



Clear Thinking newsletter from Uncommon Knowledge - Issue 85

In this month's Clear Thinking...

1. How to create stories for therapy
2. Online course: Lift depression fast

How to create stories for therapy

The right story at the right time can facilitate psychological and even physical healing. It's possible that the [ancient traditions of storytelling](#) so rich and rife in all cultures may have been the earliest form of [psychotherapy](#) as well as vehicles for passing on patterns of wisdom. (1)

Using stories for therapy isn't new, but it's becoming more popular again. Dr Milton Erickson used to tell his patients stories from his own and other people's lives, as would the late great family therapist Virginia Satir.

Stories bypass the shredding effects of over-analysis and conscious reasoning. Stories are inherently hypnotic in that they fixate attention and appeal to the imagination. This makes them the perfect device for delivering fresh patterns of hope as well as more specific suggestions for change.

A powerful story

The unconscious mind deals in *patterns*. My father (also a therapist) used the pattern of 'blocking the food supply of an invading army' in a

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story he told to a boy with warts. This 'mirrored' the pattern of 'blocking the blood supply to the warts'. Neither warts nor blood were mentioned in the story, but the boy's warts began to disappear soon after he heard this story.

Stories are not meant to be consciously picked apart. You don't have to know exactly how a medication works in order for it to take effect and heal you from within.

And if a story doesn't immediately 'work' for someone, no harm is done. They have simply heard an entertaining story!

But how do you *create* stories for change that fit your client's situation?

1. Read, listen and learn stories

Plunder the worlds' rich treasure trove of stories.

They say there are only seven plots, and all the differences between stories are in the details. This is also true of human problems. There aren't *that* many different problem patterns, and many of the apparent differences are just matters of detail.

Read, listen to and memorize stories. Lots of them. Think about the different 'problem patterns' different stories address. Practice telling them and make them part of who you are. (You'll always find a willing audience in children!) I have built up a library of stories in my mind to fit the pattern of just about every human problem from addiction and depression to divorce and grief.

There are plenty of great books on stories and storytelling. Among them I recommend therapist Rob Parkinson's *Transforming Tales* (1) and world famous story teller Idries Shah's great corpus of traditional stories *World Tales*. (2) Then there's our own (frankly fantastic) [Storytelling CD](#).

A great story seldom has just one 'point' or 'punch line' - it will contain many layers of meaning. Reading and listening to stories develops creativity and is a fun way to [improve your therapy skills](#). After all, what do we therapists do but deal directly in human 'stories'?

2. Process, not content

To match a story to the needs of an individual you have to look at the wider pattern of their life and seek a story that fits that pattern. Clients often deluge you with so much detail that, if you don't make a conscious effort, you can lose sight of the bigger picture. When sitting with clients I'll often ask myself repeatedly: *"What is really going on here?"*

Many traditional 'fairy tales' match common life patterns such as

- disadvantaged childhood
- appearance of benign help from outside later in the 'story'
- overcoming seemingly impossible obstacles
- personal qualities flourishing *because of* rather than *despite* disadvantages

For survivors of abuse I might tell a tale such as 'The Algonquin Cinderella' (3) to powerful effect.

3. Make your stories hypnotic

A great storyteller is a natural [hypnotist](#). He or she will transport you to other times and places, you'll forget about time passing, your surroundings will gently fade from awareness and you'll submerge into a world of difficulties, betrayal, hardships, adventures, wisdom and hope. All the things that call forth the best from people, such as courage, persistence, daring and true friendship in hard times.

Hypnotists communicate to all the senses, so when you tell a story, describe the sounds, sensations, smells, tastes and sights as fully and vividly as you can. For example, compare "The sun shone on the lake" and "A bright golden sun blazed in the deep blue sky, drawing a shimmering haze like an exotic gauzy veil up out of the deep dark waters of the lake." Vivid descriptions fully engage your listener and make the story an *experience*, almost like a dream.

If you have not yet used story telling in your practice it can feel a bit strange at first, but it won't be long before it will start to feel like the most natural thing in the world. Which it is!

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The story of depression

Once upon a time... there was a very unhappy wo/man. S/he had become withdrawn and stopped speaking to friends. S/he continued (unwillingly, unhappily, less and less effectively) to work, but colleagues couldn't help noticing that dark gray cloud, and the absence of any smile. In spite of long hours in bed, s/he always woke up exhausted, thick headed, anxious and miserable. Nothing was any fun anymore. It looked like nothing ever would be fun again...

A tragic story? Not necessarily.

Our [lift depression fast online course](#) will teach you everything you need to know to understand – and change – the story of depression. And quickly. Therapeutic stories are a powerful tool to help people who believe they will never recover from depression.

The next course launches on 9 February 2010 and there is still just time to [save 25% off the course fee](#) if you book your place before 19 January 2010. (That's a gift from your fairy godmother.)

Make sure you know how to bring the story of depression to a happy ending.

See you in a fortnight.

[Mark Tyrrell](#)

Co-Founder

Uncommon Knowledge

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Notes

(1) Rob Parkinson: *Transforming Tales: How Stories Can Change People*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers 2009. ISBN-10: 1843109743; ISBN-13: 978-1843109747

(2) Idries Shah: *World Tales*. Octagon Press 1991. ISBN-10: 0863040365; ISBN-13: 978-0863040368

(3) *World Tales*. Pg 242