



Ask. Listen. Tell.

How to create safe
spaces for story-sharing



Mini resource

HEARTLINES



Why story?

Stories are all around us. They are what move us, challenge us, anger us, make us feel alive and inspire us. We use stories to make sense of life and the world in which we live. We can all relate to stories because each of our lives is a story.

Stories give us a way to reach out to people and connect emotionally. Hearing someone's story helps us understand who they are and where they come from. We discover more about the events and people that shaped their lives, and we learn about their hopes and dreams for the future. We find out who they are at a deeper level, and our view of other people and the world we share expands.

What's Your Story? is a tool to build healthier relationships and a kinder, more understanding world through sharing in each other's stories.

What's Your Story? was launched by Heartlines, the Centre for Values Promotion, in 2016, spearheaded by the film, *Beyond the River*, and supported by various print, video and digital resources.

In this booklet we explore how to create safe spaces for story-sharing.



An initiative of

HEARTLINES

THE CENTRE FOR VALUES PROMOTION



What is Ask. Listen. Tell?

Sharing our story with others is not always easy. In fact, getting to grips with our own story can be a challenging and uncomfortable process. Getting to know someone's story can feel intimidating and awkward – where do we start, what do we ask? We believe that there's a simple way to help us share in each other's stories. It's a framework called Ask. Listen. Tell.

By asking, listening and telling our stories, we can embark on a process of deepening our relationships. When our relationships display understanding, acceptance, empathy, respect and love, they become a powerful treasure, for us and our wider communities.



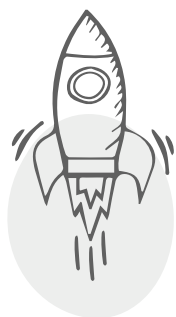
ASKING is about seeking first to understand. It's about being courageous enough to go "one step deeper" with the people we interact with on a daily basis.



LISTENING acknowledges the fact that everyone has a story worth sharing; it acknowledges the humanity of the other person.



TELLING is our way of letting others into our lives in order to help them understand us a bit better.



Go beyond

Make a habit of asking and listening to stories in your daily life – at school, at work, on campus and in your community or home.



Creating safe spaces for story-sharing

We know that stories are best shared in an environment of trust and mutual respect. We call these “safe spaces”; some people call them brave or courageous spaces.

Using the framework, Ask. Listen. Tell, we’ve identified a number of values for asking, listening and telling. Through these values, we believe we can create safe spaces for story-sharing.



Values for asking

The first step to knowing someone’s story is simply to ask. But remember these **values as you ask**:

“1. Seek first to understand”

“2. Be curious - yet respectful”

- The aim of story-sharing is to go on a journey of discovery, to learn something new about another person and the world around us.
- Ask general questions first, such as “Where did you grow up?” or “What do you enjoy doing with your free time?” Only if the person feels comfortable, ask some more personal questions (we have provided suggestions of story-sharing methods at the end of this booklet).

3. Ask without judgement

- Don't ask questions that are based on stereotypes, e.g. "Why do you always talk so loud?" or "It must be nice to be wealthy, isn't it?" Ask with a genuine desire to learn.

4. Be sincere

- Do not treat someone as if they were a project – ask and respond from a place of authenticity.

5. Affirm as you ask

- Feel free to say encouraging words as the person shares, but don't derail their story by talking too much about yourself.

6. Be willing to also be asked

- The person might also want you to share something about yourself. Be open to doing so, but wait until asked. This is not about you; it's about giving someone else your time and attention.

Also consider these questions before you ask someone about their story:

1. **Is the timing right?** Don't try start a conversation with someone who's hard at work or in the middle of something. Always first assess the timing.
2. **Is the context appropriate?** Are there other people around who may deter the person from sharing?
3. **Is my attitude right?** Ask yourself: Am I trying to interrogate someone or am I sincerely wanting to grow in understanding?
4. **Does the person seem open to my questions?** Start with a general question before diving into, "Tell me your whole life story!"
5. **Is my heart open to listening?** You might hear answers that leave you feeling various emotions. So prepare your own heart to be ready to listen and receive.



Values for listening

One of the most important ways to show someone respect is to listen to them. Many of us think we're good listeners, but does your listening pass the test? Remember these **values as you listen**:

1. Listen with your heart

- People can see when you're pretending to listen. Listening with your heart means making a deliberate decision to pay attention to what is being said.

