

The Restorative Power of Storytelling for Cancer Survivors and Caregivers

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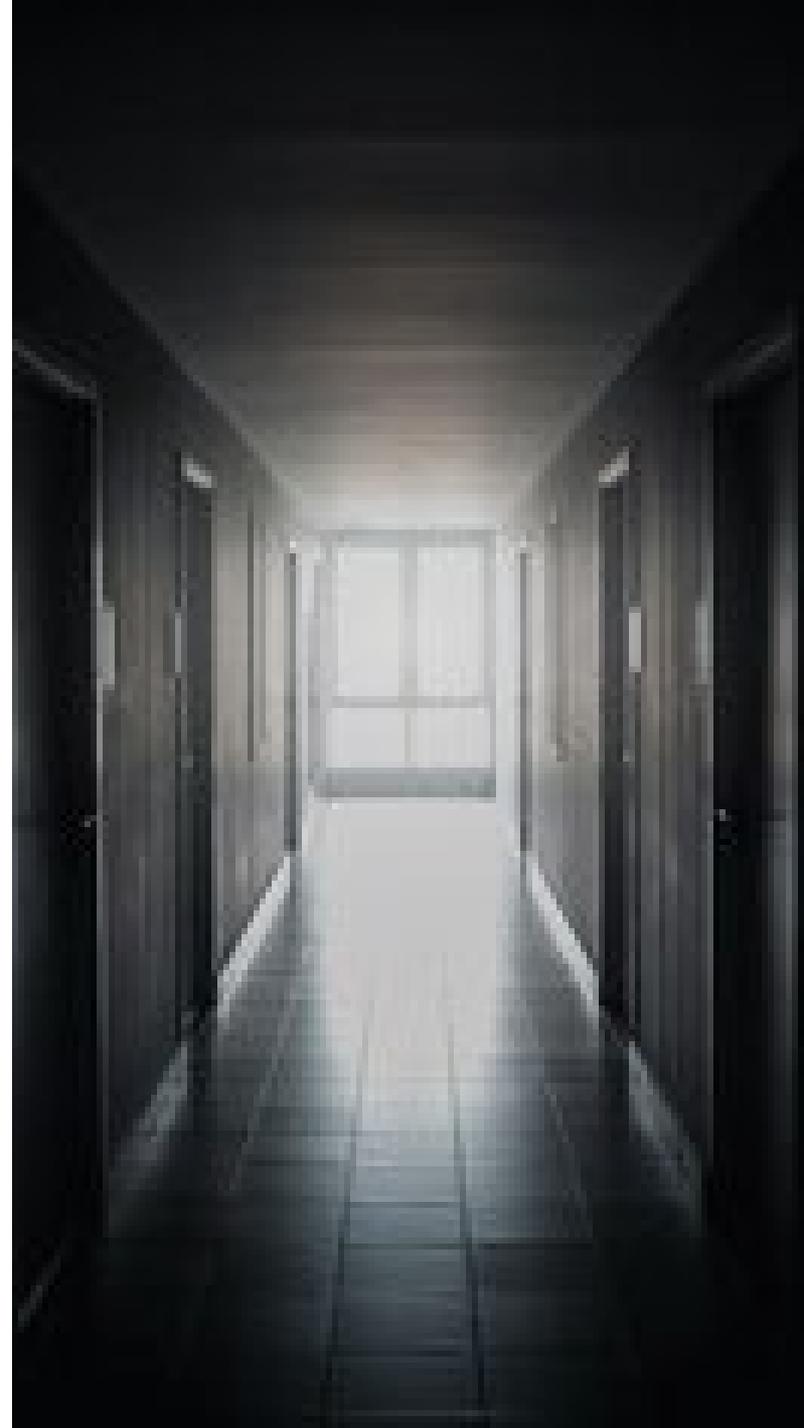
Mental Health and Cancer

Trauma, Stress, and the Biopsychosocial Lens



Cancer: Fear and Uncertainty

- Grief
- Shame
- Anger
- Guilt
- Fear of death and dying
- Can I provide for my family?
- Feeling detached or numb
- Loss of identity
- Fear of pain and physical changes
- Fear of side effects
- Fear of recurrence/Scan anxiety
- Fear of being a burden to family/friends





Impact on Care Delivery and Clinical Outcomes

- Increased all cause mortality risk
- Decreased survival
- Shorter progression-free survival
- Greater symptom burden
- Diminished well-being
- Decreased quality of life
- Poor treatment compliance



Integrated Behavioral Health

- Screening for distress and routine screening
- Holistic and patient-centered care based on the biopsychosocial model
- Interdisciplinary collaboration and continuity of care
- Offer tailored treatment options

Barriers to Integrated Care

- Lack of awareness
- Individual patient beliefs and stigma
- Competing demands for care
- Lack of staff and financial resources
- Complex transactional care delivery ecosystem



