

# Stories

*How changing your inner narrative  
can change your life*



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# My Story

My “rock bottom” came at the very beginning of 2019. One blustery January day, I sat in the bedroom of our cold little French apartment, having just cancelled the online English classes I had been scheduled to teach that day. My son and I were dealing with our second round of Bronchitis since moving to France, and I had to not only try to manage my day-to-day life while coughing up my lungs on a regular basis, but also needed to care for him.

Our bedroom was a disaster—clothes scattered around the floor, books and toys everywhere. Mold, which had been growing for a while, was on its way to conquering the entire ceiling. Everything was in disarray—which is exactly how I felt inside. My son slept in the next room with my Chinese in-laws, who I could hear conversing (all in Chinese—and I can count on my hands the words that I can understand in that language) with my name thrown in here and there.

I wanted to get up and clean the apartment, or go for a run, or cook a meal—or something to try to bring order to the chaos. But my anxiety and the Bronchitis wouldn’t allow that. My heart was pounding out of my chest as I sat, inert, for at least a half hour—frantically scrolling on Facebook and unsure what to do. I worried that my in-laws were speaking poorly of me. Why wouldn’t they? They had seen me fighting with their son. Our marriage had been a joke since the beginning.

My autistic son wouldn't eat anything other than yogurt, and I worried about him getting too skinny—or worse, dehydrated, since he practically refused to drink anything while sick. I had a lot to do—but couldn't get myself to do it because I lacked the energy.

Eventually, the anxiety got the best of me and I fled the apartment, heading up the road to my favorite coffee shop. As I sat there, sipping a matcha latte with my journal, I happened to glance at the Bible verse that sat at the top of the page:

**Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind -Romans 12:2**

I thought that I needed my mind 'renewed' at that moment—something was wrong. I had become a grumpy and irritable person—which didn't feel like me at all. My anxiety felt overwhelming—and I couldn't seem to get myself to do the things I wanted to do. I was completely exhausted.

Even though my life may have looked perfect and enviable from a distance, inside I was a mess. It wasn't until I had a revelation a few months later that I discovered what exactly needed to change.







## WHAT ARE STORIES?

As I was sitting in my chair teaching my English classes one morning, the student's power suddenly went out and I found myself staring at a blank screen for a few moments.

This was not an uncommon occurrence for my students, who lived exclusively in China, to experience. But as I sat there staring at my computer, I happened to notice the thoughts that were trickling through my mind.

You're smiling too much—you're not smiling enough.

You're being too over-the-top. Oh, now you're not being lively enough.

The parents are judging you—they think you're a bad teacher.

This student is bored—I should be doing something different.

When is this going to be over??

English teaching was what I did by default as an American living in Europe—the spouse of a PhD student. But it wasn't something I enjoyed. I knew it could be something I enjoyed. I consider myself a lively person who would be good with kids for that reason—but oftentimes, shyness would overtake me and I would become quiet, restrained—almost robotic. And I hated myself for not being able to overcome that.



But that day, I recognized with stark clarity the real reason teaching (and life in general) wasn't fun—my thoughts.

Of course you're not having any fun, I told myself. Look at what's running through your head all the time!

I had studied psychology in school—this felt like something I should have figured out years ago. But head knowledge can be notoriously slow on its journey to the heart. Thoughts had always felt wild and uncontrollable—I felt intimidated by the prospect of 'taking every thought captive to Christ' or even taking thoughts captive in general. But maybe there was a way—I suddenly became more aware of the stories I was telling myself when teaching or in any situation where I felt shy or anxious.

Stories are the narratives we tell ourselves about the things that happen to us. We can't control much of what goes on in the outside world—the weather, politics, other people's actions—but we do have power about what we choose to tell ourselves about these things.



# WHY WE TELL OURSELVES UNHELPFUL STORIES

Something important to remember is that our brains operate with purpose. You may think that because your brain is doing something that isn't actually helpful in the present moment, that your brain must be 'working against you'. But it's actually working for you—it just may still be operating according to some past situation that you're not in anymore.

Take people pleasing as an example. This is a behavior that we generally think of as bad, unproductive, and unhelpful—something we need to get rid of in order to live a happier life. But it's important to know that compulsive people pleasing always originates from somewhere—there was a time in your life when people pleasing actually kept you safe. Because our brains tend to remember the negative stuff more than the positive stuff (as a way to protect us and keep us safe), we may still be operating as if we're in that situation.



*Your brain is not working against  
you--you may just be operating as if  
you're still in the past situation that created  
the story.*

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Fast forward to the present moment, though, and you find that now that instinctual safety response is actually working against you. Yet you continue to wear the story like a security blanket, because that's exactly what it feels like.

The moment of releasing and letting go of the story is the worst part—the unsettling part that can feel like exposing yourself needlessly to danger again. But once you've let go, you find that the world isn't actually as terrifying as you thought.



*Releasing your stories may feel scary, but once you realize you don't need them anymore, you will find freedom to move on to the new...*



# HOW TO RECOGNIZE AND FLIP THE SCRIPT OF YOUR 'STORIES'

## 1. Pay attention to your thoughts

If you're scared of, for example, public speaking, simply start by observing your thoughts before, during, and after the experience.

