



WHAT'S **YOUR** STORY?
church

STORY-SHARING AND GRIEF

*How story-sharing can help your church
community deal with grief and emotional stress*

HEARTLINES

WHAT'S STORY?

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HEARTLINES

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Find more resources around personal storytelling at

www.whatsyourstory.org.za



Why we need to deal with grief and emotional stress



Loss, death, and grief are inevitable and universal, but COVID-19 and lockdowns have meant we have to confront death, dying, illness and trauma in a more isolating and tragic way. When we neglect to deal with changes in our lives, ignoring and repressing our grief and pain, this negatively impacts our bodies, minds, and spirits. The pain will then inevitably resurface in some other way, often in forms that are damaging and destructive to ourselves and others.

As the church, we have a key role to play as a wellspring of God's hope, healing, and resilience.

Allowing spaces for congregants to express pain, and have authentic conversations with God and others, is crucial for healing. It helps us to deal with our pain, acknowledge our brokenness and face our sufferings actively together with a renewed hope.

This resource is a guide for how you can use story-sharing in your church programmes to address grief and stress. It includes practical ideas on how to run *What's Your Story?* story-sharing exercises to help your church members.



The power of story-sharing



We understand the world through stories. We make sense of our lives through the stories we tell. We also keep the memory of those we have lost alive through story.

Hearing someone's story helps us understand who they are and where they come from. We find out about them at a deeper level, and our view of other people and the world we share expands. Sharing stories in times of grief and loss can be difficult. When someone is struggling with grief or emotional stress, often our fears stop us from reaching out. We try to change the subject when the grieving person mentions the deceased, worried it will bring more pain. We are concerned that we will not say the right thing or that we may make it worse.

But it's ok if you don't know what to say. One of the most powerful ways you can support someone is to really listen, to allow them to share their story of grief or stress.

When we tell our story to someone who is really listening, our body's stress response switches off. Instead of toxic stress hormones, we 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 well-being and connectedness with other people. When we allow someone to tell the story of their grief, we allow them to process their grief and keep the memory of their loved one alive through the power of story.

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 each other's stories. It's a *What's Your Story?* 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.



Where to share stories?

In sharing our stories of grief and stress with others, we can slowly but surely start breaking down taboos around grief and mental health.

When you share stories in your church community, we recommend that you continue adhering to all the relevant COVID-19 protocols. This may include wearing masks, social distancing or meeting outside, depending on who and where you are meeting.

Home visits

While taking communion to the sick, delivering a meal to a family, or doing general home visits, be sure to spend a few moments asking the person or family about themselves, their concerns, and their hopes for the future. If they have recently lost a family member, ask them about that person.

Story-sharing in small groups

At the end of your regular Bible study or small-group session, allow an opportunity for one member to share their story. If you know someone in particular who is grieving or under stress, you can gently encourage them to share. Or, each member can take a turn answering one question (you can choose from our suggested list of questions on [page 11](#) below, or create your own that speaks specifically to grief or stress).

During a church service

Pause during the service, break up into small groups or pairs, and allow congregants to answer a few of the questions listed on [page 11](#).

After a service

After the service, over tea and coffee, encourage congregants to break into small groups or pairs and allow each person to answer a few relevant questions outlined below.

Online

If the pandemic does not allow your church to meet physically, story-sharing can also take place online using Zoom, WhatsApp, Facebook Live etc.



How to get started



1. ENGAGE LEADERS

As you seek to help people in your community who are dealing with stress or grief using story-sharing, you can start the process by finding a key person or key people in your church to help you implement *What's Your Story?*. These can be small group leaders, church leaders, youth group leaders or anyone who has a passion for this.

2. ORGANISE

Decide whether to integrate story-sharing into Bible studies, small groups, church services, or youth group meetings, or to share stories in separate, dedicated story-sharing sessions. Draw up a plan with your *What's Your Story?* leaders. Identify when, where, how and who:

When: When is the best time to integrate story-sharing?

Where: Where is the best place to implement this process?

How: What story-sharing methods best suit the 'when' and 'where'?

Who: Who will take responsibility for organising and facilitating these sessions? What skills can you draw on from different members of your team to roll out the process effectively?

