

Therapeutic value of stories in children

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Abstract:

Storytelling serves as an alternative approach to communication. Mental health professionals use the technique with an overall treatment plan rather than as a standalone treatment approach. Children's inherent interest in stories confirms the storytelling technique as a crucial clinical mechanism. Metaphors incorporated into the stories work as tools of therapeutic intervention. Children can develop more adaptive emotional and behavioral reactions by using cognitive and behavioral methods through storytelling, which aim to elicit reasonable thinking and viewpoints about themselves and the environment. With the help of story therapy, children can grow emotionally, think more critically, and find creative solutions to the problems they face in their daily lives.

Keywords: Mental health; therapeutic story; story telling; rapport

Introduction

Stories have such a profound grip on human existence that we have become entirely immune to their peculiar and enchanting influence. The power of stories capable of healing and making wounds is undoubtedly known to humanity from the primitive age. We humans have always loved to tell tales for several reasons. According to biopsychologists, our brain stores our memories in the form of stories. This is a factor that makes humans unique among animals. A long time ago, communication was primarily through word of mouth. Stories educated the next generation and passed on their traditions and beliefs. They provide insights into other societies and offer a mirror to our culture, time, and individual identities. Storytelling profoundly impacts our imagination, nurturing our souls and pushing the boundaries of our beliefs, especially for young minds. It serves as a platform to captivate imaginative minds and mold them into different forms, like melted wax.

Impact of storytelling in tender minds

Research conducted with children has shown that information presented in a narrative is easier to understand and more likely to be remembered than information presented in a non-story format. Through stories, children gain the courage and inspiration required to tackle life's challenges. Each and every aspect of a narrative, including its characters, setting, atmosphere, and the way the storyline twists and turns, has the potential to serve as a revitalizing force for the mind. The wholehearted vicarious experience of the story will be an enlivening experience. Literature, being a primary medium for experiencing stories, allows kids to gain insights into truth and the human condition by exploring the lives of others and their own.

Importance of storytelling tradition within families

Storytelling is an essential tradition within families that can assist children in understanding their familial heritage. The act of storytelling serves as a means of preserving cherished

family history. Research has shown that family storytelling improves children's understanding of human emotions and promotes social intelligence development. Children who feel connected to their families tend to have higher self-esteem and increased self-awareness. Narratives have the remarkable ability to endure over time, even as memories fade. Significant events, customs, thrilling experiences, achievements, as well as periods of adversity and hardship experienced by ancestors, are passed down through generations, thereby maintaining familial ties to the past and instilling descendants with ancestral traditions and values. A deep sense of pride and resilience can be inculcated in the next generation through these narratives. Despite the accomplishments of those who came before us, even immense hardships or tragedies can also leave a lasting positive impact. Powerful emotions evoked as a result will nurture deep bonds with family members and fortify familial ties.

Application of stories in mental health issues

Throughout history, stories have been valuable in guiding individuals through life's challenges. Even before Aesop's fables, educators recognised the power of stories to help young minds navigate a complex world. For generations, teachers have imparted the importance of harnessing one's imagination to empower children and their parents to master vital skills. Children naturally gravitate towards storytelling, effortlessly immersing themselves in a creative realm. Making meaningful connections between new knowledge and past experiences dramatically enhances their learning ability. Stories possess a mesmerizing charm that captivates children. Through their symbolic language, which is brimming with monsters, mythical beings, heroes, and heroines, stories enable children to comprehend meaning in a manner that logical arguments simply cannot. Those who have experienced sharing stories with children know the magical sparkle that illuminates their eyes, filled with fascination and awe. Anger, aggression, anxiety, fear, a lack of confidence, and low self-esteem can be effectively alleviated with the use of therapeutic narratives. Engaging with narratives allows us to gain insights into the past, present, and future while understanding our current actions' potential impact on these outcomes. In a counseling context, utilizing a representative story facilitates a more constructive reflection on life, as opposed to focusing solely on issues and tragedies. Stories show the best and worst of human nature and help people empathise with one another.

How stories become a therapeutic story

Therapeutic stories aim to transform how people think. To achieve this goal, a story must be structurally representative of the client's life. This reveals how a pattern influences the client's life and helps identify areas for improvement. Incorporating real-life problems transforms the story into a therapeutic narrative. A skilled bibliophile can select literature and self-help books that relate to a client's issues and use them as therapy tools. Stories help us grow and evolve by telling us about how others overcame similar disabilities. Realising that others have been in the same situation will help a person understand himself.

Application of stories in children

Research has clearly demonstrated that our bodies have a physiological response to stress. When faced with a stressful situation, our bodies release adrenaline and hormones, activating our nervous system and heightening our senses. This leads to an increase in pulse rate, respiration rate, and muscle tension, preparing us to react to potential emergencies. However, in modern times, these automatic physiological responses occur even in non-physical, emotional stressors. Our bodies undergo these changes, but we often fail to take appropriate

action. Continuous exposure to such stressors can result in exhaustion, negatively impacting our immune system and making us more susceptible to illness.

Relaxation techniques can effectively calm the aroused nervous system. Relaxation is a natural mechanism that helps counteract the harmful effects of stress and restores our body to a healthier state of balance. To induce relaxation, incorporating active imagination stories and assisting children in redirecting their thoughts towards strategies will enhance their resilience and minimise stress responses. These therapeutic stories equip children with the tools to navigate the challenges they may encounter in their life journey.

