Storytelling & Personal and Social Identity

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HLTHAGE 2B03: Social Identity, Health and Illness

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When an individual experiences a traumatic event, sometimes the easiest way to get through it is to block out the pain rather than facing it. This can lead to a loss of social and personal identity because the individual is silently suffering and not healing. In the movie, *A Child’s Grief*, the children are taught to narrate their traumatic experiences through storytelling.

Using storytelling techniques allows the individual to understand their experiences and themselves, gain control over their lives, and help manage their emotions, which overall maintains their social and personal identities. However, sometimes these health and wellness techniques fail to completely help an individual through their traumatic experience, this is where other techniques are used.

  The movie, *A Child’s Greif*, displayed a handful of children that in some aspect of their lives, lost someone very close to them. Whether it was a mother, a father or a sibling, all the children suffered immense emotional and physical pain from losing someone they loved. In the movie, the directors aimed to show the audience how child grief was very different from the way adults grieve. For example, adults will tend to shut down and stop life, while children seem to function through the loss. Even though children will seem to function in a more efficient manner, they also tend to suppress the pain to protect their parents or do not have a complete understanding of their loss. For example, in the movie, *A Child’s Greif*, one of the children, Kevin, was asked to narrate to the group his experience of losing his sister. Here, Kevin, explained how their family was on a trip to England, when they decided to go to an amusement park. At the time Kevin was only 7 years old and his sister was 5. They decided to go on a rollercoaster ride, where his sister hit her head and slipped out of the moving ride. Kevin recalled his mother's horrid screams and even looking down to see his dead sister's body on the tracks. Going through this terrible experience would cause anyone severe emotional and physical pain and would steer anyone that went through this far away from amusement parks. However, Kevin's mother talked about how he still had a desire to go to amusement parks and seemed to be quite fond of them. Hearing this, would cause anyone to then assume Kevin’s social identity as being weird, not normal or having something wrong with him. However, through narrating to the group what had happened, Kevin mentioned how he often suppressed his emotions, so his parents did not feel sad. Kevin then shared how he often cried himself to sleep or banged his fists against his head to stop himself from feeling pain. Therefore, storytelling was not an adequate treatment for Kevin to gain control over his social and personal identity. In addition, art therapy was used for Kevin to illustrate a chart of his emotions. An array of guilt, sadness and anger filled the majority of the chart. This demonstrated that through art therapy allowed “a sense of resolution, which results[ed] in less rumination and eventually allow[ed] disturbing experiences to subside gradually from conscious thought” (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999, p.1). Therefore, by using art therapy techniques, Kevin was able to share his feelings and contribute to his understanding of his emotions. Ultimately, Kevin’s personal and social identity remained intact because he was able to process his negative emotions through art therapy.

Another child mentioned in the movie, *A child’s Grief,* was Stephanie. When she was asked to narrate what had happened to her, she mentioned how her mother passed away suddenly one day and she did not know the cause. Stephanie emphasized that her mother's death did not just mean she would experience home life differently, but her social life would forever be altered as well. Society treated her very differently and her social identity was then known as the girl that was weak, sad and fragile and everyone would be cautious as to how they spoke and acted around her. Stephanie explained how she wished people would treat her the same no matter what because “being a member of a stigmatized group can play a profound role in a person’s life. A recent study found that … members of stigmatized group… change[d] one’s level of collective self-esteem” (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1995, p.5). Ultimately, how other’s view your social identity will automatically play a direct role in how an individual view their own personal identity. This can be alarming especially to children that go through a tremendous loss in their life because they need a sense of normality in their life to function effectively. When society views and treats people differently, it instills a negative view of themselves in their mind that they are different from everyone else because they are suffering. In reality, social and personal identity can be restored through the act of storytelling. In the movie, *A Child’s Grief,* it states that if adults ask children to share what had happened to them and do not treat them any differently, or make them feel as if they are wounded, the children are more willing to open up about their trauma. Opening up about a traumatic experience allows for “structure and meaning, it would follow that the emotional effects of that experience are more manageable” (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1995, p.1). Moreover, treating a child who is grieving with normality and openness, will create a safer environment for a child to narrate their emotions. Once a child can openly talk through their traumatic experiences, then they are able to fulfill aspects of their social and personal identity and become one step closer to healing effectively.

When children suffer through a loss of a parent, most of the time that parent can never be replaced. In the movie, *A Child’s Grief*, vocabulary of motive helped two boys move on from their father’s death and allow room for a stepdad in their lives. The film showed how two boys felt extreme feelings of anger from being left behind by their father and fell into a recursive loop of denial. The two boys did not want to talk about their father's death with anyone, carried on life as normal as possible and never wanted to visit their dad’s grave at the cemetery. However, when their father was sick, he shared emotional words with the boys that helped them find the strength to move past his death. Their father gave his blessing to his sons and his wife to eventually move on with their lives even after his passing. Their father said these words because he knew their mom deserved to love again and that the boys deserved to be happy again. The use of vocabulary of motive in this situation gave permission to the boys to get on with that part of their life. If their dad did not share these powerful words with his family before he passed, the family would have never moved on from his death and would always carry feelings of guilt and anger with them if their mom was to find love again. It is the power of words in this scenario that saved the family from being stuck in a recursive loop of denial and allowed this family to move forward with their lives. In addition, the boys carried a mostly positive outlook when they told the story of their father’s death. The fathers use of vocabulary of motive allowed the boys to have a mostly positive outlook on the situation and ultimately lead to a positive outcome on their personal and social identify. The two boys now look at their personal and social identity as making their father proud and are able to find happiness even with the passing of their dad.

In conclusion, when an individual experiences a traumatic experience, the best thing to do is to not hide from it. If one is willing to feel the pain and narrate what they went through, it will bring them one step closer to finding peace. Storytelling techniques and the vocabulary of motive were used in the movie, *A Child’s Grief*, where two boys found the light at the end of the tunnel after their father’s death. Storytelling techniques can allow individuals to understand their experiences and themselves, gain control over their lives, and help manage their emotions, which overall maintains their social and personal identities. Moreover, in some cases, such as the scenario with Kevin, other techniques are used to help overcome being stuck in a recursive loop of denial. All in all, health and wellness techniques are very beneficial to overcome traumatic experiences, especially for children like Stephanie that just want to be treated the same and have her story heard.

References

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