

THE ETHICS OF PUBLIC RECOVERY SELF-DISCLOSURE (BILL WHITE, BILL STAUFFER, AND DANIELLE TARINO)

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Ethics involves the application of moral principles to promote good and prevent harm. Ethical decision-making within our service and advocacy activities is an assessment of the ratio of potential benefits to potential harms in any course of action—with a particular emphasis on “first do no harm.”

Such decision-making involves asking ourselves three questions. First, what parties could benefit or experience harm in this situation (and what is the degree and duration of such benefit or harm)? In our advocacy roles, it is helpful to assess such potential benefits and harms related to ourselves, our families, organizations with whom we are associated, the recovery advocacy movement, and the community.

Second, are there any laws, policies, or historical practices that offer guidance in this situation? This question illuminates the complexities between law and ethics: actions may be legal and ethical, unethical and illegal, legal but unethical, or illegal but ethical.

Third, what ethical values are most applicable to this situation and what course of action would these values suggest? Self-disclosure as an ethical issue has been explored in both professional and peer recovery support contexts (See [HERE](#) and [HERE](#)), but little attention has been focused on ethical concerns related to self-disclosure within the context of public recovery advocacy. Several traditional ethical values inform decisions related to disclosure of our personal recovery stories in public or professional settings.

Beneficence is the ethical command to help others and not exploit the service context. It invites us to share our story as a means of helping individuals and families suffering from addiction and commands us to focus that story on those in need rather than as an act of self-aggrandizement or a means of pursuing our own interests.

Nonmaleficence is the ethical command to do no harm. In the context of public recovery storytelling, it forces us to assess the timing and the intended and unintended consequences of our public disclosures on ourselves and other parties.

Honesty demands that the recovery story be a truthful representation of our experience. Honesty and candor challenge us as advocates to speak truth to power even when lacking confidence in the authority of our own voice.

Fidelity calls upon us to keep our promises. It asks us to remain faithful to pledges we have made to individuals and organizations. It asks us not to make promises that we cannot keep and to adhere to commitments made in the context of our story sharing.

Justice requires that we acknowledge disparities in recovery opportunities and resources and calls on us to seek equity in such opportunities and resources.

Discretion calls upon us to protect our own privacy, the privacy of our family, and the privacy of others in the presentation of our story. Public recovery storytelling is an act of public service; it is not public therapy or a platform for airing personal grievances.

Self-protection calls upon us in our service roles to avoid harm to self, family, and others. It is an acknowledgment of the legitimacy of tending to our own safety and health. It is a recognition that risks of harm to self and others exist within the public storytelling arena.

There are also values deeply imbedded within the history of communities of recovery that can inform recovery storytelling within public and professional arenas.

Humility reminds us of the dangers of ego-inflation and that we speak not for ourselves but for the experiences and needs of all people seeking and in recovery. (See earlier [blog on distinction between recovery rock stars and recovery custodians](#))

Gratitude is a call to give credit where it is due and to express our thanks to individuals and organizations that made our story possible. We offer our own story in thanks for the meaning we drew from the stories of others at a time we were most desperate for the hope they offered.

Respect/Tolerance is a recognition of the spirituality of imperfection—that we are all wounded in some way, that through this shared brokenness and healing, we can experience profound connectedness. It is an extension of humility and empathy—seeing ourselves in the lives of others and respecting multiple pathways and styles of recovery.

Service is the call to carry a message of recovery to all those who continue to suffer from addiction and related problems. We do that as an act of altruism and as a perpetual step in our own self-healing.

There are many decisions involved in public recovery storytelling. Filtering these decisions through a model of ethical decision-making and core values of recovery can help minimize risk to self and other parties.

Coming Next: Guidelines for Public Recovery Storytelling

Article link - [HERE](#)