

# Finding Meaning: My Life Story

- Unit 1: Introduction
- Unit 2: Psychoeducation
- Unit 3: My Life Story
- Unit 4: Reinforcing Skills
- Unit 5 Alternate Classes
- Unit 0: Sub Classes

## Abstract

This curriculum is heavily rooted with narrative therapy practices for a process-oriented young adult to older adult group. It seeks to be psychoeducational group with journaling integrated throughout to allow members to redefine their self-concept and promote a healthier shift in perspective about their life's purpose and meaning. It begins by establishing trust within the group, followed by introducing principles of narrative identity and the skills associated with the practice. These include separating problems from oneself, finding exceptions, identifying dominant themes, then re-establishing one's past and present stories to be more empowering.

*Keywords:* Narrative Therapy, Narrative Identity, Externalization, Unique Outcomes, Dominant Narratives, Re-Authoring, Re-Membering, Existentialism, Meaning-Making, Curriculum, Group Therapy

## **Class 1: Confidentiality & Guidelines**

### **A. Introductions:**

1. Client Introductions:
  - a. *What made you choose to be in this class?*
  - b. *Tell the group one thing that nobody knows about you (not related to mental illness).*
2. Clinician & Group Introduction:
  - a. Clinician Introduction
  - b. Group Introduction
    - i. *This class is Finding Meaning: My Life Story.*
    - ii. *Seeks to re-empower members to believe they have control over their story.*
    - iii. ***Will teach narrative techniques such as identifying dominant thinking of a person's life, separating problems from yourself, giving meaning to exceptions, and re-authoring your story to include more empowering aspects that will hopefully change the way members see themselves.***
    - iv. *Facilitator is the expert on the therapeutic process and theory, but members of the group are experts on their own life, experiences and feelings.*
    - v. *This group will be very educational with some activities and journaling to help reinforce these skills within everyone's life.*
    - vi. *This will be a difficult task, but adjustments can be made based on client's comfort*

### **B. Confidentiality & Guidelines (See Appendix A)**

- a. **What is said in here stays in here.**
- b. KISS: Keep it Short & Simple.
- c. **Active Participation.**
- d. No put-downs of self or others (listen, no cross-talk, don't judge).
- e. Sharing is encouraged, but never required.
- f. If you need to leave early (or arrive late), please leave quietly.
- g. Turn off cell phones (or put on vibrate, take important calls outside of class).
- h. No activities that take your attention away from group (e.g. texting).
- i. If you're tired and need to sleep/put your head down, please excuse yourself from class.
- j. Drinks with covers, water is okay. No food.

### **C. Icebreaker: I am the kind of person who... (Part 1)**

1. *Complete the end of this sentence "I am the kind of person who..." , with a list of seven short answers.*
2. *Invite everyone to share their answers*
  - a. *Does anyone connect with another person's response?*
  - b. *Are there any patterns in the list that people can see about themselves or others?*
  - c. *Do some of these answer define who you are or how you see others?*
  - d. *Any other thoughts?*

## **Class 2: Expectations & Worries**

### **A. Icebreaker: I am the kind of person who... (Part 2)**

1. *Look at the answers you put for "I am the kind of person who...", out of the seven responses pick three that seem to be the most present and rank them.*
  - a. *Invite everyone to share their answers*
    - i. *What do these three answers mean?*
    - ii. *Are these examples of dominant thinking in your life?*
    - iii. *Any other thoughts?*
  - b. *Write a paragraph reflecting on what life would be like without the 3rd answer?*
    - i. *What is life like without this 3rd thing?*
    - ii. *How does it change things?*
    - iii. *Any other thoughts?*

### **B. Expectations & Worries**

1. *What some expectations or goals you would like to attain while in this group, then what is one worry that you have about the group (clinician, others, group)?*

### Class 3: Introduction to Narrative Identity

#### A. What is Narrative Identity? (See Appendix B)

1. *Look at your life as a book that you are writing, what is the moral of your story, who are the characters, and what role do you play. The problems you struggle with as well as the supports you have are characters within this book.*
2. This theory proposes that people make sense of their everyday lives through the stories we tell. These stories include what people want, like about themselves, and what they would like to change. **Thus through these stories people are defining themselves through the stories they share (Words have weight).**
  - a. The stories people tell themselves and others explain where they have been, what they have done to become who they are, and where they are going. If a person shares stories of achievement and glory they may define themselves as confident or successful. If people tell others stories all about their defeats, they may define themselves by failure.
  - b. We cannot change the past, but we can put emphasis on different aspects of our lives (**Changing the stories we tell and how we tell them**).
  - c. From an early age people start to create stories about their everyday lives, but these stories can be based on assumptions since at that age we don't understand everything or have the whole story about things that go on.
  - d. Furthermore, the way people in our lives tell their stories influences how we tell our own stories which can create pre-judgments (biases). If a parent speaks about all their failures as all they are in their stories, children may be influenced to define themselves similarly. By retelling this, you can somewhat separate from the influences you had and create your own unique meanings.

