

The Power of Story for Mental Health Recovery

"When you tell a story that touches me, you give me the gift of human attention—the kind that connects me to you, that touches my heart and makes me feel more alive." (From The Story Factor by Annette Simmons).

Human beings have one very important and powerful thing in common. From the time we begin to communicate or express ourselves, we share our lives in story. In fact, current brain research indicates that human beings think, learn, and remember in narrative or story. We share stories informally each day, about the people who are important to us, the places that hold memories, the objects that hold meaning, and the events or turning points that have had an impact in our lives.

I make my living telling stories to help people learn, heal, and connect. Lately, I have been paying attention to the stories that people tell about themselves. When I ask them about their life, how do they answer? What part of their life story do they choose to share? What part of their story are they leaving out? Is their story about limitations or possibilities? Are they telling their whole story?

For those dealing with the challenges of mental illness, the story can start to feel heavy and lopsided, and so, recovery stories should include all the facets of a person's life. Not just stories about the challenges of mental illness, but the joys, adventures, and successes too. Recovering from mental illness is not the whole story but it is an important part of the story a person in recovery tells. That is why I have been sharing my Turning Points Personal Narrative model with people recovering from mental illness.

Our stories are an accumulation of experiences that we have had along the continuum of our life's journey so far. Our lives are one long, changing story. We can stop at many points along that continuum and find a story about an experience that impacted our lives. Each stop is like a portal, or a "door" that can be opened to a story that will give us new insights about ourselves. Think of three things that have happened to you in your life so far, from the time you began remembering, to this very day. What are three important or impacting events you have experienced? Could you tell a story about each of these events? How did these particular events cause you to grow, learn or change?

Some of the stories we tell about ourselves are joyful. Some are sad. Some are painful, and some are full of hope and inspiration. Some of our "story doors" take courage to open. Some we may not be ready to open until later. Each of us has a whole story, and telling our personal stories, can help us see our lives as whole. Listening to the stories that others tell, can do the same, for us and for them.

Why is it important to share recovery stories? I believe that when we know and tell our own story, we understand ourselves better. When we listen to and witness the stories that others tell, we give them the gift of deep listening, so that they can understand their lives better. Since, our life experience is mirrored in the stories that others tell, we see that we are not alone. Stories build bridges from one person to another and create a sense of connection and compassion between us. Telling your recovery story helps you see your journey more clearly, gives others in recovery strength and hope, and is a

powerful tool for creating a greater understanding about mental health issues. It is said that "the truth clothed in a story is easier to hear".

Why Tell Our Story?

1. The stories that we share from our life experience speaks to the truth about living with, and recovering from mental illness.
2. Stories can help break through the stigma about the causes of mental illnesses by breaking down barriers of ignorance, prejudice and unfair discrimination, and promoting education, awareness and action.
3. Stories can be a powerful advocacy tool that helps create policy and protects against the abuse of rights and mistreatment of consumers.
4. Telling your story, and listening to the stories of others in recovery, can promote your healing and the healing of your peers.

Suggestions for Consumers:

- Use storytelling and story writing activities with peer groups, local V.A. Recovery Group, or in your Club House settings to support and empower each other. Make it a weekly or monthly event.
- Speak to groups of peers who are dealing with mental health issues to mentor them in recovery.
- Write your story and post it on a blog, or place your story on other mental health related posts.
- Send your story to magazines, newsletters, or publications that print recovery stories that others can read and benefit from.
- Create an inspiring story piece for You Tube!

Suggestions for Mental Health Providers and Recipient Rights Advocates

- Use narrative writing and telling as a healing tool for those you provide mental health care for.
- Provide a listening space for your clients in group therapy so individual's stories can be heard in a safe, supportive environment.
- Involve family members of consumers in story telling and story listening sessions to help create awareness and understanding.

- Ask consumers to share stories, or use stories, with permission, to help dissolve stigma, create policy, and advocate for the protection of rights for mental health care recipients.

In his book, *"Listening for True Treasures in the Wind"*, author Ron Collins says, "When we take our time and focus on our fellow human beings and give of ourselves, we can truly connect our inner core with another inner core. It is empowering...True listening connects living souls, enhances healing, reduces loneliness, empowers, and impacts all of our lives in the most positive ways...The person you come across can be impacted by the true listening you give to them. Both of our lives can be impacted in ways you can only imagine due to the gift of true listening".

When we know where we have come from and understand our past "story", we can understand our present story with greater clarity. Our present story can be one of possibilities, not limitations, for the most powerful way to connect with other human beings, at the core, is to tell and listen to each others stories.

Jenifer Strauss is a keynote speaker, storyteller, and workshop facilitator from Hastings, Michigan. She uses her Turning Points Personal Narrative model to help people in Recovery. For more information on Turning Points, go to www.storybetold.com or Email Jen: jenifer@storybetold.com.