



## Mind Matters

articles on mental health from experts in the field

### **Storytelling has Therapeutic Value**

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I was 16 years old. Many other things, that I thought were extremely important at the time, were going on in my young life, but the four crisp and brilliant autumn days in October stand out in my memory. My Aunt Lil and I took a road trip from Michigan to Tennessee, visiting my Aunt Bert, who lived in Greeneville. The three of us spent one entire amazing day at what has since then become the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesboro, Tennessee. Individually, and sometimes together, the three of us roamed between large circus tents where storytellers from all walks of life spun their captivating tales. I remember hearing a story that was passed down through the generations from the time of slavery in America. In another tent, I heard a creation story from a member of the Choctaw Tribe. I also recall laughing and crying in the same 10 minute span as I listened to a hilarious, and sometimes sobering, story of growing up in extreme poverty in Appalachia, directly from the mouth of a person who had lived it. I knew back then, at 16 years of age, that spoken-word stories were incredibly powerful.

Now, over 20 years later, I have learned that the power of storytelling is far-reaching. Stories have the ability to unite cultures, generations, families and friends. Spoken-word stories can be therapeutic, nurturing, comforting in difficult times, and enriching (spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally). Evidence of the impact of storytelling is all around us, in the music we listen to, the way we spend our time, the people we care about, in all aspects of our lives. In fact, as I wrote this article, I received a phone call from a close friend I have known for over seven years. She and her family just adopted a cat from a local shelter. She tells me the story of her 2-½ year old nephew naming the cat “Walter,” after an infamously flatulent dog from the storybooks. I happen to be the one who introduced those books to the family, and so I am now responsible for the name of this rescued cat. I am strangely flattered instead of guilty. And I realize, coincidentally, that there are many, many stories within this very short one that I have just told. There’s the story of how the cat got his name, the story contained within the Walter storybooks, the one I just told in a few lines, and the story of how I came to be attached to this particular family. Perhaps I’ve made my point, in telling the story that has become this article, about the amazing and universal powers of storytelling. Being a long-winded storyteller myself, I will simply leave you with a few suggestions of how to tap into the power within a story:

- Read books. Read them to yourself, to your children, to your grandparents, to your family pet...Just read them.
- Ask elders to tell you their stories. Many of us overlook the treasure trove of stories that is all around us in the people of past generations. This point was made very clear to me recently, when I heard the estimate that within a couple decades there would no longer be any survivors of the Holocaust still living to speak about the atrocities from a first-hand perspective.
- Record the stories of your family members. This can provide a lasting legacy of stories that reminds the generations to come of their roots, both positive and negative. Genealogy stories can inform us of how to avoid mistakes or negative patterns, while assuring us of our strong and positive foundations.
- Expand your horizons. Find ways to expose yourself and your children to the rich and varied stories of other cultures. Many cultures are deeply rooted in the storytelling tradition. In parts of Africa, storytellers were and are revered for their abilities. They have been referred to as “Griots,” and often travelled amongst villages sharing fables, cautionary tales, family or tribal yarns, and true stories. Many other world cultures have deep roots in the oral storytelling tradition, and provide excellent sources for learning about our larger world (or even our more local surroundings).
- Encourage your kids to tell stories. This activity builds creativity, critical thinking, problem solving and self-expression skills that usually remain for a lifetime and are subsequently passed on to your grandchildren. Distinguish for your kids the difference between times when it is okay to make up and tell stories or exaggerate the truth, and times when those things would be considered lies and could cause problems. Providing channels for imagination, such as storytelling, can even diminish dishonest behavior in some kids.

Attend a storytelling festival. Or, on a smaller scale, go to your local bookstore or library during story time. Who knows, maybe I’ll run into you next year in Jonesboro. But there are a million exciting stories awaiting us between now and then... What will yours include?

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