#### B. What is Narrative Therapy?

1. Narrative Therapy is a conversational process of telling and retelling stories, which allows people to **bring more awareness to how they define their lives, how their problems influence them, and the amount of control they have on their story. After this awareness is built, beginning to shift one's beliefs held about the self and returning the power of the story back to the person.**
2. This process occurs through telling one's story, separating problems from yourself (externalization), finding exceptions (unique outcomes), giving the exception meaning, identifying dominant thinking of life, building upon these stories, and following through with these new stories.
  - a. **Telling One's Story:** *By mindfully telling one's story, you can learn how you define yourself, others define you, and how you understand the world.*
  - b. **Separating Problems from Yourself (Externalizing):** *This is looking at problems as something other than yourself.*
    - i. Sometimes people can personify the problem they are struggling with; this begins with naming it, finding how it influences the person's life, then changing their relationship with that problem.
    - ii. Examples:
      - "I'm depressed" vs. "I am currently experiencing depression or I am a person with depression."
      - "I'm A.D.H.D." vs "I have problems staying focused on a task."
      - "I'm angry today" vs. "'The Anger' is trying to take over my day."
    - iii. With the first statement depression is who the person is, while in the second is they are a person first and is struggling with depression.
    - iv. In the third statement 'The Anger' is its own thing that the person is struggling/interacting with.
    - v. With this small difference in speech the problem is now the problem and now the person is interacting with the problem, rather than the person **being** the problem
    - vi. When people define themselves by their problems (**often times people do**) it becomes who they are or may think it's all they are. This can lead to low self-esteem, worth, and self-hate.

- c. **Finding Exceptions (Unique Outcomes):** *This involves highlighting times when the person was able to gain control over the problem.*
  - i. Many times people will overlook times they succeeded over their problems and see only times they failed to have control over their problem.
  - ii. By overlooking these exceptions there is nothing learned until they are brought to awareness.
  - iii. These exceptions are potential pivotal moments that when given meaning, can lead to these exceptions becoming more frequent and feeling more confident in the ability to break free from the control of a specific problem.
  - iv. Examples:
    - A young man who loses control of his anger when teased by his peers at school, manages to walk away.
    - A woman who has a gambling addiction and feels that ‘once she starts she can’t stop’, but leaves the premises after half an hour.
- d. **Dominant Thinking (Dominant Narrative):** *These are the beliefs a person holds about life, themselves, and others, it is based on culture, upbringing, past experiences, and present experiences.*
  - i. How a person speaks about the history of a problem reflects a pattern of thinking.
  - ii. Depending on the pattern of thinking it can empower or disempower a person,
    - Oftentimes negative themes reflect loss, failure, incompetence, hopelessness, shame or futility.
    - While positive themes reflect growth, success, redemption, belonging, meaning, freedom, etc.
  - iii. People carry these dominant ways of thinking to their present and future lives.
  - iv. By becoming aware of dominant thoughts, a person can begin to change these thoughts into themes that are more empowering.
- e. **Re-Authoring:** *This involves a person re-imagining how they would like their life to be told and thought about.*
  - i. A person will accomplish this by highlighting the exceptions that contradict the negative dominant thinking they have, in actual stories.
  - ii. First by exploring the present situation of their problem in detail, then exploring why they take the actions they do and what it means about them.
- f. **Re-Membering:** *This is the process of actively engaging in and renewing relationships, they have lost, while getting rid of the relationships they no longer want (in their preferred story)*
  - i. Meaning needs to be given to the aspects of life that a person wants to be more prevalent.
- g. **Following Through with these New Stories (Reinforcement):** *If the person doesn’t continue believing these new stories and meanings it will not become automatic thinking.*
  - i. Shifting your stories changes your beliefs and values, but takes time.
  - ii. Best way to drive these stories home is to tell the stories to others and for them to give validation that the story is true.

### C. Narratives Beliefs

1. A person’s culture environment, and previous experiences all influence how we tell our stories and make meaning from it.
2. Our reality is shaped by how we think and talk about ourselves and others. However, what is true for us may not be true for someone else. Two people can experience the same event completely differently.
3. Even our stories change over time which changes how we see the world.

## Class 4: Letters of Self-Compassion

### A. Letters of Self Compassion (See Appendix C)

1. *“People need encouragement like plants need water, people who need it the most get it the least”*
2. *Compassion is the act of treating others with care and concern, even when a mistake is made. Very often people will show others compassion, but will be their own worst critics. This assignment is to write a letter of self-compassion, where you show yourself care and concern for mistakes, failure, or shortcomings you have made. **The point of these is to save them for a day when you need some extra encouragement or compassion.***
  - a. *Structure it how you would like, but be detailed and specific about your thoughts, images, or stories come up when you think about an obstacle you are experiencing.*
  - b. *If it helps imagine a kind, caring, and wise friend that you have known for years writing you a letter.*
  - c. *Everyone talks to themselves differently, this sample letter is an example, but feel free to write yours in the way you want.*
3. [Sample Letter:](#)

Dear [Your Name Here],

I know you are feeling really anxious right now, that you would really enjoy having your needs to be understood and accepted met. It's understandable that you're feeling that way, since you worked really hard to write that email to your friend, to disagree in a really polite way, and you were hoping that it would become a positive conversation. Instead, your friend decided to stop emailing you for a while. I want you to remember, though, that your brain is designed to help you care about relationships. You're feeling anxious because you also have a need for connection and community, and your brain is reminding you of that. That reaction is natural and important, and you can use it to help you keep making decisions that meet your needs. In fact, would you be willing to go spend some time connecting with a friend sometime soon? It's been a while since you played guitar with X – would that be a good place to start? Thanks for always listening to me, talk to you soon.

