

# A study on narrative therapy being emotionally focused



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When one imagines a spouse coming home from work there is usually a question asked in the scenario, "how was your day?" Now in the household I grew up that question was usually responded to with a story or anecdote as oppose to a simple "fine" or "bad." My family has always been emotionally open, but generally withdrawn from using the emotion words like happy or sad instead explaining their days through the events.

I think that narrative therapy has much potential to be emotionally focused, and still accept the social constructs we all are inundated with from birth. In many ways narrative therapy celebrates life as two stories intertwine with one another and the therapist is not the "expert, but an interested collaborator. Rather than look for pathology or flawed functioning couples the therapist works to develop awareness of problematic discourse and offer couple the opportunity to describe and evaluate the effects of those discourses on their relationship." (Freedman & Combs, 2008)

I full-heartedly agree with narrative therapies take on goal setting. By being too specific in any goals life possibilities are eliminated and single-mindedness tends to reign supreme in one's mind. Life has a fluidity that presents and eliminates obstacles. Goals do not always account for these variations. The goal setting of narrative therapy is to help the narrative remain fluid from moment to moment and what positive emotions can be reached. (Freedman & Combs, 2008)

I think that objectivity is a key component to solving dysfunction and once two people become too enmeshed in a conflict, objectivity disappears.

Working with narratives is an excellent way to separate oneself from a

conflict and see a perspective without as much irrationality. The couple in the provided scenario is losing objectivity in their current worldview of soon to be married professionals. Narrative therapy is not a concrete process with a list of events that have to occur before the next step can occur. It is a more cyclical process that allows the therapist and couple the ability to move back and forth between the processed goals. That does not mean a regression in thinking will not happen, but narrative therapy is based on building forward a story that has its own ebbs and flows. It is the role of the therapist to guide and advise the client in ways to construct the narrative. (Brimhall, Gardner, & Heline, 2003)

I thought of narrative therapy when I started thinking about the couple in the scenario, because with only three months before the wedding I feel that constructing a narrative would work with the time period available. Narrative therapy has a free structure that has a distinct jumping off point, but overall a structure that has chapters that include emotions one can return to. I would personally be weary of how many sessions I would be able to have with this couple with their wedding being so close.

The first thing to do in the initial session and assessment with the couple in the scenario is have them identify their problem. Ask them to give a name to the problem, associate the emotions with the problem, and identify the alteration in each member of the couple's lives and relationships due to the problem. The couple stated that the problem is "constantly getting into fights and cannot discuss anything without being angry and defensive." For the sake of brevity the problem will be shortened to "fighting." The next thing is to construct the narrative that leads up to the anger, fights, and

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defensiveness. While the narrative approach is based on the clients being the experts on their own lives, a therapist must still assess disorders, dysfunctions, and negative thoughts. The therapist is also responsible for making the dialogue progress so that all the necessary emotions and cognitions about the relationship emerge. It is easy to see one side of the couple dominate the narrative. Each member of the couple should have equal time to present their own narrative and the therapist should make sure of this. One member of the couple tells his or her narrative of the relationship to the therapist while the other partner listens. The therapist reiterates it back to make sure everything is clear. This gives the therapist the chance to reframe the narrative structure and encourages the listening partner to understand the narrative from an objective viewpoint. Then the same process happens with the other partner. Each partner must feel that their own story has been heard. One partner should not dominate the session. After each partner has shared his narrative then the therapist has a clear vision of all the problems which in this couples case are anger and defensiveness. Ultimately, I think there should be a completely shared narrative also, but that is idealistic.

The couple spins the narrative in the sessions a greater understanding of the relationship between couple and problem presented in the narrative. By mapping the influence understanding of the problem a therapist can begin to trace back where and when the “ fighting” started. (Corey, 2009) This couple does not have an enormous history of fighting, so the historical precedent can be traced to an origin point. I would also work on preferred points in the relationship. Both members of the couple could benefit from positivity with

questions such as “ what initially attracted you two to one another? What kinds of things do you like to do together? What do you most appreciate about your partner?” Exploring the narratives of the successful times of the couple’s relationship can be just as much a positive benefit as looking at their problems.

