

# TELL SOMEONE WHO CARES

*Storytelling is a powerful, ancient practice with deep roots and proven psychological benefits. Find out why it works and how you can employ it to support your own healing journey.*

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**W**e all tell ourselves stories. At various times, we might be victims, villains or heroes. The difficulty is that these stories, formed from memories, thoughts and other people's input, are coloured by emotion. Our retelling is rarely accurate or objective and, in worst case scenarios, it can undermine our self-esteem and confidence. So how can we reclaim our story and write a new, better chapter?

## NARRATIVE THERAPY

Paula Money Penny is a Narrative Therapist based in Waikato, New Zealand. She first encountered this concept when studying for a Master of Counselling at the University of Waikato. "I learned how narrative therapy helps people move away from problem-saturated identities – where life feels defined by struggle and failure – toward more hopeful narratives of agency and freedom. Narrative therapy supports clients in crafting identities grounded in choice, possibility, and self-authorship," says Money Penny.

Narrative therapy was developed in the 1980s by social workers and therapists David Epston (in New Zealand) and Michael White (in Australia). They intended it to be an alternative to traditional, medicalised psychotherapy that often focuses on diagnosing and 'fixing' problems. Money Penny says, "Narrative therapy emphasises a respectful, collaborative process where clients are seen as experts in their own lives, defined by strengths rather than problems. It explores the stories people tell themselves and the meanings shaped by culture, society, and relationships.

"Narrative therapists pay close attention to dominant cultural narratives – such as those about success or worthiness – that can unconsciously shape self-perception and limit choices. I work with clients to examine inherited narratives from family, culture, and society, and help them define their true values," says Money Penny.

Research shows that 're-authoring' stories can change the brain. Money Penny says, "Neuroplasticity – the brain's ability to rewire itself – explains how the stories we tell can reshape identity. When clients strengthen alternative narratives and notice

moments of strength, they build new neural pathways. Old patterns – like 'I am defined by this problem' – lose dominance, while new ways of seeing themselves – 'I am capable, resilient, and agentic' – are reinforced. Clients don't just think differently – they experience themselves differently, with shifts in identity, choices, and capacity for action.

"Narrative therapy reminds me daily that we are all able to be active authors of our lives, capable of evolving identity and creating life stories filled with choice and possibility," she says.

## STORYTELLING TO STRANGERS

Stories that Stir is a storytelling community where six ordinary and yet extraordinary people get up on stage to share their raw, personal stories with the goal of breaking down barriers, starting conversations and creating connection. Event founder, Monica Rosenfeld has plenty of experience sharing stories. She started her career as a TV producer and later ran a successful PR business for 20 years. It was during the COVID-19 lockdowns that the idea for a storytelling event came to her.

“I was walking with my husband Joram and our dog when I suggested this idea. I’d been feeling like I needed a change for a while because I was missing the stage. Before the lockdown, I’d been doing stand-up comedy but then events ceased. The first few Stories that Stir events were an experiment. There was no agenda – I didn’t see it as a business – but I did feel it light me up,” says Rosenfeld.

Three years later, Monica and Joram hosted the global launch at the Sydney Opera House. Since then, there have been

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more than 80 Stories that Stir events around Australia, as well as one in Bali. Monica and Joram set up Stories that Stir so they can be run anywhere by local hosts. Everything you need to host an event is on the website, and hopeful speakers simply fill out a form to go in the running to tell their story.

“Our mission is to create human connection and healing through storytelling,” says Rosenfeld. “The core events will always stay the same – raw and personal stories – but now we also have Stories that Stir for conferences and I coach people on transformation narrative storytelling. My vision is that there will be community events all over the world and my next big goal is to host an event at The Apollo Theater in New York. Once I’ve done that, I’ll know we’ve made it.”

No matter how big it becomes, Rosenfeld says that every event has one key feature. “By enabling people to release their story to supportive witnesses, they feel seen, heard and self-expressed. It is a healing modality that we just sort of stumbled across,” she says.

### PUBLIC SPEAKING

Jo Richards specialises in teaching people how to share their personal stories at public speaking events. A trained actress and event facilitator, Richards’s entry into the storytelling experience began with her own. She performed her own personal stories and realised that there was an opportunity to coach people while also guiding them on a healing journey.

