Harnessing the Healing Power of Stories

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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.
Our Philosophy

Yearning

BECOMING A DOCTOR
MY STORY OF ILLNESS

HEALTH STORY COLLABORATIVE

Healing ≠ Curing
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
“He who has a why can endure almost any how.”

-Frederick Nietzsche

"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

-Victor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning (1959)

**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
“Vulnerability is the glue that holds relationships together. It’s the magic sauce.”

- Brené Brown

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
I0, I1, I2, I3, 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
illness as a biographical disruption

Narrative Identity

Positive:
• Agency
• Communion
• Redemption
• Coherence

Negative:
• Contamination

Narrative Identity: Themes
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?
Stories for Health

Two pathways:
- Deep exploration and the active search for meaning in the face of challenges (accommodative processing)
- Coherence, agency, communion, redemption.

Hedonic

Eudaimonic

"Stories as relational acts."

YOU help shape the STORY
Michael: Purpose, Community, Gratitude

thank you!

http://www.healthstorycollaborative.org/