2. Don't make it about you

- Desperate as you may be to share examples from your own life, remind yourself to listen twice as much as you talk.

3. Slow down as you listen

- Don't be thinking about the next question on your list, or your next appointment. Be mindful and fully present in the moment.

4. Don't judge

- It takes courage for someone to share their story with you. Keep an open mind and don't judge or compare their story to yours.

5. Don't interrupt

- At our online resource centre, under **Videos**, watch the Empathy: Ask. Listen. Tell. clip to remind yourself about what active listening entails.

6. Don't give advice unless asked

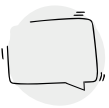
- You're not there to be someone's counsellor or pastor – you just need to listen. Only offer your opinion if asked for it.



Why listening is good for everyone

Listening to someone, and actively seeking out their story, can help build better communities. We desire to change the world we live in and, to do that, we need to plant small seeds. The good news is that, like

a mustard seed, listening to someone's story is a small act that can result in something bigger. It takes faith because it is not easy to risk possible rejection, but taking the risk opens you up to a new way of seeing the world, and broadens your understanding.



Values for telling

Once you've asked and taken the time to listen to someone share their story, also be ready for them to ask you to share your story. There are various ways to do so – we've listed some methods for story-sharing later in this resource. As you prepare to **tell your own story, remember these values:**

“ 1. Own your story ”

- Nobody else in the entire world shares your exact story. You have a unique story to tell – trials, challenges and imperfections included.

“ 2. Be truthful ”

- We'd all like to change aspects of our stories, but being authentic ensures we have a richer story-sharing experience.

“ 3. Only share as much as you feel comfortable ”

- Although honesty is important in story-sharing, ask yourself beforehand which parts of your story are for public sharing, and which are for personal sharing.

4. Maintain privacy

- Other people are part of our story but that doesn't mean they're ready for their story to be shared through ours. Always first check with anyone whose privacy might be compromised by your sharing.

5. Be true to your emotions, but be respectful

- If someone has hurt, disappointed or upset you, it's okay to share your emotions honestly. But try to not incite revenge, hatred or prejudice through your sharing.

6. Be willing to be vulnerable

- Sharing your story can involve exposing parts of yourself you might not have shared before. Think of how you'd like to process those vulnerable emotions after your sharing.

Maintaining these values as you ask, listen and tell will make sure others feel heard, honoured and understood.

Methods of sharing your story

1. The River of Life
2. Tree of Life (Roots & Fruits)
3. Photographs & objects
4. Prompts
5. Fork in the road
6. Story-sharing through questions

1. The River of Life

Required materials: Paper (A4 or larger). Coloured pens, crayons or khokis.

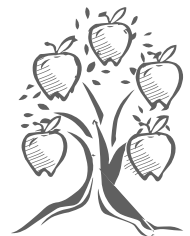


How it works:

1. Imagine your life as a river which roughly corresponds to the chronological order of events in your real life. For example, the river can be calm and straight, perhaps bubbling, during the good/happy times. The river might then wind itself around large, imposing rocks that could represent obstacles you've faced. Think of relationships or key moments with your family and friends, or encounters with people who are different to you. A major bend in the river could represent a big life change, such as moving away from home. A waterfall could represent those times when you feel like you lost control and were caught in a downward spiral.
2. Think also of your river in terms of some key moments in South Africa's history, and in terms of significant personal encounters.
3. Spend some time drawing your river.
4. Once you've done this, choose four key moments – good and bad – that have shaped who you are today. These are what you'll share when telling your story.
5. Note: This method is suitable for any age group or context, provided you are able to allocate some time for the drawing of the river.

2. Tree of Life (Roots & Fruits)

Required materials: Paper (A4 or larger). Coloured pens, crayons or khokis.



How it works:

1. Think of your life as a tree
2. Spend some time drawing your tree.

Roots of my life

- Who are the people that played the biggest role in my life while I was growing up?

- What are the moments, events or memories that I believe have shaped who I am today?
- What are the key moments or memories I have from my upbringing when it comes to relating to others?

Fruits of my life

- What are the key moments, victories or accomplishments I hold dearest in my life right now or over the past few years?
- What are some good fruits or personal victories when it comes to relating to others?

