

The Power of Our Stories

We make sense of our lives by telling stories about them. Some of these stories we tell only to ourselves. Our thoughts are the continuous internal voice-over about what's happening to us and why. This narration allows us to organize our thoughts, identify meaningful patterns, reflect upon what's important to us, and shape who we believe ourselves to be.



Some stories we tell to other people.

When we do this, it moves that internal voice-over to the outside and gives other people the opportunity to better understand the things that have happened to us and how we dealt with them. Hopefully, it also helps them to better understand us as a person. When they, in turn, share their stories, we can overlay our own perspectives and expand the way we experience our world.

Star and Narrator

In the story of our lives, [we play two roles](#): we're both the star of the show and the narrator. We don't have control of how every plot detail unfolds, but we do have control of the language we use to talk about that plot. The way that we narrate our life to ourselves determines the "script" that we then act out as the main character. So...how can you improve the scripts that you'll use to guide the way you live your life?

- **Pay attention to your "story prompts."** Are you framing the experiences of your life in ways that are self-defeating or supportive? When you're feeling down, look for ways to flip the narrative and offer yourself encouragement.
- **Approach difficult people and situations as necessary to your character development.** Every hero needs challenges to grow into their power. When we think of difficult times or people as teachers meant to spur our evolution, it can be easier to choose helpful reactions. Experiment with asking yourself, "If this was a movie, how would I want my character to respond? What would I learn from that response?"

- **Observe yourself as a character.** When you're caught up in the action of playing the main character, you can sometimes lose perspective. Shifting into narrator mode allows you space to calm down, detach a little bit, and think objectively. Referring to yourself as another person can make this easier. (ex. Bill needs to take a break, go for a walk, and recharge.)

- **Write about a hard time** and how it connected with your past, relationships, and work. This helps with reframing, finding meaning in difficult events, and feeling your way into the future.

- **Connect with other people.** Opening our hearts, and then listening deeply when someone opens theirs, is one of the greatest gifts we can offer to another person. As we come to understand ourselves and each other better, deeper connections can be forged.

Calming our Bodies, Engaging our Minds

We are [hardwired to benefit](#) from the connections created by sharing our stories. When we discuss our experiences with someone who is kind and willing to bear witness to what we're communicating, things shift in our bodies. Stress hormones begin to dissipate, and the stress responses that they cause begin to calm down. The high-intensity response of "Fight, Flight, Freeze, or Faint" relaxes, and "Rest and Repair" can begin.

When we listen to a story, our brain begins to [synchronize](#) with that of the storyteller. The activity in our two individual brains soon mirrors one another. This enables us to better understand point of view and to empathize with them. Whether they're factual or fiction, we can learn lessons from the stories that we're told - lessons that have the power to [improve our lives](#).

In reality, we're not limited to knowing only about the things that we can personally see, hear, taste, touch, or feel. When we share our stories, a whole new world becomes available to us.

Taking care of ourselves can take a lot of support. We're here to help!
Ask a nurse or provider if you'd like to talk. 218-387-2330

Research has confirmed what our hearts already know. [Connection with others](#) is deeply important for our well-being, and sharing our stories is perhaps the best way to build those connections.

[Conversations of depth](#) have three components:

1. **They allow for self-expression.** Most people are eager for the opportunity to discuss what's going on inside them: sifting through thoughts and exploring and clarifying priorities. When we get to do this with a truly interested partner, we feel validated and understood.
2. **They allow us to understand ourselves.** Effective listeners provide feedback by reflecting back to us who they experience us to be. When we think about this "reflection," it can help us to see ourselves more clearly than we could if we were limited to just our own perspective.
3. **They allow us to connect to the listener.** Like the flow of an electrical current, the cycle of "self-expression, receiving feedback, self-expression..." is what completes the circuit between conversational partners. When expression and reflection are flowing both ways, it makes for deeper, more thoughtful connections!



But how do we actually create these kinds of connections? Like anything else, getting good at having [meaningful conversations](#) is best done with kindness, curiosity, and a little practice.

1. **Use small talk to start laying a foundation.** Chit-chat breaks the ice and allows the first links to begin to form.
2. **Learn to ask better questions.** Don't just talk about things that interest you, think about the other person, and ask about things that are important to them. Make questions open-ended and bring plenty of curiosity, humility, a good dose of open-mindedness to the conversation. This will probably be warmly received—most people enjoy the opportunity to express

themselves!

3. **Really listen to the answers.** Most of the time, we're not fully listening to what someone is saying, we're also formulating our reply. Deep listening is an act of kindness and respect.
4. **Be willing to share about yourself.** When we open up to others, we're signaling trust and offering closeness. This can encourage our conversational partner to do the same and helps create feelings of closeness. Conversations aren't meant to be one-way interrogations; they're about cross-creating bonds.
5. **Go with the flow of the conversation.** Give people the time and space to share their stories, without "hijacking" the topic. Be willing to let them guide conversation for part of the time. When appropriate, offer your story in return, and pay attention to their response before you reply. This "dance" may not always be perfectly smooth, and occasionally, toes may get stepped on, but the effort can lead to conversations and connections that mean something.



If great questions are an essential ingredient to great conversations, how do you come up with those questions? Not to worry. There are resources that will help you have better conversations flowing in no time!

[Story Corps](#) is a nonprofit organization whose "mission is to preserve and share humanity's stories in order to build connections between people and create a more just and compassionate world." They have an extensive [list of questions](#) to help you get conversations started.

Want to stretch your storytelling and listening skills? Check out [One Small Step](#) - a program that intentionally pairs people for conversation who are different from one another in some way: politically, religiously, etc. Their reason? "...to use the power of meaningful conversation to create connections and remind us of our shared humanity. In doing this, we can begin to mend our nation — one conversation at a time."

Remember: while telling our stories can be healing, sometimes stories need to be told to a counselor. If your story overwhelms you with fear, anger, or anxiety, turn to a trained listener. They offer feedback in a way that's different from talking to a friend, and sometimes that difference is exactly what's needed. Call Sawtooth Mountain Clinic at 218-387-2330 and ask to make a "Behavioral Health" appointment. **They're here for you.**