

Sharing Your Experience with Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C)



A Short Guide to Personal Storytelling



Asian Women's
Shelter

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United Against Female Genital Cutting

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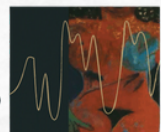


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Disclaimer

Sahiyo and the Silence Speaks program created the *Voices to End Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting* (FGM/C) project in 2018, and Asian Women's Shelter supported the expansion of *Voices* in 2021. The *Voices* project enhances the well-being of survivors and advocates by supporting them in sharing their personal stories as short digital videos and collaborates with storytellers on the distribution of these videos as part of education and advocacy activities intended to end FGM/C.

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Although this guide does discuss mental health and well-being, *it should not be used to diagnose trauma-related conditions*. If you require professional support, please explore the list of resources available at the end of the guide.



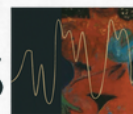
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Introduction: The Power of Your Story

We all have stories about who we are and how our experiences define us, and we make meaning of our lives by reflecting on and sharing them. The process of narrating personal experiences through storytelling is a uniquely human activity. By telling our stories, we can shed outdated understanding of past events and form new ideas of who we understand ourselves to be. The storytelling process can reduce the grip that painful memories have on us, and alleviate blame, shame, and fear. It can also inspire us to speak out publicly and take action on issues that are important to us.

For many survivors of FGM/C, telling personal stories and sharing them with others is an important step towards healing, as well as a way to advocate for an end to this harmful cultural practice. Shifting from a story of helplessness to one of resilience and solidarity with other survivors can foster lasting changes in identity, self-efficacy, and overall well-being. If you're considering sharing your story of FGM/C, you are not alone; you are joining a brave group of people who are bringing awareness to this important topic in the hopes that future generations will be spared.

This guide is designed to support decision-making related to publicly sharing personal stories of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C)—whether with friends, family members, or wider audiences. The contents of the guide explore the positive benefits of storytelling for FGM/C survivors, as well as the potential risks. Tools for writing your story are offered, and guidance on how to navigate the process of going public are included. Finally, because each path of healing is unique, the guide also provides insight and advice on the myriad impacts of trauma, to help you anticipate feelings and sensations that might arise when you share your story.

We look forward to supporting your storytelling journey!



“

We (the group of Voices workshop participants) were from around the globe, and while our stories all centered on FGM/C, each of us had a unique experience and outlook. I didn't expect so quickly to forge a bond between the women in the group, but I did. The space was safe for us to share our experiences, hear each other's comments about our project, and feel the compassion radiating through the group.

 *Arefa* 

”

Benefits of Storytelling

Deciding to share your FGM/C story is ultimately about breaking away from the silence so often demanded of survivors of this harmful practice. By shedding light on your experience, you are contributing to a growing chorus of voices daring to speak openly about a practice that has been considered taboo for centuries.

Storytelling creates a ripple effect; when one person shares their story, others can be inspired to share theirs. As these narratives come into being, they challenge the underlying social norms perpetuating FGM/C, fostering a shift towards its abandonment. Storytelling offers numerous benefits:

- **Personal Growth and Reflection:** Telling your story requires introspection, offering an opportunity for reflection on past events. Sharing can be a tool to help you gain clarity and perspective on your healing journey and contribute to your ongoing development as a person.
- **Connection and Empathy:** Storytelling also offers opportunities to create a sense of community with other survivors and foster solidarity and understanding that you are not alone. Together, you can empathize with and support one another.
- **Education and Awareness:** Sharing your story publicly can shed light on the reality of FGM/C in all its various forms, including how it occurs and what impacts it has. You are opening the door for more opportunities to initiate conversations, educate communities about the harms of FGM/C, challenge the stigmatization of survivors, and push for policy change to protect children from these practices.
- **Empowerment and Advocacy:** Telling personal stories can be cathartic for individuals and a source of inspiration for those who have not yet spoken out. You may find that the process of speaking of your personal experience with FGM/C deepens your existing activism against the practice, or that it inspires you to take action for the first time.

