

Five Reasons to Share Your Mental Health Struggles



By [Summer Allen](#) | [Greater Good Magazine](#)

Now, more than ever, we need to help people—and particularly [young adults](#)—who are struggling with mental health challenges. This will require training more mental health care practitioners and reimagining ways that schools and workplaces can buffer stress rather than promote it. Just as importantly, we need to change the way people talk about mental illness and work to reduce stigma. And one way to do this is to teach people how to talk about their journey through mental illness.

A new qualitative [study](#), published in the *Community Mental Health Journal*, has found that young adults who share their stories of living with mental illness can increase their well-

being and feel less stigmatized.

The Australian nonprofit mental health organization [batyr](#) runs preventative education programs in high schools, universities, and workplaces to teach young people and their families about the importance of reaching out for support for mental health challenges. Besides offering basic education about mental health, another essential component of these workshops is 10- to 15-minute stories told by one or two young people about their experiences with mental illness (such as depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive behaviors, and disordered eating), the lessons they have learned, and the skills that have helped them cope.

Before they deliver their stories, speakers are trained in groups of seven to 10 at a two-day “Being Herd” workshop. Workshop facilitators teach participants how to share their stories confidently and constructively to help others struggling with mental health. The workshop is based on research by [Patrick Corrigan](#), professor of psychology at the Illinois Institute of Technology, that has found that disclosing our mental health challenges can be empowering, improve our well-being, and reduce internalized feelings of stigma.

Why sharing your story helps

To explore the benefits of sharing your story, researchers Genesis Lindstrom and Ernesta Sofija of Griffith University in Southport, Australia, and Tom Riley of batyr conducted in-depth interviews with 18 speakers who had participated in the program. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 33 and included male, female, and non-binary participants, as well as those who identified as Australian, Indian Australian, Australian Chinese, Sri Lankan, Chinese, Italian Dutch, and Italian Australian.

The researchers identified five key themes in these interviews

related to how sharing their stories helped batyr speakers.

1. Getting better at getting better. Participants reported that their role as speakers helped them “get better at getting better” in part because it forced them to reflect on their journey and how they had overcome challenges. They were able to identify strategies that helped them and shift how they viewed mental health. One common thread was seeing recovery from mental illness and the nurturing of mental well-being as constant processes, like tending a garden.

One speaker compared his batyr experience to physical exercise:

Authentically relating the story to 300 people can be quite an intimidating experience and that sense of almost flexing your vulnerability muscles, like doing mental health pushups in front of a crowd. It almost leaves you feeling not drained, not quite shaken, but a little raw but in a good way. It's kind of like you've just climbed a mountain or jumped out of an airplane.

2. Growing toward self-acceptance. Participants also spoke about how sharing their stories changed how they thought of themselves and helped them gain self-acceptance.

For some speakers, sharing their stories helped them separate their identity from their mental illness. “As soon as you say it out loud to someone other than yourself, all of a sudden there is a distance between you and the story. Before I was the only one holding on to that and it was part of my identity,” said a speaker.

The experience also improved people’s sense of well-being and confidence. Sharing their stories made speakers feel empowered and gave them a [sense of purpose](#) since they were using their experience to help others.

One speaker noted that her increased self-acceptance made her kinder, too. "I feel like we're a lot harder on ourselves [than] we are with others. So, if I'm kinder to myself, I feel like that makes me kinder to others as well," she said. "I think it's just a natural progression to turn that outward."

3. Breaking the wall by talking about mental health. Being a batyr speaker also helped participants actively fight against the public stigma associated with mental illness.

"Any stigma is just a lack of understanding, a lack of understanding comes from a lack of knowledge, right?" said a participant. "The more that we go, and we have these conversations with people, we introduce them to new ideas, we challenge their existing ideas."

The speakers noted that the Being Herd workshop gave them tools to "face the elephant in the room" and to talk about mental illness in a safe way. The workshops included resources for seeking help and advice on how to discuss specific issues such as suicide and trauma. Participants also learned how to share specifics of their stories without generalizing their experience as the only way that people experience mental illness.