3. METHOD

There are two styles of story-sharing in this guide: **prompts** and **questions**, both of which are outlined below. For more story sharing methods look at pages 8 to 11 of the Ask. Listen. Tell. resource, which you can find on our website here: <https://bit.ly/3b0VCfw>

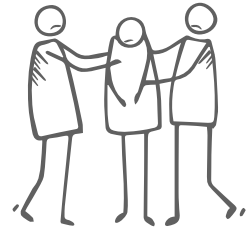


Dealing with grief and emotional stress

As you engage and connect with stories and people talk about their pain and grief here are a few things to remember:

- **Acknowledge** the thoughts and feelings shared by reflecting them back to the person gently.
- **Affirm** the vulnerability and courage it takes to share grief, pain, or stress. It is hard work and at times people may feel tired and drained after sharing their grief.
- **Be aware** of your own grief, thoughts, and feelings. Do not become anxious if you do not know what to say. Often in these times what is most important is for you to be fully present, to see, to listen and to hear the storyteller.
- **Seek help.** If you feel you are not equipped to respond to a person's particular situation, it is important to reach out to others in your congregation who are either counsellors or healthcare workers, especially if someone is showing signs of:

- o Total despair and loneliness, lacking the ability to see any hope, severe depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder.
- o Harmful behaviour towards themselves or others.
- o Suicide ideation where they are thinking about, considering, or planning suicide.



Methods of story-sharing

Questions

Depending on the time you have available, select a few relevant questions. Get each person to answer a question before moving on to the next person. When everyone has had a turn to answer a question, introduce another question for everyone to answer. Keep going until you run out of time.

General questions:

- What personal lessons are you learning during the pandemic?
- What are some of the challenges you are facing personally?
- What discourages you the most?
- What encourages you the most?
- What is one hope you are holding onto right now?
- What is a plan for this year that you had to let go of because of the pandemic?
- In which ways would you describe the 'new normal' as being better than the 'old normal'?
- What are some of the big events or turning points in your life that have helped define who you are?
- What are some significant achievements, events or experiences that shaped your life?
- Who are some of the people that have played the biggest roles in your life?
- What are some of your future goals?

Questions for people who have lost loved ones:

- What do you wish you could say to a loved one who has passed on?
- How are you and your family coping?
- What does their loss mean in your life?
- What is the first memory you have with the person you have lost?



Prompts

Another way of doing *What's Your Story?* is to provide sentences for people to complete and comment on, called prompts. Ask each person to answer/complete a prompt. Not everyone needs to answer the same prompts. Encourage people to share a little about each prompt. When everyone has had a turn to answer/complete a prompt, get the group to answer another prompt. Keep going until you have used up the allocated time.

You may want to circulate the prompts ahead of time.

Some examples include:

- In my life right now I'm excited about...
- An area of my life in which I feel strong and good right now is...
- A compliment that someone has given me that I remember is...
- One important thing my family does together is...
- One important belief about life that I have is...
- I hope for...
- My goal for this year is...
- Lockdown and the pandemic have been a challenge because...

Prompts related to loss and grief:

- My first memory of... is when...
- The best day with...
- I wish I had said...
- When I woke up this morning, I felt... because...
- For me loss means...
- I need help with... because...



You can also turn the examples from the **Questions** section above into “finish the sentence”. e.g. One thing my family is doing to cope with lockdown is...



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 of Ask. Listen. Tell, we’ve identified some 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:

- Seek first to understand
- Be curious – yet respectful
- Ask without judgement
- Be sincere
- Affirm as you ask
- Be willing to also be asked



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:

- Listen with your heart
- Slow down as you listen
- Don't make it about you
- Don't judge
- Don't interrupt
- Don't give advice



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:

- Own your story
- Be truthful
- Only share as much as you feel comfortable
- Maintain privacy
- Be true to your emotions, but be respectful
- Be willing to be vulnerable





Go beyond

Once they have started a journey of storytelling, many churches and communities have integrated it permanently into their communities.

Story-sharing can help create social cohesion and emotional health and can also be used to address issues such as diversity and cross-cultural understanding.

Heartlines' award-winning film *Beyond the River* is also available for viewing and can be followed by relevant discussions about the different aspects of the film's story. Discussion questions can be found at <https://bit.ly/3b0L8gb>

To keep the storytelling revolution going, we've created an online platform where you can read, watch, or listen to the inspiring stories of others. You can also share your own story with others.

The site also offers various resources and ideas to continue storytelling in your workplace, home, or community. Visit www.whatsyourstory.org.za to sign up.

For more information, visit www.heartlines.org.za or contact Heartlines directly at info@heartlines.org.za

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