Sincerely,

[Your Name Here]

4. Questions to consider and reflect on:
  - a. Am I being understanding of myself instead of harshly critical and judgemental?
  - b. Am I alone and isolated or am I connected to others who understand some of my experiences.
  - c. Am I accepting of the mistakes I have made without exaggerating them or ignoring them.
  - d. What questions does this activity bring up for you?
5. *Bring these letters into class, put them in folder/notebook or give them to the facilitator to save the letter for a day when you feel you need some encouragement.*

## Class 5: Separating Problems from Yourself

### A. Dog Years Prompt (See Appendix D)

1. *In order to show what it is like to separate a problem from yourself, this is an artist who creates a metaphor for her relationship with her mental illness and personifies it as a Dog.*
2. *Discussion Points:*
  - a. *What did her dog represent?*
  - b. *Any thoughts about the prompt?*
  - c. *Did anyone recognize any symptoms of? How did she describe them?*
  - d. *Did anyone recognize any coping skills she used? How did she describe them?*
  - e. *Do you think that doing this helped the author? How did it?*
  - f. *She described a relationship with her problem, what did this do for her?*
3. *This example is one-way people separate problems from themselves. This can be really helpful to explore how the relationships we have with our problems, then how we can better cope.*

### B. Separating Problems from Yourself (Externalizing): (See Appendix E)

1. *This is looking at problems as something other than yourself.*
  - a. *With this small difference in speech the problem is now the problem and now the person is interacting with the problem, rather than the person **being** the problem*
  - b. *Many people believe that problems of their lives are a reflection of their own identity, defining of others, or a reflection of their relationships*
  - c. *When people define themselves by their problems (**often times people do**) it becomes who they are or may think it's all they are. This can lead to low self-esteem, worth, and self-hate.*
  - d. *Examples:*
    - i. *“My life sucks” vs. “I am going through some hard times right now” or “Currently, I am struggling with some problems”*
    - ii. *“I’m depressed” vs. “I am experiencing some problems with depression” or “I am a person with depression.”*
    - iii. *“I’m A.D.H.D.” vs “I have problems staying focused on a task.”*
    - iv. ***“I’m angry today” or “I’m an angry person” vs. “The Anger’ is trying to take over my day.”***
  - e. *Sometimes people can personify the problem they are struggling with; People can create a metaphor to explain how it impacts their lives similar to the “Dog Years” prompt.*
2. *Questions to ask and reflect on?*
  - a. *What does “\_\_\_\_\_” have you believing about yourself?*
  - b. *In what ways does “\_\_\_\_\_” injure your relationships with others?*
  - c. *What actions might you take that might shrink the effects of “\_\_\_\_\_?”*
  - d. *How do I cope, adapt, or learn from “\_\_\_\_\_?”*

## **Class 6: Identifying the Problem (Part 1)**

### **B. Create Your Own Metaphor (See Appendix F)**

1. *After reading the dog years prompt (possibly use the prompt as an example) come up with your own metaphor about your relationship with a specific problem.*
2. Questions to consider and reflect on:
  - a. What is the name of the problem?
  - b. How would you personify or objectify the problem (dog, cat, octopus, mud, an intimidating man, gremlin, etc.)?
  - c. When did the problem appear?
  - d. What was your relationship with the problem originally? Did it serve a purpose for you at that time?
  - e. What is your relationship with the problem now?
  - f. What are some of the ways the problem influences you, in your daily life or specific situations (positively and negatively)?
  - g. What are some triggers for the problem?
  - h. What is your goal for this relationship?
  - i. What are some ways that have changed the way the problem influences you for the better (socialization, art, meditation, etc.)?
  - j. What questions does this activity bring up for you?

### **B. Changing the Relationship with the Problem**

#### **1. Characterizing the Problem**

- a. *Bringing your story to light we need to establish the problem as a character within it, and understand what they are like.*
  - i. What type of problem it is?
  - ii. What are its tactics?
  - iii. How does it behave?
  - iv. How does it think?
  - v. When does it misbehave?
  - vi. Who is around?
  - vii. How long does it last?
  - viii. How can we trick the problem and change things?

#### **2. Mapping the Effects of the Problem**

- a. *After figuring out how the problem behaves and misbehaves, how has it impacted your life? What role does it play in your life? (home, school, work, family relationships, peer relationships, relationship with yourself, who you are, and your future possibilities)*

#### **3. Thoughts and Feelings about the Effects of the Problem**

- a. *Assess how you feel or think about the problem, many times people may tell us what we should think about it, but giving yourself a voice to how they would rather like life to be.*
  - i. Are these consequences okay with you?
  - ii. Is this preferable?
  - iii. What are the positives and negatives?

#### **4. Asking Why**

- a. *Explore **why** their needs to be a change in order to live the life that you want.*
  - i. Why isn't this okay for you?
  - ii. Tell a story about why you took this position on the problem?



