

# Telling stories

**Sue Steer shares the ways she uses both traditional and creative methods to help children tell their stories**

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**H**ow many times did you hear the words 'once upon a time' as a child? I loved being tucked up in bed at night and read a bedtime story, entertained with made-up tales of what the fictional little people who lived in our back garden had been up to that day. I come from a family of storytellers and so it's no surprise that I ended up becoming an author as well as a counsellor. But just how important is storytelling in our lives and how can we use it in therapy?

## Active storytelling

I believe that storytelling is one of the most powerful tools of therapy; clients often like to tell their life story as a way of making sense of their experiences. I find that some clients put away parts of themselves, such as the 'fun part' or the 'hurt parts' as life is busy, responsibilities are draining and they just don't have the time to feel the feelings that these parts may bring. Working creatively using figures or objects combined with storytelling can be extremely powerful for such clients. I do this by asking them to choose stones that represent parts of their self they have lost touch with, such as the person they were before their parents separated or before they started secondary school. We then spend time telling that part's

story from its own perspective, which can be meaningful and cathartic. We may then shift and tell the story from a here and now perspective, as a way of reflecting and finding new meaning or acceptance. Telling stories in this way can help to reintegrate parts of the self that may have been rejected or forgotten, and can also help clients to consider how to move forward, now that the forgotten or rejected part has a voice.

I find that telling stories about the past can help bring perspective to clients. Often, difficult experiences, worries or muddles are put away, and if stories about them are not told in a safe space, they can become heavy to bear. When difficult stories are shared in therapy with someone who is non-judgmental and who offers unconditional positive regard, our clients can view the story from their current

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position and find empathy or understanding where previously there was shame. For example, when working with a young person who may be discussing a time they made poor choices, retelling the story from that perspective may help them to see that they did the best they could with the knowledge they had in the situation they found themselves in. Now time has passed and they feel less sad, hurt or angry, they can see that they would make different choices.

When doing this kind of work, it is very important to spend time hearing the story of each part and not rush into trying to solve things in the here and now. The stories may have been partly told before or made a joke of as a way of minimising them. In therapy, a client is able to share the full story which brings new understanding.

## Traditional storytelling

Storytelling in therapy can also deliver helpful messages, which can be therapeutic to clients experiencing difficulties. They can be used to evoke feelings, memories and new understanding to situations. For example, when working with younger children, I may read a story about overcoming a challenge or practising self-care, as a way of helping them find their own solutions to their worries or muddles. After reading the story aloud, we will talk together about it and what they may take from it that could help them with their own situation. Telling stories to children can inspire wonder. They might identify with the characters in the books, which can help them to disclose their own story, as the therapeutic process develops.

## Creative storytelling

Stories are not just told verbally in my therapy room, they are told in numerous creative ways, for example through writing, journaling, drawing, sand tray work, acting out, playing games and working within the metaphor. Stories can play a role in developing our resilience, empathy and compassion. They can help us to make sense of ourselves and the world around us.

Whether it be through reading stories or listening and reflecting on the client's own stories, there is no denying that storytelling is a fundamental part of building relationships with our clients and helping them to find new meaning. What a privilege it is to witness them. ■

**Sue Steer BACP (Accred)** is a counsellor and author of *Bea's Busy Brain* (self published, 2023), *How to Feel Like Sunshine* (self published, 2023) and *The Lumpy Bumpy Rug* (self published, 2024) which provide children with an introduction to counselling and self-care in a fun and easy to understand way.