

The power of storytelling to promote resilience and recovery from life's disappointments and tragedies¹

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The author describes how storytelling can help to find meaning in suffering, misery and traumatic experiences and promote self-healing and resilience.

What is a story that changed your life? Think of a seminal story you've heard or watched that had such a strong impact on your life that the effects still resonate within you today. Think of a character from a story who so intimately inhabits your life that he or she feels as real to you as anyone you know personally. Consider a story you tell about yourself that holds within it a sacred and precious quality that you value most. And most importantly, recall an instance in which you faced a difficult challenge, disappointment, or crisis and you managed to recover and become stronger as a result: What story did you tell yourself (and others) about this experience that

featured you in a heroic role rather than as a victim?

We learn to make sense of the world, as well as to prepare for life's challenges, through the listening to and telling of stories. From as early as 18 months old, infants begin to describe their experiences through rehearsing and nonverbal gestures. Parents and teachers read stories to children that hold within them the cultural and moral lessons that are considered most significant. In fact, most conversations between children and their parents (as well as other adults) involve the sharing of a story.

Once we grow older, two-thirds of all our conversations involve sharing stories about others or ourselves. Although gossip has earned a bad reputation it has actually evolved as a means to share information about those among us who are unreliable,

who engage in strange or inappropriate behavior, or who don't carry their fair share of the load (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012). Storytelling is thus the primary means by which we communicate with others, make sense of our experiences, and hold onto memories that are most significant (Bucay, 2013; Gottschall, 2012; Kottler, 2015).

Stories have been found to be significantly more memorable than providing facts alone; if the goal is to influence and persuade others, we do that most effectively not by argument or even rational logic, but rather through narrative examples. The brain automatically converts almost every experience into a story, whether fantasies, dreams, or seminal life experiences.

Through mirror neurons in the brain we can even have vicarious experiences featuring adventures, danger, threats, or disasters (Hess, 2012; Rifkin, 2009). We can travel to faraway places, confront fears, enjoy exhilaration and high emotional arousal, all without leaving a chair. Through television, films, plays, novels, musical lyrics, fairy tales, video and online games, as well as conversations, we are able to feel as if these adventures are really our own – and as far as our brains are concerned, they are as real and authentic as anything else we have lived through. That is one reason we may feel such strong emotional connections to fictional characters, celebrities, or sports figures – they feel like intimate friends with whom we feel closely connected because our brains don't distinguish between them and our actual family and friends.



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Ill. 1: We learn to make sense of the world through the listening to and telling of stories; here: Storytelling Club Taiwan



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Ill. 2: Storytelling in a therapeutic context presents great opportunities for healing

STORYTELLING AS THE MEDIUM BY WHICH TO CREATE MEANING

It is through re-storying distressing events that we first understand what happened to us, and then understand the significance of what happened. The stories alone are not enough, no matter how they are recast, unless they are combined with adequate coping skills and a more optimistic perspective. Consider the difference, for example, between someone who insists s/he is a victim of circumstances beyond his/her control (fate, luck, bad genes, poor economy, nature, others' behavior) versus someone who genuinely believes s/he is a resilient survivor of difficult challenges and has confidence in his/her ability to deal with things and hope for the future. Whereas a pessimistic attitude may prevent against disappointment, it also sabotages the ability to construct more resilient stories that feature courage and recovery from difficulties (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014). Much of the research on trauma supports the idea that the stress and negative symptoms can coexist with the potential growth that can accompany them, making the goal not so much to

provide a "cure" as a way to deal with the important issues that arise.

It turns out that after traumatic events people react in 3 primary ways (Joseph, 2011). They may very well become debilitated and traumatized, even permanently damaged as a result of the experience. Roughly one-third of survivors just get on with their lives with minimal lingering symptoms. What has been most surprising, however, is to learn that another third report incredible growth as a result of what they suffered.

