



"Hero"
 -Can be a real person or fictional character
 -A person who is a figure of great strength and wisdom, or inspiration to you



Who is your hero?

-Growing up, who was your hero?

-What do you know about their origin story? Their turning points?

-What tools, skills and resources helped them to face their doubts, their decisions, and build a sense of hope?

****Why are these questions important to recovery?**



What is Hero Therapy?

Using popular culture in our work as therapists (fictional books, TV shows, Sci-fi, movies, (Fantasy) Sports, and video games alongside research-supported therapies – ie: ACT, IFS, CBT)

- Superhero therapy
- Geek therapy
- Hero therapy



JANINA SCADL, PhD <http://www.superhero-therapy.com/>

Why Superhero Therapy?

“Imagination is absolutely critical to the quality of our lives. Our imagination enables us to leave our routine everyday existence by fantasizing about travel, food, sex, falling in love, or having the last word—all the things that make life interesting. Imagination gives us the opportunity to envision new possibilities—it is an essential launchpad for making our hopes come true. It fires our creativity, relieves our boredom, alleviates our pain, enhances our pleasure, and enriches our most intimate relationships.”

Bessel A. van der Kolk, [The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma](#)



Benefits of ‘Hero Therapy’

- **Inner allies:** Brings playfulness, imagination and hope into sessions, they become allies in recovery.
- **Connection:** A unique way to reach those clients who feel labelled or who are uncomfortable. Often clients are able to see their therapist more as a human being rather than a ‘professional.’
- **Distance:** A character’s origin story can provide a safe and creative way to explore a client’s thoughts, feelings and experiences.
- **Depth:** While at first fictional characters seem more like entertainment, they can introduce a language of depth and meaning.
- **Inclusion:** Young people are often shamed for their interests/feelings/experiences instead of asked about them

Rationale

Shame research – Brené Brown

- We all have shame – about our differences, our bodies, our diagnoses, our addictions, our parenting (mistakes), how much money we have
- We're afraid to talk about shame
- The less we talk about it, the more we have it
- Can lead to avoidance of core values (e.g., heroic actions)
- Leading to more depression, substance use, and other symptoms

Brian Sutton Smith - 50+ years of research on play behavior showing increased:

- Self-confidence, and more true to ourselves
- Physical energy
- Positive emotions (curiosity, optimism, excitement)

Rationale

Rosenberg & Letamendi, 2013

- Wearing a mask can shift attitudes, make a person more willing to undergo painful medical treatments, may be more willing to take risks and step out of their comfort zone (ie: meeting people, engaging in a cause, or helping others).
- Understanding, learning about and wearing hero-related clothing can help a person to identify with a hero, with others who like the same things. Can be a way to bridge the discomfort of meeting new people, find common interests and feel less alone.

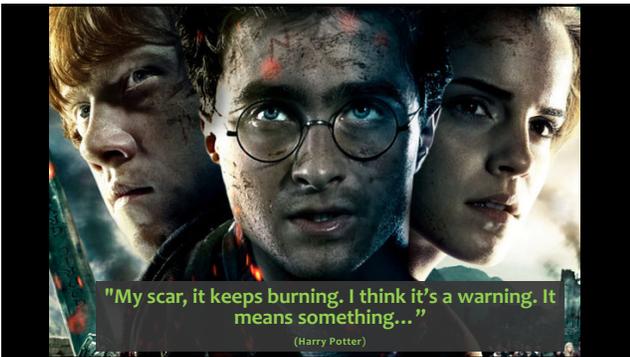
Joseph Campbell's hero adventure and archetypes

3 parts to the heroes adventure:

- The call to adventure and the urge to leave what is safe – Initiation: accepting your challenges, your burdens and your gifts – The return: from refusal to return to deciding to return and share your gift

Utilizing Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, and Internal Family Systems Therapy

- Accepting the parts of ourselves, Understanding our core values



Heroes Assemble!

Recruiting Heroes into Recovery Work



Introducing Superhero Therapy to clients

- As part of the initial assessment - ask clients what movies/books/popular culture they like or used to like, other interests and passions.
- Take it slow – adjust to level of: trust, investment, urgency
- Listen for how they describe their experience - metaphors are windows into their imaginary world – which is a gift and a way of assessing cognitive, perceptual, creative benchmarks
- “Hero” examples and fictional/imaginary stories
- Fandom, SH figures and pictures are present in my office
- Invoke whatever heroic stories, memories and metaphors they are familiar with (and accept from you) in the service of their valued directions
- Empty chair exercise, interviewing their hero, listening to or asking their hero for advice or support

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Metaphor as a powerful ally in recovery

- Journey
- Path
- Battle
- Struggle
- Swamp
- In a fog
- Lost
- Map
- Prison
- Tournament
- Marathon

Pay close attention to the metaphors a client uses to describe their addiction, recovery, and well-being.

Metaphor is a window into their inner world. It is a way to recruit their imagination and hope into their recovery.

How is "Recovery" an adventure?

