

# The Power of Story: How the Stories We Tell Shape Our Lives

The stories we tell ourselves and others affect our well-being.

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The stories we tell ourselves are a reflection of our inner lives, mirroring how we experience the world and define our [identity](#). Our realities are malleable, reshaping as we grow and change. As a narrative inquiry researcher, I listen to people's plotlines, intrigued by the throughlines holding their chapters together.

But how do we construct our life story, and what is the impact of the stories we tell ourselves and others?

## How Do We Build Our Life Story?

McAdams (2013a, 2022), a pioneer of narrative research, conceptualizes psychological development as a three-part progression of actor, agent, and author. In the beginning, we join the ranks of social actors, engaged in what Goffman (1959) describes as dramaturgical analysis, making us hypervigilant to the societal clues abounding around us. At this juncture, we are learning the rules of our role, busily practicing our parts in the background, and engaging in [impression management](#) as the curtain lifts and we step on stage (Adler, 2019; Habermas and Bluck, 2000; Habermas and Köber, 2015).

As we move into [adolescence](#) and young adulthood, we maintain our outward-facing social roles previously adopted, yet now, we are more selective in what parts we accept (Habermas and Bluck, 2000). At this stage, we are what McAdams (2013a) describes as "motivated agents,"

using our values, [goals](#), and project plans as roadmaps for moving forward.

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In the final phase, we take the pen, no longer enacting the script of another, and write our own story. We are agentic in our life's narrative, crafting our own identity.

## What Do the Stories We Tell Ourselves and Others Reveal?

We are each dealt a different deck: tragedies mixed with celebrations that are self-made, other-inflicted, or simply outcomes of random circumstances. Despite the plotlines, both constructed and endured, how we tell our story provides a window into how we make sense of our experiences, assign meaning to our existence, and create unity in our life's arc (Adler and colleagues, 2016). Our tellings also offer glimpses into what we might do next. Though our stories are unique, the structures we adopt for the tellings follow predictable patterns and provide insight into our well-being. Four contrasting categorical markers offer particular utility: coherence versus episodic, redemptive versus contamination, agency versus passivity, and communion versus isolation.

**1, Coherence Versus Episodic:** When we view our experiences as episodic, our tellings are isolated and static, leaving us telling the same stories on repeat. Void of connective tissue linking our life's episodes together, we are left rudderless, unable to mine for meaning in difficult circumstances, insights that could inform later happenings.

In contrast, when our story possesses a narrative coherence, each episode joined by a common thread, we are in a position to chart our evolution and celebrate our growth, constructing an identity built on personal values and mission. Narrative coherence storytelling has

consistently been tied to positive mental health outcomes, because it invites the teller to reflect on lessons learned, sharing how insights gained from one experience served to inform the next (Adler and colleagues, 2016; Lysaker and colleagues, 2005). In other words, storytelling with narrative coherence consists of chapters with a narrative arc, gifting generative aha moments and inspiration to others (Mason and colleagues, 2019).

**2. Redemptive Versus Contamination:** Curveballs are a natural and unavoidable part of our existence, but it is the ending valence where the meaning lies. Ending valence is a term used to delineate if a story concludes on a high or a low, a decision that is partially reliant on the meaning we assign to the experience and where we draw the chapter breaks. In other words, if a story has a bad ending, perhaps we should consider it halftime instead of the final scene (Adler and colleagues, 2016; McAdams, 2013b).

The stories we tell tend to be redemptive or contaminated, and the designation is not fully reliant on the event. Two people can live the same experience and assign radically different meanings, changing the narrative arc.

Stories of redemption are not [toxic positivity](#) tellings—but stories where we survey what unfolded and, even in the face of unfairness and cruelty, identify the lessons learned. Within the insights gained and personal growth incurred, we measure our redemption, even when the bad outweighs the good, as is so often the case in tragedy (McLean and colleagues, 2020; Perlin and McAdams, 2023).

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For example, I was in a serious car accident last year, breaking my back and pelvis, and though now I live with a body infused with metal and in [chronic pain](#), I learned the comfort afforded when I allow other people to

care for me, instead of always directing the show. Furthermore, over my many months on medical leave, I enjoyed a constant flow of friends, both old and new, who reminded me of the power of [friendship](#), kindness, and humanity to heal our bodies and souls. My story is redemptive.

Contamination, on the other hand, is an oil spill that poisons the waters, leaving us sinking and in despair, unable to turn the page on a new chapter. Contaminated stories are quicksand, trapping us in the pain and disallowing us from climbing out of the muck and moving forward.

It is important to note, that in difficult circumstances, grieving is necessary and often prolonged. It is okay to sit in the contamination and breathe in the pain and unfairness of it all as you come to accept the unfolding, adjusting your plotlines to accommodate the disappointment or catastrophe. The power, however, comes when you start to crawl out of the hole, dragging the lessons learned, hard-won, into your next chapter, eradicating the contamination, and learning to carry the pain in a meaningful way. Redemption doesn't mean the experience was worth it or that you wouldn't undo it if given the opportunity, it simply means that you squeezed some revelations out of the reeling.

Research indicates redemptive narratives are connected to well-being, as well as, a more generative existence or a life example that leaves positive ripples for future generations (McAdams, 2022).

**3. Agency Versus Passivity:** Themes of autonomy, control, and mastery are tied to our quest for agency. An agentic self is correlated with positive mental health outcomes. In contrast, when we view ourselves as a passive protagonist, our plotlines place us as victims of circumstance, leaving us at the mercy of life's mishaps (McAdams and colleagues, 1996).

Agency, however, looks different depending on the circumstance. For example, in the face of a terminal diagnosis, we may not have agency over the disease's progression, but we can gain control over how we spend our

remaining days and the legacy we leave behind (Brewster, 2022).

Interestingly, when studying the narratives of adults in [psychotherapy](#), changes in agency preceded positive changes in mental health (Adler, 2012; McLean and colleagues, 2020).

**4. Communion Versus Isolation:** Humans are wired for connection, an evolutionary trait to warn us of danger and ensure our protection (Sapolsky, 2004). Isolation, especially as a fallout of ostracization, has detrimental health consequences, sometimes provoking [anxiety](#), [depression](#), gastrointestinal issues, [migraine](#), sleep deprivation, and [suicidal](#) ideations (Suskind, 2023). The hurt of ostracization and exclusion triggers the same parts of the brain as physical pain (Eisenberger and colleagues, 2003).

Lives of communion ward off [loneliness](#) and despair. Isolation, on the other hand, removes the buffers to harm, leaving us vulnerable to a hostile world. Communion narratives tell the stories of our affiliations, friendships, and loves—attaching us to something outside ourselves, helping to lessen the load (McAdams and colleagues, 1996; McLean and colleagues, 2020). When communion is broken, whether that be the ending of a [romantic relationship](#) or being pushed out of an organization, the emotional fallout is significant. In repairing the harm, it is essential to reestablish or create connections with friends and communities.

Our autobiography is not a neutral telling but a window into how we interpret our life circumstances. Cohesive stories, framed by redemption, agency, and communion, are correlated to psychological well-being. In this way, our stories are not static but alive, actively predicting our futures. Therefore, the stories we tell are both recounts of the past and predictors of next steps, living and breathing organisms directing our chapters' unfoldings.