What distinguishes those who have lingering trouble versus those who are able to learn and grow from the experience? The stories they tell themselves about what happened. It also helps that they have the opportunity to share their stories with others, especially listeners who help them to honor their suffering and find meaning in the experience.

We know that a significant number of people who seek help are suffering from the lingering effects of trauma, whether the result of catastrophic events, grief and loss, illness, abuse, neglect, violent crime, combat, or exposure to some disturbing event. We also know that the likelihood that someone will recover from such a threat is directly related to the way they

process the experience in the form of a narrative to explain and make meaning of what happened. In other words, it isn't only the traumatic event itself that creates ongoing problems, however devastating its effects, but also the relatively inarticulate and limited way the experience is coded as a story to relive and tell to others. Indeed, one of the consequences of trauma is that it interferes with a person's ability to process what happened except as a series of incoherent fragments that can be both confusing and frightening (Neimeyer, 2012; Sewell, 1996; van der Kolk, 2014).

The experience of trauma occurs on multiple levels and dimensions, involving both neurobiological processes and intense emotional flooding, as well as problems making sense of the experience in a form that helps integrate it into self-identity. There is often an ongoing feeling of incompleteness, confusion, uncertainty, and dread as a result of being unable to find a way to make sense of what happened and move forward.

It's not uncommon that those who are suffering the lingering effects of abuse or trauma will struggle to describe what happened. Memories are clouded. The narrative takes on chaotic characteristics – halting stops and starts, long pauses, abrupt jumps in chronology, and a marked lack of coherence. It is difficult for any listener to follow, which only reflects the client's own experience.

Personal narratives can contribute as much to mental illness and the way trauma is metabolized as they can lead to healing and growth (Adler, 2012). People who have trouble in life are often stuck in a story that was sparked by traumatic circumstances, then exacerbated by the meaning (or lack thereof) of the event that was created afterwards. Often these stories can hold people back, or trap them in a narrative of failure, shame, guilt, fear, confusion, or tragedy in which they are very much helpless victims. Storytelling

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is often used by helpers and healers from all theoretical frameworks to help people identify and own their personal experience with suffering in such a way that they make greater meaning from the affliction or trauma, as well as to realize they are not alone in the struggle. It has been one of the common themes of the world's stories to present poignant examples of trauma and emotional suffering, often featuring heroic efforts to demonstrate courage, resilience, and recovery. Within contemporary Western literature, for example, some of the classic works showcase individuals who have been subjected to horrific abuse and somehow (but not always) manage to thrive. There is a long and distinguished list of individuals who faced extraordinary difficulties and chose to tell their stories as a way to promote self-healing, as well as to tell others about what they suffered, finding meaning in these experiences. Whereas viewing or reading accounts of others' traumatic experiences can assist with recovery in one way, it is far more powerful to help survivors of trauma to tell their stories in such a way that they can speak out against future injustices and abuse. In a sense, suffering, trauma, and misery can act as fuel to motivate constructive action in the future, at least if the experiences are processed in meaningful ways (Kottler, 2015).

TELLING STORIES THAT RELEASE SUFFERING

One of the lingering effects of trauma is that it often feels like there is an unrelenting need to tell the story of what happened and what it meant, whether this occurs in conversations with friends and family, private journaling, or a more public statement to a larger audience. Ultimately, it is this storytelling that presents the greatest opportunities for healing.

There are a number of studies that clearly demonstrate the benefits that

take place as a result of helping people who are suffering to tell their stories. As we have seen, such narrative accounts can assist people to reframe their experiences from one of tragedy to triumph, from victimhood to heroic survivor, from helplessness to resilience and resourcefulness (Greenberg, 2008). As one example, a physician (Lawlis, 2007) described how he uses stories to comfort children who are experiencing catastrophic or terminal illnesses. He was about to do a spinal tap on a 6-year-old boy who was suffering from leukemia, but the boy was actually more immediately terrified of having another needle inserted into his spine. The doctor asked the little boy if he'd like to hear a story, and when the boy nodded, he began with, "Once upon a time ..." The child was transfixed by the tale, created on the spot, about a disease that had taken over a village but was being challenged by the hero who demonstrated courage but eventually fell victim to the illness. But because the character in the story learned how to deal with the pain he was able to cure himself through a magic potion. Lawlis reported that once the story was over, the boy first went to his mother to reassure her that he would be okay and then took great pride in subjecting himself to the procedure with minimal resistance.