Choosing Stories

Selecting therapeutic stories requires several characteristics. A story must meet the client's reading level. Kids are more likely to read titles that relate to their lives. The story should provide realistic problem solutions and maintain balance. The tale should be nonjudgmental and funny, if possible. Teens and children have diverse reading interests that alter with age. Children like familiar stories in the early years, which will progress to fantasy stories. Early adolescence will see a shift towards mystery and supernatural stories, with war, romance, and teenage life stories becoming increasingly appealing as they grow older. Personal ideals, social relevance, and unique human experiences will become their choices in late adolescence.

Things to be remembered while suggesting stories

1. Suggest familiar stories.
2. Avoid complex storylines with unnecessary details and circumstances.
3. Stories should reflect clients' personalities and lifestyles.
4. Kids' comprehension should be assessed when suggesting stories.
5. The story should include the rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution.
6. Empirical evidence should support the therapeutic story.
7. The story should accurately describe a child's problem.

Considerations to be taken into account for the storytelling activity

Using tales as therapy requires awareness of numerous restrictions and safeguards. The treatment should never use stories alone, but rather as a complement. The storyteller should accurately measure kids' reading and interest levels. Reading material that doesn't match the kids' reading and interest levels can be frustrating. The drawback of story therapy is that it can make clients overthink a problem while reading about it. The kid may not relate to a fictional book character, projecting their own problems onto them and evading responsibility for solving them. It is important to recognise that stories do not possess the ability to rectify every problem, and some erroneous choices may potentially lead to further complications.

Storytelling mode

A story can be enhanced by using surprise, ritualistic repetition, and phrases with rhythmical emphasis, such as poems. Human communication typically aims to communicate in a style that doesn't strain the listener's comprehension and focus so they can follow the speaker's thoughts and listen for lengthy durations. When a scenario aligns with the story's content, the child's unconscious mind determines its relevance and the appropriateness of the message. Those elements make a narrative therapeutic.

Prioritising the content of stories

If we are focussing the healing and transformative power of stories main focus should be on therapeutic aspects of the story instead of aesthetics. When a story is shared during a therapy session, the unconscious mind carefully analyzes it for therapeutic benefits. On the other hand, a story shared casually at a social gathering may not receive the same level of scrutiny. Similar way a catchy advertising slogan quoted during a counselling session may change a patient's life, but at the same time, when read while passing on a highway, it may not have the same effect. The client must feel the story solves their problem, and the story's situation should be structurally similar to the patient's life. A therapist's intuition in selecting stories is very important in this.

Basic therapeutic storytelling interventions

(1) Real and imagined reframing

Humans are always making sense of their life experiences, and there are countless ways to perceive any event or action. After encouraging a child to shift their perspective, a child therapist can recommend a new method for narrating their story, using the same events but altering their dynamics. It's like having the same scene but framed differently. By asking the child to think about how another individual might view the situation and the implications of that perspective, the reframing can become even more insightful.

(2) Reversing or shifting the focus of attention

Reversing attention is another useful strategy. Metaphors, reframes, pace, and leading strategies are effective ways to achieve this. Reframing can be effectively used as a convincing tool to the tender minds of children.

(3) Reinterpreting life stories

Therapeutic stories offer children a unique way to reframe the challenging aspects of their lives. The inspiration found within these narratives ignites a shift in mindset, ultimately leading to greater happiness. By helping children reinterpret their experiences, they can gain a fresh perspective on the world around them. This approach has been thoroughly tested and proven effective in therapeutic sessions worldwide.

(4) Externalisation and visualisation

Physical and mental symbols can disappear when we externalise the situation through storytelling.

As the problems of kids are psychological, they are easier to manage and solve. Therapist can help kids to visualise problems in different shape and size. Cartoon techniques are effective for this. The problems can be visualised as evaporated, melted, or shrunk. It can be relocated or tossed away at a kid-safe distance. Resolving, shrinking, dissolving, or forgetting a problem can contribute to a child's healthy life.

(5) Fostering a culture of expectations, inquiry, and learning

Therapeutic stories can set expectations and encourage learning and inquiry. It serves as a culturally inclusive and commonly employed pedagogical method worldwide. Psychoeducation can also encourage curiosity and positive expectations.

Rapport based interventions

Harmonising one's behaviour with a group's or individual's is called rapport. It is broadly recognized that the bond established between a story teller and the listener constitutes the most crucial element in any therapeutic environment, irrespective of the approach employed. This concept may appear contemporary; however, its origins can be traced back to ancient storytelling techniques. The connection between the narrator and the audience is contingent upon a foundation of trust and safety, as this environment encourages self-disclosure and the beneficial changes that may follow. Deep involvement in stories helps children distance themselves from their problems and confront them better. The skill to overcome obstacles and tackle life challenges is higher in children who choose narrative therapy as a self-improvement method. While narratives are used as therapy, no one is criticised for their issues or expected to blame others. Even if they struggle to modify ideas or behaviours, kids should be seen as full and capable.

Conclusion:

Human beings are guided by stories that have been passed down from ancient times. Our brains evolved to think, understand, remember, and recall stories. In a confusing and isolated world, narratives help us organise our ideas, find direction, and comprehend our identities. Stories change values and behaviour in us, and they make us mentally fit. Our brains naturally interpret information and experiences as narratives. We either adjust the information or ignore it if it doesn't make sense. Stories help kids reconnect with themselves, obtain new perspectives on their issues, and learn healthy coping skills. The inbuilt neural story net between sight, ears, and the conscious brain is what turns incoming information and experiences into story terms that make sense. The application of storytelling in the realm of mental health is an encouraging innovation, yielding novel insights in the fields of counseling and psychotherapy. This strategy may facilitate substantial changes in our understanding of individuals and contribute to the improvement of mental health in the modern era. However, stories cannot be applied universally, and intuitive awareness of each client's culture, religion, and nationality should be present for the effectiveness of using stories as a therapeutic tool.

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