## **Class 7: Identifying The Problem (Part 2)**

### **A. Create Your Own Metaphor (Con't) (See Appendix F)**

1. *After reading the dog years prompt (possibly use the prompt as an example) come up with your own metaphor about your relationship with a specific problem.*
2. Questions to consider and reflect on:
  - a. What is the name of the problem?
  - b. How would you personify or objectify the problem (dog, cat, octopus, mud, an intimidating man, gremlin, etc.)?
  - c. When did the problem appear?
  - d. What was your relationship with the problem originally? Did it serve a purpose for you at that time?
  - e. What is your relationship with the problem now?
  - f. What are some of the ways the problem influences you, in your daily life or specific situations (positively and negatively)?
  - g. What are some triggers for the problem?
  - h. What is your goal for this relationship?
  - i. What are some ways that have changed the way the problem influences you for the better (socialization, art, meditation, etc.)?
  - j. What questions does this activity bring up for you?

### **B. Changing the Relationship with the Problem (Con't)**

#### **1. Characterizing the Problem**

- a. *Bringing your story to light we need to establish the problem as a character within it, and understand what they are like.*
  - i. What type of problem it is?
  - ii. What are its tactics?
  - iii. How does it behave?
  - iv. How does it think?
  - v. When does it misbehave?
  - vi. Who is around?
  - vii. How long does it last?
  - viii. How can we trick the problem and change things?

#### **2. Mapping the Effects of the Problem**

- a. *After figuring out how the problem behaves and misbehaves, how has it impacted your life? What role does it play in your life? (home, school, work, family relationships, peer relationships, relationship with yourself, who you are, and your future possibilities)*

#### **3. Thoughts and Feelings about the Effects of the Problem**

- a. *Assess how you feel or think about the problem, many times people may tell us what we should think about it, but giving yourself a voice to how they would rather like life to be.*
  - i. Are these consequences okay with you?
  - ii. Is this preferable?
  - iii. What are the positives and negatives?

#### **4. Asking Why**

- a. *Explore **why** their needs to be a change in order to live the life that you want.*
  - i. Why isn't this okay for you?
  - ii. What values that come up when thinking about why these effects are undesirable?
  - iii. Tell a story about why you took this position on the problem?

**Class 8: My Life Story Class**

**A. Conversation between Problem & You or Tell a Story about a Problem in Action. (See Appendix G)**

1. *Write a story about an interaction you have with your problem, or how a problem impacts you during a specific situation.*
2. Try to address the following within the entry or reflect on them after.
  - a. What does this interaction or situation mean to you? And what does it mean about you?
  - b. Is this interaction or situation the norm?
  - c. Who tends to dominate the conversation or is it equal?
  - d. What questions does this activity bring up for you?

## **Class 9: Giving Meaning to the Exceptions**

### **A. Finding Exceptions (Unique Outcomes): (See Appendix H)**

1. *This involves highlighting times when the person was able to gain control over the problem.*
  - a. Many times people will overlook times they succeeded over their problems and see only times they failed to have control over their problem.
  - b. By overlooking these exceptions there is nothing learned until they are brought to awareness.
  - c. However, since these moments of change don't line up with how we think or talk about ourselves we forget about these moments and replace them with more times the problem persisted.
    - i. This is what is called confirmation bias a maladaptive pattern, which is when a person uses a few events to provide proof for every situation that has occurred or will occur. Any break from this is minimized or ignored, since it doesn't line up with initial beliefs.
  - d. *Example: A teenager named Chris mired in troublemaking behavior whose present happiness and future possibilities are being jeopardized. The first step would probably be to externalize trouble, treating it as its own entity with its own traits and behaviors. Once trouble is well-defined, the next step would probably be an exploration of unique outcomes, times in the recent past where Chris resisted trouble, where in spite of the various temptations he held strong against it, refusing to respond to this temptation.*
  - e. These exceptions are potential pivotal moments that when given meaning, can lead to these exceptions becoming more frequent and feeling more confident in the ability to break free from the control of a specific problem.

### **B. Giving Meaning to the Difference**

#### **1. Tell Story about an Exception & Give it Meaning (See Appendix I)**

- a. *In order to give meaning to an exception tell a story about a time that you broke free from the influence or control of a problem.*
- b. Questions to consider after:
  - i. How were you able to defy the problem, when you did not let it affect you?
  - ii. Was it harder or easier than you thought, standing up to the problem?
  - iii. What personal qualities led you to change this instance? How can you use these qualities in the present and future?
  - iv. If this exception was more frequent what would it mean for you in your life?
  - v. What questions does this activity bring up for you?

## **Class 10: Broadening the Story**

### **A. Tell Story about an Exception (See Appendix I)**

1. *In order to give meaning to an exception tell a story about a time that you broke free from the influence or control of a problem.*
2. Questions to consider after:
  - a. How were you able to defy the problem, when you did not let it affect you?
  - b. Was it harder or easier than you thought, standing up to the problem?
  - c. What personal qualities led you to change this instance? How can you use these qualities in the present and future?
  - d. If this exception was more frequent what would it mean for you in your life?
  - e. What questions does this activity bring up for you?

