

From Stigma to Strength:

Storytelling for Dignity in Substance Use Discourse

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- Program Design and Implementation
- Storytelling and Workforce Training
- Story and Theatre Performances
- Storytelling Workshops and Coaching



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Why I'm Here

Skye
Lourdes
Dicky
Spike
Sean
Jeremy
JD
Carl
Corey

Scott
Jon
Donnie
Wayne
Mara
Doug
Rob
Delicia
Dean

Kealynd



This is also why I'm here



Scan the QR Code for:



Workshop Handout

PowerPoint Slides

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The Science of Storytelling



Stories are how we know who
we are – our values, beliefs,
passions, culture, identities,
history, and what is sacred to us



Stories bind us together; they are
how we know we BELONG

“I listen to stories to find myself in you.”

-See No Stranger, Valarie Kaur



Stories are how we convey
the value of a person or
group of people.



Social Survival

- Survival is social; we rely on others to get our needs met
- Know our tribe and who our safety group is
- Develop stories that protect us and get our needs met
- Our stories give us a sense of agency and predictability



Stigma is enacted through
a public performance of
storytelling.



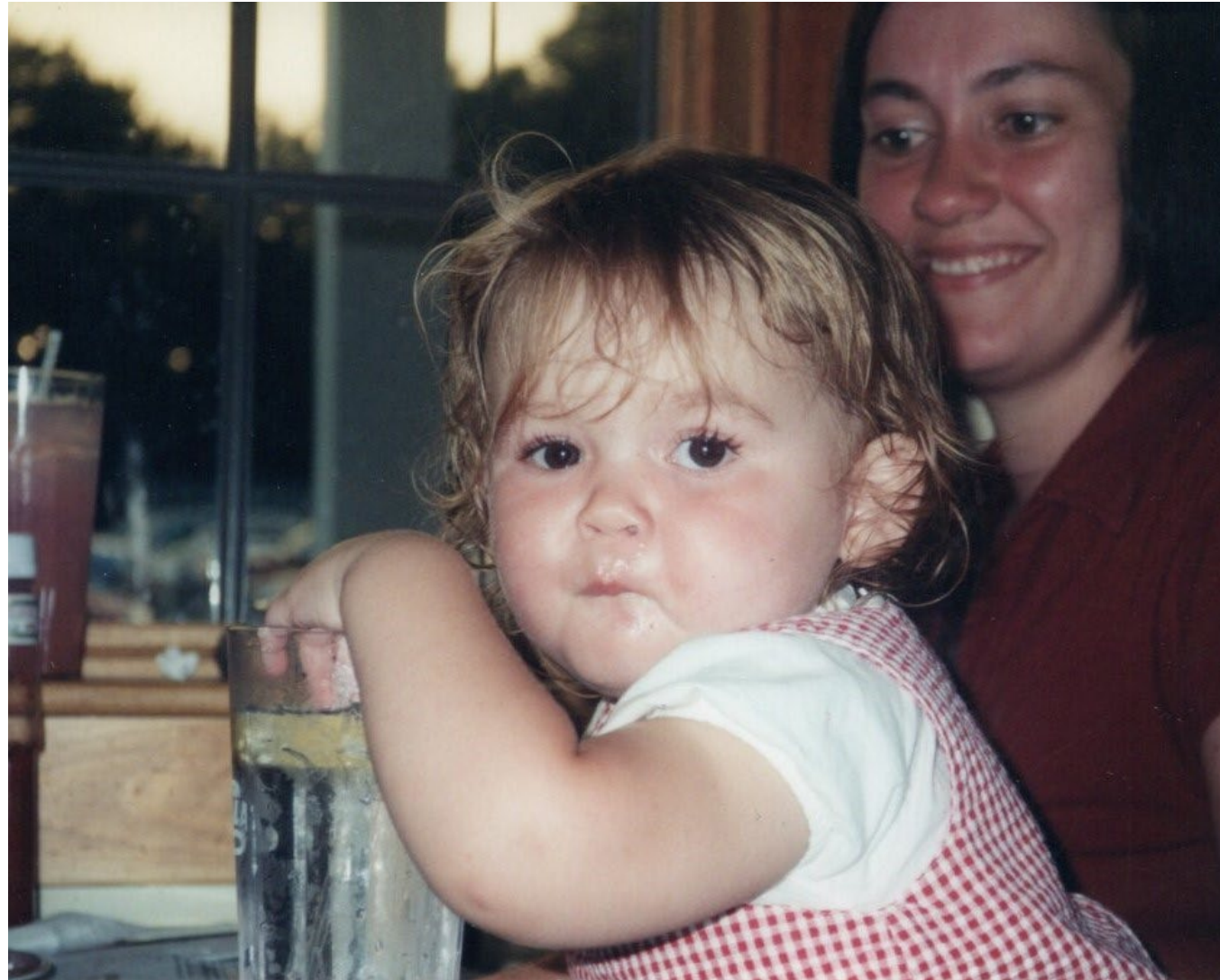
Sophie in the hospital



Shortly after coming home



Drug Court Toddler Days



Sophie and Me Today



STORY Time!

Think of a decision you made
or action you took that had
painful consequences. Share
that with a partner.



ADDICT/FELON

The Risks of Redemption Stories



Redemption Stories

- Most enduring form of narrative across culture and literature
- Hero's Journey: Suffering and adversity as a path to a better self
- Widely used in treatment and recovery spaces
 - Sense making
 - Identity reconstruction
 - Hope and possibility
 - Connection

Redemption Stories – the Dangers

- Creates absolutes and binaries
 - Person is either bad or good
 - Substances are bad and abstinence is good
- Casts the person who uses drugs (PWUD) as unequivocally flawed, broken, in need of saving
- Oversimplifies the experiences of PWUD
- Reinforces myths that all drug use is bad/PWUD are bad

Redemption Stories – the Dangers

- Emphasis on outcomes:
 - Perceived failure
 - Blaming individuals
- Recovery driven by fear
- Makes heroes who may fall from grace
- Siloes us as special or different
- Excludes people with different experiences



The dominant
redemption story of
substance use
perfectly fits the
