



Brief Counseling Techniques for Your Most Challenging Patients Narrative Therapy: A Story of Thriving, Not Just Surviving

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Pueblo story teller clay figurine



Objectives

- Understand the ways in which narrative therapists emphasize *how people construct meaning* rather than how people behave
- Describe how people are negatively influenced by dominant culture “stories” (beliefs and practices) which may objectify them and limit their freedom
- Describe how people can be liberated through alternative, empowering stories about themselves and their problems

Objectives

- Learn how to help people **externalize** their problems: instead of *having* a problem or *being* a problem, patients are encouraged to think of themselves as *struggling against* their problems.
- Learn how to help people identify **unique outcomes**: times when they resisted the problem or behaved in ways that contradicted the problem story
- Learn how to help people connect to communities of support to maintain their new narratives

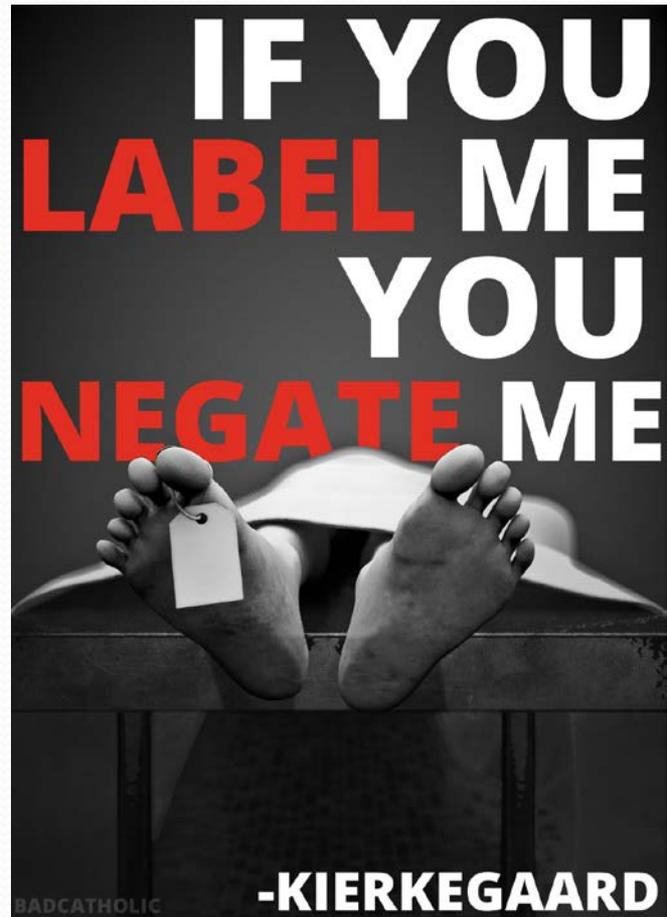
The Truth of Experience Isn't Discovered, It's Created



Providers of Narrative Therapy

- Collaborate and listen rather than direct
- Are open about their premises (to “situate” themselves with clients) rather than retain expert knowledge
- Use questions to take a non-imposing, respectful approach to any new story
- Help people make sense of their own experience rather than stand in judgment of them

Label Me Negate Me



Providers of Narrative Therapy

- Assume people are not their problems and don't need or want their problems
- Resist labeling and objectifying people
- Search for times when people were strong and resourceful
- Assist people in separating from oppressive, dominant culture "stories" they may have internalized through the development of alternative, empowering stories.

Jean Houston Quote

**IF YOU KEEP
TELLING THE
SAME SAD
SMALL STORY,
YOU WILL
KEEP LIVING
THE SAME SAD
SMALL LIFE.**

-JEAN HOUSTON

Process of Narrative Therapy: Telling the Problem-Saturated Story

First, find out how people spend their time, paying special attention to talents and competencies.

- Then ask them to tell their *problem-saturated story*: closed, rigid, pessimistic and blaming accounts (and destructive cultural assumptions) that encourage people to respond to each other in ways that perpetuate the problem story.

Key Purposes of Externalizing the Problem

- Separate the person from the problem
- Permit the problem to be viewed from a variety of perspectives and contexts
- Foster client agency over the problem

Cartoon – Man Carrying Problems



Separate Person from Problem

- Ask questions that *map the influence of the problem on the person*, using the externalizing language of *deconstruction questions* to ask about the problem's effects rather than its causes
- How does Guilt affect you? Push you around? Get you to do what it wants?
- What does Guilt tell you?

Ask About the Influence of the Person on the Problem

- Ask questions that *map the influence of the person on the problem* using *relative influence questions* that explore how much the problem has dominated the person versus how much the person has been able to control it
- “What times have you won the battle against depression?”
- “What did you do?”
- “Who helped you?”