### **B. What does the Group need?**

## **Class 11: My Life Story Class**

### **A. Design House Activity: (See Appendix J)**

1. *Use the prompts to explore different aspects of one's identity and reflect on how positive, negative, and neutral different parts of ourselves are. This is meant to encourage that one single experience or thing **does not** makes up a person's entire being.*
2. **Parts of the House:**
  - a. **Foundation:** Values that govern your life.
  - b. **Floor 1:** Behaviors that you are trying to gain control of or areas of your life that you want to change.
  - c. **Floor 2:** List or draw emotions you want to experience more often, more fully, or in a healthier way.
  - d. **Floor 3:** List all the things you are happy about or want to feel happy about.
  - e. **Floor 4:** List or draw what "a happy life" would look like for you.
  - f. **Door:** Things you keep hidden from others.
  - g. **Walls:** Anyone/things that supports you.
  - h. **Roof:** People/things that protect you.
  - i. **Chimney:** Ways you "blow off steam".
  - j. **Billboard:** Things you are proud of and want others to see.
3. *Possibly compare to others houses since many will have commonalities, but will also be unique.*

## **Class 12: My Life Story Class**

### **A. Tell Story about Life Experience Using Skills (See Appendix K)**

1. *Try applying the skills learned within the group so far such as externalization and unique outcomes in a life experience you have had.*
2. Questions consider or reflect on:
  - a. How comfortable were you using the skills?
  - b. Was it difficult to apply them? If it was why do you think it was?
  - c. What questions does this activity bring up for you?

### **Class 13: The Stories We Choose To Tell**

#### **A. Narrative Constructs: (See Appendix L)**

1. *These are the types of stories we choose to tell about our lives, they show the dominant thinking or patterns in a person's life. Many people are very lazy or neglectful in their storytelling. This process is about creating thicker and richer narratives for ourselves.*
2. **Self-Exploration (Exploratory Narrative Processing):** *When a story is told or written, this is the amount of yourself you share.*
  - a. Example: "I knew I reached an emotional bottom that year . . . but I began making a stable life again, as a more stable independent person . . . it was a period full of pain, experimentation, and growth, but in retrospect it was necessary for me to become anything like the woman I am today."
  - b. This can be situational since people may not want to share everything about themselves to another person. However, this includes times we reflect on our own story in a journal or at night in bed.
  - c. People can be lazy with their self-exploration and simply take things at face value or psych themselves out with overthinking.
3. **Role (Agency):** *Recognizing the role the individual plays within the story and how much influence or control they have over the outcome of the story, others characters, and the environment.*
  - a. What role does person play: Main character, supporting character, audience, something else?
  - b. Example: "I challenge myself to the limit academically, physically, and on my job. Since that time [of my divorce], I have accomplished virtually any goal I set for myself."
4. **Bonds (Communion):** *The amount of connectedness we feel toward others within a story. This comes through love, friendship, dialogue, being connected to something bigger and can harness a sense of support, intimacy, caring, or belonging.*
  - a. Example: "I was warm, surrounded by friends and positive regard that night. I felt unconditionally loved."
5. **Contamination:** *A particular story that begins positively, but leads to something negative that overwhelms, destroys, or erases the previous positives.*
  - a. Examples:
    - i. Marriage is wonderful... Partner states they want a divorce
    - ii. Feels great pride at high school graduation... Father says they look fat crossing the stage
    - iii. Receiving a valuable gift... Gift is stolen
    - iv. Birth of beautiful baby... Baby develops a serious illness
6. **Redemption:** *A particular story that begins negatively, but leads to something positive.*
  - a. Examples:
    - i. After years of bitter fighting between two best friends about a conflict that happened years ago. They finally reconnected with each other and found a way to move forward.
    - ii. A husband not being a good spouse due to mental health and addiction issues for years, but through counseling, AA, and personal growth has been able to be the spouse they always wanted to be.
    - iii. A mother who was never present for their children, found a way to become a good grandparent in later life.
    - iv. A person who suffers from persistent panic attacks is able to use coping skills to get recognize and manage it when she becomes overwhelmed.
  - b. Types of Redemptive Stories:
    - i. Atonement: Sin → Forgiveness, Salvation
    - ii. Emancipation: Slavery → Freedom
    - iii. Upward Mobility: Poverty → Wealth, Social Standing
    - iv. Recovery: Sickness → Health, Wholeness
    - v. Enlightenment: Ignorance → Knowledge
    - vi. Development: Immaturity → Actualization

7. **Moral of the Story (Meaning Making):** *The degree in which a lesson is learned, growth or insight happens because of a story.*
  - a. Example: "It really made me go through and relook at my memories and see how there's so many things behind a situation that you never see. Things are not always as they seem."
8. **Closure (Positive Coherent Resolution):** *The extent that the tensions in the story are resolved to produce closure and a positive ending.*
  - a. Example: "After many years, I finally came to forgive my brother for what he did. I now accept his faults, and, as a result, I think he and I have grown closer."
  - b. This includes:
    - i. Looking at both the positive and negative aspects (this promotes growth).
    - ii. Then communicating and committing oneself to a positive resolution or change if that is preferred (this promotes happiness).

