

Research into the Psychology and Benefits of Storytelling

Storytelling is one of humanity's oldest art forms. In his classic work, *Human Universals*, anthropologist Donald Brown wrote that all people, "use narrative to explain how things came to be and to tell stories." (Brown, 1991) Michael Witzel, in *Origins of the World's Mythologies*, traces many of our modern mythological systems to a common storyline that emerged 40,000 years ago in southwest Asia. Other stories can be traced back further, to between 90,000 and 160,000 years ago. (Witzel, 2012)

But stories are not just relics of our past. Scientists are increasingly aware of the central role they play in everything from our mental health to our resilience to the trajectory of our lives.

Storytelling and the Self

There is a growing recognition among psychologists that storytelling is not just something we do, it is something that we *are*. An emerging consensus in personality psychology holds that what we think of as our "self" is, in fact, a story. We use "autobiographical memory" to select the important chain, or chains, of events that we believe made us into the person we are.

This "self-story" is known as our, "narrative identity," which psychologists Dan McAdams and Kate McLean describe as "a person's internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose." (McAdams, 2013).

This life story is not fixed, but it does reflect and influence our mental health. As McLean et al. write: "Narrative identity matters for some of the most fundamental components of the human condition; perhaps most important, it matters for psychological well-being." (McLean, 2020)

In American culture, there are two dominant narrative arcs employed in constructing personal stories. The first is that of "redemption," which is defined as something positive emerging from something negative. In a redemptive story, a person goes through a difficult experience, then extracts meaning or benefit from it. The second is "contamination," which is defined as something "good" becoming ruined, contaminated or spoiled. (Donovan, 2009) In

contamination narratives, a negative event causes, or signals. a downward trajectory for all events.

McAdams & McLean write that, “when narrators derive redemptive meanings from suffering and adversity in their lives, they tend to enjoy correspondingly higher levels of psychological well-being, generativity, and other indices of successful adaptation to life.” (McAdams, 2013)

Developing a Story

According to McAdams, the ability to construct a life story is something that develops gradually. Around the age of two, we compose a “primitive autobiographical self.” By ages four to five, children start to tell stories that show “temporal coherence,” and which use “theory of mind.” By adolescence, they begin composing a “personal fable” about who they might become (astronaut, president, etc.). In young adulthood, this becomes a fuller and more realistic “life story.” (McAdams, 2006)

Robyn Fivush and her colleagues argue that constructing an autobiographical self is a learned sociocultural ability, and that infants, “begin telling these stories almost as soon as they begin talking.” They argue that, "autobiography is a critical developmental skill; narrating our personal past connects us to ourselves, our families, our communities, and our cultures." (Fivush, 2011)

Storytelling, Well-Being and Mental Health

There is a significant body of research showing links between well-being, mental health, and our ability to construct “coherent” narratives that include themes of redemption and closure. Likewise, there is a connection between contamination narratives and psychological distress.

Looking at 395 written accounts of the 9/11 terror attacks, Adler & Poulin found that individuals who wrote accounts that were high in closure and redemptive imagery exhibited “higher levels of psychological well-being and lower levels of psychological distress.”

Individuals who wrote accounts low in closure and high in personal contamination showed higher levels of psychological distress. (Adler, 2009).

In another study, Adler, et al. found that people who wrote accounts high in agency and redemption, with lower levels of contamination, experienced increased in mental health over a four-year period. Additionally, those who displayed themes of “agency, communion, and redemption” in their narratives saw greater increases in mental health over two years following a major physical health diagnosis. (Adler, 2015).

One theme that has emerged is the notion of “coherence,” which is defined as, “the ability to give an ordered history of our lives, or the creation of a coherent account of who we are.” It is seen as, “a narrative [that] makes sense to a naïve listener and is thus able to convey the content and meaning of the described events in a structurally and thematically cohesive manner.” (Vanaken, 2021)

Patients suffering from schizophrenia have difficulty constructing such stories. Raffard, et al., found that “participants with schizophrenia described personal narratives that were less contextualized, less chronologically ordered, and thematically less developed than healthy controls.” They concluded that, “schizophrenia patients have difficulties to organize and extract meaning from their past experiences in order to create coherent personal narratives.” (Raffard, 2010)

Vanaken et al. note that “adults who are not capable of forming a chronologically structured narrative that is situated in time, show more severe forms of psychopathology like Alzheimer's disease or schizophrenia.” (Vanaken, 2021)

The question of whether mental health and well-being contribute to our ability to compose coherent narratives, or whether the skill of constructing coherent stories contributes to mental health has not been settled. But Adler found that an improvement in the ability to construct stories preceded gains in mental health. “In other words,” he writes, “the results indicate that individuals begin to tell new stories and then live their way into them.” (Adler, 2012)

