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# **Leaders, Sharing Your Own Mental Health Story Can Help You Become a Better Ally**

by Kelly Greenwood

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**Summary.** Celebrities and athletes have increasingly been speaking out about their mental health over the last several years, but organizational leaders have only just started. To fully catalyze societal change and normalize mental health challenges and seeking support, workplaces must also play a part. When leaders of all levels share their personal stories, it reduces stigma and normalizes the ups and downs of being human — especially as a high-performing professional. This type of role-modeling positions vulnerability as a strength instead of a weakness and shows it's possible to succeed and thrive with a mental health challenge. The author presents best practices for how to tell your leader ally story — and why it matters. [close](#)

More than a decade ago when I had to take a leave of absence due to generalized anxiety disorder and depression, I thought my career was over. I was struggling — drowning in shame, self-stigma, and fear of professional repercussions as I did my best to hide what was happening. What would have given me hope was knowing other leaders had successfully navigated mental health challenges.

Years later when I started to share my own story after founding Mind Share Partners, a nonprofit focused on changing the culture of workplace mental health, I discovered that I hadn't been alone. More than that, I've learned that everyone has a story of some kind.

Celebrities and athletes have increasingly been speaking out about their mental health over the last several years, but organizational leaders have only just started. To fully catalyze

societal change and normalize mental health challenges and seeking support, workplaces must also play a part. This is critical since many people spend most of their waking hours at work, and workplace factors can lead to poor mental health.

As part of Mind Share Partners' client work, we coach organizational leaders one on one to share their mental health stories in an empowering way. We find that this type of storytelling in all-staff meetings and other group settings is one of the most powerful tools to encourage openness and begin to transform organizational culture. As part of our movement-building work, we launched our "Leaders Go First" campaign, which includes a collection of videos from C-suite leaders and a companion playbook based on our years of working with clients, to inspire and teach leaders to share their stories. Here are our best practices for how to tell your leader ally story — and why it matters.

## **The Benefits of a Leader Ally Mental Health Story**

A leader ally story is an authentic, vulnerable, and supportive message that includes a personal experience with mental health, which can range from high stress to burnout to grief to a diagnosable condition. It can be past or present, a one-time episode, or an ongoing challenge, and it may or may not have affected work.

When leaders of all levels share their personal stories, it reduces stigma and normalizes the ups and downs of being human — especially as a high-performing professional. This type of role-modeling positions vulnerability as a strength instead of a weakness and shows it's possible to succeed and thrive with a mental health challenge. In fact, in Mind Share Partners' 2021 Mental Health at Work Report in partnership with Qualtrics and ServiceNow, C-level and executive respondents to our survey were actually more likely than others to report at least one mental health symptom.

Leader ally storytelling can improve the staying power of other workplace mental health initiatives, such as training and awareness campaigns, by helping personalize them and signal their importance. It also helps workers feel comfortable discussing their own mental health if and when they choose to as well as seeking support or treatment. As U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy shared with us, "...when workplaces step up, when their leaders step up in particular to share their personal mental health stories, it inspires openness and shifts a culture to one where we don't feel ashamed to seek help."

This is evidenced by Andrew Miller, COO of the Minnesota Vikings, who shared this in his video for our campaign:

Just a few weeks into the pandemic, I joined a virtual all-staff meeting. I was nervous about what I was going to say, but I knew it was the right thing to do as a leader ... [I said], “I know that many of you are struggling with your mental health right now and I can relate to you because ... I’ve battled depression throughout most of my life.”... I was surprised not only at the number of people who had experienced mental health challenges, but also at the gratitude they had for someone in my position sharing my story.

## **Crafting Your Story**

When thinking about how to tell your own mental health story at work, you should first consider whether it makes sense for you professionally. If it does, here’s what to consider when crafting your leader ally story:

**Decide whether and how to tell your story.** Depending on your organization’s culture, your role, and your level of seniority, sharing your story may or may not be an easy decision. You might also hesitate to share for non-professional reasons, such as fear of resurfacing past traumas. If you’re concerned, consider asking a mentor or trusted colleague for their advice. In thinking through whether to disclose at work, you may also want to turn to safe spaces in your personal life for input, such as a friend, partner, or therapist.

If you arrive at the decision to share, reflect on which format you prefer. Telling your story live (in-person or virtual) can be especially powerful for listeners and may provide opportunities for conversation. Recording your story on video provides a similar level of authenticity while allowing for retakes. Written stories are also an option if you're nervous about public speaking. If you're still getting used to having your story out there or don't want it to go beyond your target audience, avoid putting it in writing or having it recorded.

**Speak from the first person and reflect on what details to include.** What's most important is to share *your* personal mental health story — not someone else's. While it can be helpful to hear stories about family members or close friends, not sharing your “I” story can inadvertently reinforce an “us vs. them” narrative, as in, “We should support people with mental health challenges, but I'm completely fine.” Just as no one has perfect physical health, no one has perfect mental health, either. Instead, we all move back and forth on a spectrum throughout our lives, managing chronic conditions or acute episodes with specific triggers. It does your colleagues a disservice to let them think you've never struggled with anything (even if it's not a diagnosable condition) and can make them feel othered or less than. If your story does involve other people's mental health, make sure to anonymize the details unless you have their permission to share.