**B. Dominant Thinking (Dominant Narrative)**

1. **Dominant Thinking (Dominant Narrative):** *These are the beliefs a person holds about life, themselves, and others, it is based on culture, upbringing, friends, past experiences, and present experiences.*
  - a. How a person speaks about the history of a problem reflects a pattern of thinking.
  - b. Depending on the pattern of thinking it can **empower or disempower a person**,
    - i. Oftentimes negative themes reflect loss, failure, incompetence, hopelessness, shame or futility.
    - ii. While positive themes reflect growth, success, redemption, belonging, meaning, freedom, etc.
  - c. People carry these dominant ways of thinking to their present and future lives.
  - d. By becoming aware of dominant thoughts, a person can begin to change these thoughts into themes that are more empowering.
  - e. Individuals and others in their lives may need to find alternative ways to communicate with each other to develop and maintain new ways of thinking.



## **Class 14: Identifying Dominant Thinking**

### **A. List Dominant Thinking in Life (See Appendix M)**

1. Create a list of dominant thinking patterns in your life.
2. If there is any deeper meaning or lesson that you take from a specific thinking pattern write this down as well.
3. Does this way of thinking limit you or open up new choices or opportunities?
4. How does this influence other areas of your life?
5. What questions does this activity bring up for you?

### **B. Existential Meanings of Dominant Thinking**

1. These dominant thinking patterns relate to the beliefs we live by and affect how you perceive life along with your purpose. It is believed that developing meanings in life a person can become more resilient and grow.

*“He who has a why to live can bear almost any how.” – Frederick Nietzsche*

2. Accepting Meanings vs. Making Meanings

*“Life doesn’t make sense, but people make sense of life”*

- a. Human beings can be meaning makers but more often than not they’re meaning acceptors. In their short lives they grasp onto various given sources of meaning, meaning handed down to them by anonymous cultural authority as well as by specific authority figures like parents, teachers, priests, and coaches. Having this meaning in place is like having a compass and a map in the middle of a vast, uncharted wilderness. It provides a system of orientation towards people and the world and it reduces painful, hard to understand existential anxiety.
- b. Sometimes these meanings placed on us do not actually match our lives anymore and this creates a temporary lack of purpose. Which we have to talk initiative to regain.
- c. While external meanings are place on us, only we can truly create meaning for our lives since we are unique beings.
  - i. Myth that meaning has to come from a higher being.
- d. Through the inner process of self-actualization where unique potentialities are discovered, unfolded, and turned into actualities in forms like loving relationships and productive work we can find our why.

### **C. Beliefs about Dominant Thinking**

1. Who started this dominant thinking?
  - a. Did you create this meaning or was it created by something or someone external?
2. Does this dominant thinking support or put limits on the way the you see yourself?
3. How does the dominant thinking support or put limits on how the you behave?
4. Does this dominant thinking serve some purpose?
5. How has the dominant thinking helped or hindered the client? Or helped or hindered those around them?
6. Is it possible to change this dominant thinking or the meaning attached to it?
7. Other thoughts?

## **Class 15: My Life Story Class**

### **A. Redemption or Contamination Entry (See Appendix N)**

1. *In order to practice the types of stories we tell, write about an experience where a situation began negatively then turned positive or vice versa.*
2. Try to address the following within the entry or reflect on them after.
  - a. What kind of role do you play in this story (main character, supporting character, background character, witness, etc.)?
  - b. What made the story positive or negative?
  - c. What were your feelings at the beginning of the story?
  - d. What was the turning point of the story?
  - e. How did this story end?
  - f. What are your feelings about the conclusion?
  - g. What does this story mean to you?
  - h. What does this story mean about you?
  - i. Does this stories meaning or feeling appear in other stories (Is there a pattern?)?
  - j. What questions does this activity bring up for you?

## **Class 16: My Life Story Class**

### **A. Dominant Thinking Entry (See Appendix O)**

1. *After listing some of your dominant thinking and realizing some of the weight they hold on how you view yourself and the world. Pick one or two of them (maybe one positive and one negative) and write about how these appear in your life through various experiences.*
2. Questions to consider and reflect on:
  - a. What are the dominant thoughts in this story?
  - b. How do these influence me in my behaviors, thoughts, actions, feelings?
  - c. What do these mean about me and how I view myself and/or others?
  - d. What are some specific experiences that these dominant thoughts appear?
  - e. What are your feelings about these thoughts? Do you feel like they are healthy or unhealthy?
  - f. If you could change something about this theme, would you? What are some ways would you bring about this change?
  - g. Is there dominant thinking that you wish you had more of within your story?
  - h. What questions does this activity bring up for you?

## **Class 17: Giving Power Back to the Author**

### **A. Re-Authoring (See Appendix P)**

1. *Building a preferred story for yourself, involves reflecting on what the story is currently and including characters in your live, dominant thoughts you hold, and then thinking about what you would like your story to be/include more of then making it a reality.*
  - a. A person will accomplish this by highlighting the exceptions that contradict the negative dominant thinking they have, in actual stories.
  - b. First by exploring the present situation of their problem in detail, then exploring why they take the actions they do and what it means about them.
2. Questions to help with this:
  - a. What aspects about yourself are downplayed in your current story that you wish had a larger role?
  - b. Are there any exceptions that open up the story?

