

## Case Studies/Activities

### Chapter 23: Narrative therapy

#### Case Study – Part 1

The following case study demonstrates how narrative therapy can be employed as an intervention with a service user. Steven has been referred to a practitioner following an increasing number of angry outbursts at home and work. His employer has advised that he is on his 'final warning' regarding his heated behaviour in the workplace. He has also been getting into a number of fights in pubs and clubs. He feels very negative about his future and cannot see a way forward. This is his first meeting with his practitioner, Emily.

Emily: Hi Steven, It's good to meet you. I'm Emily and I will be working with you. How are you feeling today?

Steven: Oh, okay I suppose.

Emily: Is it okay if we get started?

Steven: Sure.

Emily: Okay. What I would like you to do is to tell me a story about yourself so I can understand a little more about you. Any events you think are important to you. You can give as much detail as you like.

Steven: Well, I finished university over two years ago. I studied engineering. I did okay at uni. I had really good marks in the first three years. I had lots of mates. I spent a lot of time doing sport, particularly rugby. I was in the uni rugby team and really enjoyed the social side of the club too. That's how I met my girlfriend Sarah. We went out together for two years and it was pretty. We were making plans about looking for jobs in the same city when we finished studying. We had just started to look for a flat together when she was killed in a car accident. I managed to finish uni with a scrape pass but things have been pretty terrible since then. I got a job fairly soon after I graduated. But that's not hard for an engineer in this town. I bet they would never have taken me on if they had known what kind of psycho they were getting.

Emily: Tell me more about what you mean by that. (Interested, questioning more about the story)

Steven: Well, I just lose the plot at the least little thing. I know the boss and other blokes are watching me as they are sick of it and just waiting for me to kick off. Sometimes I think they say stuff just to get me to lose it.

Emily: What do you mean by lose the plot? (Clarifying, getting better meaning)

Steven: Well, if a job is not going to plan or the boss has a go at me I lose control. I shout and storm out usually, but lately it has got worse and I punched the walls.

Emily: Have you ever hit anyone? (Expanding the story)

Steven: Not at work but I have been in lots of fights in the pub lately. The other night I really hurt a guy for nudging my pint. My mates say they do not want to go out with me anymore. I think they are embarrassed but I can't help it. I just snap. Mum and Dad say I am angry all the time. They're right. I flew into a rage last night with Mum for not ironing the right shirt. I know I am going to lose my job

and likely my mates too but I just get so angry and out of control I can't stop. It is not even at anything specific now. *(This is an example of a problem saturated story)*

## Case Study – Part 2

Emily: Steven, you have spoken about how the problem is affecting your work and relationships with your friends and parents. Can you tell me how the problem is affecting your emotions? (Mapping the issues)

Steven: Well, I feel pretty low and lonely at times. It is so unpredictable. This is when it gets difficult with my mates. After an explosion I am so embarrassed I don't want to contact them. This makes it harder to call them up to do anything the next weekend and I end up sitting home on my own.

Emily: Do you think we could name the problem? Perhaps something that you think describes it well for you? (Externalising the problem)

Steven: Yeah. It feels like it is a snap and then everything is out of control and destructive. I think an explosion kind of sums it up. Yes, we could call it 'The Explosion'

Emily: Okay. 'The Explosion' is a good name. Can you tell me a little more about how 'The Explosion' is affecting your relationships?

Steven: Well, I don't know when 'the explosion' is going to take over. I don't trust myself to speak to girls at work or at the pub for fear I explode or snap. I can't see any relationships in the future as they won't hang around. I don't want to hurt anyone.

Emily: How does that make you feel?

Steven: Rubbish. Blokes are supposed to be able to protect their women and be reliable. I should be there to help my mates when they are in trouble. Not give them grief. My Mum and Dad don't need me to act like this. I am an adult. I should be looking after them now they are getting older. (A conflicting image of a male member of society with 'moral worth')

Emily: How do you think 'The Explosion' affects them? (Widening the exploration)

Steven: Well I think they are scared of me. Mum most of all. They try to be in a different room in case they upset me which is difficult as the house is not big. I know they don't want to go on holiday or out in case I smash the house up as they just don't know when it is going to happen.

Emily: You say 'The Explosion' is unpredictable. Is there any time that you think it is more likely to happen than others?

Steven: Hmm ... well I can usually know it is going to happen at work when we have a lot of work on and we are busy. There is a lot of money tied up in the jobs we do and we are all under pressure to get the job finished. That is when I am under pressure. It is also worse when I am out and have had a drink.

Emily: Can you remember a time when 'The Explosion' was not around? (Exploring the evolution of the problem)

Steven: Yes, when I was at uni and before I lost Sarah.

Emily: So can you remember when 'The Explosion' first came to light?

Steven: I think it started about six months after Sarah died. We were busy at work. I had not been sleeping and was still pretty cut up about Sarah. I had asked for time off to see someone about how I was feeling but my boss told me that that was for losers. He had a go at me because I was taking a long time to do a simple job. He shouted at me and told me to 'act like a proper man'. I swore at him in front of everyone and went home. It has happened a lot since then.