You can be as selective as you want in terms of the level of detail to include. Sometimes, leaders prefer to share something from their past instead of a mental health challenge that they're currently navigating. Regardless, you should share what happened, how your mental health did or didn't affect your work, and any workplace factors that contributed, such as overwork or lack of autonomy. It's important to share how you got support, ideally including any parts of that experience that may be stigmatized, such as therapy and medication. Consider including what changed after you sought support or first talked about your mental health at work. Would you have done things differently or acted sooner knowing what you know now?

**Think about the bigger picture and strive for inclusion.**

Remember to acknowledge that your mental health experience is just one of many. Reflect on the kind of narrative your story reinforces about mental health and offer constructive takeaways, such as the high prevalence of mental health challenges, that they aren't anyone's "fault," and that they don't necessarily make people violent or less capable.

Just as your mental health story is unique, so is your identity and how it shaped your experience. Our experiences with mental health, along with the barriers we face, are intrinsically tied to our identities and backgrounds, including gender, race, ethnicity, geographic region, LGBTQ+ identity, religion, and more.

If you're comfortable, name the visible and invisible identity markers that have affected your mental health journey — whether through systemic barriers, added stigma around seeking help, or even the related bright spots, such as community and strong cultural identity. In this context, instead of putting the burden on individuals from marginalized groups to “educate” those from dominant ones, the intent is to help others who share aspects of your identity and may find your story particularly resonant.

**Name why mental health at work matters and include a call to action.** To conclude your story, talk about why addressing mental health at work is important. This could be anything from your personal views to statistics to the role of work on mental health — for better or worse.

Share what you and your organization are doing to create a mentally healthy workplace. Go beyond just listing off your benefits and describe your culture and ways of working as well as your workplace mental health strategy if you have one. If you have a hard time thinking of examples, this may be an indicator that more needs to be done. Without the foundations in place, a personal story will only go so far.

Finally, encourage others to join the conversation, whether by sharing their own story if their workplace culture is psychologically safe, attending mental health-related events or trainings, or modeling mentally healthy practices and ways of working.



**Consider your tone.** Throughout your personal story, maintain a hopeful tone, especially for the benefit of workers who may currently be struggling. Knowing that their mental health challenges can get better and be managed while being a successful professional can be validating and inspire them to persist. It can also make them more willing to explore treatment or other support.

Being specific instead of speaking in generalities is key to ensuring your message is authentic, relatable, and memorable. However, be mindful of oversharing certain details about your mental health challenge — especially anything related to self-harm or suicide — to avoid accidentally triggering someone or causing harm. That’s not to say that these topics should be avoided altogether, but that the message should be framed intentionally. Consider mentioning which mental health topics you’ll be discussing up front so participants can opt out of a potentially triggering share.

Lastly, do whatever feels most authentic to you, whether that’s weaving in humor or taking a serious approach. You don’t have to have the perfect words or delivery for your story to be impactful — just be genuine.

## **Navigating Tricky Reactions to Your Story**

More often than not, you'll find that your colleagues express gratitude in response to your leader ally story, and they may even share similar experiences with you. However, sometimes people may approach you in ways that feel uncomfortable or outside of your role as a colleague or manager.

If someone asks you to open up beyond what you shared, you are under no obligation to do so. Instead, you can say that there are aspects that you prefer to keep private or that are still challenging to discuss.

Alternatively, someone may want to share their mental health experiences upon seeing you as a safe space. This may require setting boundaries, but don't immediately assume that they want you to be their therapist and solve their problems — most people just want a listening ear. When responding, be clear that you care about the person and want to be supportive. You can always listen, validate, and show compassion. If their mental health challenges are work related, you may even be in a position to help. If that isn't the case, feel free to explicitly say that you're not a therapist, but that you're happy to point them toward your organization's mental health resources. To avoid sounding dismissive, reiterate your intent and desire to support them.

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I know firsthand how scary it can be to share your personal mental health story. In fact, making the decision to do so was my biggest hurdle in whether I should found Mind Share Partners — the type of organization I knew would require an authentic, vulnerable leader. It's normal to be nervous if you haven't talked about your mental health before, especially in a work setting. I still have to push myself to share my mental health challenges in real time instead of talking more comfortably about experiences that are in the rearview mirror. But each time I do, I help others and become more relatable.

Be kind to yourself and give yourself grace. What matters in this type of storytelling is normalizing mental health challenges at work and encouraging people to seek support. Leader allies inspire openness, transparency, and true culture change. Sharing your story may require courage, but so does much of leadership.

Leaders: Go first.

**Kelly Greenwood** is the Founder and CEO of Mind Share Partners, a national nonprofit changing the culture of workplace mental health so both employees and organizations can thrive. Through movement building, custom training, and strategic advising, it

normalizes mental health challenges and promotes sustainable ways of working to create a mentally healthy workforce. Follow her on LinkedIn and subscribe to her monthly newsletter.

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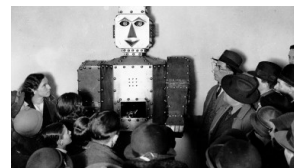


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