



©istockphoto.com/Svyatoslav Lypynskyy

# NARRATIVE THERAPY APPROACHES IN THE TREATMENT OF TRAUMA

Charley Lang, LMFT

Professional Exchange

Like the topic and want CE credits? Visit CAMFT's self-study program through EBSCOhost® at [www.pathlms.com/camft/courses/1419](http://www.pathlms.com/camft/courses/1419) to get started!

*The articles printed under the heading "Professional Exchange" represent the views and opinions of the writers and do not necessarily reflect the attitudes or opinions of the California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists.*

## professional exchange

Jake, a gay-identified 26 year-old man enters my office for our first session and sits down on the sofa with a deep sigh. “I’m finally ready to do it.”

“Do what?” I ask.

“Tell you everything. All the gory details about what my uncles did to me, the sexual abuse that started when I was a kid,” he replies.

“Woah!” I say, holding up my hands for emphasis. “Let’s take this one small step at a time. First of all, I’m curious where this idea of needing to tell me ‘all the gory details’ comes from.”

“Well that’s what you’re supposed to do, isn’t it? It’s what I’ve always heard the experts say on TV, even read about in books. The only way to get through this shit is to finally have the balls to tell someone everything that happened. In all its creepy living color.”

“Well, I’m certainly aware of those messages from the culture, and I’m not saying I’m not willing to go there. But I am suspicious of a one-size-fits-all approach to something as personal and devastating as childhood sexual abuse. In fact, I think it’d be irresponsible of me to just dive in there without having a pretty clear idea of your hopes for what might be on the other side of that process.”

Jake looks at me for a long moment. “Well I never really thought about my hopes,” he says. “All I know is I’ve always been terrified of doing this thing that everyone says I’ve gotta do.”

“Well I for one am inclined to respect your experience of feeling terrified,” I say. “The fact is, you’re sitting here now, you survived the abuse. I’m frankly more interested in how you managed to do that, especially in the face of such powerful imperatives from the culture.”

Clients most often come to see us with the idea of talking about their problem stories. This is a given. Before going there, however, my first question always points in the direction of the future, a question like “What’s your hope for what our conversations will be able to provide?” This way, the client is informed right from the start, of my interest not only in the problem

“Clients most often come to see us with the idea of talking about their problem stories. This is a given. Before going there, however, my first question always points in the direction of the future, a question like “What’s your hope for what our conversations will be able to provide?” This way, the client is informed right from the start, of my interest not only in the problem narratives from the past, but also in the future narratives of possibility and change.”

narratives from the past, but also in the future narratives of possibility and change. I need to know Jake’s ideas about the space he’s interested in occupying ‘instead,’ a space beyond the one that’s currently rendering him stuck in the problem story.

“What are my hopes?” Jake quietly asks himself.

Through our ensuing conversation, Jake expresses relief at the possibility of not having to, as he says, “re-live the nightmare of my childhood.” He shares with me a vivid dream he’s had on many occasions since that time. In this dream, Jake is standing in what feels like an underground bunker, surrounded by a half dozen doors, all closed. One of the doors has “a kind of a glow” to it, and Jake knows it leads to the world above, a vibrant place, free from the isolation of this frightening underground. But in the dream, he is somehow restricted from approaching the door and opening it. Instead, he is compelled to endure the dampness of this darkened space, immovable and alone.

“That’s a pretty potent dream,” I say. “What’s your take on it?”

“It’s how I always felt after the abuse,” he replies.

I ask Jake if he’d like to hear a thought I have about childhood sexual abuse, based on my conversations with other survivors. He says sure.

“I find myself thinking that it’s less about sex or sexuality, and more often about power. The abuse of power by the abuser.” Jake and I talk about the powers that abusers use to take advantage of young children, the powers that his uncles used over him, including coercion, physical strength, threats and secrecy.

“Would it be ok if I asked you some questions about the abuse? Not what happened or how it happened, but rather, what effects the abuse had on you and your life afterwards.”