Voices to End FGM/C has supported more than 70 survivors and advocates in telling their stories as short videos. Here we offer comments from participants, about how the experience of joining a group of survivors in speaking out has impacted them.

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What I took away from the experience (of telling a story) is that there are people who understand my struggle of wanting to be part of a community while working to end one practice within it. They are people who understand that I am not trying to bash my community or shame it.

 Zehra 

”

Potential Challenges of Storytelling

Despite these benefits, it's important to acknowledge the potential challenges and realities of personal storytelling, should you decide to share your story publicly:

- **Negativity and Criticism:** You will likely receive a range of responses to your story from family members, friends, your community, and the public. While some may greet you with words of encouragement and support, others may criticize your decision to speak out.
- **Threats:** Some people may actively oppose your views or threaten you or your family in person or online. *Note:* Threatening to hurt someone is against the law. If this happens to you, please contact local law enforcement in your area.
- **Resurfaced Trauma:** While some survivors of FGM/C do not consider themselves as having endured a traumatic experience, others may define themselves as trauma survivors. This guide prioritizes safe ways to share your story publicly, but it's important to recognize the unpredictable nature of individual reactions to your story and their possible impact on your well-being.

For information about how to prepare for potentially difficult responses to your story, see pg. 17 [Navigating Responses to Your Story](#). For more information about the potential impacts of trauma, see pg, 20 [Understanding Trauma](#).



“

If you're thinking of sharing your story, don't worry about feeling it's not the right or perfect story to tell. You have a creative process, and someone in the future will thank you for your courage to record an event of your time. I hope that my story will leave a positive lasting impact and reach Muslim parents and survivors. I hope we'll choose our children over harmful social norms because I want to see a future where queer, trans, and nonbinary children grow up with high self-esteem and know that someone is on their side.

 *Afiqa* 

”

Preparing to Share Your Story

A. Establishing Your Support Network

Having a support network as you prepare to share your story is crucial. A network of friends, peers, and/or family can provide validation, emotional support, guidance, protection, and practical assistance. Think of them as your “safe people,” individuals who will be there for you no matter what. Be sure to identify your personal champions and get them onboard with your decision to tell your story. Let them know you will need ongoing support through this journey, and do not hesitate to reach out to them.

Use the space below to list some members of your support network:

B. Emotional and Mental Preparation

Before sharing your story, consider your current physical and mental state. Do you have a safe and secure living situation with adequate income? Is your body prepared to handle the potential emotional challenges that may arise as a result of speaking out? Are there risks of going back to unhealthy coping mechanisms if the storytelling process triggers anxiety or stress? Remember to provide your physical body with plenty of rest, healthy foods, and water to support yourself. For more information on the realities of how trauma can affect our bodies, refer to pg 21. [Trauma in the Body](#) section.

Use the space below to list some supportive activities or healthy coping mechanisms:

C. Affirmations

Affirmations are short phrases you can repeat, to change the way you think and feel about yourself. For trauma survivors, who often internalize beliefs of being “damaged” or “bad,” affirmations offer a simple yet powerful tool to challenge those old beliefs and summon the courage to face unfamiliar or scary situations. Although not everyone may find them immediately comforting, affirmations can serve as reminders of the reasons why you decided to share your story. Here are some suggested affirmations to get you started:

- I am BRAVE
- I am GOOD ENOUGH
- My story MATTERS
- I have the right to share my EXPERIENCE

Write down your own positive affirmations:



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I most enjoyed meeting others who vocalized their stories and shared their experiences. Their stories normalized my own; their feelings validated mine. In the beginning, listening to others' stories was very hard. At the end of each session, they kept saying: take care of yourself. But I felt like the session was taking care of me. I opened up. I started talking and writing about this experience.

