

VALUES FOR GIVING PERSONAL STORIES

It is great to get as many people as possible giving their personal stories. The best stories "fit" with the content of the evening (although not absolutely essential) but as you may not fully know everyone's stories you may have to guess who would be good at sharing their stories. Encourage everyone to give their story (as much as possible and try to ensure that there is a spread of perspectives such as those who have chosen to separate, those at "fault" or causing a separation, male, female, different backgrounds, with children and without etc.

Try to encourage people beforehand and maybe send an email with some of the details below to them:

I know that you will all be brilliant in giving your story. Personal stories should be around 5 minutes long (maximum 8 minutes) and therefore focus on the key issues that you came up against and how you tackled them, rather than a chronological recounting of your marriage and divorce. Good to give a quick background, say 30 seconds long, but then the issues you had to deal with and what helped your recovery are more important.

Reading from notes doesn't come across as well as answering questions although I totally understand that you might want to have a simple list of things that you want to remember to say. The best tactic is to speak about the hardest things you have had to overcome as this breeds openness from everyone else on the course. You do not have to have all the answers or be completely "restored". In fact, honesty of where you are now, even if you feel that you are "a work in progress", is great.

I would suggest the following questions each evening:

- **In brief (30 secs), what was your background?**
(i.e how long did you know your ex / how long were you married / did you have kids / where did you live / anything general for background?)
- **What happened to you?**
(anything lead up to your relationship breakdown / what caused your relationship breakdown / what happened afterwards?)
- **What were the biggest issues** that you experienced [related to the session this evening] while going through separation and divorce?
- **How did you deal with these issues?**
- **How do you feel now?**
- **If there was one thing that you would say to someone going through separation and divorce, what would it be?**

I have also attached the values document that we believe is good to follow.

We recognise that the personal stories of healing and restoration that are told by individuals are the lifeblood of the course.

Personal stories have an amazing power to help guests because the openness and honesty of individuals enables guests to understand the depth of issues; recognise their own situations; encourages their own openness; and above all, speaks of hope that issues can be overcome and restored lives possible.

We are conscious that each story starts with the breakdown of a relationship and so, by definition, there is another person (the 'ex') whose story it also is. While these stories need to be told, we wish to take every step possible to respect the ex and to protect his/her identity from being associated with the story and we therefore give these guidelines:

1. Show respect to your ex in the way the story is told. Don't say anything critical about them to belittle them, or purposely diminish them in the eyes of anyone listening to the story (for instance someone who knows your ex).
2. Share facts in such a way that they are uncontroversial. A good test would be to ask 'Would I be comfortable presenting my story in this way if my ex were in the room?' The aim is that the story is presented in a factual way (just talking about the facts), but not in a subjective way that would be controversial in the ex's opinion.
3. We are free to speak openly about how we responded to what happened: what we experienced, what we felt, what we found difficult, what helped etc. This part of the story is really important and is about us, and not about our ex.
4. Actively create distance between the ex in the story and the real ex, so that he/she would not be identifiable to anyone listening to the story. So names, places, job descriptions or personal descriptions should be changed. For example: 'John, a plumber from Croydon' can become 'Paul, an electrician from Barnet'. 'My wife left me to go and live in Paris' can become 'My wife left me to go and live in Berlin'. An incidental fact has been changed, but the impact of the story will be the same. The initials of the new names should be different.
5. We recognise that some may feel that changing names, places and descriptions doesn't result in an entirely honest account. In our view this is both justifiable and necessary in order to provide anonymity and protection from identification for the ex.

We would also suggest that people should try to ensure that the key themes in your story are not lost on people because of audience pre-conceptions. Comments on, say, wealth or background may needlessly distance you from some people. Such as:

- Talking about your hobbies of hunting or opera
- Discussing your skiing holidays or time at boarding school
- Over emphasis on Christian issues / biblical verses

Some mention of Christian beliefs / support may be wholly appropriate, such as a particular bible verse which was important to you, or an awareness of the Lord's forgiveness which helped you to forgive. However, the personal story should never stray into teaching or preaching, but should

remain specifically about you. In general isolated Christian references are fine if they are a key part of your story.

The aim of the personal story is for other people to hear about another person's experience. We therefore suggest keeping this section to discuss what happened, the reactions and emotions, and how the situation was dealt with, rather than making wider comments in general. Comments such as "all men act like this" or "women always listen better than men" are not always true, so it's best to keep to a person's own experience rather than general effects on other people.

Please take these guidelines in the right way – our aim is to retain the power of the stories whilst respecting the ex (not putting him/her down in a public setting) and being sensitive to a very broad audience.