Other research also suggests that the ability to find coherence promotes mental health. This may be because coherence allows negative events to be understood, integrated and in some sense resolved (Medved, 2010). Waters & Fivush also found that, “the ability to tell coherent

autobiographical narratives that explicitly address identity is linked to a higher sense of Purpose and Meaning.” (Waters, 2015)

Strong evidence comes from a landmark, two-year study of 278 first-year psychology students, aged 17-22, which found that individuals who had composed more coherent personal narratives two years prior to the emergence of COVID-19, experienced less stress and higher emotional well-being during the pandemic. They also had more perceived social support. The study suggests that the ability to find coherence is a skill that can “predict future emotional adjustment to adversity.” (Vanaken, 2022)

Storytelling and Education

Oral storytelling has been found to have educational benefits. Isbell et al. write that: “Both storytelling and story reading were found to produce positive gains in oral language.” (Isbell, 2004) One study of oral storytelling among university students in Malaysia found that “Storytelling is effective in enhancing communicative skills,” and that, “students demonstrated progress with each storytelling in specific language skills such as vocabulary, comprehension, sequencing, and story recall.” (Mokhtar, et al, 2011)

Hibbin (2016) concluded there were socio-emotional benefits as well:

The benefits of oral storytelling to children’s socio-emotional development are considerable and arrived at through a complex of processes tied to self-expression, identification, empathic understanding of self and others, and bi-directional communication. Oral storytelling can be understood as providing important opportunities for self-representation through the development of narrative ability and an emotional vocabulary - two prerequisites for telling ‘stories of self’ (Warin, 2010). Such an ability can enable children to ‘re-narrativise’ their lived experiences, providing “a kind of ‘identity capital’” (Warin, 2010; p.178) from which children can draw.

Storytelling, Resilience and Trauma

Storytelling can also have physiological effects, which researchers are starting to uncover.

In one study, a 30-minute storytelling session with hospitalized children led to “an increase in oxytocin, a reduction in cortisol and pain, and positive emotional shifts during a free-association task.” (Brockington, 2020).

Dealing with trauma may be beyond the scope of The Wildling’s mission, but it’s worth noting that there are many connections between storytelling, resilience and recovery.

In a study of Afghan women who experienced gender-based violence, Mannell et al. found that, “storytelling under supportive conditions was perceived to be a highly valuable experience that could help formulate positive social identities and challenge broader social structures.” (Manell, 2018)

Weststrate et. al. concluded that “Within the context of narrative identity, telling and retelling the evolving story of a traumatic incident to a valued audience could provide an opportunity for personality growth. Under ideal circumstances, storytelling is an opportunity for the teller to articulate their experience in coherent terms and to receive cognitive-emotional scaffolding from a supportive listener.” (Weststrate, 2022)

A robust field of research on narrative and trauma comes from what is known as “Narrative Exposure Therapy.” One meta-analysis found that for victims of mass violence and torture, NET showed “significantly better results” than supportive counseling, psychoeducation, group interpersonal therapy, waitlist and no treatment, (McPherson, 2012) In one group of refugee children treated with NET, only two of 26 children presented with PTSD symptoms after six months. (Ruf, 2010).

In Narrative Exposure Therapy, a child or patient will construct a chronological narrative of his or her entire life with a focus on exposure to traumatic stress. In one version, a rope is used to indicate the patient’s “life line.” For traumatic events, a stone is placed on the rope. For good memories and hopes for the future, a flower is placed on the rope. “Within a predefined number, usually about 4–12, of 90 min sessions, the fragmented reports of the traumatic experiences will be transformed into a coherent narrative. Empathic understanding, active listening, congruency, and unconditional positive regard are key components of the therapist’s behavior and attitude.” (Elbert, 2015) McPherson (2012) notes that, “no trials have shown NET to be ineffective.”

The ability to recast the episodes of our lives is part of what gives both NET, and storytelling, its power. As one NET patient put it “It already helps to tell myself that the scary

and unpleasant feelings probably have nothing to do with the current moment and perception...Even bad experiences, as long as you can locate them, can give you the feeling of: “*This is my story. I am.*” (Elbert, 2015)

McAdams & Jones write: “Making sense of the trauma effectively means figuring out how, and why, it came to be...How do people make meaning in the wake of trauma? There are surely many viable answers to this question, but behind many of them is the supposition that meaning is made, in large part, through narrative.” (McAdams, 2017)

Conclusion

As shown here, there is a large body of research demonstrating storytelling as fundamental to our social and emotional well-being, our mental health and our identity. Further evidence suggests that the ability to compose stories that are coherent, and to extract meaning from difficult events, can have significant mental health benefits, which may extend to physical health and life outcomes. Additionally, sharing stories orally is found to have educational benefits.

At The Wildling, it is our hope that youth will come away from our program with an enhanced ability to compose stories of their own that will assist them in overcoming, and understanding, whatever roadblocks they may find in their path through life.