 *Muna* 

”

Choosing How and What to share

Personal storytelling can help to transform recurring memories of loss, trauma, and stress into narratives of resilience and survival. Sharing your experience with a close friend differs from crafting a piece of writing or creating a video intended for public consumption. Here are some tips to guide you in making decisions that feel right to you, in terms of what storytelling format(s) and content to choose.

Tips to Begin Telling Your Story:

- Writing a private version of your life story can be a great way to start. This will enable you to explore the full scope of your experience before making decisions about what to reveal publicly. If the idea of putting your story into words feels daunting, consider starting with a description of a moment when you felt safe. Think about:
 - Where were you at that moment? What was going on?
 - What do you remember about the feeling of safety, and how it felt in your body?
 - How did other people or places enhance that feeling of safety for you?
- Creating a timeline can also help you contextualize your memories, pleasant or difficult, by organizing life events in a way that is personally meaningful to you. Draw a timeline from your birth to the present:
 - Start by identifying happy milestones, such as achieving a personal goal or feeling happy about a significant life event (i.e., a joyful birthday party, school graduation, a new job, the birth of a child, etc.).
 - Then, add your FGM/C experience and any other difficult events you'd like to explore to your timeline.
- Write without editing, disconnecting from the part of yourself that may want to critique your writing. Let your thoughts flow without hesitation. If you don't have conscious memories of experiencing FGM/C, describe what you do remember from that time, and explore how you became aware of what happened.
- Take your time crafting your story. Once you finish an initial draft, set it aside and do something that brings you joy. Return to your writing after you've had some distance from it, and, if desired, start your editing process then.

Crafting Your Story for Publication:

The act of telling your story does not mean you don't have the right to carefully choose what aspects of the story to make public. Here are some suggestions for how you might proceed with creating an edited version for larger audiences.

1. Choose your medium: You may wish to develop your writing as a longer-form essay or blog posting, providing lots of detail and backstory. Alternatively, if there's a particular moment of the story that really stands out for you, you could create a series of social media posts or a short video. Finally, writing isn't for everyone. Visual art is another helpful way to express yourself and access emotions and memories that feel too difficult to verbalize. You may also consider including original artwork, which can be a wonderful addition to written or video pieces.

2. Consider safety and privacy: Many survivors of FGM/C initially decide to avoid naming themselves or other "characters" in their stories and choose to share anonymously. This approach can protect you from backlash and allows you to gradually test the waters of speaking publicly. You can always decide later to reveal your identity.

Questions to ask yourself as you make the decision include:

Will naming myself jeopardize my physical or emotional safety, or the safety of others in my family or community?

If I go public, will this negatively impact personal or community relationships that are important to me? Will it make life difficult for those I care about, and am I willing to tolerate their discomfort?

Does naming myself potentially enhance the usefulness of my story for education or advocacy, and is this important to me?

3. Self-representation: Storytelling has become popular across various sectors, ranging from the nonprofit and health arenas to the corporate world. However, discussions of storytelling often stress the importance of sharing stories from a place of vulnerability and honesty, without acknowledging the fragmented quality of memory and the challenges of really knowing ourselves and our own truths. Navigating these complexities can feel hard. Sometimes, the easiest approach is to describe your lived experience in simple, everyday language, in your own first-person voice.

4. Speaking of language: You have the right to choose what language to use, in sharing. Some people are more comfortable speaking and/or writing in a language they learned at a very young age. Others are happier expressing themselves in English. At the end of the day, it's up to you to decide what feels best.

5. The value of a group process: If you feel that telling your story in isolation will be too burdensome, you may consider participating in a storytelling group of some kind. For example, this guide has been developed as part of the *Voices* project, which provides a supportive environment in which survivors gather, share their stories, and craft them into short videos. For more information about *Voices* and its digital storytelling workshops, visit our website at voicestoendfgmc.org



“

For the first time, I was in a room full of women who all shared the experience of being cut. I felt a connection, a belonging that I had never before experienced and I was 74 years old. I have many close friends, yet I still look to my fellow survivors as the only ones who can fully accept and relate to my authentic self. My friends who know my story just cannot imagine it.