### **B. Re-Membering:**

1. *This is the process of actively engaging in and renewing relationships, they have lost, while getting rid of the relationships they no longer want (in their preferred story)*
    - a. Meaning needs to be given to the aspects of life that a person wants to be more prevalent.
  2. Questions to help with this:
    - a. What relationships have you lost touch with that you would like to reconnect too?
    - b. How can you make this a reality?
    - c. What relationships would you like to lose touch with?
    - d. How can you make this a reality?
- C. *Both of these are important to making your preferred story a reality for yourself.*

## **Class 18: My Life Story Class**

### **A. Write a Story about the Role you Play within Your Story or Write a Story about you Playing a Different Role within Your Story (See Appendix Q)**

1. *People are all are the authors of our own story, because they develop their own truths, but a person will feel they are not always the main character in the story. Exploring the roles we play within others stories and our own is the assignment.*
2. Try to address the following within the entry or reflect on them after.
  - a. What kind of role do you play in this story (main character, supporting character, background character, witness, etc.)?
  - b. Is this the usual role that you play?
  - c. Is this the role that you prefer to play? Why do you prefer it?
  - d. If there is a role that you prefer to play that you aren't playing, how can we change the story?
  - e. What does this story mean to you?
  - f. What does this story mean about you?
  - g. Does this stories meaning or feeling appear in other stories (Is there a pattern?)?
  - h. What will changing the role you play mean about you? And mean to you?
  - i. What questions does this activity bring up for you?

## **Class 19: My Life Story Class**

### **A. Angel & Devil on Shoulder Entry (See Appendix R)**

1. *Write a story about the different characters in your story and their influence on your decision making or views. This may be understood through imagining the characters are similar to an angel and devil on your shoulders.*
2. Try to address the following within the entry or reflect on them after.
  - a. What kind of role do you play in this story (main character, supporting character, background character, witness, etc.)?
  - b. Which character(s) are the most vocal?
  - c. Who ultimately has the most influence or makes the final decision?
  - d. Are the characters influencing you, what you would prefer?
  - e. If the characters that you want to influence you less are more vocal, how can we shrink their influence? Or boost the characters we want to influence us more?
  - f. What does this story mean to you?
  - g. What does this story mean about you?
  - h. Does this stories meaning or feeling appear in other stories (Is there a pattern?)?
  - i. What questions does this activity bring up for you?

## **Class 20: My Life Story Class**

### **A. Letter of Letting Go: (See Appendix S)**

1. *We will be writing a letter of letting go of a problem this week, similar to a “Dear John” letter it will include everything good and bad about the relationship you have with the problem. You do not need to share this letter with anyone unless you choose to. Be raw and open with your emotions and allow yourself to free yourself from this problem.*
  - a. *Sometimes we are not quite ready to be completely free from a particular problem, but by writing this letter of “breaking up” serves as awareness of the things that this problem has done and then a strong commitment to separate yourself from this relationship.*
2. Sample Letter:

*Dear Workaholism,*

*You’ve been part of my life for as long as I can remember. Maybe our connection is ancestral: I come from a long line of immigrants who fled persecution to make a home in a new land. They toiled to support their families. They instilled that same work ethic in my parents who worked hard, volunteered, maintained friendships, cared for their aging mothers, and sustained a loving marriage for almost 52 years. My parents made their overloaded lifestyle seem far too easy. I inherited their tendency to work hard, thinking it was praiseworthy.*

*And it was. People gave me kudos for good grades, good manners and good social values. Who wouldn’t want to keep receiving that kind of recognition? I certainly did. You had me convinced that if I didn’t keep toiling to measure up, I’d be a failure, unable to support myself. I was chasing a carrot on a stick, and you were the one dangling it in front of me. You told me that all my achievements came from you and that without you, I’d lose everything.*

*But believing you almost cost me my life.*

*A heart attack helped me see I needed to cut ties with you. When someone leaves an abuser, this can be the most dangerous time in the relationship. The abuser’s attempts to make the victim stay tend to become more forceful. It was the same way with you.*

*When I started cardiac rehab, you persuaded me to do more: put in more time, exercise more intensely, sweat more profusely. You told me I had to substitute my fitness discipline for my professional focus because I was no longer working 12 hours or more a day. It felt great to leave the gym dripping wet and limping. I paid for it by feeling exhausted for the rest of the day, but it felt like a good tradeoff at the time.*

*Medical tests showed that my adrenal glands were suffering and that I was setting myself up for another health crisis. My doctor said to cut my workout time to three days a week — you had me negotiate for four. Are you afraid I’ll become a couch potato if I don’t respect my healthy limits?*

*I’m calling in the “Reserves” — the human kind. My family and friends are with me. They’re standing beside and behind me as I show you the door. You had your place in my life once. I thank you for the lessons. Now it’s time for you to go as I take a new path — one with gratitude, grace and ease — and without you.*

*Sincerely (no longer) yours,*

3. Questions to consider and reflect on:
  - a. How did this activity feel before and after?
  - b. What purpose did the problem originally help with?
  - c. How specifically did this relationship benefit you?
  - d. When did this relationship begin to turn negative?
  - e. What specifically did this relationship cost you?
  - f. What supports do you call upon to help manage this problem?
  - g. Knowing what you do now, what is your intention for the relationship with the problem?
  - h. How do you intend to keep this separation from the problem?
  - i. What questions does this activity bring up for you?