Cartoon - Woman with Evil Depression Monster on her Shoulder



Define the Problem to be Externalized

- Symptoms (Sadness, Tantrums, Self-hatred)
- Patterns of interaction (The Rift, The Fight)
- Cultural assumptions (Sexism, Racism, Classism)

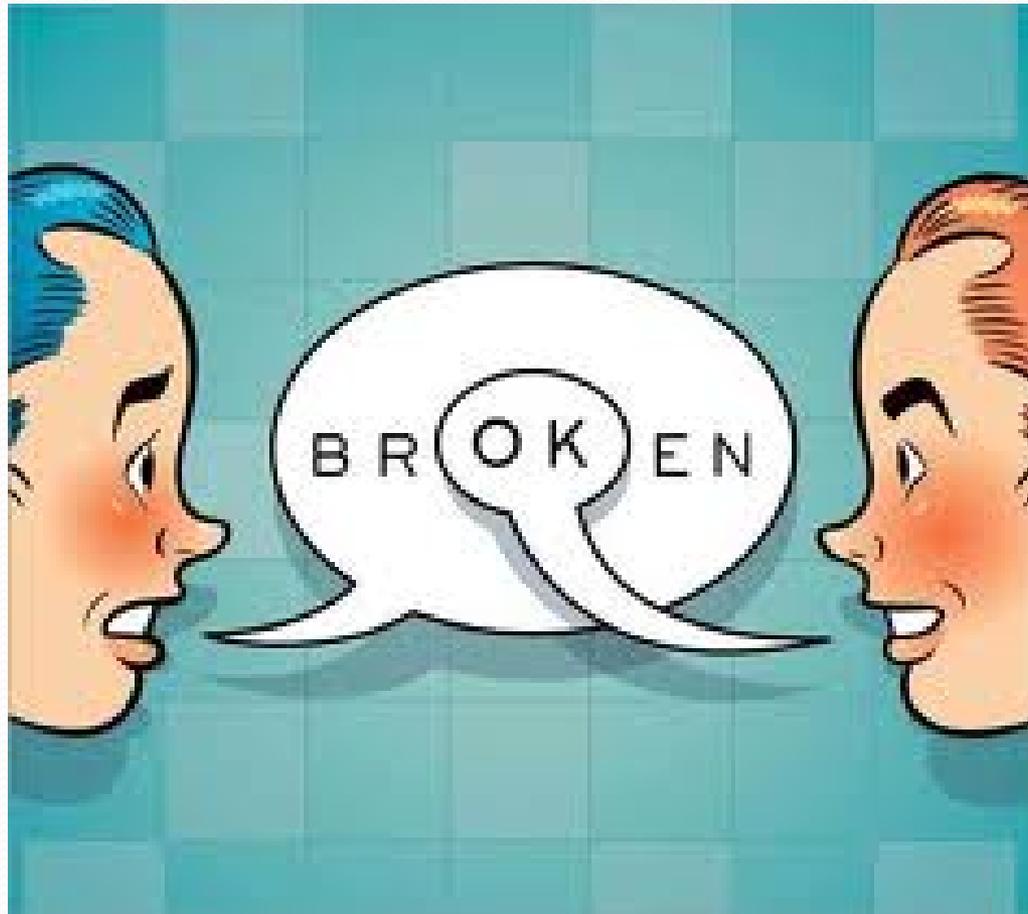
Worry Monster



Personify the Problem

- *Personify the problem* as unwelcome invaders that try to dominate people's lives
- Encopresis becomes Sneaky Poo
- Anxiety becomes The Worry Monster

Broken - OK



Open Space for Unique Outcomes

- Ask *Opening Space Questions* to make a discovery of “*unique outcomes*” to learn when the person has escaped the influence of the problem by
 - Resisting it
 - Behaving in ways that contradict the problem
 - Focusing on strengths

Fish Jumping from Small to Big Bowl



Open Space for Unique Outcomes

- Ask *Opening Space Questions* to make a discovery of “*unique outcomes*” to learn when the person has escaped the influence of the problem
- “Can you remember a time when Chronic Pain tried to make you do what it wanted but you didn’t let it?”
- “Maria, do you realize how hard it was for Ben not to let Chronic Pain win last night?”

You have the power to rewrite your story.



You have the power
to rewrite your story.

What story will you choose to tell?



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Is the Unique Outcome the Desired Outcome?

- Speculate as to how this “*unique outcome*” might be part of the solution to the problem
- Make sure *unique outcomes* present preferred experiences by *Preference Questions*: “Was this way of doing things better/more effective or worse for you?”

My Story



Developing the New/ Preferred Story

- Elaborate the discovered solution practices and invite the person to endow these practices with significance, thus *reinforcing the story*.
- Draw distinctions between problem-saturated stories where the person is the problem and the practices that free the person from the problem

Developing the New/ Preferred Story

- These *Story Development Questions* include
- “Who will be the first to notice these positive changes in you?”
- “How is this different from what you would have done before?”
- “Who played a part in this way of doing things?”

There are a lot of Stories out there waiting for you to live them!



From Problem-Person to a Person with a Solution

- Ask *Meaning Questions* that challenge negative images and emphasize positive action further this goal
- “What does it say about you that you were able to do that?”
- “What does this tell you about yourself that is important for you to know?”

Future = Next Exit



From Problem-Person to a Person with a Solution

- *Ask Questions to Extend the Story into the Future*
- “What do you predict for the coming year?”
- “How do you see this working for you the next six months?”