 *Renee* 

”

Navigating Responses to Your Story

In communities where FGM/C is practiced, there is often immense social pressure to avoid discussing the topic publicly, particularly with those outside of the community. This pressure exists within complex social, economic, and religious systems that uphold FGM/C as a required tradition and have normalized it within the community. Practicing communities tend to value conformity and strongly disapprove of those who publicly question the value of FGM/C.

Given this reality, speaking out can lead to backlash against both those who decide to share their stories and their family members. Survivors who speak up about their experiences and what they went through at the hands of their family members or community are often rejected and ignored in very important decision-making opportunities in the community. Regarded in some communities as “Betrayers,” those facing this experience have found it difficult and painful to navigate.

Preparing to Release Your Story:

If you’ve taken the step of crafting a story that you plan to release publicly, consider these points when preparing for its release:

- If possible, talk with your support network about potential repercussions and how you might prepare for them together.
- Reflect on / discuss with your support network the variety of ways you might respond to anyone showing disapproval of your story. Examples of responses include, *“I’m glad you feel comfortable talking about this issue; it has really helped me to reveal my experience,”* or *“Clearly we disagree about FGM/C. I’d love to share more information about why I believe it’s a tradition that needs to end.”*
- Consider whether you’d like to encourage those who encounter your story to get involved in advocacy. Examples include, *“I’m hoping my story can help mobilize people to push for an end to FGM/C; can we talk about what these efforts look like?”* or *“I’m networking with people who are willing to speak up against the practice, and I’d love your help.”*
- If you don’t feel ready to face potential backlash, consider whether sharing your story anonymously might be a better choice at this time. You can always re-evaluate this decision later, when and if you find yourself at a point of readiness for being publicly identified with the story.

What Is Your Responsibility?

As you navigate the process of sharing your story publicly, it's important to pay close attention to how you are being affected, in terms of your mental health and well-being. Keep in mind that while challenging feelings may arise for those who are close to you, when they read or hear your story, it does not have to be your responsibility to manage their feelings. If someone you know and care about has a very strong reaction to your story— whether positive or negative— it's important to gently let them know that it's not your responsibility to help them handle what's coming up for them. Consider practicing how to establish a boundary and prevent gossip or hearsay in such situations.

For instance, you might say something like, *"I noticed my story has really affected you. It's been challenging for me as well, having shared it, so I have an idea of what you might be feeling. I did want to let you know, though, that because I'm navigating my own process of having shared the story publicly, I am not in a space right now to take care of your emotions. I really hope you can reach out to someone you're close to, to talk about what you're experiencing. I hope I can rely on you to keep our conversation confidential."*



A Few Words About Social Media:

Making your personal FGM/C story available on some online platforms will open you up to “comments” and direct messages. If you have shared your story publicly, be advised that you may be attacked by people who are referred to as internet “trolls.” Internet trolling is when someone intentionally tries to upset others online. Trolling can often lead to “piling on,” where others join in the attack. Experiencing trolling has been associated with distress and significant negative psychological outcomes. Fortunately, the following steps can be taken to mitigate trolling:

- **DO NOT respond:** Instead, if possible, report abusive online behavior directly to the social media platform and, if the threats are severe, to local law enforcement.
- **Disable comments:** Consider disabling the ability for others to comment on a post, video, etc., documenting your story.
- **Delete and block:** On platforms that allow blocking (i.e. Facebook, Instagram, TikTok), take steps to block individuals posting harmful or trolling comments. Alternatively, have a friend monitor and remove such content.

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No two stories are completely the same. Every story matters. Every story needs to be shared. With each story, we began to break the wall of silence. We shatter the limits and the boundaries in place. Stories allow for truth to be seen, allows for awareness that there are so many more affected by FGM/C than is recognized, an awareness that we may never really know all affected until that wall is completely gone.