Jake begins to describe how things took a dramatic turn after he reached the age of ten. He stopped playing sports, started cutting school and seeking comfort from the bottles in the family liquor cabinet. Shame about his “dirtiness” and fear of retaliation if he “ever shared this secret with anyone” created a powerful relationship between Jake and isolation. Shame convinced him that he was “damaged goods” and not worthy of a relationship with others. As a teenager, he found further escape from these pressures in a variety of recreational drugs and prescription medications. In one of our conversations, Jake calls his sexual abuse “a smothering blanket of unworthiness” that was thrown over him by his uncles.

“Do you think the shame you describe belongs more with abused kids or with the abusers?”

“With my uncles for sure,” Jake replies. “I didn’t deserve this shit.”

““ Exceptions are the incremental building blocks to the alternative stories of possibility that we seek to co-author with our clients. A powerful assumption in the work is that small change leads to larger changes. ””

“Right on,” I say. “Based on my conversations with others, I strongly suspect that shame also lies to you, convincing you that you’re not worthy of relationship, and that drugs, alcohol and isolation are your only options.”

“Well that’s certainly what it’s felt like.”

“Is it okay that shame is having these effects on you?” I ask, inviting Jake to take a stand in relationship to this force in his life.

“No it’s not okay!” he declares.

“Why not?”

“Because I deserve a decent life, like everyone else.”

“Great. So are you game to join me in challenging these experiences of shame and unworthiness in your life?”

Jake sits up and leans toward me. “Sure,” he says.

“Let me ask you another question then. What has shame tried to steal from you that you used to like about yourself?”

“I’d have to go back a long ways for that one.”

“That’s okay. Take your time.”

Slowly, Jake begins to tell me how much ‘fun’ he used to have as a little kid at the arcade, “challenging my friends at video games, especially Space Invaders, Sword Quest and Super Mario Brothers. I’ll never forget the day I outscored every other player on the pinball machine and was declared “Master of the Universe!” He loved going with his buddies after school to get Italian ices at the deli, and even mowing the neighbors lawns was ‘fun’ because it gave him the money to save up for

his first Gameboy, and to take a camping trip in the mountains with his Indian Scout troupe.

“So here’s what I’m wondering now,” I say, leaning forward in my chair. “Despite everything that shame has stolen from your life, and I get that its a lot...I’m very curious about any small, small way that you’ve managed to hold on to some shred of this ‘fun’ in the recent past.”

“There’s nothing,” he says, automatically.

“Take a moment, Jake, and think about it. I’m not asking for anything big here. I’m just wondering if there’s some small, even tiny thing that’s given you the slightest pang of pleasure in recent days.”

Jake sits back on the sofa and takes a deep breath. After a long moment, his eyes meet mine again. “Well this probably sounds ridiculous but, when I heard the new R.E.M. song in the coffee shop this morning, I kinda caught myself humming along and tapping my foot. I realized I hadn’t done that in a really long time.”

This was a seemingly small exception, perhaps, but a potential piece of gold. Exceptions are the incremental building blocks to the alternative stories of possibility that we seek to co-author with our clients. A powerful assumption in the work is that small change leads to larger changes. In response to this line of inquiry, Jake and I begin to tease out his long-standing appreciation for music and the ‘fun’ he has always associated with it, an appreciation that shame has not managed to completely eradicate from his life. Slowly, a distinction begins to emerge, ever so slightly, between the identity description enforced by shame, and Jake’s own preferred sense of himself in the world. It’s within this space that we start to explore alternative descriptions of

who Jake is, and perhaps more importantly, who he is interested in becoming.

“When you’re able to stand apart from shame’s definitions of you, what possibilities can you see?”

Along with additional notions of ‘fun,’ Jake shares that he is keen on experiencing a different kind of sexual interaction, one, he says, “that includes intimacy, caring, connection and a supportive sexual partnership with a man... something I’ve never known before.” He agrees that any potential connection with this goal, in even the smallest of ways, represents a crack in the opening of that glowing door from his recurring dream in childhood.

“In what ways have you already begun to think about engaging this possibility of partnership?” I ask.

