

Client Worksheet 9

A Different Story

You saw earlier how OCD convinces you to doubt by creating a story. The story is made up of a sequence of reasons or justifications on why you should doubt. The strength of the argument lies largely in the fact that it is a story, not a sequence of events. The importance of viewing the argument as a story is that, as a story, it has considerable power because it does more than just state facts. It is dynamic, as it moves us along from a starting point to an end point. It's like a journey where we pass all manner of images and events on the way.

The Candid Camera

Suppose I pick up a pen and try to convince you the pen is really a secret camera. I could just state this pen is a camera and discuss the make and type of camera. This statement on its own might not be too convincing. But, suppose I relate a story about it being built in the same factory as James Bond's special car and how the developer won a prize for his work. It was tested in field trials in different situations and it was patented and is now in general use as a spy pen. All I have done here is to connect up a series of statements and observations in a sequence to make them more believable. One piece of the story piggybacks onto the next piece, and so on, until there is an accumulation of experiences supporting the idea. At this point, one begins to live in the story. The lived feeling comes from a number of elements. First, there is the dynamic aspect of "moving along" in the story. Second, there is the detail of the scenery as you go past it. The richer the scenery and the descriptive detail, the more the story is lived. There is also the feeling of being immersed in the story and a detachment from everyday life which allows the imagination free rein. You not only conjure up images and transitions as the story moves you along, but also build the scenes in your imagination and make the events seem even more vivid, personal, and meaningful. So, you become immersed or absorbed in the reality of your story. As you go off into the imagination, what at the outset might have appeared completely impossible that now appears almost logical. Let's take a ludicrous example of a flying pig with you between its trotters. It could never happen, but let's build a story....

The Flying Pig

Your friend is working for an experimental genetic laboratory where the scientists have been working for some time on mating birds and mammals. They have succeeded with rats and doves and are moving up the evolutionary scale. There have been several popular films exploring the idea of mutant humans. When you arrive at the laboratory, you find they have mated an eagle with a pig. One of the testing criteria is assessing the load the mutant animal can take and your friend asks if you would take a turn as a volunteer to be transported by the flying pig over the local town.

I'm No Good at Stories

You might say, "But I'm not too good at creating stories" or "I have no imagination." But as we have seen, you have built up and lived in an OCD story which was essentially imaginary. Now it's time to use that same imagination creatively to your advantage. In the exercises, you will find the resources to build up the story and feel the effects of immersion in that story. The exercise will allow you to understand exactly how the OCD works its convoluted magic on you.

Client Exercise 9

A Different Story

John's story about why he doubts his door is locked -

Well, I always worry about the door being properly locked. I close it very carefully; paying attention to every action. The click of the latch and the resistance of the door when I push it shut. But I still doubt if it's really closed. I think of a door I once saw swing open after the person thought they'd locked it, and well- I'm not an expert on locks and some can spring open automatically. My friend had a garage door once which just opened in the middle of the night; mind you that was an electric lock. When I test the door, it seems shut but I don't know how shut is shut. I mean how much movement is allowed? Of course, if I was robbed because I left it open, I'd feel terrible.

John's story is a good example of an OCD story justifying by the doubt. Now the first point to note is that all of the reasons given by John relate to other times and other places. None relates to what he is observing in the here and now. Obviously the story can't be relating to the here and now because his senses say all is OK in the 'here and now', but he feels justified in drawing on events he has heard about second-hand; connecting completely different events and imagining sequences. However, these all make him 'doubt' what he is actually seeing in the here and now.

Do you think John is justified in doubting because of these reasons? You might say yes because sometimes we need to rely on our 'intelligence', 'know how', or 'memory' despite the fact that these came from us, not from the outside. For example, if I've read somewhere that one area of a town I'm visiting is dangerous, I might be wise to avoid it even though I have no evidence in the 'here and now' that it is dangerous. If I know from experience that every time I leave the house with more than three accessories, I'm likely to lose one of them, it may be a good idea to take precautions even though there is nothing lost in the here and now. If I know I'm prone to slip on ice, then it might be sensible to watch out when I walk on ice, even if I've not already fallen. All these 'reasons' for caution are valid because they either based on real information from outside sources applicable to the here and now, or I have had direct *experience* of them in *identical* situations. The reasons do not come from second-hand information, hearsay, and invented stories.