**Class 21: Driving Home the New Story**

**A. Following Through with these New Stories (Reinforcement) (See Appendix T)**

“Your beliefs become your thoughts,  
Your thoughts become your words,  
Your words become your actions,  
Your actions become your habits,  
Your habits become your values,  
Your values become your destiny.” - Gandhi

1. *If the person doesn't continue believing these new stories and meanings it will not become automatic thinking.*
  - a. Shifting your stories changes your beliefs and values, but takes time.
  - b. Best way to drive these stories home is to tell the stories to others and for them to give validation that the story is true.
  - c. What are other ways to reinforce our new preferred stories (destiny)? (beliefs, thoughts, words, actions, habits, values)



## Class 22: Reflective Class

### A. Review & Clarification (See Appendix U)

#### 1. Journey to Recovery:

- a. **Separating Problems from Yourself (Externalizing):** *This is looking at problems as something other than yourself.*
- b. **Finding Exceptions (Unique Outcomes):** *This involves highlighting times when the person was able to gain control over the problem.*
- c. **Dominant Thinking (Dominant Narrative):** *These are the beliefs a person holds about life, themselves, and others, it is based on culture, upbringing, past experiences, and present experiences.*
- d. **Re-Authoring:** *This involves a person re-imagining how they would like their life to be told and thought about.*
- e. **Re-Membering:** *This is the process of actively engaging in and renewing relationships, they have lost, while getting rid of the relationships they no longer want (in their preferred story)*
- f. **Following Through with these New Stories (Reinforcement):** *If the person doesn't continue believing these new stories and meanings it will not become automatic thinking.*

### B. Feedback Loop

1. Evaluate Effectiveness of Group, Structure, and Strengths/Weaknesses

**Class 23: My Life Story Class**

**A. What I would like to carry into the next semester? (See Appendix V)**

1. *In order to practice reinforcing the lessons and insights learned, write an entry about some insights, lessons and/or behaviors you would like to carry into the next semester or in life.*
2. Questions to consider and reflect on:
  - a. What I would like to carry forward?
  - b. Why do I want to carry this insight, lesson, and/ or behavior forward?
  - c. How will I follow through with this insight, lesson and/or behavior (Be specific)?
  - d. What will my life be like if this insight, lesson and/or behavior is a part of my life?
  - e. When it gets difficult to keep up with this insight, lesson and/or behavior, what will I do?

## Class 24: Termination

### A. Hope Entry

1. *"People need encouragement like plants need water, people who need it the most get it the least"*
2. Options:
  - a. Write a story about hope.
  - b. Hopes that you have about next semester.
  - c. What would you like to carry with you from this semester?
3. *Invite everyone to share one of their hopes and then **one hope they have for someone else** preferably within the group.*

### B. Closing Remarks...

### C. Connection

1. *As a last activity everyone will stand up, then give one other person a gift/positive affirmation and hold their hand (**if they are comfortable**). That chosen person will pick another person and do the same until everyone in the room is connected.*
  - a. *The gift can't be like happiness or anything super abstract, try to be specific.*
  - b. **Pick someone that hasn't been chosen yet.**

## **Substitute Class 1: Tree of Life**

### **A. Tree of Life Activity:**

1. Introduction: Today clients will be doing an exploratory activity that will allow people to look at multiple parts of their lives and parts of their identity. This activity will have parts that are negative, but will also have parts that are positive.
  - a. Client's identities and experiences are complex and multifaceted, there is no black and white. While some parts may be negative this activity is to encourage that these aspects do not make up the entirety of a person's being.
  - b. Clients should be encouraged to look at the symbolism of the house as a representation of themselves.
2. Content:
  - a. Roots: Clients write where they come from, family history, mentors, favorite places or things they hold dear.
  - b. Ground: Clients write where they live now and activities they are engaged in their daily life (school, job, parent).
  - c. Trunk: Clients write their skills and abilities (caring, loving, empathetic, writer, organized).
  - d. Branches: Clients write their hopes, dreams, and wishes for the directions of their life in the future.
  - e. Leaves: Represents significant people in their lives, who may be alive or passed on.
  - f. Fruit: gifts clients have been given, not necessarily physical (being cared for, loved, acts of kindness).
3. Conclusion: This activity is done to connect the group through common life experiences, while highlighting the many different aspects that make the client who they are.

### **B. Storms of Life Activity:**

1. Introduction: If clients are symbolically the tree in this metaphor, then the storms are the struggles that threaten the tree. Even though, these storms may be serious, they are separate from the tree. They affect the tree, but these storms do not make the tree what it is.
  - a. Thus the client is not defined by the storm/struggles in their lives, they certainly affect the client, but how the client is affected and responds is partially up to the client.
  - b. What the client can do is learn to adapt, make changes, and gain insight to have the storm affect them less (Not easy to do).
2. Content:
  - a. Invite people to share some storms in their lives
  - b. Highlight that the storm is separate from the tree (creating distance between the experience and the problem).
  - c. \*Optional\* Forest of Life:
    - i. Pass the trees around for people to see and have clients write words of encouragement, support, and appreciation in the sky.
3. Conclusion: These storms in the clients lives do not have to knock us over, they may injure or scar the tree, but the rest of the tree is still intact.