


Harnessing the Healing Power of Stories

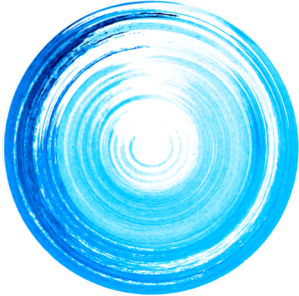
Annie Brewster, MD

HEALTH STORY COLLABORATIVE

Home Care, Hospice & Palliative Care Alliance of New Hampshire November 15, 2018


Dr. Annie Brewster

- Mother
- Physician
- Storyteller
- Story-sharer
- Patient



GOALS

- Review the philosophy and motivation behind the use of storytelling as a therapeutic tool.
- Review the research that guides our approach.
- Apply to care at the end of life.

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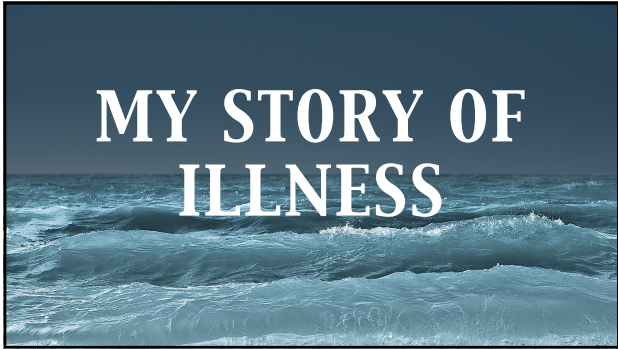
Our Philosophy



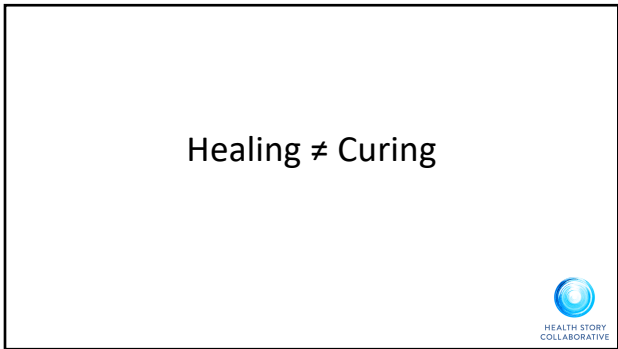
Yearning



BECOMING A DOCTOR







Move beyond simply “fighting”
disease and “enduring” illness



Post-traumatic growth

Individuals faced with traumatic
events—including receiving a
medical diagnosis—quite often
actually grow and thrive in
response.

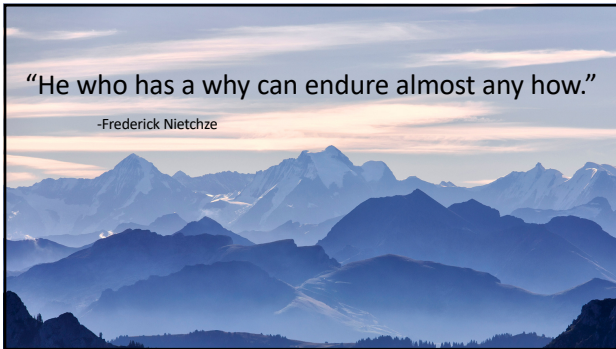


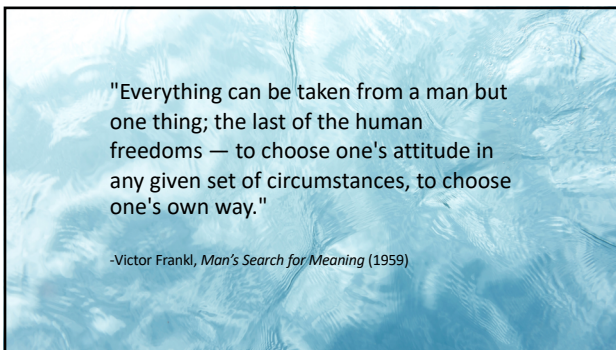
Post-traumatic growth

- Personality characteristics (extraversion and openness to experience)
- Social interaction
- Disclosure
- Deep cognitive processing

Reframing and revising one’s narrative








Storytelling

It is through stories —the ones we tell and the ones we hear—that we make sense of what happens to us, understand who we are, and connect with others.



Purpose
Community
Gratitude

Connection to a larger story, a larger force.

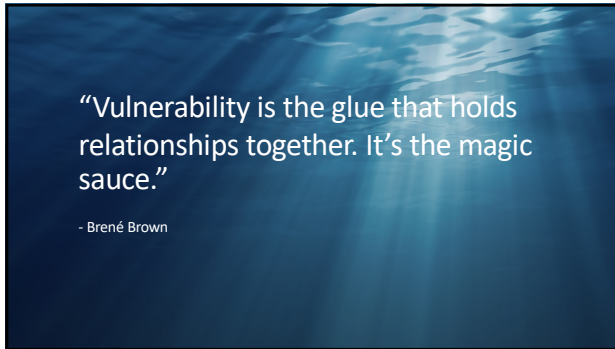


the science of stories




Health Benefits of Listening to Stories







Support groups

- fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression
- fewer and shorter hospital stays for people with psychiatric symptoms
- fewer physical symptoms and improved quality of life in cancer patients



Loneliness is toxic

Earlier cognitive and physical decline
Increased mortality

Social connectedness and health

- As powerful as cigarette smoking, high blood pressure, and obesity
- Intimacy keeps us alive: Married men live 7-17 years longer; married women live 5-12 years longer
- Broader social networks and more social activity relate to later onset and slower rates of cognitive decline



Health benefits of listening

- Improvements in emotional engagement and self-care in patients with hypertension and diabetes
 - improvements in diet
 - increased exercise
 - better communication with health providers
- Better blood pressure control in patients with difficult to manage hypertension when compared to controls



Health benefits of having your story received by an empathic listener



Empathy

- Decreased severity and shorter duration of symptoms with common cold
- Increased patient compliance and satisfaction
- Decreased emotional distress
- Decreased physical pain
- Increased diagnostic accuracy
- Fewer complications with Diabetes



Interpersonal Neurobiology

“Interpersonal empathy is **co-constructed** by mutual responses that activate similar cortical and subcortical neural circuits between clinicians and patients.”

