



Affective Center for Therapy

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IT IS NOT ABOUT THE STORY

Some Clients have a compelling need to tell their story in therapy. These are invariably the stories that you would hear in just about any lunch room between friends and fellow workers. They are often very well rehearsed and are designed to elicit sympathy for the story teller. In these stories, the teller usually portrays themselves as the victim, "See what he/she did to me." These "ain't it awful stories" are void of most the person's feelings except for anger, hurt and embarrassment. What is missing is what their story means to them.

When a Client brings me their story, I, as a therapist, do not need to hear their book length story. I have heard just about every variation that you can imagine. A five minute version is usually more than enough to "prove" to me that they see themselves as a victim.

"Ain't it awful stories" invariably elicit Ann Landers type "fix" it solutions such as, "You need to be strong and tell him to get out!" Or, "What you should have done was. . . ." These types of answers are usually heard by the person telling the story as "You are so dumb that I have to tell you the obvious." The result is that the person gets to feel stupid, putdown and angry. Then the person you are "helping" with your answer responds with, "You're right but. . . ." This is where you think, "If you don't want my help, why are you telling me this." And, if you keep repeating this cycle with that person, you will find yourself avoiding the person and becoming resentful. Most of us know what we should or could have said or done. The problem is getting yourself to do it differently next time.

The next time you find your therapist falling asleep on you, you might want to check your story. What is your intent in telling your story? What are you trying to convey to the therapist? What do you want back in response to your story? If you are the therapist, you could ask you client these questions.

Some people tell their story to "prove" to themselves and to others how mistreated and abused they are. "If you can get people to agree that your situation is really that bad, then you will be justified in tacking action: Getting a divorce, using physical/verbal abuse, stealing from the person, use drugs/alcohol, etc.

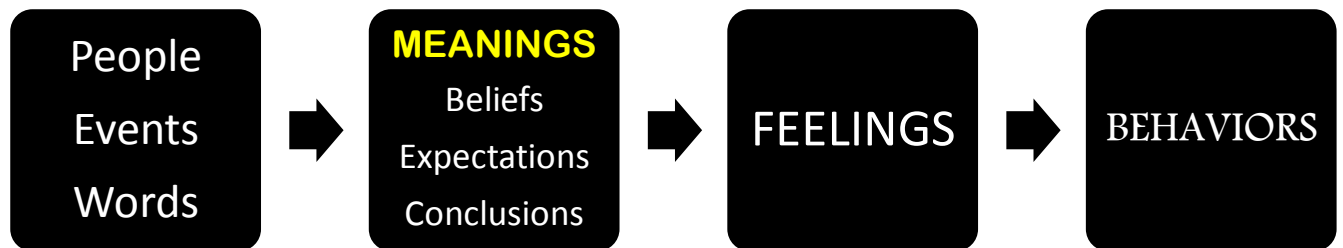
Other people believe if they can only understand WHY they are doing what they are doing, then they can change." "I want someone to analyze my behavior to tell me why I'm doing what I'm doing (and, you will need to know every detail of my story so that you can give the right answer)."

So, what is the difference between the stories you tell during a coffee break and what the therapist is looking for? Here, an understanding of behavior is important. It is not, "What did your mother do to you that made you this way." Your mother could have given you cigars to smoke when you were three years old, but that is NOT why you are smoking today. It is not because it is a habit. Any habit or addiction can be broken. It is not because of fear. Fear has never stopped anybody from doing something that they really wanted to do.

One of the most common rationalizations for not doing what you say you want to do is, "I can't." There are certain things you can't do, such as, go to the parking lot, flap your arms and

fly. Most people will use “I can’t” instead of “I won’t,” thereby creating the illusion of powerlessness. “I won’t” does not allow you to play the victim. “I can’t come over to your home and help you with your mother.” Now, does that not sound better than “I won’t come over and help you with your mother?” You do not want to look like the bad guy, so you will lie and create the illusion of powerlessness and then complain about not having open and honest relationships.

To understand your behavior, you need to understand what your behavior is based on. You do not react to people, events or words, **YOU REACT TO WHAT IT MEANS TO YOU** and you are choosing the meanings. This is a universal process. It does not matter what country you are from or what language is spoken. This is how it looks:



If you want to get to the driving force behind your behavior, you will need to get past the content of the story, which is composed of People, Events, and Words, to what it means to you and how you feel about it. Two different people can experience the same event and choose very different meanings. One person may conclude that the world is not safe and that they have to be constantly alert, while the second person may conclude that they made it through, therefore they are able to handle whatever the world throws at them.

Whichever conclusion they choose to think, tends to set up expectations that “it” whatever it is, will happen again and the results will be the same. You are born without any Beliefs, Expectations or Conclusions about how the world is. These are all learned, AND what is learned can be unlearned. You can change your meanings, and in doing so you will change your feelings.

Years ago, therapists used to believe that you could not change your feelings. It was kind of like you were stuck with whatever feelings you were experiencing until they kind of changed on their own. We know differently now. Feelings can be changed by:

- 1) Changing your meanings/beliefs/expectations, and
- 2) Feelings can also be changed by Postural Induced Affective Metamorphosis. PIAM is a cute way of saying that by moving around you can change your feelings. Running, doing aerobics, doing a physical workout are all examples of PIAM.

- 3) Another way of changing your feelings is through Right brain techniques such as visualization and psychodrama. The left side your brain thinks in letters, words, symbols and numbers. The right side of your brain thinks in pictures (check out [Jill Bolte Taylor video](#) on the internet). You cannot use visualization and psychodrama to change the thinking on the left side

of your brain nor can you use words to change the right side of your brain. The right side of your brain learns through Stimulus–Response, S-R. And, the only way it can unlearn is through S-R.

Meanings can be located in the left or right side of your brain. It is up to you and your therapist to figure out in which side of your brain that a specific Meaning is logged.

A quick way of identifying if a Meaning is in the Right brain is when you hear yourself saying, “I understand, that makes sense, but. . . .” Or you might hear, “I understand it logically but. . . .” These are sure clues that your Right brain has a “picture” or “pictures” of some trauma that it has put a meaning to. The Left brain cannot change the “picture” even though you know logically that your behaviors do not make sense, even to you. This is when your therapist will initiate Right brain interventions. (A good book on this is John Arden’s BRAIN BASED THERAPY.)

Going back to the Event → Meanings → Feelings → Behaviors model, notice that all your feelings are the result of the Meanings that you hold. If you change your meanings, your feelings change. And, when your feelings change, your behaviors will change.

As you can start to see, it is not about your story. Your detailed story actually gets in the way of helping you change. Please, just give me enough of your story to help me be oriented as to people, events and words (who said what).

- ✓ I just need enough of your story so that I might guess what meanings you might have put to that event.
 - ✓ Give me enough of your story so that I want to be able to put myself in your shoes and feel what you must have been feeling, and then be able to make a guess as to what it meant to you when the event occurred.
 - ✓ If you do not know what something means to you, sometimes when you share your feelings, I will be able to imagine what it would have meant to me if I had felt that way.
- My next step is to share back with you what I am hearing. ***What I hear you saying is that you are feeling... (loved, afraid, scared, confused, etc.) and what that means to you is that... (the world is, men are, you are, etc.).***

If you want to understand “why” you are doing what you are doing, never ask why! Look at the model again, what comes before behavior? Feelings! How likely are you to get a feeling response if you ask a person “why” they did what they did?

If you know what you are feeling, you will know why you did what you did. So, please keep your story to just the Readers Digest version. That can help me hear what you are feeling and what things mean to you. When you know your feelings and meanings, you will be able to start the change in yourself that you are looking for.

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