

Narrative Therapy

by

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Adapted from the book - *What is Narrative Therapy?*

by

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Narrative therapy is a non-blaming approach to human problems. It uses a respectful focus on people's ability to externalize problems. By these means they are not considered as the "problem". By creating some space around people, they are better able to use their abilities, including skills of living and self-knowledge, to deal with their life's challenges. Individual values, attitudes, competencies, perceptions, and goals are brought forward as a part of alternative stories and used to reframe problem stories.

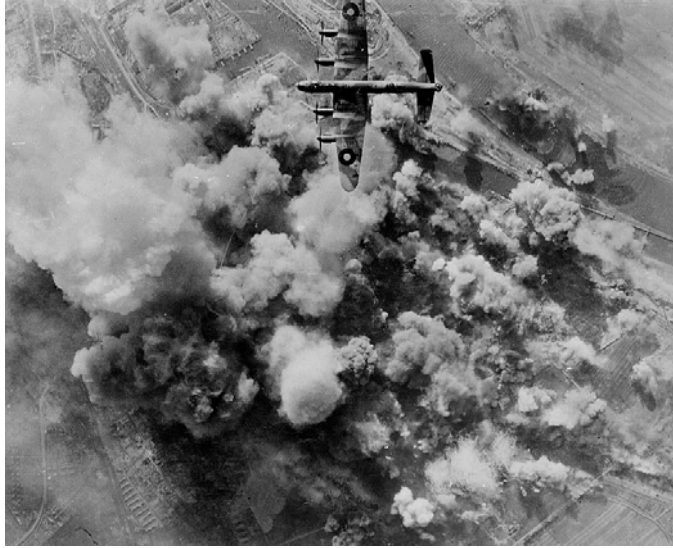


Minimization and overworking the problem through social discourses in which people continuously engage, is seen as an attempt by people to make sense out of their harried lives. Curiosity and a willingness to ask questions, coupled with a willingness to be co-active, authentic and transparent in the story's co-conceptualization and reformulation are essential components of this intervention process.

Journaling stories can be a form of narrative practice for those who follow some basic rules of the process. These general rules relate to the defining of life events that are significant to us. After this individuals are to link them in sequence across time, while formulating a minor or major plot or theme for them (meanings and significance). Running narratives of one's life are littered with dozens of continuing stories from the heroic to the mundane.



The multiple stories people are living at any one time differ and are acted out in the broader context of one's family, community, and culture. For example, some of our quest stories are filled with successes and determination, while other stories of being wounded may show failure, dysfunction, or have tragic endings.



An individual's dominant stories often have far reaching influences on their daily coping and living and even on the path of their life. Narrative interventions looks for even covered up stories which may aid, by highlighting them and bringing them forward, the destructive influence of overwhelming problems and overworked storylines.

The Telling of Your Story

Many people forget how complex and often interesting the sequence of one's life can be. Many people have been so conditioned by negative sound bites that they start thinking of their own story in such a fashion. Those disposed to such thin descriptions (blaming, criticisms, labels) for their actions or self- identities (which they have created or which others may have created for them by others), representing the oppression of mainstream society. Such self-descriptions allow little space for the complexities, contradictions and particularities of life. They tend to be surface descriptions, a pathologizing (causal labeling) abstract if you will, which can camouflage real feelings, intentions, attitudes, desires, and the complex array of human emotions and interactions. Such thin stories often lead to thin conclusions and thin labels of what problems may be. People often label

them-selves, or are labeled, as 'bad', 'a troublemaker', 'looser', or 'lazy'. Sometimes such labels (thin descriptions) often hide strengths and cover up a more richly and thickly described account of one's life, which could and should have been brought forth.



Either by being taught or by self-learning, individuals who discover to form rich and thick descriptions are often able to identify alternative stories or unique outcomes having far different consequences than the thin ones they often face on a daily basis. Rich descriptions about one's experiences involve the expressions of fine detail of the storylines of a person's life. A person can become the author of his own enriched stories leading to new alternative ways of dealing with problems. Some personal stories may require co-authorship, a coach or friend, who can offer reflection, active listening and clarification.