The therapist can begin to see the patterns that emerge in each narrative where the named problem is present. From this point, hopefully with rapport built, it will be time to start externalizing the narrative the couple has presented. Externalization means a new and more objective perspective and the ability to re-author the narrative into alternative meanings. The externalization of conversations is the key to an objective attitude when in an emotionally charged situation. Part of externalization is the need to know their relationship with the problem. How does the fighting start? What makes the fighting worse? What makes the fighting stop? These are all questions each partner should address when looking at the relationship with the problem. There is a very good chance that the couple will each have their own answers to these fighting relationship questions, but it is of the utmost importance to note both partners have a relationship with the problem.

(Freedman & Combs, 2008) The couple should then start seeing each other’s narratives and the attached emotions. It is really important to monitor each client’s emotions and follow them up with additional emotionally focused questions. Just because the couple has a better emotional understanding does not mean hurt feelings and negativity cannot appear, especially in early stages. If needed returning to positive questioning and the preferred time could be part of the strategy.

The next step is the search for unique outcomes. This is to search for moments during the problem that point to success regarding the problem. (Corey, 2009) What are the exceptions to the problem? I like to think of the lessons learned of unique outcomes is like capturing lightning in a bottle. Is there anything that this couple can do to recreate the incident that stopped the fighting? These unique outcomes often are accompanied by events that cannot be recreated. When that unique outcome is found a new story can be formed. With this unique outcome solutions are starting to materialize amongst the couple. More history should be evaluated amongst the clients.

After restructuring clients start determining the pattern of negativity and they have the ability to team-up against the problem that is sabotaging their relationship. (Johnson, 2004) It is important to see all members of the counseling party united against a common goal now. After progress with the couple and successful externalization of narratives the couple will talk directly to each other instead of dialogue being filtered through the therapist. The therapist still acts as the guide and monitors the dialogue to avoid or counter-act the relational problems and the regressions from the preferred story. Hopefully, the couple has moved past the strict turn based structure initially presented amongst the first sessions, but still respects each others dialogue. (Brimhall, Gardner, & Heline, 2003) With the scenario's couple the therapist has to monitor awareness of anger and defensiveness and point out the problem when it arises. When a couple is aware of the path their narrative is taking they actively try to avoid the problem and restructure the dialogue of the narrative. The therapist is trying to pursue

unconditional positive regard between the partners without having them discount their emotions.

After they have finished the therapist guided sessions the clients should have created a mutual preferred narrative and start complete non-turn based dialogue based on a solution focused result. The positive regard is more apparent in the couple and they are able to focus on unique outcomes. The couple now has new interactions and alternative stories. The couple is in the last stages of their therapy and have an awareness of their problems and strategies for coping with regression back into the problem.

The narrative is now ready to be solidified. This stage is close to termination with the couple. The couple now has a unique preferred narrative that both partners have contributed to. This story contains positive outlooks and more objective views. This concrete preferred narrative is also fused with positive emotions and noticeable cooperation attacking the problem from both partners. Bringing in an outside party to share the completion of the new narrative is an important activity for the client to participate in. This shows the client has completed a goal. I believe external validation away from therapy couch is necessary to promote growth in any problems, whether individual, conjoint, or group. This demonstrates self-confidence in the client as well and shows they are self-reliant when facing their problems. (Brimhall, Gardner, & Helene, 2003)

The only step left for the couple now is to prepare for the future. The couple can now circumvent their problems of anger, defensiveness, and can use externalizing questions to explore emotions and attain an objective

perspective on their problems. There are steps that this couple learned that they can use for the rest of their relationship.

The theory of narrative couples therapy has many diverse skills a couple can learn to help them through relationship problems and prepare them for the future. The therapist can combine many aspects of different theories in narrative, including emotionally focused therapy so they can attack client problem from many different angles.