The workshop tools empowered participants to voice their opinions and address negative behaviors and language around mental illness in their own social circles. Speakers also said they became more inclusive and empathic with their friends and family members who were struggling and noticed a change in how their loved ones talked about mental illness.

4. Increasing connectedness. Participants reported feeling [connected](#) to other participants in their Being Herd workshop, as well as a sense of community with other speakers in the batyr program. Some participants said they felt a sense of common purpose and that connecting with other participants helped them feel less stigma. They also derived meaning from

talking to students, knowing that some of them were likely experiencing similar challenges.

“I just love being able to connect with other people on that level and knowing that at least someone in the room will hear what I’m saying, and it will resonate with them,” said a speaker. “I think that too often, we forget that the human experience is a shared one, even if it’s something that is unique and individual to us.”

5. Reaching out for support. Participants noted that since sharing their stories publicly, they had become more willing to seek help when they found themselves struggling with their mental health, were more aware of appropriate places to find support, and were more likely to encourage others to seek support.

Several male participants mentioned that traditional expectations related to masculinity had previously prevented them from talking about their experiences. “It’s interesting because coming out of a mental illness as I did there was a lot of shame about the way you feel, and how that fits with society’s view of how boys should feel,” said a 25-year-old male speaker.

These participants appreciated talking to male students about the barriers that might prevent them from seeking help and encouraged them to be vulnerable and reach out.

Emory University sociologist and psychologist [Corey Keyes](#) posit that mental illness and mental health each operate on a separate, yet related, continuum. The batyr researchers suggest that the program works on both these continua—it decreases mental illness by addressing stigma and encouraging people to seek help, and it increases mental health by creating social connectedness, a sense of purpose, and personal growth.

The value of self-disclosure

While this study looked at the subjective experiences of just 18 people, and follow-up studies are needed to quantify these results, other studies also suggest that disclosing our personal experiences with mental illness may be helpful both personally and societally.

Corrigan and others have studied a different peer-led training program called [Honest, Open, Proud \(HOP\)](#). HOP is designed to support people with mental illness in their decisions when and with whom to disclose their mental illness, and it helps them to practice how to tell their story.

Randomized controlled studies find that HOP training reduces stigma-related stress in [adults](#), [college students](#), and [adolescents](#), although it is [not known](#) how long these positive effects last.

HOP is different from the batyr program because it is not designed to train participants to tell their mental illness stories to large groups of people. Instead, it helps participants decide if they want to disclose their history and, if so, to whom. For example, a person may choose to tell their story to a close friend but withhold information from an acquaintance who recently made a disparaging comment about someone with mental illness.

This highlights the complexity of self-disclosure. Disclosing a history of mental illness isn't without risks—it can lead to labeling and discrimination—but there are also potential benefits—like getting more social support and help, feeling authentic, and being less stressed about keeping it secret.

Similarly, there are risks and benefits to people who *hear* the stories of other people's challenges with mental health. If you have a mental illness yourself, listening to such narratives may occasionally worsen your symptoms (such

as [eating disorder behaviors](#) and [self-harm](#)), but it can also be a [tool](#) for recovery and dismantling stigma.

In a review of HOP, Nicolas Rüsçh and Markus Kösters of Ulm University in Germany wrote that in order to “achieve lasting change in a public health sense, HOP should be combined with programs to reduce public stigma.” They note, “People with mental illness must not be left alone in dealing with a stigma for which they are not responsible . . . only decreased public stigma will lead to a less prejudiced social environment that facilitates disclosure, positive contact, and social inclusion.”

Accurate media portrayals of people with mental illness, public awareness campaigns, [celebrity stories](#), and programs like batyr can all help.

Together, these findings suggest that sharing our experiences around mental health may be a way to improve our own well-being and gain better self-acceptance, while also combating stigma and teaching others about how they can get help. In this way, our stories have the power to not only help us but also help others and help our society.

About the Author



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