Tardiness Support Group



Audience of Support for the New Story

Provider writes letters to patient to

- Convey what the person has endured in fighting the problem
- Confirm the outline of the new story
- Express confidence in the person's abilities and capacities
- Underscore the client's progress.

Audience of Support for the New Story

- Encourage the development of ongoing groups of people with similar problems to support one another's efforts to continue to resist the problem.
- Encourage some kind of public ritual to reinforce new and preferred interpretations moves past private insight into not just action but socially supported action.

You are the author of your own story. Don't let anybody else write the pages go by what your heart says.

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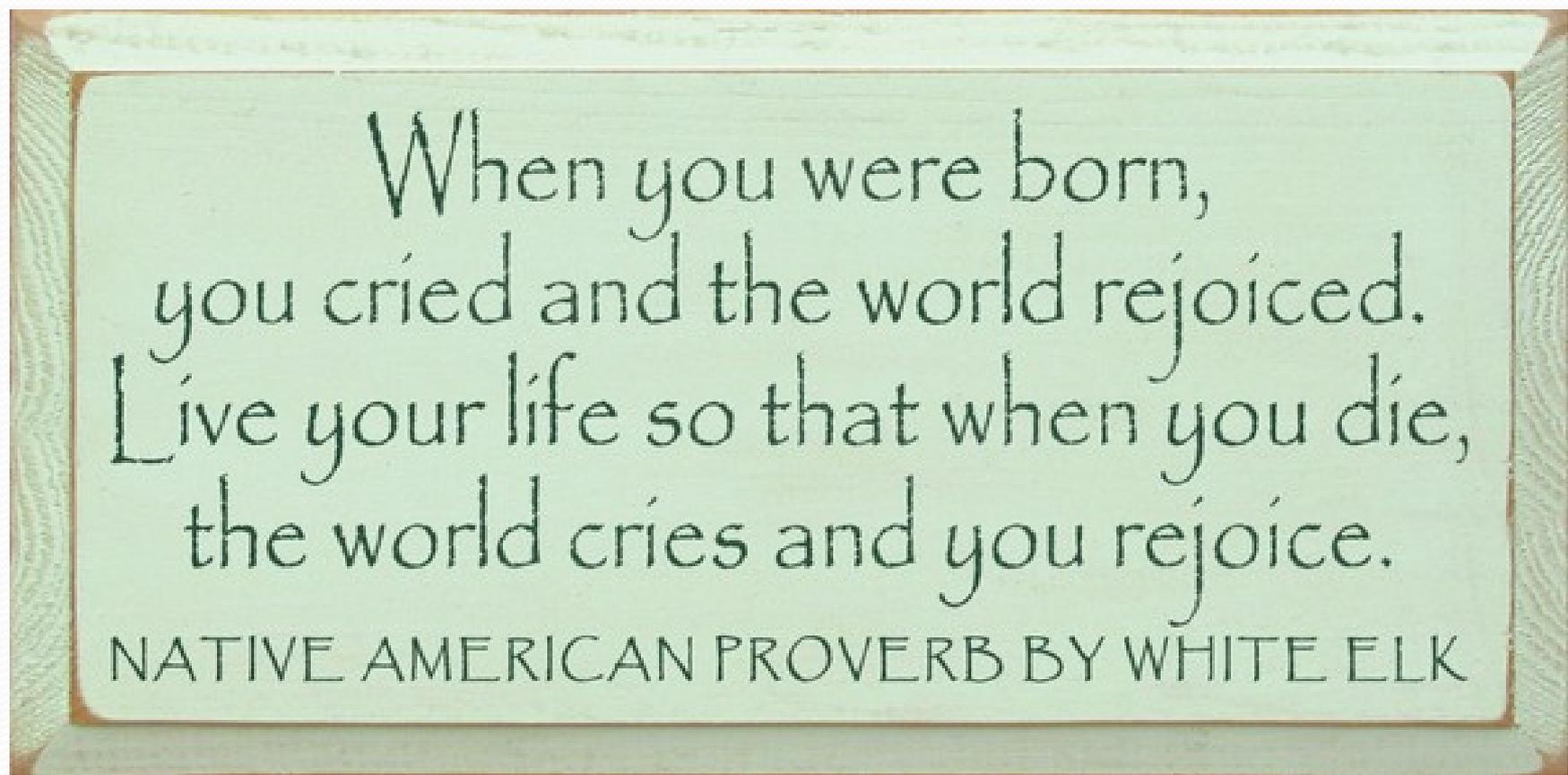
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Critiques of Narrative Therapy

- Ignoring attempts to understand the interpersonal, interactional context in which problems develop
- Imposing the provider's values and political bias regarding an oppressive, dominant culture

When you were born, you cried and the world rejoiced. When you die, the world grieves and you rejoice.



When you were born,
you cried and the world rejoiced.
Live your life so that when you die,
the world cries and you rejoice.

NATIVE AMERICAN PROVERB BY WHITE ELK

Selected References

- *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* by Michael White & David Epston
- *Maps of Narrative Practice* by Michael White
- *Using Narrative Therapy with Native American Recreational Tobacco Users* by Rodney C. Haring