Many stressful events, especially those that involve serious trauma, pain, and activate extreme emotional arousal often become stored in short-term memory, mistakenly catalogued in temporary access, but with an assortment of chaotic fragments, disturbing images, and disorganized patterns that lead to uncontrolled reenactments. It is as if such individuals are condemned to relive the memories over and over again until such time that they can somehow be reintegrated and more fully processed (van der Kolk, 1994; 2014). It is storytelling, in a therapeutic or informal context, that facilitates this initial acceptance of traumatic events as a reality of the past but one that allows for the contextual creation of a new storyline that emphasizes themes of growth, courage, flexibility, and resilience instead of previous themes in which a sense of lingering, entrenched self-perception of helplessness and hopelessness prevailed.

It isn't only through telling one's own story that healing and recovery take place – we've seen how such a process can also occur vicariously. That is one of the extraordinary facets of this phenomenon in that people can privately, silently, unconsciously, serendipitously, experience major life changes as a result of watching or listening to someone else's story.



Ill. 3: Telling one's story helps one to be or feel more fully understood by others

BENEFITS OF EMOTIONAL STORYTELLING

Ultimately the goal of any healing storytelling is to find (or create) meaning from what transpired, in spite of the serendipitous, random, seemingly fateful way that events unfolded. Previous self-defeating assumptions are often challenged – that the world is treacherous and unsafe, that not all people are evil and threatening, that what happened was not God’s will and should be accepted as such. Most critically, a significant reworking of the major plotline of the story results in dispelling notions that the events must define who you are, that you are not to blame, and that this is not the absolute worst thing that could ever happen, no matter how difficult and challenging it might have felt at the time. All of this is consistent with a lot of the major constructs of cognitive behavior therapy and narrative therapy, which commonly challenge beliefs and assumptions that are less than helpful. When the opportunity presents itself, or is initiated, telling one’s story often assists individuals to be more fully understood by others – or at least feel understood – which is probably even more important. Recounting the events in a reasonably coherent way, within the context of a safe relationship, can help build greater support and closer bonds. This is especially the case when the feelings associated with the traumatic events are related at an “optimal distance,” meaning that there is a modicum of self-control that allows for mild to moderate expression of emotions without triggering re-traumatization: there is a difference between catharsis of feelings in an accepting environment versus falling apart and feeling ashamed afterwards (Scheff, 1979). Whereas in theory and general practice emotional or cathartic storytelling has been found to be useful and constructive, its ultimate effects depend very

much on how the narrative is structured. This is the case whether stories are offered in the form of visual media (Sandler, 2018), writing (Cleland, 2018), digital forms (Lambert, 2018), or even data (Knaflig, 2015). As with almost everything else that we do to touch, influence or move people emotionally, it is critical that the readers, listeners, or viewers are able to enter into the narrative as if it is their own authentic experience (which of course it is). This is especially true during daily conversations and interpersonal engagement.

Remember who you are, clarify who you wish to become

In contemporary life with so many distractions, diversions, multi-tasking, and technological intrusions, it is rare that anyone is still given the opportunity to speak without interruption about the stories of their lives. People need to talk about the stories that inhabit their dreams and fantasies, that haunt their past, that feel special or shameful, meaningful or fragmented. It is how we remember who we are. It is how we clarify who we wish to become. ■

NOTE

¹ This article is adapted from Kottler, Jeffrey (2015). *Stories we've heard, stories we've told: Life-changing narratives in therapy and everyday life*. New York: Oxford University Press.

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