Richards says, “There was a time when people would sit around a campfire telling stories. In the modern world, opportunities to tell our own stories have dwindled and, with it, there’s a loss of connection, empathy and community. So many of my clients come to me feeling like they have nothing to say and their story is not valuable. My goal is to help them find their voice and claim the value of their stories and their own lived

experience. When we claim the value of what we know, clarity and confidence naturally occur.”

She uses the analogy of knowing how to make a chocolate cake. “When you know how to make a great chocolate cake, you will deliver that information with total conviction. You know what to emphasise because you know what’s important and your delivery will be spot-on,” she says.

When it comes to beginning to share personal, vulnerable stories, Richards says that a space where you feel genuinely seen

and heard is key. “We don’t often get the opportunity to speak freely and hear ourselves articulate our thoughts, feelings and the hard-won wisdom we have gained through lived experience. When I offer this space, compassion and curiosity to my clients, I see them ‘ignite’ when they discover there is so much they have to say. It’s such a joy to witness that unfurling,” she says.

“The ability to tell your story from a first-person perspective and bring the audience into your experience – what you saw, tasted, smelled and felt – is also key to great storytelling. It’s incredibly vulnerable and generous because it’s this kind of sharing with an audience that creates connection and reminds us that we’re not alone. It’s so healing,” says Richards.

### MEMOIR WRITING

With two memoirs under her belt, as well as seven years of teaching memoir writing to others, Louisa Deasey says that the process of writing down your stories – also known as memoir or personal narrative – is as much a spiritual practice as it is an authorial process.

“Whether you’re an author or not, you’re always making up stories. And being aware that something is a story, changes your perspective on it,” says Deasey. This is particularly helpful when it comes to the rocky terrain of more difficult emotions.

“No story is actually ‘wrong’ if we can face the truth of it. Some stories have this shameful power but that’s only because we haven’t brought them into our awareness,” says Deasey. “The art of storytelling gives you a safe container to put those thoughts, feelings and experiences into so that it can become a separate thing that can be examined and witnessed. When we bring things out into the light and face them, you can see them more clearly and it dissolves the shame.”

Deasey says that journaling is a helpful way to connect to your higher self and write your story. “It’s not about being ‘woo woo’.

It’s about making something physical of something spiritual. When you journal, you think about an idea, you get a pen, you write it down. You are bringing something from non-material to material form, and that is an incredibly powerful spiritual manifestation practice.

“You’re tuning into the intuition and the ideas that were already there. Imagination is endless. What most people need to do, and what we’ve never been taught, is to trust your intuition and become aware of your ideas, feelings and patterns.”

Deasey maintains that journaling is essential to memoir writing but also to self-awareness, understanding and confidence. Research shows that 12 minutes a day is the minimum to see the physical and psychological benefits. “We’re conditioned from childhood to look outside ourselves for opinions and validation,” says Deasey. “We’re not taught to look inside.

“This kind of writing is about finding your voice and trusting that you are worth listening to. Asking certain questions of ourselves, and then observing what happens in our mind, behaviour and bodies is the basis of all narrative and psychotherapeutic practice.”

## How To Find A Narrative Therapist

To find a qualified narrative therapist in New Zealand or Australia, check professional bodies such as NZAC (New Zealand Association of Counsellors), ACCA (Australian Community Counselling Association) and PACFA (Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia).

Paula Money Penny recommends looking for a therapist that has completed comprehensive training such as the programs at University of Waikato (NZ), Dulwich Centre (Australia), David Epston’s trainings (NZ), Vancouver School of Narrative Therapy (Canada) or The Narrative Therapy Institute (US).

“These programs provide in-depth education in narrative approaches, ensuring that narrative therapy is the foundation of the therapist’s practice – not simply an add-on to an existing degree,” says Money Penny.

If you are looking for a storytelling event to participate in or attend in Australia or New Zealand, visit: Stories that Stir, [storiesthatstir.com](http://storiesthatstir.com) The Moth, [themoth.org](http://themoth.org)