narrative and goals of
the War on Drugs



The Danger of a Dominant Narrative



The Impact of the Dominant Narrative

- Systems and supports built by and for dominant group
 - Loudest voices
 - More recovery capital
 - Perpetuates their model of success
- Places lower value on PWUD and those with less resources = limits compassion and tolerance
- Bias = only severe/diagnosable substance use challenges
- Providers and services focused narrow pathology and goal

People are dying
because they don't
see themselves
reflected or
respected in the
narrative



Small Groups:

Where do you see the dominant narrative showing up in your settings? In your own practice?

Is it causing harm? Is it impacting your efficacy? How?



The Benefits of Strength-based Storytelling



Strength-based Storytelling

- Disrupts the binary
- Shifts from shame to compassion
- Recognizes strength and resilience at all stages
- Reintegrates a fluid identity across a lifetime
- Emphasizes more universal experiences
- Strengthens agency and self-advocacy

Strength-based Storytelling Approaches

- Reduces power differentials between listener and storyteller
- Recognizes a tapestry of stories rather than a single story
- Storyteller self-defines challenges and solutions
- Externalizes challenges: “I am not the problem, the problem is.”
- Focuses on strengths, skills, gifts, wisdom and experience past and present
- Favors complexity and universal themes

Our Model

- Developed in 2017; over 2,000 participants to date
- Non-clinical, peer-led and community based
- Narrative Therapy, Drama Therapy, Peer Support and Expressive Arts
- Northeastern University's Institute for Health Equity and Social Justice Research:
 - 2020: Positive outcomes from NEA-funded study
 - 2025: R34 Application for grant from NIH/NIDA to study in RCC setting

I listen not to change you, but to
be changed BY YOU.

-Valarie Kaur, *See No Stranger*



What is the Impact?

What difference do you think a strength-based approach to storytelling will make in your sphere of influence?



Actions

- Take training in strength-based storytelling
- Tell more nuanced stories about substance use
- Create a code of ethics or practice guidelines for storytelling in your agency (use people with lived and living experience to design)
- Call people in when you hear stigmatizing stories
- Challenge dominant narratives in policy, practice and personal interactions

Questions and Takeaways

A tapestry of stories where everyone belongs





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