises to relax before the speech. Joke with them a little and give a hug before going public.*
- *Encourage them to bring a friend or family member for support*
- *Tell it like a story, with a beginning, middle and end, talk about how you felt before/ during/after, how you handled it, who helped you along the way, what was difficult.*

“What would I have wanted to hear if I was in the audience before my abortion?” That usually helps a new storyteller frame their message, goals of what they want to say, and think about a particular audience member.

Story Ownership:

Storytellers must know that their story is just that: theirs. They must know that they can and should share their truth, and not simply reiterate an organisation's talking points. Storytellers must always feel that they are in control of their own story and experience.

Ongoing Support and Consent:

It's important that storytellers consider what forms of support they want from an organisation they partner with — before, during and after the act of sharing. They also must know that even if they provide consent to an organisation to share their story, their consent must be obtained again at each storytelling opportunity. Just because they shared their story once does not mean they have to share it again.

Compensation:

Often storytellers are treated as volunteers and are not given compensation for the work and time they give when sharing their stories. Where appropriate, storytellers should be compensated for the work they do on behalf of an organisation, even if it's simply reimbursing travel expenses. Storytellers must know that their work and contributions are valued.

Media Support:

Sharing abortion stories can be an exhilarating experience, but it also comes with privacy challenges. Storytellers can ask a partnering organisation to field reporter calls, keep their names and personal information off the Internet, and report harassment on their behalf.

Step 6: Reporting & Follow Up

Last, but definitely not least, it is important to properly report and evaluate at the end of the project. You might think this is the least interesting, but it is so important that all your hard work gets documented and remembered. Write up a report after the session, stating how each step of the planning and implementing process went. Reflect on what worked, and what did not. Think about the challenges that you faced and how you overcame them. Write about what participants learnt and took away from the session.

Share your event! If you took photos of the event, share them (remember about permission and make sure you have the consent of all participants to have their photos published)! You surely learnt a lot of valuable lessons from the event, those should be shared too!

Keep in touch with your participants to make sure they are receiving the support that they need. At the end of the event, give your participants SRHR information and contacts for future reference.

Example Session Plan: Focus Group Discussion (5-10 people)

** this session plan was created for a focus group discussion which would last two and a half hours. These is simply a guideline, you may change things as you wish depending on what you see fit.



15 min	Welcome everyone, introduce the event, explain the objectives of the session. Everybody has a chance to introduce themselves.
15 min	Establish rules for the session together, define expectations, write them down on poster paper.
1 hour	Open stage - everyone gets a chance to share their story - either go around the room (in a circle), or participants speak when/if they want. If people have questions/comments, ask them to wait until the end.
15 min	Break (with some snacks)
30 min	Discussion, sharing feelings and thoughts. The facilitator can ask open-ended questions: "How did it feel to share your story?" "What did it feel like to hear other people's stories?" "What was challenging?" "What did you learn?" The facilitator should try to give everybody the opportunity to talk about their feelings and emotions
15 min	Wrap up - thank everybody for participating, give information on how to stay involved, and contact information in case they want to see a counsellor afterwards.

Resources

More about abortion storytelling can be found at:

Talking Abortion, Stigma, and Storytelling with The Sea Change Program:

<https://jwa.org/blog/talking-abortion-stigma-and-storytelling-with-sea-change-program>

Abortion Storytelling and Story Sharing: Keeping It Ethical:

<https://feminisminindia.com/2016/09/28/ethical-abortion-storytelling/>

A list of storytelling projects by individuals and non-profit organisations, including some by ACP Board members and grantees:

<http://www.abortionconversationproject.org/storytelling/>

We Testify, a leadership program for people who have had abortions at the National Network of Abortion Funds:

<https://wetestify.org>

How Abortion Storytelling Was Born:

<https://rewire.news/article/2016/01/22/abortion-storytelling-born/>

Abortion Storytelling:

<http://www.reclaimproject.org/abortion-storytelling/>

Can Storytelling Help Destroy Abortion Stigma?

<https://psmag.com/social-justice/abortion-storytelling-may-reduce-stigma>

Youth Activist's Toolkit

<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/publications-a-z/2229-youth-activists-toolkit>

Saying Abortion Aloud:

<https://www.reneebraceyshearn.com/saying-abortion-aloud/>

Youth Activist's Toolkit

<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/publications-a-z/2229-youth-activists-toolkit>

#MyBlackProtest by the Federation for Women and Family Planning

http://en.federa.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/MY_BLACKPROTEST_WWW-1.pdf

Telling our stories exercise, tool made available by the International Centre: researching child sexual exploitation, violence and trafficking (IC) at the University of Bedfordshire in the UK

<https://test.our-voices.org.uk/assets/documents/Telling-our-stories.1.pdf>