 *Jenny* 

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Understanding Trauma

Overview:

This section of the guide offers basic information about how the mind and body might experience trauma. Trauma is a biological reaction to extraordinary life experiences. When an event causes a traumatic response, the brain and body “hold” onto that experience and can later get re-triggered, resulting in a repeat experience of that trauma response. These reactions can manifest even when we're responding to a present-day situation that is unrelated to the initial trauma. Gaining an understanding of the way our brains and bodies process trauma can help us to address lingering reactions we might have in response to FGM/C and the circumstances surrounding it.

One reason why the brain can have difficulty narrating a traumatic event is rooted in our biology. Human brains are wired so that when a harmful experience happens, the survival part of the brain responds immediately and causes our bodies to have a stress response. This survival-focused response— known as the ‘fight-flight-freeze’ response— allows us to have quick reactions that can protect our mind and body from further harm.

For many, during the experience of FGM/C, the ‘fight or flight’ response was not possible, leading to the body feeling ‘frozen’ in fright. This biological survival instinct serves to protect survivors from remembering all the details of highly stressful events. It can even cause some chemical reactions that give us the sensation of ‘floating’ or ‘observing’ the trauma from a distance, rather than actively living or experiencing it. Because we cannot remember the details of our experience, the narrative part of our brains cannot create a cohesive story about what happened to us. If the traumatic event occurred during childhood, in addition to the survival brain taking over, the narrative brain had not even fully developed yet. This may result in having difficulty remembering what happened to us, or not having words to describe our experience.



Trauma in the Body:

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a normal stress response that can occur after a traumatic event. The most important thing to know about PTSD is that our bodies are designed to heal from stress and trauma. Listed below are ways in which PTSD might express itself.

Flashbacks

“Flashing back” to a traumatic memory can happen unexpectedly and can feel startling. Flashbacks are vivid experiences in which we relive fragments of our experience or feel as if they’re happening right now, in the present. During a flashback, one might experience:

- breathing difficulties
- dizziness
- disorientation
- muscle tension
- a pounding heart
- shaking
- inability to concentrate

Flashbacks can last anywhere from a few seconds to hours or days. They can leave us feeling fearful, confused, and distressed. These episodes can be jarring, painful, and disruptive to our everyday life.



Nightmares

Nightmares are a common occurrence for those who have experienced trauma. When we attempt to avoid painful memories during the day, those memories may arise as we prepare for bed or manifest as a nightmare while we're asleep. Sometimes nightmares are reenactments of the traumatic event itself or echo themes connected to it. Some interpret nightmares as our body attempts to make sense of distressing events.

Reoccurring Thoughts

Recurring thoughts or thoughts that feel intrusive may involve dramatic images or memories that resurface frequently. They could involve the face of the person or people that inflicted harm on us, or memories of locations, sites, smells, or sounds associated with a traumatic event. These images or memories are replayed over and over again in our minds.

Dissociation

Dissociation can happen at times when we believe we cannot escape emotional and or physical trauma. The dissociative state provides a way for us to survive a traumatic experience or avoid memories and flashbacks about that experience. Some experience dissociation as a type of "out-of-body" experience where they observe their own bodies and create the perception that "this is not happening to me." When dissociation occurs in childhood, it might have become linked over time to a panic response.

During a traumatic event, sensations experienced in the body can induce feelings of shame, guilt, and confusion, prompting dissociation. If we were to constantly relive our trauma, our bodies would remain in a state of fear, shame, or anger. The body and mind resort to dissociation to escape from that misery. When we are overwhelmed, our traumatic experiences can become fragmented from our core selves. Emotions, sounds, images, thoughts, and physical sensations linked to our trauma remain separated from our conscious minds to alleviate the distress.