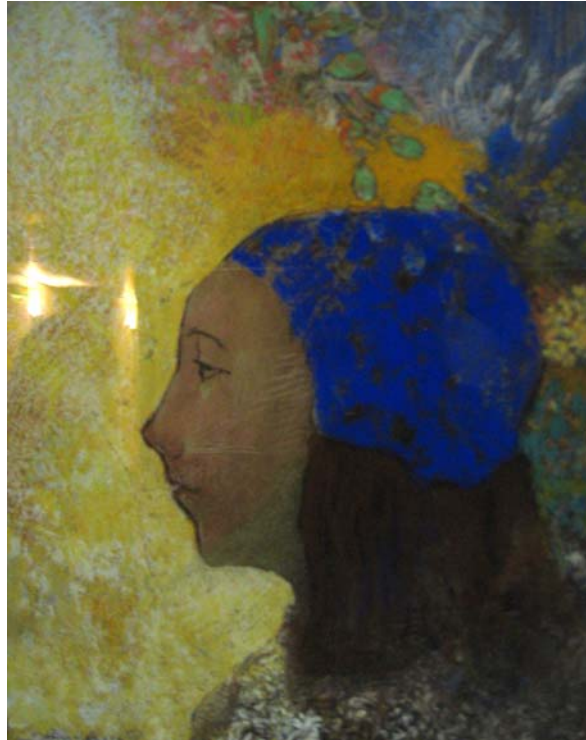


A greater understanding of the process of re-writing problematic stories of other's lives can be transporting. We can view a process by which individuals draw forth more preferred versions and meanings of their stories from a rich repertoire of experiences and sparkling events that are also part of their stories, but have been less attended to in the past. New possibilities may come from viable solution understandings (know what one might do) and personal resources that are more easily integrated into a rich life story and the new sense of self. A greater understanding of the richness of one's' life may come through the story's thickening by providing the details and particularities of the major and minor themes of one's life.

The Narrative Process:

The initial goal of the narrative process is to name a problem within its social context, and then begin the process of externalizing it. By externalizing a problem, individuals are often able to separate themselves from it and are more easily prepared to find alternative stories for dealing with their individual relationship to the problem. Difficulties are less rooted in cement when they are externalized, being less ingrained in 'who the person is'. Once a person is able to see an alternative for the problem story and begins speaking of 'the problem as an influence', or in relation, to it (the externalized influence) as opposed to

being it, they often find significantly more stories for problem solutions come to the four-front.



Things such as feelings, problems between people, cultural and social practices, fears, addictions, and other ills can be externalized. All externalized stories are about the problems that are outside individuals and the effects they have on the individual. What does “the fear,” “the addiction,” “the anger or guilt,” or “the depression” have to say about how you live your daily life? A rich story of the problem area, by personifying it or using it as a metaphor, may ask questions about the problem’s tricks, tactics, way of operating, intentions, beliefs and ideas, plans, or what keeps it hanging around. It’s rules, desires, motives, techniques, deceits or lies it uses to do its dirty business, are explored.

Since many individuals are experts at internalizing problems, it may be helpful to understand why one should be able to externalize them. It may also provide insight into why externalizing problem stories and conversations may increase alternative solutions and find sources for new developing stories.

Internalized:

Person is the problem
What is 'wrong' with person
Actions come from personal core or self
Often need other experts to explain behaviors

Problems linked to self-identity
Downplay social context
Usually based on thin conclusions about self

Based on internal influences

Focus on negative aspects of differences
that may lead to feelings of discrimination
As part of self-identity learning to cope with
problems
Professionals seen as experts

Learning new tools for problem fixes

Language used "I am ..."
Much focus on problem

Externalized:

Problem is the problem
Problem external to self-identity
Actions learned over time
People invited to identify their
own interpretations of self

Problems separate from core self
Highlight social context
Based on rich descriptions of
lives and relationships
Looks at cultural, social-political
stories influencing people
Celebrates differences

Re-negotiation of relationships
with problems
Individuals experts over
themselves
Communal growth using
discovered skills and knowledge
present in individual

Language used "It is...."
Looking for stories outside of
problem

Evaluating the history of the problem as well as spaces where it grew, developed and resides opens up consideration for other alternative stories. A problem looked at over time often shows it to be less static and more changing, having more or less influence in relation to one's life at different times or during different situations. Exploring what has been its history and what are the effects of the

problems on the person's life in multiple contexts i.e. view of self, view of differing roles of self, hopes and dreams, work, social life, spirituality, moods, physical health, and daily life, can be very helpful. Asking what are the effects of the problem's influence on the person's life within the problem story is also a good strategy. One might also inquire as to when the problem works or does not work, when it shows itself and when not, and why the problem is evaluated by the individual in the way they do?