*At this stage, Emily begins to get Steven to explore his grieving process when Sarah died. They discussed the 'normal' passage of grief, then how his passage of grief compared to this. They then looked at society's expectation of how males should deal with grief. Emily was linking social influences throughout the process.*

Steven: Well, I do need to 'man up' and get over it. It's just hard. I still miss her.

Emily: Do you think having to 'man up' is what is expected of you by everyone?

Steven: Well perhaps some people. Not my good mates or parents.

Emily: Do you think this feeling of having to be 'a man' reflected in some of your work colleagues' attitudes has prevented you from grieving for Sarah and could have contributed to 'The Explosions'?

Steven: Mmm ... Yes. I can see that could be true. I don't think my boss or some of the other guys will change how they think. But they are not all like that. Some are okay.

### **Case Study – Part 3**

Emily: Can you remember any time that 'The Explosion' has not happened at work when you are under pressure or when you have been out? (Looking for exceptions to the rule)

Steven: Well, it happens most days, but about a month ago I went camping with one of my old mates from uni. We used to do go out to the hills a lot but hadn't been for ages. Well, since Sarah died actually. It was good to get out of the house. We usually would bring some beers but this time we forgot. But it ended up that we had a good time anyway. Only once did I think I was going to lose it when I tripped on the tent pegs but I kept it cool. 'The Explosion' did not come near me for 3 days.

Emily: So there are times that 'The Explosion' could be there but it has not manifested?

Steven: Yes. I suppose so. Emily: What do you think was different?

Steven: Well, I was not drinking for one thing. I was not pressured and no one was watching or judging me. And I was having a good time. We were laughing about some of the good times we had at uni. My mate Jack did not avoid talking about Sarah and include our memories of her openly. That was good. I could be me.

Emily: So there were a number of things happening. You did not drink but still felt relaxed and did not feel you were being judged or watched. You could be yourself instead of what some of your work mates thought you should be. Also, you were able to speak about Sarah openly. Is that correct? (Reframing)

Steven: Yes, I had not thought about it like that. It just felt like 'The Explosions' were constant but I suppose that is not entirely true. They are so destructive that it seems this is what I have become.

Emily: It sounds like you really enjoyed the camping. How did you feel about yourself at this time?

Steven: Yeah, it really tests your strength and being out in the wilderness is amazing. It was great to be just to be one of the guys.

Emily: I notice within your story that you said you really liked getting out of the house and being up in the hills. Can you tell me a little more about this? (Exploring interests)

Steven: Sure. When I was little I used to go camping a lot with Dad, just the two of us. Then when I was at school I would sometimes go with my mates, not far but enough to feel away from the city. At uni some of my mates were into rock climbing and hill walking and we used to go away regularly. Mostly we went to the West Coast, but once we went to France for two weeks climbing. We did some pretty impressive peaks. I still have all the gear but it's lying in the garage now.

Emily: So is this something you might enjoy again?

Steven: Well, Jack did suggest we do a climb over the long weekend which is coming up soon.

Emily: So what I think I am hearing from you is that some people like your boss have a view that guys should not show their emotions because you are male. It is unlikely that they will change their view but this is not a view that is held by everyone you are in contact with. Your parents and some friends are OO speaking with you about how you feel. The 'Explosions' tend to manifest themselves when you feel you are under scrutiny or when you are drinking and it feels like this happens all the time. However, there are periods of time when 'The Explosions' do not manifest. Times when you are not drinking and doing things you really enjoy like hill walking and having the opportunity to talk openly. Do you think that sums up the story you told me? (Reframing and checking)

Steven: Yes that's right.

*Emily then set Steven a task. She asked him to have a think about his life story again. She asked him to write down how his story might be different if 'The Explosions' did not present. She asked him to think about the control he might have in day-to-day situations, how he might be feeling, how he might interact with people at work, home and with friends and family. She also asked him to think about his wishes for the future and how his story might end. Steven agreed to do this for their next session. (Constructing an alternative narrative)*

#### **Case Study – Part 4**

Steven has constructed a new story and works hard to maintain this new chapter within his life. He understands that his workmates views on how males should behave will not change; however, he accepts he has options over how he will react to this. His new narrative includes other ways to express his masculinity without violence.

'The Explosions' have left. Life is calm.

Steven: It is still really busy at work but inside I feel composed. I am enjoying work and have started a part-time project management course at university. My boss and some of the boys still have a go at me but I don't let 'The Explosions' come near me. I have nothing to prove to them. I know that I can be me and I like me. I have the occasional beer but I don't really drink much. I know it can change how I behave. I talk about Sarah with my mates sometimes and the rawness is leaving by just keeping her alive in our discussions. Although I miss her, I have met a girl through the rock climbing club and we get on really well. We both want this to last. I don't need to be a 'tough man' around my old or new friends. They take me for what I am. They like the bloke I am without the violence. Scaling a rock face or negotiating a peak is proof enough.

I have started camping with Dad again. We can talk and connect. He says I am great company for him. Mum is smiling.