



WHAT'S YOUR STORY?

for Families



Mini resource

HEARTLINES

WHAT'S STORY?

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The stories in our families



Our families are filled with stories. From births to first steps, schooling, heartbreaks, illnesses, weddings, funerals, and everything in between – our families bear witness to the most intimate details of our lives. But when it comes to story-sharing, it's often easier to ask a stranger about their story than the people in our own family!

There are various reasons for this. It might be that we've assumed because we've had a relationship with someone all our lives, we know everything there is to know about each other. There may be cultural expectations that keep us from "prying" into the lives of our elders. Or, there may be a relational breakdown in our family that keeps us from relating honestly with one another.

Whatever your situation, in every instance where someone has engaged in story-sharing with a relative they have, at the very least, walked away with a bit more understanding – either about that person, or about themselves. And that is the aim of *What's Your Story?*: to help you grow in understanding.

In this resource we explore how to adopt story-sharing in your family.



Getting started

In our resource, *Ask. Listen. Tell.* we mention some of the principles for creating a safe space for story-sharing. We recognise that not all families are a safe space and there may be cases of relational breakdown, neglect, secrecy or even abuse. In these instances, we would recommend that you only engage in a story-sharing journey with family once you are in a safe living environment and have the help and support of a relevant professional.

By asking, listening and telling our stories, we can embark on a process of deepening our relationships. When our relationships are characterised by understanding, acceptance, respect and love, they become a powerful treasure, for us and our families.



The value of story-sharing

When we tell our story to someone who is really listening, our body's stress response switches off. Instead of toxic stress hormones, our bodies release hormones that make us feel better and help our bodies repair themselves. Stress, anxiety and feelings of isolation are replaced with a sense of wellbeing and connectedness with other people.

Hearing someone's story helps us understand who they are and where they come from. We find out about them at a deeper level, and our view of other people and the world we share expands.

Another important benefit of personal storytelling is that it's been proven to promote literacy and language skills in children! While you might not be a qualified teacher, simply sharing stories with your child can benefit their own educational development.

People and families grow closer together and empathy is created when people get the opportunity to tell their personal stories in a safe environment. To create this environment, there needs to be love, understanding, acceptance, respect, trust and forgiveness.



How do I begin the conversation?

Asking someone their story, or sharing your own story, can be uncomfortable at first, especially if your intention is to go deeper. An easy starting point is to ask questions that help you understand a little more about the person's background. Questions such as:

- Where did you grow up? What was your childhood like?
- How many siblings/cousins/parent-figures did you grow up with?
- What were some of your favourite things to do?
- Who were your role models growing up?

From there, you can begin to ask questions that go a little deeper into different facets of their life. Remember to ask questions that are open-ended – questions that will give you more than a “yes” or “no” answer.

For example, “Did you have cereal for breakfast this morning?” will likely result in a “Yes” or “No” answer. However, asking, “What did you have for breakfast this morning?” leaves room for the person answering to tell you themselves what they had for breakfast.

If you already know a little more about someone, then you can begin to dig deeper into other areas. We've listed some questions along these lines at the end of this resource.

If you feel comfortable about beginning a story-sharing experience with a family member, consider these questions before you ask someone about their story:

- 1. Is the timing right?** Don't try start a conversation with someone who's hard at work or in the middle of something. Always first assess the timing.
- 2. Is the context appropriate?** Are there other people around who may deter the person from sharing?
- 3. Is my attitude right?** Ask yourself: Am I trying to interrogate someone or am I sincerely wanting to grow in understanding?
- 4. Does the person seem open to my questions?** Start with a general question before diving into, "Tell me your whole life story!"
- 5. Is my heart open to listening?** You might hear answers that leave you feeling various emotions. So prepare your own heart to be ready to listen and receive.

When you've answered all the questions above and you feel ready to take the next step, here are some ideas for story-sharing in your family.

Ideas for story-sharing in your family



Get to know who's in your home

Make it a habit to get to know the people who live in or regularly visit your home better – not just as a "background check" exercise but out of genuine interest in getting to know them better.

