

Resilience and 4 Benefits to Sharing Your Story

New insights into resilience can help everyone get better at bouncing back.

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Everyone can get better at creating and sustaining resilience. Almost all of us will experience some kind of adversity—most of us will go through some pretty tough times at some point in our lives. Humans have a remarkable capacity to bounce back after problems. Even more impressively, we all have the potential to get even better at resilience.

There is a lot of good advice out there about increasing resilience. Here, I want to focus on the remarkable benefits of sharing your story. Emotional, autobiographical storytelling can be a path to truly owning your story. Further, by "giving it away," you can use your own journey as a means to help others on theirs.

I have been surprised at the power of emotional, autobiographical storytelling. Emotional, autobiographical storytelling means writing about events and people that have mattered to you in your own life--not just describing the facts of your lives.

Research shows that even brief autobiographical storytelling exercises can have substantial impacts on psychological and physical health even months after the storytelling. Although in the dominant Western culture we often use writing to tell stories, I have also seen the power of oral storytelling. For example, oral storytelling is a major tool in many interventions developed by American Indian healers.

I am currently working on a project with John Grych and Victoria Banyard that examines the impact of one particular storytelling program, the Laws of Life essays. The quotes below are from the in-depth interviews from that project.

One thing I have learned since starting this project is the importance of sharing your story. It is not just the telling or writing it down, but knowing that what you write will be read by others and the hope that by sharing in a public way, someone else might be inspired or helped by your story.

Surprisingly, the evidence from many studies suggests that it is not necessary to "keep" a journal, as people say. Even writing on just one or two days, if you really put yourself into it, that can have significant psychological benefits.

Here are some of the benefits that seem most important.

1. Realizing that sharing your story can help others.

Stories can be very healing and many people benefit from getting the opportunity to pass on their wisdom to others. This can be especially powerful for people who do not always feel that they have the chance to help others. Resilience is strengthened by recognizing that we are all experts in our own lives and we all have something to share with others.

Another piece of this is starting to understand that words can have power—positive power—on others. As mentioned above, this is an under-appreciated benefit of narrative and storytelling. In appreciation of how important it is for people to be able to pass on their own stories, here are some quotes from some of the people we have talked to:

- "I wanted to help people have a voice."
- "I thought, well, if anyone reads this at all, maybe it will make a difference in their life, or make them think, 'Well, you know, I never really thought about honesty that way.'"
- "Words can touch people, and it all depends on how you want to touch them. Good or bad."

2. Finding your voice.

Another well-known benefit of storytelling is finding your own voice. What does it mean to "find your voice?" It means learning how to express yourself and learning how to think about what has happened in your life in a way that makes sense.

Developing and organizing your story often means imposing a traditional story structure on the events of your life. Sure, in some sense it may be true that many of the events of our lives are random and unconnected. From a psychological point of view, however, it does not help to think about them that way. It helps to think about your life as a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. It helps to think about how the various events—even the bad ones—have been part of a journey toward the person you want to become.

Writing it down or telling it to someone else can help you impose that organization on it, help you identify key events, and even help you just rehearse and remember the details in a way that helps you become the author of your own life.

- "I think for the first time I found my voice when I started to do the Laws of Life essays."
- "The last [essay] was a gateway for me. I owned it. I was no longer a victim. I was a survivor."
- "[The essay] forced you to look in-depth at things and what you considered important in your life and I think if it wasn't for the Laws of Life essays I did the three years of high school, I probably wouldn't have started reflecting and my healing process would have been so much more delayed."
- "It was interesting to me how vivid I could remember little details that I would normally...if you just asked me to tell you about it, I couldn't remember all that stuff."

3. Re-affirming your values.

Sometimes you learn things about yourself from the act of writing or storytelling. It can be a way to clarify what is important. Many of the people we have spoken to have mentioned that pausing to tell your story can be a

good reminder of your priorities. It is so easy to get swept up in the day-to-day hustle and bustle. Taking some time to focus on values can be beneficial.

- "I think writing about it has helped me kind of...I don't know, redouble my efforts and try to make sure that I am living up to the expectations that I set for myself. And...how I should...how I know I should be treating other people and everything."
- "I think the essay kind of helps me, I guess, put in words what is essentially most valuable to me and is kind of a cool thing that those things are still valuable to me...Being able to put in words what's valuable to me is very important and a reminder, sort of, of how I should be living my life."
- "When I was writing [about saving money], I was thinking about, you know, what I didn't have, what I could've had or should've had, and it really made me wake up and think, you know, 'Maybe I should put some of this in my life, and maybe it would be better.'"

4. Finding peace, finding hope.

What's the difference between someone who has achieved resilience and someone who has not? One important difference is a sense of well-being. People who have found their voice, shared their story, and reaffirmed their values often find a sense of peace and a hopefulness that they did not have before.

- "Just actually sitting down and writing probably helped me find that, that peace...."
- "I got closure and I let go of the anger. And I think when you let go of the anger you are freer.... Anger holds you back and I think once I read it and turned it in, I was like, 'It is what it is.' (laughter) It was like a chapter that was being closed and I started planning for my future."

For those of you who may still be struggling to overcome challenges or difficult times, one of our participants said if she could pass something on now, she'd say be hopeful. In her words:

"Your story hasn't been written yet. The final chapter hasn't been written yet."

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SOURCE: Psychology Today

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-web-violence/201309/resilience-and-4-benefits-sharing-your-story>