Oftentimes we miss that last part. Exposure therapy is commonly used to treat phobias--the idea being that gradually exposing ourselves to the thing we find scary will desensitize us to it. However, if, after exposing yourself to the thing, you go home and tell yourself that you're so glad that's over and how miserable it was, nothing is actually going to change.



*What are you telling  
yourself before, during,  
and after doing the thing?*

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## 2. Find a more helpful story to tell yourself



You're not looking for 'true' vs. 'false' here. You're looking for something that will be a help, rather than a hindrance, to achieving your goal. If you want to get good at public speaking, telling yourself beforehand that you're going to be so miserable, and then going on to fixate on how your voice shakes throughout your presentation, and then sinking back into the shadows telling yourself how glad you are that that's done and out of the way—is not going to help you to enjoy the experience. Try to remind yourself why you're doing it and talk to yourself about that before heading on stage. While presenting, try to focus on your message rather than on how you might appear to others. And after, tell yourself that it actually wasn't so bad—and how much your message must have meant to the people hearing it.

*“Does this story I’m telling myself help me to achieve my goal?”*

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### 3. Pay attention to how you retell the story

We often revise our stories with each retelling—solidifying the experience as positive, negative, or somewhere in between. Perhaps your story is something you're telling yourself about an event that happened years ago, or even something from childhood. I often tell myself stories about how 'cringey' I was when I had just graduated college and moved out to Wisconsin to be with my fiancé (who would eventually become my husband). I had no life skills, was hyperactive, and emotionally volatile. However, whenever I tell myself that story I find myself distancing further from the characteristics about me that made me behave in that way (my energy, my whimsical humor, my love of bright colored clothes, my curiosity). I can then tell myself a much gentler and kinder story about me at that age: I was simply growing into adulthood at my own pace, as we all do.





## ***For those stuck in a toxic or difficult situation***

*They say ‘you can’t heal in the same environment in which you got sick’—and there is truth to that. It is easy to change, let go, and move on when your external environment says it’s safe to do so—and your ultimate goal is hopefully to get out eventually.*

*But this a complex and nuanced topic—it’s not as easy as ‘if you wanted to leave, you would’. Maybe you are too young to live on your own apart from your parents, or you don’t have enough money, or in more extreme situations, you could face some kind of punishment or ostracism from your community if you left.*

*But there are things you can do right now to get yourself to a better mental and emotional place.*

### ***Separate yourself from the situation***

*This takes a lot of conscious effort when you’re still in a toxic situation—but pay attention to your thoughts throughout the day. Are you accepting toxic or difficult people’s words as absolute truth? Do you believe what they say about you? If so, that is something that you have control over and can change.*

*Once you see the ways in which you are overly identifying with the person or the situation, you can work to try to counter those thoughts when they arise.*

### ***Talk to yourself***

*For me, this didn’t just involve sitting down and rationally going through, point-by-point, whether the person’s harmful words or behaviors are true or justified. I had to deal with myself at a more instinctual, emotional and bodily level (which is the level at which the fight, flight, freeze and fawn responses operate).*

*I started by practicing taking a moment to simply take a few deep breaths before responding—this taught me (unconsciously) that I deserved to take a break and wasn’t simply a robot who had to immediately jump up and comply with others’ commands. It also served the purpose of decreasing my heart rate, which made my entire body feel more relaxed and calm.*

*I also found music to be incredibly helpful—music is emotionally charged, and I knew from experience that even just a few seconds of listening to a song could drastically change my mood. Any song that I find empowering or calming (or ideally, both) worked. I would then force myself to stand in a ‘power pose’ (shoulders back, head up high, hands on hips). This spoke directly to my inner child, who used to like to play ‘superheroes’—it made me feel strong, stable, secure and powerful.*

*After doing some of these exercises, I felt stable enough to return to the stressful situation with a much more calm and relaxed demeanor. Whether or not you’re dealing with a toxic or difficult environment, it is always best to respond, rather than react—and through this, I was able to respond calmly and thoughtfully to the stuff that came up.*

*You will need to find what works for you—but remember that you need to find something that will calm you down on the bodily and emotional level rather than the rational mind. Deep breathing is an excellent place to start.*

### *Doing what you need to do, but not internalizing*

*Maybe you still need to be outwardly focused on keeping the house clean to avoid an explosion, or on making sure that you don't leave your socks on the floor, or anticipating the person's reactions to different things you might say and do. Maybe they still might explode anyway, nitpicking and finding fault even though you were simply doing the best you could. Maybe you still just need to calm the person down in order to get through the day or to protect other people who might be in the home, like children.*

*But you can begin to see yourself with loads of compassion. Remind yourself that you are in an exhausting (and unreasonable) situation and that you are doing the absolute best that you can—rather than seeing these things as simply 'things that good people do'/that if you fail to do them or do them well, that makes you bad. There is a big difference.*

*It is important to note here that if you are in physical danger, you need to make a plan to get out as soon as possible. And even if you are in a situation that isn't physically abusive or dangerous, your ultimate goal should still be to leave. This may take time—but the most important thing to keep in mind is that you do not deserve any of this.*