Jake shares that in his explorations online, he found the website of a social action volunteer group for gay men. This is acknowledged as an important first step in the direction of possible new connections for Jake, and subsequent steps continue to be considered. ‘Fieldwork’ is an integral part of the process here. Fieldwork involves the identification of specific, measurable and doable goals to consider engaging between our conversations together. Since problems are viewed as external to people, often having their roots in dominant discourses in the culture, it’s important for clients to integrate their strength-based ideas of possibility in their day-to-day actions out there in the world. This is how we grow exceptions and challenge the dominance of problem narratives in our lives. What we pay attention to, tends to grow. If we’re looking for unworthiness, we’re likely to find it. If on the other hand we remain vigilant for experiences of self-care and connection, that’s exactly what we’re inclined to discover.

Eventually, Jake makes contact with the volunteer group and attends his first event, planting trees at a local high school with twenty other gay men and joining them for lunch afterwards.

“Who from your past wouldn’t be surprised that you were able to take this important

## professional exchange

step in the direction of self-care?" I ask at our next meeting. Jake ponders this question for a long moment and then tells me about Mr. Hernandez, his history teacher in middle school, a man with a real passion for life, especially about history. On class museum trips, Hernandez always made eye contact with all of the students, drawing Jake in to the richness of the stories from the past and the excitement they had to offer. Jake tells me how he presented a report on the explorer Cortez to his 5th grade class and how Hernandez invited the rest of the class to join him in applauding Jake's presentation afterwards.

The teasing out of stories like this are essential in the development of Jake's ongoing narrative of possibility, for they not only historicize a connection to his current goals, they also require a re-visioning of the dominant narrative of shame and unworthiness from his past. As Jake comes to realize and appreciate the achievements he's capable of and the qualities he's been able to engage in service of these achievements, he begins to redefine and revalue himself. As he looks back from his new, preferred perspective, Jake begins to understand his history as one of courage and determination in the face of extraordinarily oppressive circumstances.

Throughout our meetings together, I am also willing to hold pieces of Jake's abuse story that are important for him to share. The distinction here is crucial. Jake came in believing he had to "tell all the gory details" in order to heal. This idea was identified as a cultural construct that did not, upon further inquiry, fit Jake's own preferences for healing. Jake's sharing of these abuse experiences include deep emotional expressions of anguish, fear, sadness and rage, often accompanied by the flow of tears and extreme physical discomfort. Throughout all of these encounters, we hold the pain together. With Jake positioned as the expert of his own experience, we are able to honor a pace that is defined by him, free from top/down, prescriptive advice-giving on the part of his therapist.

As our discussions proceed, Jake and I continue to draw out various narratives of resistance to the shame-dominated story that

“ Fieldwork is an integral part of the process here. Fieldwork involves the identification of specific, measurable and doable goals to consider engaging between our conversations together. Since problems are viewed as external to people, often having their roots in dominant discourses in the culture, it's important for clients to integrate their strength-based ideas of possibility in their day-to-day actions out there in the world. This is how we grow exceptions and challenge the dominance of problem narratives in our lives. What we pay attention to, tends to grow. If we're looking for unworthiness, we're likely to find it. If on the other hand we remain vigilant for experiences of self-care and connection, that's exactly what we're inclined to discover. ”

has run his life for so long. He nurtures a new appreciation for his value as a person committed to the experiences of caring and connection, and in the process, comes to know a new definition of what power can look like. "This is the kind of power I want to have in my life," he says. "The power to connect. The power to care. The power to get control over drugs and alcohol. The power to be fuckin' scared of some new challenge, and have the balls to do it anyway..."

After about nine months of conversations together, Jake tells me he feels fortified enough to consider taking a break, knowing that my door always remains open for any periodic tune-ups that may be desired along the way. We spend our next several meetings honoring his growth and development, including a letter written from me to Jake, documenting his impressive achievements, a resource against the potential future re-emergence of any unwarranted stories of unworthiness.

I still remember with emotion the words that Jake spoke the last time I saw him, firmly established on his own path...sometimes wavering, other times transcendent...of connection and self-care.

"Thank you," he said, taking my hand in his, closing this chapter of our work together. "Thank you, for not making me tell you everything." 



*Charley Lang, LMFT, is co-director of the Psychology and Addiction Studies Concentrations at Antioch University L.A. and co-founder of Narrative Counseling Center, providing strength-based consultation services to individuals, couples and families in the greater Los Angeles area.*