

## What's Your Story?

There is a claim that all story-telling in literature is based on one of two themes: a hero goes on a journey, or a stranger comes to town. The author of this claim is in dispute, and we can also challenge the notion that these themes cover the entire literary field, but it is still interesting to note how often these two scenarios are present in novels, films, games and popular media. Both of these themes are also particularly apt metaphors for psychotherapy.

In the hero's journey scenario, a person begins a mission and faces certain tasks or labors. In the course of the journey, the hero finds allies, encounters adversaries, manages set-backs, overcomes hardships, and finishes the journey with greater wisdom. In psychotherapy, clients (male or female, child or adult, couples or families) begin an exploratory process which is unique to them. They face challenges and transitions, experience moments of pain and mastery, develop tools and strategies, and arrive at an endpoint with more understanding of themselves and their emotional lives.

The therapist is an ally who accompanies the hero, participates in the discovery process, suggests strategies, supports in difficult moments, and validates the important milestones in the change process. While therapists may learn and grow as a result of this collaborative relationship, it is not their journey. The focus is on the hero, and it is the hero's set of choices, priorities, and pacing that shape the path.

The decision to explore psychotherapy happens for many different reasons. Sometimes a situation that was barely tolerable becomes impossible. We may also seek personal growth, improved relationships or increased creativity. Sometimes we can see change coming. We know that we are headed into a new academic, work or relationship situation, and we want to prepare for the adjustments ahead.

Change can also ambush us. Like the idea of the stranger coming to town, the experience of encountering the unknown creates destabilization of the existing order. Circumstances like a death or sudden illness, an unexpected job loss, or the surprise of a first panic episode, cause us to seek support.

We don't always want to change. Even when we are very uncomfortable, there is safety in the known and familiar, and it is hard to let go of time-tested ways. However, there is value in learning new ways of being and relating. Lack of change or novelty creates stagnation and complacency, and disruptions allow new possibilities to emerge.

In the scenarios of the hero's journey and the stranger coming to town, the narrative is about transformation. In the course of the journey, or the interaction with the unknown, we develop new understandings about ourselves and our environment. It is a similar process in psychotherapy. We refresh our knowledge of who we are and develop new ways of approaching our connections with others.

In psychotherapy, sometimes known as talk therapy, the method of transformation involves a series of conversational meetings with a therapist over a period of time. It brings focused attention to confusing or painful feelings and experiences in a confidential and respectful environment.

Research on psychotherapy has shown improvements in client's well-being in a variety of ways. Studies of both depression and anxiety have documented significant and lasting beneficial effects from psychotherapy, and these benefits have been shown to increase over time. Other studies have shown that psychotherapy enhances interpersonal relationships, reduces medical expenses, and improves work or academic performance.

In addition to resolving a specific set of present-day concerns, clients in psychotherapy develop an approach to addressing their feelings, thoughts, and choices that provides an ongoing transformation that benefits many aspects of their future well-being.

For those considering psychotherapy, the following articles will discuss topics ranging from finding a psychotherapist, describing types of therapy and therapists, navigating the initial interview, understanding insurance and billing practices, clarifying ethical concerns, and describing best practices.

The information is intended as a practical guide from the perspective of over 30 years as a psychologist. Every day, I have the opportunity to learn about someone's life story and to walk with them for a piece of their journey. This road map is part of my mission to demystify psychotherapy and to explore aspects of contemporary life from a psychological perspective. I look forward to the journey ahead.

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