Re-staging the Problem and Re-directing It

Problems survive with the support of ideas, beliefs, principles and practices promoted by dominant cultural discourses, and by their effect on the environment and the physical self. The helper's role is to help restructure the problem story as based within the beliefs, ideas and practices of the broader culture in which the problem story occurs and at the same time bringing forth the impact of the person's preferences, hopes, dreams, ideas and values in relationship to the problem.

Problem stories, especially those in deep cement, must be replaced with other stories having a rich context, with many views from diverse sources. Brought up must be instances where events ran counter to the problem's influence. These striking outcomes may form the foundation of alternative stories. These unique outcomes may be based on past or present actions out of the norm or may be based on a change in plans, actions, feelings, what it said, the quality of ones work, desires or dream, thoughts, beliefs, commitment, and talents and abilities. These variations from the dominant story are often overlooked in thin histories (stories), because thin histories tend to focus on the obvious, the dominant theme, and not on the subtle aberration, no matter how positive it may have been. Problem saturated texts eclipse anything good. Look for the silver linings encircling dark clouds.



- How have you kept the problem from becoming worse?
- Describe the times the problem is manageable?
- How do you cope when things require the problem not get in the way?
- What kind of things are more important to you than your problem and when have you followed your impulses not to let the problem get in your way?

The Alternative Story

The exploration of alternative outcomes may be the door to new and different stories about people's lives and relationships. By tracing the history of unique outcomes they can be placed in the foreground of people's awareness and match people's abilities for re-creating these outcomes in new stories that can lead to changes in future actions. The details of the unique outcome must be rich with history in setting, circumstances, actions, and consequences. Sequential events, including outcomes, must be explored in detail. Resistances to continuation of the unique outcomes must be explored in the shaping of the new story.



Details of exploration might also include but not be limited to the following:

- Desires, wishes, preferences
- Personal values
- Relationship qualities
- Personal skills and abilities
- Intentions, motives, plans, purposes
- Beliefs and values
- Personal qualities

As explorations of aspects of the unique outcome in relation to the above variable progresses, an alternative story may develop having an alternative plot (meanings). The person might be asked questions about what personal skills the person has for development of their new story that a loved one would not be surprised at. Searching for:

- Motives
- Reflections by others about the character
- New interpretations
- Details of what is said, felt and done by another
can add the spice to make the developing story richer.

Once the alternative story has been formulated, it should be named i.e. *strength* and *survival* instead of *worthlessness*. One now has both negative and positive

stories with them named in front of them and the time is ripe for more richly describing the new story.

Thickening the Alternative Story

The integration of an alternative story as a replacement for an existing (often problematic story) uses a number of strengthening procedures. These procedures need not be used sequentially, but may be utilized as desired by the individual and those assisting i.e. therapist or helper.

- Finding witnesses and an audience for the new story. This is the basis for many support groups for all types of human ills.



- Using re-remembering conversations to enrich the presentation of the alternative new story. Who would validate the new story by personal experience with the person? Such is a way to link to the past, near present and future vital social supports These recollections may also be related or unrelated, real or imaginary, and may include animals, toys, pets, places symbols or objects.



Who would be most surprised to hear you say this?

Who else would know what you stand for?

To be able to learn more about this skill, who else might be able to tell me?

- Use reciprocal sharing or linking to others lives by finding (re-remembering) individuals who would share the same preferences, commitments, beliefs or values as the new story. The reciprocal is just as powerful asking the one being remembered, what place they hold in them, the memory of their friend and how its made them different.



- Make therapeutic documentation of important achievements related to the new story through documents, declarations, certificates, notes, videotapes, lists, and pictures.



- Learn to write therapeutic letters to significant others including the therapist. The health provider, therapist, or helper will often model such letter writing, and can assist in naming the problem and its history, summarizing progress made to date, and validating and naming new told stories.
- Integrate new rituals and celebrations into the new story.
- Find a support group of individuals for your new story and constantly have your new story reinforced.



We hope this summary has been of assistance. If you find yourself wanting more, we encourage the reading of **What is Narrative Therapy? - An easy to*

read introduction - By Alice Morgan ,Dulwich Centre Publications, Adelaide,
United Kingdom, 2000.