- Learning Superhero skills
- Overcoming phobias like Batman
- Defeat your Voldemort and save your future
- Training in magic spells
- Jedi practice
- Standing up for what is right like Harry Potter or Luke Skywalker
- Hero training
- A quest to reclaim their life
- Adventure training
- Taking action in order to fulfill your quest
- Following your heart like Wonder Woman

"Recovery,"
"Relapse
prevention," and
"Therapy" may be
too clinical for
some clients.
They may connect
deeper when
they can relate
their interests or
passions to their
'recovery'

Example:
Wanda Maximoff
The hero with the
courage to change
her mind



Your Parts

One part of you wants...
And
Another part of you wants...



In the 2018 movie, Venom was a terrifying alien symbiote living inside of Eddie Brock that wanted to destroy the world, along with satisfying his hunger by eating people and pets.

"On my planet I am kind of a loser, like you. But here, we could be more."



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Your Parts

One part of you wants to use...
And
Another part of you wants a better life...



Their Villains



Image credit: Wellston Area

- Difficult thoughts, feelings, sensations, memories framed as inner 'villains'
- Sometimes villains get their job because they tried to protect us, take some memories or feelings far away from us. Eventually they became hated parts.
- When did your 'villain' arrive? What is it trying to do? How do they try to keep you safe?
- What thoughts, feelings, sensations does your 'villain' bring with them?
- Can you be willing to listen to your villain? Get to know it and hear it's struggle? What do you think it is has been like for the villain to carry all of this for you?
- When ready and with support, sit with our villains and hear their unique "origin stories"
- Learn to befriend our villains – can you be willing to make them part of your team?





Case Example: Captain Picard

Family: parents and 17 yr son abusing marijuana, vaping. History of concussive accidents, emotional reactivity, parental conflict, mother anxious and over-reaching while father is distant and removed.

-Youth client left family counselling early on.

Initial 5-6 sessions: – assessment, boundaries and developing consistency

-Began to focus more on cohesion and providing support to each other, due to the considerable emotional challenges

Used 4 Hero examples: ie – the father had seen the new Avengers movie so I used Thanos' stealing the soul stones as a metaphor of how addiction/mental health may have stolen life from their teen/their family

-The dad became more animated and engaged.

-Applied their metaphor to their couple relationship/parenting. The couple have a different way to talk about their relationship, their strengths and perspectives

-Reflecting how his 17 yr old is more like Kirk... but he is more Picard and what this means

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Your hero's message

- Settle yourself for a moment
- Use your imagination and call to mind one of your heroes
- If your hero was with you right now, what do you think they might say to you? (ie: about a difficult choice, situation, or life-stage you are facing?)
- What would they say to you about how they faced their own personal turning point?
- How did this turning point add to their strength?
- How is or can this hero be an inspiration for you today?

“Everyone is born creative; everyone is given a box of crayons in kindergarten. Then when you hit puberty they take the crayons away and replace them with dry, uninspiring books on algebra, history, etc. Being suddenly hit years later with the 'creative bug' is just a wee voice telling you, 'I'd like my crayons back, please.'”

Hugh MacLeod, [Ignore Everybody: and 39 Other Keys to Creativity](#)

Hero Therapy

Recruiting imagination and heroes into recovery work



Addendum and Resources

“We live in the stories we tell ourselves. In a secular, scientific rational culture lacking in any convincing spiritual leadership, superhero stories speak loudly and boldly to our greatest fears, deepest longings, and highest aspirations. They’re not afraid to be hopeful, not embarrassed to be optimistic, and utterly fearless in the dark.”

Morrison, Grant. *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, and a Sun God from Smallville Can Teach Us About Being Human*. Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Guidelines

- *‘Hero Therapy’* rather than *‘Superhero Therapy’* may work better with some clients
- The client is the expert
- Be flexible - include books, tv, movies, fandoms, music, fictional and real role models, personal and ancestral heroes, and any other source for hero stories
- It’s not for everyone and for some clients it may take time before they are ready to participate in SHT
- Client takes the lead, is the expert
- Some clients won’t go for it, but will spend many sessions telling you about family members who are ‘heroes’



Questions that elicit hero stories

Ask clients what movies/books/popular culture they like... ask them what the movie's hero's are all about.

"Did you ever want to be a hero?"

"Just because he has a vulnerability does that make him less of a hero?"

If this person (their chosen hero or character) was working at recovery and facing their fear or difficult emotions, how would they respond to it?

If you could describe one of your strengths as a superpower, what would that be?

When is your superpower like Kryptonite to you? (ie: helping becomes overwhelmed b/c of poor boundaries, or being too giving that we give too much, or we don't ask/accept help)

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Origin Story: Spiderman



-Raised by his uncle and aunt

-Lost his uncle, felt responsible

-Insecure teenager, bullied, a 'geek'

-The spider bite

-Falling into himself (he had to learn to take leaps of faith and explore his strengths, accepting his anxieties along with his abilities)

-Facing his web of villains, anxieties, worry about his family, finding and losing love, wanting to give up but discovers that one of his greatest powers is refusing to give up

Origin story: A hero's family background, their trauma and challenges, how they received and developed their power, their villains, their allies and friends, and their mission

Origin Story: Spiderman



Ask clients what movies/books/popular culture they like... ask them what the movie's hero's are all about.

