

## The Hero's Journey: A New Narrative for People with Mental Health Challenges

The Hero's Journey® narrative can offer a way to understand and articulate the recovery journey for people with mental health challenges. It can give meaning to a person's struggles and diminish self-stigma.

The Hero's Journey® is the universal story (mono-myth) described by Joseph Campbell in his book *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1948). Campbell discovered that although stories varied throughout different cultures and throughout history, the theme of the Hero's Journey® remained consistent. The Hero's Journey® involves key elements, including accepting the call to journey, crossing the threshold from the known into the unknown, finding mentors and allies, facing tests, foes and challenges, and ultimately being transformed as they bring forth their inner hero. Campbell's research implies that the narrative of the Hero's Journey® has real applications to present-day life regardless of life circumstances. It can guide the person through personal journeys showing what is expected and how to proceed.

The concept of narrative identity refers to the internal evolving life story that individuals construct by integrating stories related to their past, present, and future to provide their lives with unity, meaning and purpose (Kerr et al., 2019). Culture, consisting in part of shared stories, specifies the prevailing images, themes, plots and meanings that may contribute to the construction of narrative identity (McAdams, 2019). Stigmatizing narratives from cultures that label people with mental illness as crazy, scary, unpredictable, and violent, can become internalized and rob people of their ability to lead a fulfilling life. Self-stigma and other disempowering self-narratives are significant barriers to recovery from long term mental health challenges, and there is evidence that intervention techniques engaging people in the process of re-examining their personal narratives can lead to the reduction of self-stigma (Yanos et. al, 2019). Research also has shown that as narratives change over time in the direction of greater agency, the adults who tell these stories tend to experience improvement in

mental health. The changes in the story predict and preceded the decline in symptoms and the enhancement of well-being (McAdams, 2019).

An important task for individuals with mental health challenges and for those who have internalized stigma is to redefine themselves, to reconstruct a preferred identity aligned with mental health and wellbeing, empowerment and agency. This process involves a) awareness of a more agentic sense of self, b) taking stock of one's strengths and limitations, c) putting aspects of the self into action and d) using this enhanced sense of self as a resource in recovery (Kerr et al., 2019). This process is aligned with Campbell's outline of the stages of the Hero's Journey. The inner hero, (those qualities of insight, courage, willingness, agency, self-efficacy, resilience, strength) is brought forth on the journey as the person faces tests, foes and challenges, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant. Like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, the individual becomes more empowered and confident as they begin to acknowledge and experience that their inner hero has been with them all the time. As their journey unfolds, tests, foes and challenges become more difficult. Strategies and approaches need to be re-evaluated for their effectiveness and new strategies and approaches are developed that will push the person out of their comfort zone. With the support of their mentor and allies, the person draws upon their inner strength and resources to continue their journey, although a transformation has taken place. The old self-narrative has died off and a new self-narrative has emerged.

The Hero's Journey® narrative can offer individuals with mental health challenges a new framework in which to view their lives and invites them to consider the recovery journey as their own hero's journey. This narrative offers hope and empowerment in the face of internal and external stigma allowing them to access their "inner hero," qualities that we all possess but may at times seem hidden. There is evidence that adopting the Hero's Journey® narrative can help individuals overcome the effects of self-stigma by seeing their experience of mental illness as a source of growth and strength rather than a fruitless, frustrating, stigmatizing endeavor. The Hero's Journey® may be particularly resonant for youth who are immersed in narratives from film and books that echo Hero's Journey® elements. Although controlled research has yet to be conducted, preliminary

analyses using pre-and post-data indicated that participants with significant and long-term mental health challenges in Hero's Journey® groups improved significantly over time in the self-esteem/self-efficacy subscale (n =11, Baseline Mean = 16.6 ± 3.7, Follow-up Mean = 15.3 ± 4.5, F = 5.6, p < .05) of the Empowerment Scale (Rogers et al., 1997).

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