

Better Conversations

Part 5

Avoid labels

<i>The Problem</i>	Stereotypes are conversation stoppers. How can we talk about stigmatizing subjects without prompting bias and prejudice?
<i>The Premise</i>	<p>“My son is dead,” says storyteller Elizabeth Ellis. “I tell stories about him that make him real to [listeners] in all his complexity. When I begin, they see him as a brother, as a son, as an uncle, as a good friend, before I begin introducing the concept that he’s mentally ill.</p> <p>“I don’t give it labels, because labels have the tendency to shut the door in people’s faces. I just lead them to understand that he was, at times, a very hard person to love. That I have learned a great deal from having him in my life. And that some if it is stuff I wish I didn’t have to know. I think in hearing these stories, it opens people up to be more empathetic and more understanding of people who are different in whatever way.”</p> <p>Ellis once noticed that her colleague Donald Davis uses a similar technique of delaying information in a story he tells about a beloved neighbor who died of AIDS. “If he had made it known that the man had AIDS at the beginning of the story, a lot of people would withdraw,” she says. “They would hold themselves against developing any warmth or feeling toward that man.” Sometimes bringing someone along is simply a matter of timing.</p>
<i>The Application</i>	We live in a media environment that leads with provocation and controversy. A headline can make a reader decide how they feel about a story before they know any details. In conversation and relationship building, we want to achieve the opposite. We want to provide as much information as possible before a person makes up their mind.
<i>How It Works</i>	Stigma is real, but it’s not immutable. The way we create change is by helping people see past divisive labels. Timing is a surprisingly effective way to help people transcend their bias.

Find the full toolkit on the [More than One Story Resources](#) page.