

Natural Fixes

Narrative Therapy for Depression

BY HANNAH CHENOWETH

First things first: What is narrative therapy?

JOHN WINSLADE: A lot of people assume narrative therapy is about journaling, but it's a type of talk therapy that starts from the assumption that people form stories about their lives. Certain stories can be painful or problematic and take center stage in defining a person's perception of his or her identity or life. Narrative therapy aims to help us create better, more productive stories. It operates on the basis that people are separate from their problems. It puts them in the driver's seat of their lives and helps them identify ways to use their skills to confront issues creatively.

How can it help those dealing with depression?

WINSLADE: Depression is like a suitcase—it carries different things for different people. It could mean a sense of failure,

despair, or anxiety. It may also include someone who has experienced trauma that has left him or her feeling depressed. In narrative therapy, the practitioner emphasizes that depression is visiting; depression is not who the client is. This can help people see their circumstances with more clarity and self-compassion, and less judgment. For comparison, in other forms of talk therapy, the practitioner is the objective party; narrative therapy strives to give both people this external perspective.

What would a typical session be like?

WINSLADE: It depends on the individual. That said, a session would start with identifying the problem, with the assumption that the *problem* (such as depression) is the problem—the *person* is not the problem. Narrative therapists aren't



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trying to find something wrong with the client, but rather with a particular story and way of thinking. The therapist and the client will externalize the issue and talk about it as something separate from the person, to help him or her move away from it. Elements of a unique counter-story would be found in the midst of that conversation.

What kinds of results can someone expect to see?

WINSLADE: The goal is for clients to gain a sense of choice about the decisions

that one difference, a series of differences emerge, and we have an empowering story rather than a defeating one.

Is there research to support this type of therapy?

WINSLADE: There's honestly not enough research out there; therapeutic research can be trickier than drug research in some ways. If you're interested in narrative therapy, I would recommend seeking out a therapist who is familiar with this type of practice and seeing if you find the method helpful.

they make. Narrative therapy illuminates the fact that people have the power to make decisions and act upon them. Ideally, people can act upon a story that is helpful, positive, and creative instead of the story that depression spelled out for them. For instance, a person's story may have been, in part, "Depression makes it impossible for me to get to work on time." Usually I can unearth an example where this wasn't true and things went well for the individual. From