"Did you ever want to be like Spiderman? Or a hero?"

"Just because Spiderman is anxious, or felt like giving up does that make him less of a hero?"

Types of origin stories

-Personal origin story

-Recovery origin story

-Family origin story

-Cultural or community origin stories

-Work, team, program or organizational origin stories

Origin Story: Spiderman

If Spiderman was working on his own recovery, facing his fear, financial stress, difficult thoughts and decisions, how do you think he would respond to it?



He would probably:

- speak what is on his mind
- feel like a fraud sometimes, question himself and his abilities
- take leaps
- look for traps and not avoiding his villains
- trust his 'spidey sense' (intuition)
- be flexible
- not give up even after numerous setbacks
- find allies
- use his humor, sarcasm as a superpower

His painful history helped to make him who he was:

- his core values
- his awareness and
- his ability to support or identify with others

A client's origin story

Use stories that illustrate the challenges in recovery:

- hero stories that you are familiar with as examples of facing trauma, difficult challenges, facing what feels like overwhelming opposition (ie: Batman, Superman, Spiderman, Wonder Woman; sports examples; well known examples – Terry Fox, Barak Obama, Carrie Fischer; or someone they know or a family member)
- Highlight how even heroes learned to use their power (they need help and mentoring), they need allies, or a sidekick
- Take on one part to work on at a time, just like any hero cannot face all challenges at the same time.

Exerise: What is your origin story?

Imagine, write or illustrate your own origin story: Your family, trauma and challenges, how you received and developed your strengths/ gifts, your mentors, your villains and your mission.



Go ahead, give yourself a hero name:

Finding a Hero

“Who is your hero?” Inquire about heroes – note if they identify a specific genre, hero or character

Expand to include any hero in their lives – a relative, friend, someone inspirational, author, athlete...

Modern day superheroes are first responders (Police, Firefighters, Paramedics but also Doctors, Nurses, Teachers, Psychologists, Counselling Therapists, Addiction Counsellors – those who prioritize others’ safety, health, well being)

Learn about the heroes origin story of the challenges they have faced so far...

A visit with your hero

Visit your hero – Consider someone you think of as a hero. Could be a family member, an inspirational person, someone alive or dead – an ancestor, a fictional hero (superhero, etc.). Imagine they know you and are a supportive, accepting force in your life. Imagine that they know you, know where you are at and what you need right now. Take a moment to imagine sitting down with them and they speak to you. Sit with this as you imagine your hero talking to you. What did they say? What did you feel? (This is a lost practice for many of us)

We may have different types of heroes based on our needs and our stage of recovery, and we can visit our hero as often as we need.

Your recovery can be a heroes mission

Consider your personal ‘hero’ mission – what ‘powers’ do you have because of what you have experienced? How have your powers helped to make you who you are today? How can they be used for the good of yourself and others?

Learning to build a sense of ‘hero’ mission, or purpose (ie: see that recovery is more than ‘not using’ but is a journey – where they can grow... (navigate previously unexplored parts of their ‘map’; personality, maturity, character, awareness...) and be challenged (use their gifts/wounds as learning/ they have a mission/purpose to help others))

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

ACT is a behavioral and mindfulness based therapy that has shown significant results with a variety of mental health conditions. ACT is an evidence based practice and is a strong adjunct to other addiction treatment models that include Motivational Interviewing and Relapse Prevention Therapy. ACT is an experiential therapy that can teach clients to practice behavioral flexibility (resiliency) by learning to accept their current situation and experiences, and take values-based action. ACT is not only for clients, but also for clinicians – ACT clinicians will learn a great deal that will support their own awareness, defusion, values awareness and action.

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Assumptions of ACT

- How we respond to our challenges, experiences and pain can either result in attempting to escape feelings and move towards suffering, or accept our feelings and move towards our values.
- ACT does not attempt to remove or minimize symptoms, but often symptoms will decrease.
- Rather than rigidly attempting to feel less anxiety, less pain, avoid the memories or thoughts... they learn to open to important aspects of their lives, find ways to be more present to their relationships and experiences, and understand and build more of the life that they want to have.
- This is called “psychological flexibility” and is a key measurement of psychological health in ACT

ACT interventions focus around two main processes

- Teach clients psychological skills to deal with their painful thoughts, feelings and experiences – so that they have much less impact and influence over the client (mindfulness skills).
- Help clients to clarify what is truly important and meaningful to them- i.e their values – and then use that knowledge to guide, inspire and motivate the changes they want to make in order to move in the direction they would like.
- Acceptance and commitment processes are not unique to ACT and are transdiagnostic.

