Narrative Approaches to Psychological Therapies

What are narrative approaches?
These are ways of thinking about and practising therapy and community work that place clients at the centre of the work and presumes that they are the experts in their own lives and thus honours people’s knowledge’s, skills, competencies, resources, abilities and values.

What does ‘narrative’ refer to?
Emphasis is placed on the stories that make up people’s lives and how the telling and re-telling of stories has significant effects on a person’s health, wellbeing and identity. There is also recognition that culture and the wider social context supports or sidelines various stories about people than can be seen as enhancing, liberating, problematic or oppressive to health and recovery. Enabling ‘re-storying’ or re-authoring’ of problem-saturated stories of people’s lives is an important part of therapy.

What are examples of narratively-informed questions?
- What are the areas of your life that the Problem most likes to disrupt?
- How does it the Problem make its presence known?
- What does it tell you about the kind of person you are?
- What’s happening at the times you manage to outsmart the problem’s efforts to keep you isolated?
- What does this tell you about your abilities to stand up to the effects of the Problem?
- If your cherished Grandma, whose belief in the unique strengths of women in society I know you respect and value were to hear about this development, what would she say or do?
- I have felt moved by what you said about your hopes and commitments in life today and wondered what it is like for you to have this conversation at this time with me?

What makes narrative practice unique?
Some ideas and practices that define narrative work include:

1. Externalising conversations and separating the ‘person’ from the ‘problem’.
2. Emphasising the way stories are active in making up people’s identities. ‘Telling our stories in ways that make us stronger’ seems like an appropriate description of therapy.
3. In problem-dominated lives there are always ‘unique outcomes’ or ‘sparkling moments’ that contradict the problem’s version of the person!
4. Therapists working to keep clients at the centre of the work and not subject to categorisation, normative judgment, evaluation or on the receiving end of objective opinions, solutions or authority which, in themselves, may be seen as contributing to the problem.
5. Involving others as ‘witnesses’ to support and respect the efforts of the person to re-story and reclaim their lives from problems. These may be other workers in the form of ‘Reflecting Teams’ or people close to the client who may act as ‘outsider witnesses’ on the side of the person.
6. Attempts to recognise the unhealthy effects of modern-day power (such as normative judgment) and to make it visible in the therapy through conversation.

What evidence is there for effectiveness?
There is published evidence on the effectiveness of narrative approaches in, amongst others, the areas of moderate to severe depression in adults, faecal soiling in children, emotional and behavioural problems in autism, in reducing parent-child conflict, in eating disorder and depression in a group setting, in women with obesity, girls with symptoms of hyperactivity and attention deficit, in self-harm and reducing suicidal thinking.

What are further applications of narrative ideas?
Narrative practices take place in counselling and therapy, in community work with indigenous groups in Australia, Africa and New Zealand, in coaching and in organisational change, in clinical and management supervision, as responses to Problems in adults, older people children and young people, in social action projects, in prisons and in responding to many global issues of injustice.

What about more information?
There are excellent websites such as [www.dulwichcentre.com.au](http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au) and [www.narrativeapproaches.com](http://www.narrativeapproaches.com) (including the Archives of Resistance to Anorexia and Bulimia) and [www.theinstitutefonnarrativetherapy.com](http://www.theinstitutefonnarrativetherapy.com) and the written work of therapists such as Michael White, David Epston, Stephen Madigan and Kaethe Weingarten. ‘Maps of Narrative Therapy’ (2007) by Michael White is a well-reviewed book.