

Considerations and Best Practices for Lived Experience Programs

At the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC), our initiative to center the perspectives of those with suicide-centered [lived experience](#) informs all aspects of our work. Here are some considerations and best practices that can guide any group or organization in developing a lived experience program.

- While individuals with suicide-centered lived experience can be hired to fill any role, organizations should consider hiring dedicated staff with suicide-centered lived experience to develop and oversee their lived experience programs. Staff roles might include lived experience project coordinator or program manager.
- Organizations should identify multiple ways lived experience advisors can meaningfully engage with their work. This allows advisors to choose roles and engagement strategies that work for them. Examples might include participating in research, raising awareness, storytelling, or providing peer support.
- Ideally, efforts should be co-designed by lived experience advisors and members of your organization. This collaborative approach centers the perspectives of lived experience advisors at a foundational and ongoing level, while also working to equalize power dynamics between organizational members and advisors. (Asking advisors to review products and services without providing other opportunities limits their influence and does not represent meaningful engagement.)
- Make sure your communication strategies are clear, practical, positive, person-centered, and culturally aware.
- Offer lived experience advisors engagement opportunities in a way that is participatory and consensual. Advisors should not be afraid the organization will retaliate or limit future engagements if they decline an opportunity.

While storytelling is only one small part of lived experience work, it is often woven into many different types of lived experience efforts. It is important to recognize that individuals with lived experience may or may not want to participate in storytelling or sharing. Offering various types of engagement opportunities allows advisors to participate in ways that feel safe and comfortable to them.

- Safe storytelling best practices (see final bullet) should be used in all areas, including media engagements, presentations, contests, web, or newsletter content, etc. Storytelling and speaking engagements involving lived experience advisors should adhere to established [safe messaging standards](#), be trauma-informed, and support the well-being of speakers or storytellers as well as the audiences they engage.
- While some lived experience advisors may wish to share their stories, in accordance with safe storytelling guidelines members of your organization should **never** ask advisors to share personal stories or information unless it is immediately pertinent to the project the advisor is working on.
- Lived experience advisors should have ownership of their stories, and their personal information should be protected. No one should ever “out” a lived experience expert by sharing their experiences without their express consent. This is true even if they have publicly shared their experiences in the past.
- Elements of safe storytelling include:

- Safe messaging
- Consensual disclosure practices
- Rapport and relationship building
- Protecting privacy and personal information

Questions to Consider as You Get Started:

- Why does our group or organization need a lived experience program?
- In what ways will we include lived experiences perspectives in our work?
- How will we define and measure “meaningful engagement”?
- What expectations will we develop for ourselves and our advisors?
- How will we hold ourselves and our advisors accountable for meeting these expectations?
- What conflict management strategies should we develop to help us resolve any issues that might arise?

Contact Us

For more information about SPRC’s Lived Experience Initiatives, visit

<https://sprc.org/livedexperience/>.

If you have any questions, please reach out to us at sprclivedexperience@ouhsc.edu.