Now let's return to John and then to the justification for your own OCD doubt. Is John's story based on facts *related* to the here and now or on justifications *remote* from the here and now? Don't forget, *relevant* means that your intelligence about what could be there is drawn from evidence, authority, or experience based directly and immediately on the current case.

Try this exercise. Say which of the following statements is based on the *direct evidence* that 'maybe the door is locked because . . .'

1. 'This lock is old and sometimes jams and fails (in reality) to lock the door'.
2. 'I read about someone who left the door open'.
3. 'It could be a statistical probability that I leave the door open'.

Which one justifies the doubt in the here and now?

‘Maybe the door knob is contaminated because . . .?’

4. ‘Microbes exist, so my hands could be contaminated’.
5. ‘I touched a knob which I saw had mud on it’.
6. ‘It’s common knowledge you can catch germs from other people’.

Again, which one justifies the doubt in the here and now?

The correct answers are 1 and 5 only. Were your answers correct?

So let’s try building up your alternative story along the bridging game lines. First we start with your sense observation. I see the car door locked. I know it’s locked because my senses say so, and whenever I lock it I always do so correctly. It’s a good door lock, it’s never been faulty and there’s no reason to think it’s faulty now. So I’m going to shop, and when I come back it will be locked. How do you feel now about your doubt?

OK. Now return to the story and fill in even more detail, for example: I remember how the door stayed locked even in cold weather, and when I hit a bump I can’t remember the lock ever jumping open. For it to not be locked after I locked it, there would need to be some major unheard-of problem. How do you feel now about the initial doubt?

Just to be sure, go back one more time and try to add in any other details you may remember which could enrich and add density to the story. Remember that the elements can be from experience, common sense or realistic conclusions.

So now note down your own final detailed alternative story:

It's the Way You Tell 'Em

Other elements which can help you tell a good story include:

- Richness in detail: Part of the immersion comes from absorption in details of the story. The richer and more nuanced the details, the more credible.
- Smooth transport: The second is the transporting nature of stories which seem to take you along with them on a journey. All stories travel from A to B on a seemingly credible route.
- You are along for the ride: The third element is that you are in the stories. It's not just a third person narration like listening to a audio-book read by a famous actor.
- It's personal: A fourth element is the personalization of the happenings around you and that the key transition points are dramatic and meaningful and touch you emotionally.
- Imagination: A fifth point is the use of the imagination where, of course, anything can happen and very powerfully.

Client Training Card 9

A Different Story

Learning Points

- We all create stories about our lives and ourselves.
- These stories are convincing and rich in detail, the more they are lived in.
- Stories can transport our feelings and beliefs.
- Stories define who we are and where we are going.
- Changing our stories changes how we live in our world.

Practice Card

- Be aware more and more during the day when you are telling and relying on stories.
- In particular, it's important to be aware of stories about the self some of which they not be factual and therefore not true.
- If the OCD story comes along, catch it as it leaves reality, wind it back to the start and change its detail point by point by replacing the OCD argument with an opposite counter-point. Reinforce your alternative arguments with a fact or observation derived from reality. If necessary expand on the alternative story by adding bits which lead to an alternative conclusion. Finally, rehearse the alternative story . . . as a story. Measure the effect the story has on the credibility of the OCD story and how much you believe it is a story, not a fact.

Monitoring story credibility

After you've rehearsed your alternative story, please note the following scores 0-10 (where 0= not at all true and 10= definitely true)

I believe my OCD story is a fact ? _____

I believe in spite of all these exercises that my OCD story is the most credible story? _____

I realize my OCD story is just a story like any other? _____

Client Quiz 9

A Different Story

1. The alternative story is...
 - to replace the OCD story.
 - to highlight the storied nature of the OCD.
 - to create another obsession.
 - to go off into the imagination for no reason.

2. The story needs to be...
 - made up straight away.
 - built up bit by bit.
 - taken from somewhere else.
 - be mechanical.

3. The story needs to be...
 - rehearsed reflectively.
 - learnt by rote.
 - read to me by someone else.
 - left in a drawer.

4. The story makes me aware that...
 - the OCD story is just a story.
 - the OCD story is wrong and hurtful.
 - you can't believe anything.
 - I'm a good politician.

5. The story is narrated...
 - as a simple phrase.
 - as a series of statements.
 - as a tape recording.
 - as a narrative.

6. In order to be convincing, the OCD story...
 - includes as much realistic details as possible.
 - relates to strange experiences or observations.
 - avoids all speculation.
 - is related in the third person.

Please check your answers by referring to the Quiz Answers Sheet.