Consider your Gogo (who's actually an aunt), your child's nanny, or your domestic worker: do you know where they come from, their interests or other talents, etc.?

Spend a few minutes asking them about different aspects of their lives – but do so in a respectful, non-intrusive manner.



Family tree

Create an informal or formal family tree that includes names, birth dates, places of birth, and any other information you can gather about your grandparents, siblings, children and immediate family.

Once you've set up the family tree, engage in regular Q&A sessions with your parents, children and relatives (we've listed some questions for you to choose from below).

As you engage in story-sharing with one another, you can add significant family discoveries to your tree.



Game shows

Borrowing from shows such as *Family Feud*, and *Friends*

Like These, you could host a game show where the goal is to get to know each other better and ease tensions that may otherwise arise in a traditional storytelling set-up.

A “Family 30 Seconds” game can even be created as a fun way to learn more about each other. Do this by making cards based on each member’s answer to a question, e.g. your favourite sport to watch, or your best family memory. Write the answers on a card and then everyone has to guess whose answer is whose – in under 30 seconds.



Intergenerational conversations

Introduce story-sharing in your family by encouraging your children to do getting-to-know-you interviews with their grandparents or older relatives. They can start by asking them a few questions from the list below.

Let them record the answers in a journal or as audio notes or videos on a cellphone.

Once the interviews have been conducted, have a family get-together where they share some of their learnings. You may be surprised by the things your parents share with your children that they have never told you!



Questions for discovering more about someone’s story

These are some ideas from our team. Feel free to use any, all or none of them, or to add your own.

Questions for parents

1. Where were you born and raised?
What kind of family did you grow up in – big or small, urban or rural?
2. Which were your most important relationships growing up? Who are some of the people that played the biggest roles in your life?
3. What are some of the big events or turning points in your life?
4. What things from your childhood or youth do you miss the most?

Questions for children

1. What is the best gift someone has given you?
2. What is/was your favourite toy or game?
3. During the lockdown, who did you miss seeing the most?
4. What do you like most about school?
5. What achievements are you proud of?
6. What chores do you dislike?
7. Who are some of your role models?
8. What skills would you like to develop?
9. What activities do you enjoy the most?

Questions for parents

5. What were some of your challenges growing up?
6. What are the beliefs or values by which you live your life?
7. What are some significant achievements, events or experiences that shaped your life?
8. What new challenges would you like take on?
9. What are some things you wish your family knew or realised about you?
10. What are some of your goals for yourself, your family, and our country?

Questions for children

10. What new challenges would you like take on?
11. What are some of your favourite TV programmes?
12. If you had one wish, what would it be?
13. What is something that causes you to worry a lot?
14. What is something you would like to be better at?
15. What is one thing you like about yourself?

What others are saying

"When my dad was ill, he said his goodbyes to everyone except me. So I was very angry about that. With *What's Your Story?* I realised that I was actually angry with him, even though I loved him very much. It helped me find closure with his passing."

– **Mamakie, Dobsonville**

"I asked my elderly mom to share her story with me and our time together has quite fundamentally shifted things for me. With greater understanding has come an acceptance and a path to forgiveness. Now I feel more sad than angry, sad for us both, I suppose. She mothered me the best way she knew how. In many ways, I now know how fortunate I am to have had her in my life."

– **Garth, Somerset West**

"All my niece asked my father was, "Pa, have you ever been to jail?" In that moment, I heard for the first time that my father had been detained by the apartheid police on suspicion of being a rebel! Fortunately, he was released soon afterwards. It's amazing the things your parents will tell a grandkid that they kept from you while growing up. It's helped me have the courage to ask him more questions about his life."

– **Lia, Bellville**

"When we started *What's Your Story?* at home it helped everybody to be more open and not hold grudges. We sit down and we talk about things. My mom's story made me who I am today."

– **Church Leader, Soweto**

Share your group's story with us



We'd love to hear about your experience of asking, listening and telling your story. Send us your feedback, photos, videos or testimonials.

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Find resources, training materials and videos at our
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