Sleep Disturbances

Sleep disturbances are common and varied. Some of us may have experienced hyperarousal following a traumatic event. This is a feeling of being overly alert, on edge, and unable to relax our minds or bodies. Hyperarousal can contribute to symptoms of insomnia, including having difficulty falling or staying asleep and having difficulty waking up.

Eating Disturbances

Some people have difficulty eating following a traumatic experience. We might develop a bigger appetite than usual, or we might lose our appetite altogether. These changes tend to be temporary and often normalize after a short period of time, allowing our appetite to regulate back to its usual pattern.

Difficulty Concentrating

It is not unusual for trauma survivors or those who are experiencing a triggered trauma response to struggle with concentration. When a trauma response is triggered, the brain shuts down its prefrontal cortex (rational mind) and is taken over by the fight, flight, or freeze response. When this happens, it is nearly impossible to concentrate. Hypervigilance and a state of arousal may leave us unable to pay attention, or retain and recall new information.



“

(After the workshop) I am still healing and working on growing around my grief. Now, I think about who I want to be because this happened to me. I hope to break the cycle of trauma by redefining what it means to be a woman in my role as a wife, mother, and activist; I can continue contributing to a growing body of voices that will put an end to this practice in my daughter's lifetime.



Farrah



”

Healing Strategies:

Both our brains and our bodies help us to move in and out of everyday stress responses to trauma. Understanding how you wish to navigate your own healing—through cognitive (mind) or somatic (body) approaches—helps in self-care.

Breathing Exercises and Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the practice of learning to maintain a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, body sensations, and the surrounding environment through a gentle, curious, and nurturing lens. It is a way to rest the mind and bring attention to the present moment.

Traditional mindfulness practices often invite us to connect with sensations in our bodies. For those of us who tend to disassociate as a coping mechanism, connecting with our bodies may feel unsafe. Therefore, it can be helpful to utilize a trauma-informed approach to mindfulness. Making minor adjustments to traditional mindfulness practices may provide a much-needed sense of safety. By focusing on grounding, anchoring, and self-regulation techniques, we can assist our nervous systems in re-balancing and regulating themselves.

Trauma-informed mindfulness practices include:

- Performing a physical activity with **present-moment awareness**, rather than sitting still in meditation. For example, you might take a walk in nature, moving slowly and using your five senses to fully take in the sights, sounds, smells, and sensations of the experience. During these moments, you might ask yourself:
 - What color and shape are the leaves of the trees or the seashells on the beach? Can you feel the consistency of the ground beneath your feet? Do you feel a breeze blowing across your face? Are the birds singing? Does the air smell of snow or salt water?



- Observing objects, colors, or the space around you. One easy and quick practice is the 5-4-3-2-1 exercise. Look around you and name (silently or out loud) five things you can see. Then name four things you can touch, feeling their textures as you name them. Next, name three things you can hear. Then name two things you can smell (you can simply smell the air around you and your clothing if no strong aromas are immediately accessible). Finally, name one thing you can taste (this can be as simple as the inside of your mouth).
- Listening attentively to music. If it feels comfortable to you, close your eyes or lower your gaze. Notice the rhythms you hear, pick out different voices or instruments to focus on, and pay attention to how the music affects you. Are you experiencing an emotional response? Do you feel the music in a part of your body?



Healthy Relationships

Healthy relationships are critically important for those who have experienced trauma. Relationships can offset feelings of being alone and can bolster our self-esteem, which may help reduce depression and feelings of guilt. Healthy relationships also provide us with a source of support when we're coping with stress. Finally, healthy relationships can also provide us with opportunities to support others, which can reduce feelings of failure or feelings of being cut off from others. The National Center for PTSD is an excellent resource on trauma. Much of the information in this guide was sourced from their site: <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/>



“

For a long time I didn't have the courage to face myself. Telling my story opened my vulnerability; and it's okay to be vulnerable.

The experience was therapeutic for me. I was empowered. I was transformed. I met a group of strong women who, like me, share the passion to end FGM/C.



Lola



”

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