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3. Photographs and objects

Required materials: a photograph for each decade of your life. Alternatively, you can bring in a few objects (between 4-6) that have special meaning to you. It could be an item of clothing, a book or DVD, a certificate, a tool or gadget, etc.



How it works:

1. The person tells the story of the day the photograph was taken and what was happening when it was taken. Listeners are encouraged to ask questions about the story.
2. If using objects, explain what story each item tells about a specific part of your life, or how it has been instrumental in defining who you are.

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4. Prompts

How it works:

1. Using a sentence or phrase to prompt ideas is commonly used by writers and people who journal.
2. Choose a single sentence that be given to the group to interpret and use as a starting point to respond. For example: "It was the greatest risk I ever took..." This sentence can teach the group more about what someone is afraid of and what they are willing to risk their lives for, what they value, and what they have been through.

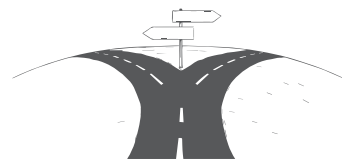


5. Fork in the Road

How it works:

Choose a big moment in your life and imagine it as a fork in the road. Use this as the centre for your story. Some helpful questions to build your story could be:

- What was a fork in the road in your life? What was a key defining moment or a turning point issue or decision you were facing?
 - What series of events were happening before this fork in the road, that may have led up to this point?
 - What else was happening in your life at the time you needed to make that decision?
 - What were some of the factors that influenced your decision: personal beliefs, advice from others, books you read, etc?
 - How did that fork in the road story shape who you are today?
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6. Story-sharing through questions

You can tell your own story using the questions below. You can also use these to ask someone else their story.



1. Where was I born and raised? What kind of family did I grow up in – big or small, rich or poor, urban or rural?
2. Which were my most important relationships growing up? Who are some of the people who played the biggest role in my life?
3. What are some of the big events or turning points in my life that have helped define who I am?
4. What were some of my challenges growing up? What were some of the choices I made to overcome those challenges?
5. What are the anchoring beliefs or values by which I live my life?
6. Can I think of an encounter with a person who is different to me (culture, race, religion, class, etc.) – both negative and positive? How have those events shaped my story?
7. What are some significant achievements, events or experiences that shaped my life?
8. What are some of my own future goals, as well as my hopes for my family's wellbeing, and the wellbeing of my community and country?



When the story ends, what's next?



Sharing our stories can sometimes bring up insecurities about what people think of us. To be real, we need to take a step towards courage. In order to do that, we have to be vulnerable. Dr Brené Brown, a storyteller-researcher on shame and vulnerability defines vulnerability as “uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure”. When we truly open up, there is emotional uncertainty, risk and exposure involved.

In a process like *What's Your Story?* where honesty and letting your guard down is strongly encouraged, sharing our stories with others can even result in what Dr Brown calls “a vulnerability hangover”. She describes it as the feeling you get after sharing that leaves you asking, “Have I shared too much? What have I done?! What will people think of me now?” It can feel like a combination of fear and regret.

But the most important thing to remember is that you have already done the scariest thing – you have shared your story!

Once you have done so, you may feel that some things that came up from your past are still painful. In those cases, it is helpful to consider taking the conversation further. Debriefing with someone else could help you break the shame of feeling like your story does not matter, or, worse, that you are not enough. A debrief can take many forms: self-reflection (such as journaling), speaking with a trusted confidante, and therapy or counselling.

When we tell our story to someone who is really listening, our body's stress response switches off. Instead of toxic stress hormones, our bodies release hormones that make us feel better and help our bodies repair themselves. Stress, anxiety and feelings of isolation are replaced with a sense of wellbeing and connectedness with other people.

If you do not share your story authentically and courageously, you leave the world a poorer place.

Find ways to regularly engage in story-sharing with your family, friends, colleagues or peers. For more resources, visit www.church.wysza.org

Share your group's story with us



We'd love to hear about your experience of asking, listening and telling your story. Send us your feedback, photos, videos or testimonials.

Email: wys@heartlines.org.za

Facebook: [whatsyourstoryza](https://www.facebook.com/whatsyourstoryza)

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Sign up now!

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