

The Power of Sharing Your Scariest Running Moment

New York runner Rachel Gersten was lining up for the New York Mini 10K in 2018 when a man began lobbing suggestive comments toward her and the other runners participating in the all-women's race.

Gersten felt belittled, frightened, and disrespected. She shared these emotions with her husband, who was with her. To him, the man's behavior hadn't even registered.

Regardless, Gersten's husband offered support and empathy, which were incredibly helpful in the moment: "I felt stronger and validated because his response was great," says Gersten, who's a licensed mental health counselor and co-founder of Viva Wellness in Brooklyn.



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FROM
CHICAGO



**CREDEN-
TIALS**
RUNNER
AND
STORYTELLER
FOR 20
YEARS



**BEST RUN
SNACK**
HUMA GEL, APPLES
& CINNAMON
FLAVOR (IT TASTES
LIKE APPLE PIE
FILLING!)



**FAVORITE
RUNNING BOOK**
*LET YOUR
MIND RUN*, BY
DEENA KASTOR
AND MICHELLE
HAMILTON



GO-TO SHOES
**BROOKS
GHOST**

**FAVORITE RUN
TECH**
MY GARMIN FENIX
5S (WHITE AND
ROSE GOLD)



**STAY-SAFE
TIP**
TRUST YOUR
GUT AND
DON'T BE
AFRAID OF
OVERREACTING.



**RUNNING
PHILOSOPHY**
EMBRACE
THE TOUGH
STUFF—IT'S
TRAINING
FOR LIFE.

But it was still a frustrating experience. “It was infuriating to have to explain it in the first place,” she says.

The exchange highlights the reality of talking openly about on-the-run harassment. Discussing verbal badgering, physical abuse, or assault can feel uncomfortable or provoke negative emotions such as shame or rage. But ultimately, sharing stories may also spark healing, says Allison Myers, the southern region director at StoryCenter, a nonprofit in Berkeley, California. Myers leads three-day digital storytelling workshops for refugees, foster youth, and others who frequently deal with trauma.

Storytelling doesn’t have to be highly produced to be effective. Participants in StoryCenter workshops turn their tales into short, three- to four-minute videos, complete with imagery, narration, and music. But Gersten says talking in-depth with a therapist or training partner or putting a short post up on social media can offer benefits as well.

Why is speaking up so powerful? For one thing, it can connect you with others who have had similar experiences. “You realize there are other people in the fight with you,” Gersten says. “I’m not doing this by myself.”

Workshop participants tell Myers that crafting their own narrative from a painful memory helps them process what happened. Once they turn their trauma into art, they’re able to separate themselves from the experience. “It doesn’t make it go away,” she says. “But it doesn’t define them in the same way.”

What’s more, sharing the impact of these experiences can educate men and others who don’t often fear for their safety, inspiring them to speak up or change their own behavior, Myers says. Over time, a chorus of voices can even change dominant cultural narratives—for instance, defying the notion that victims are to blame for harassment because they were running in a certain place or at a certain time, or that catcalls aren’t

important enough to call out.

In Gersten’s case, she says her husband is now much more aware that a person who seems merely annoying to him might come across as threatening to her. “When it becomes real in a person’s story, it does make people see it differently,” Myers says. The effect is powerful enough that public-health and human-rights organizations hire StoryCenter to lead storytelling workshops and campaigns to battle stigma and promote equality.

● HOW TO SHARE YOUR STORY

As Gersten experienced, opening up can bring up unexpected emotions, such as anger. Trauma affects the brain deeply, and can scramble distinctions between current events and past experiences, says Daniel Weinshenker, the Rocky Mountain/Midwest region director for StoryCenter, who is completing his master’s degree in social work. Putting some



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thought into how, when, and to whom you reveal your truths can reduce the risk of negative consequences. Here's how Weinshenker, Gersten, and Myers advise sharing your story with minimal risk and maximum impact.

Check in with yourself.

Before you open up about a painful event, assess how you're doing. Even if you don't feel vulnerable, stress from work or general fatigue could make disclosure more taxing. Sharing isn't mandatory, even if you've done it before or think it might help someone else. "You need to be in the mind-set where you feel strong enough," Gersten says. "You aren't obligated to the world to put yourself in a more difficult position for everyone else's sake."

Define your intentions.

Think through what you hope to gain, and choose your audience and approach accordingly. If you're shaken and want validation and support, describe your

emotions and needs to a close friend or family member who you know will support you, or to a therapist. If your goal is to inform or educate others or inspire empathy, a social media post can reach a broader audience, but you might choose to judiciously withhold some details. (One way to gut-check, Gersten says: Think about everyone who will see the post and consider whether it includes something you don't want them to read or know. Also consider how you'll feel if a troll surfaces in the comments.) When sharing with a diverse audience, it may help to set the scene very specifically. Including details about location, sights, and smells transports the reader into your shoes and increases the odds they'll feel what you were feeling.

Allow for emotion.


Sharing can get messy. You may cry, yell, or feel the need to throw something. Try not to squelch those feelings. "You just need to feel how you feel," Gersten says. "Nobody

should tell you that that's not acceptable or that you're wrong or that it's not OK."

Change the ending.

Another powerful use of story is to rewrite your experience, Weinshenker says. Say someone jumped out at you when you were running past a certain intersection. Visualizing or talking through running in the same spot safely can actually rewire your brain, reducing the impact of the negative event. Weinshenker notes, however, that this technique is often best deployed the first time in a therapist's office—it could reactivate traumatic feelings. A therapist can offer the appropriate support.

Know when to call the pros.

Storytelling can be therapeutic, but it's not therapy. If you're reliving memories involuntarily or the incident is interfering with your daily life, talk to a mental health care provider. Tools such as cognitive behavioral therapy can help you cope. 

Be obsessed.

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