
Wisdom Tales: Using Storytelling Traditions to Understand and Treat Eating Disorders

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Traditional folk tales and multicultural myths can be used as powerful tools in the treatment of eating disorders because they are repositories of ancient wisdom about the human condition and because they teach the language of symbolism, imagery, and metaphor. These wisdom tales can help clients gain insight into their disordered eating behavior and can function as effective catalysts for bringing about change in eating patterns.

Through storytelling, clients can learn the language of metaphor, which can help them intuit the existence of deeper meanings and truths. As they become proficient with this language, they are better able to understand how food can be a symbol for emotional nourishment, how eating can be an attempt to feed inner hungers, and how food restriction can be an attempt to deny these hungers.

Accessing the Truth Within

According to Marion Woodman, Jungian analyst and author on addictions and eating disorders, the healing power of metaphor lies in its ability to provide us with images that can transform unconscious material into conscious awareness. She believes storytelling and the use of metaphor have more of an immediate impact than abstract analysis when working with eating disorders. "So long as it's theory, it's removed from the actual feeling...if I put it in a story form or use images, the mind may not hear it, but the body responds. And if it's reverberating in the body, sooner or later it's going to get through to consciousness."

Our ancestors used traditional tales as vehicles for transmitting ancient wisdom accumulated over millennia to inform, instruct, and to heal. Myths, for example, are stories that have stayed alive in human imagination over long periods of time because there is a ring of truth in them about shared human experience. According to Joseph Campbell, myths guide us in the "experience of being alive." They are told to enlighten us about our origins, our inner realities, and what it means to be human.

Season for Growth

For example, the Greek myth about the mother goddess of the harvest, Demeter, and her daughter, Persephone, can be valuable in treating eating disorders. In the tale, Persephone is kidnapped by Hades and taken to the Underworld to be his queen. Demeter becomes so distraught over the loss of her daughter that the land becomes barren and no food can be harvested. Zeus, king of the gods, eventually agrees to help Demeter rescue her daughter, cautioning her that Persephone can only return if she has not eaten anything in the Underworld. As it turns out, Hades fed Persephone three pomegranate seeds and, although she could be reunited with her mother, she would have to return to the Underworld three months of each year thereafter.

Girls and women struggling with eating disorders can often relate to Persephone's experience. They know what it is like to feel estranged from their mothers (either their biological mothers or their internal mothering capacities), to be overtaken by unconscious forces that seem to come out of nowhere, and to have dark moods that hold them

hostage. The pivotal role food plays in this story can be especially compelling and poignant by providing a way to work with resistance that may be encountered when exploring eating behavior. In therapy, discussion of the first question Demeter asks her daughter when they are reunited ("What did you eat?") can help a client discover what underlies her own reactions to that question and explore issues around her own eating behavior. It becomes obvious that what appears to be a simple question can actually be fraught with tremendous meaning. Through this exploration, a client can begin to examine the symbolic meaning of her relationship with food and find connections between eating behavior and her relationships with others.

Lesson Learned

Persephone's journey to hell and back can provide a beacon of hope and understanding for a client's personal journey into the darkness of an eating disorder. By understanding her own tale of separation/individuation, identity formation, and integration, she can see that her story of innocence lost and wisdom gained is not unlike that of a goddess. By plumbing the depths of her darkest emotions in the underworld of her unconscious, she can gain the understanding and skills necessary for nourishing herself and for navigating more confidently and safely through life.

The practice of psychotherapy, which actively invites clients to tell and retell their stories, to recount tales of woe or success, and to replay the mini dramas of their lives, may be one of the few places where story telling and story listening remain valued and utilized. The clinician's office may provide a modern context for integrating current psychological theories with the wisdom of our ancestors and for introducing traditional storytelling as a way of making sense out of patterns of behavior and emotions that appear to have no meaning.

References

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Woodman, M. (1993). *Conscious Femininity: Interviews with Marion Woodman*. Toronto, Canada: Inner City Books.

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