“Emotions in an attuned relationship are more contagious than viruses, their vectors are words and gestures, and their effects are immediate because there is no incubation period.”

-Herbert M. Adler, MD, PhD. *NEJM*, October 2015



Health benefits of engaging deeply
with your own story



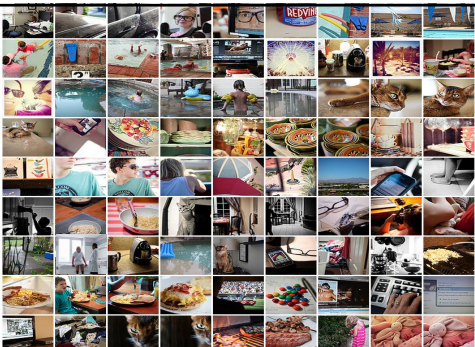
Narrative Identity

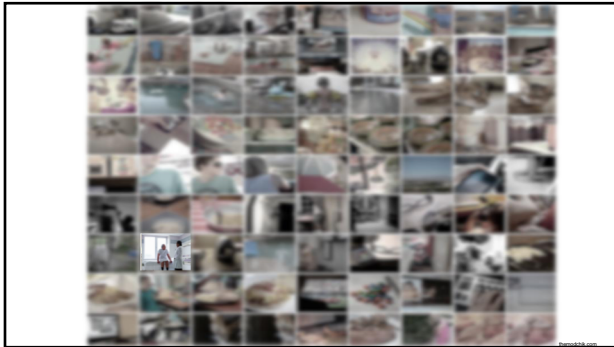


Why narrative?

A,B,C,D,E,F
IO,II,I2,B,I4










What gets storied?

Deviation from the norm

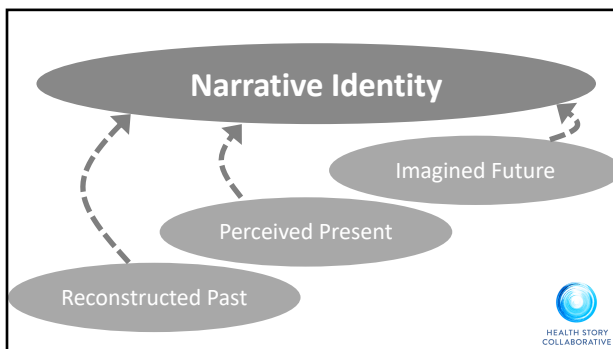
- We create these experiences on purpose (vacations, psychotherapy)
- These experiences happen to us (illness, serendipity)
- Key moments: high points, low points, turning points



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illness as a biographical disruption





Narrative Identity: Themes

Positive:

- Agency
- Communion
- Redemption
- Coherence

Negative:

- Contamination



Prompts to Nudge Agency

- Has illness changed the way you think about yourself? What strengths have helped you get through? What can you control?
- What advice would you like to offer someone else facing this illness?



Prompts to Nudge Communion

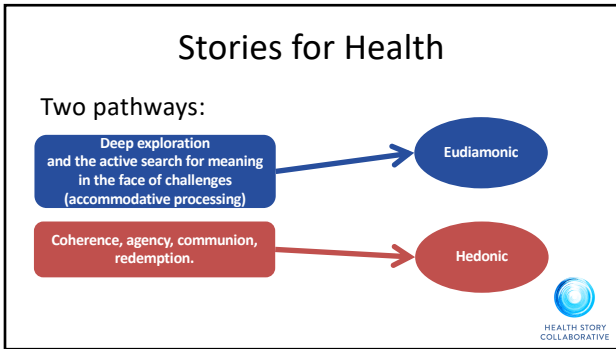
- Who has been there for you on this journey?
- How have your family or close friends been affected? What have you discussed with them? Do you feel understood by them? What do you need from them? Is there anything you would like to share with them?
- What would you like to tell the healthcare providers you have come into contact with? Is there anything they did particularly well, or particularly badly? What would you like them to know that might help you feel more cared for?



Prompts to Nudge Redemption

- Has anything good come out of your illness?
- What new strengths have you developed or recognized in yourself? Can you share an example of one of these strengths or a moment when you recognized it?
- How have your relationships shifted? Who have you become closer to?














A photograph of two women standing on a sandy beach. The woman on the left is wearing a red dress, and the woman on the right is wearing a black dress. The date "06-01-2016" is visible in the bottom right corner of the photo.

Colleen: Living Consciously While Facing Death



A photograph of a family of four standing outdoors. A man in a blue shirt and tie, a woman in a black dress, and two children (a boy in a white shirt and tie, and a girl in a blue dress) are posing together. The date "06-01-2016" is visible in the bottom right corner of the photo.

Chris: things I can do



Michael: Purpose, Community, Gratitude





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thank you!

<http://www.healthstorycollaborative.org/>