My Story



You Have Cancer

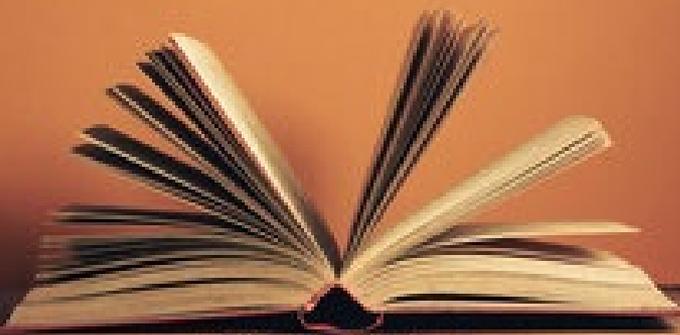


Enter: The Accountant

Our Collective Healing Power: Shared Stories

- Sharing stories are universal because they help us make sense of the world, share knowledge, and connect emotionally with others
- Long before writing, oral traditions preserved history, conveyed moral lessons, and strengthened social bonds
- Psychologist William James noted that human consciousness naturally organizes experience into meaningful sequences—essentially, stories
- Represent a necessary framework for human survival and meaning-making

Stories gain their true healing power when they carry emotional context, allowing listeners to not just hear facts, but to feel, connect, and find meaning together





Heros Journey

Introduction

- Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey—is a universal narrative framework present in myths, legends, and stories worldwide.
- Monomyth, a recurring structure in which a protagonist undergoes a transformational journey that mirrors core human psychological experiences.
- Campbell's Hero's Journey is a psychologically grounded model that helps us **connect** through shared arcs of struggle, transformation, and return.

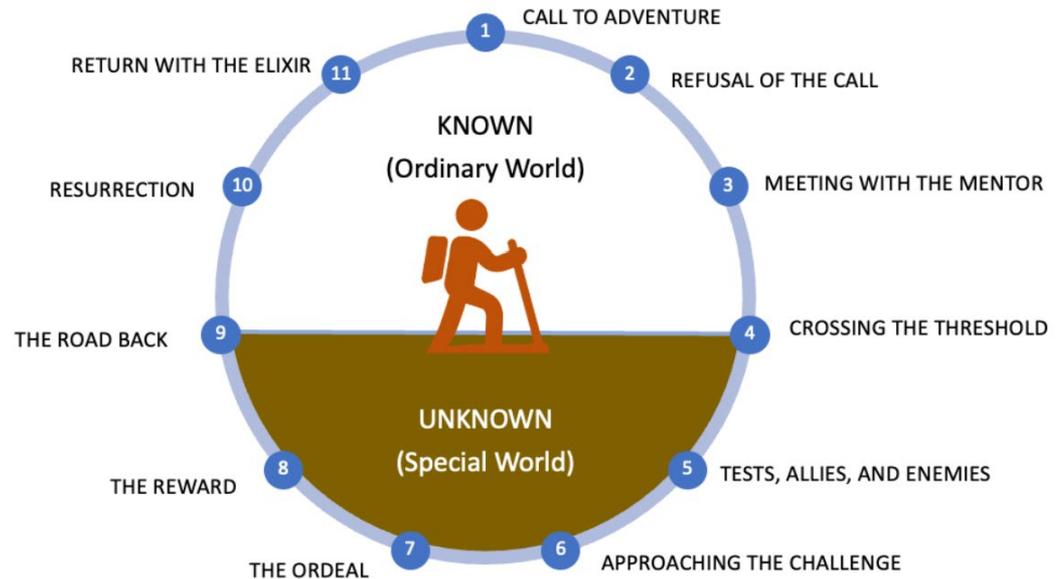
Hero's Journey - Key Stages

Departure

Initiation

Return

The Hero's Journey



Sharing a Universal Journey

Hero's Journey framework by Joseph Campbell

- Journey structure enhances meaning and purpose
- Allies and challenges foster relationships and engagement
- Transformation supports resilience
- Narrative reframing promotes positive emotion and posttraumatic growth



Exploring the Research:



Heros Journey Re-storying Intervention

- Improved ability to find meaning
- Increased resilience and well-being
- Enhanced a sense of agency and empowerment



— Physiology and Shared Experience: Purposeful Storytelling

We are :

- Embodied
- Relational
- Self-organizing





Embodied Storytelling

- Mind isn't just our brain-it's expressed through our body sensations-emotions-thoughts-and memories
- Physiological synchrony occurs-heartrate, breathing patterns change-reflecting emotional attunement
- The body literally carries the mental and relational experience

Relational Stories

- The story becomes relational , not informational
- Our minds are shaped by interactions our relationships
- Coregulation creates shared understanding and connection





Self-Organizing

- Integration of sensory, emotional, cognitive information
- Our minds organize new experiences into coherent patterns, integrated current stories with prior experiences
- Neuroplasticity and enhanced connectivity in regions of the brain that regulate resilience, empathy, and self-awareness

Vulnerability and Safety

- Increased Vagal Tone – Stimulates the vagus nerve, improves heart rate variability, reduces inflammation.
- Enhanced sensitivity to speech/human voice
- Activation of social engagement system-facial expressions-vocalizations-gestures
- Enhanced connectivity between cortical and subcortical structures-improved emotional regulation-improved ability to read the emotional states of others



Gratitude

Supports neuroplastic changes that strengthen:

Autobiographical memory

Interoceptive awareness

Attention and emotional salience





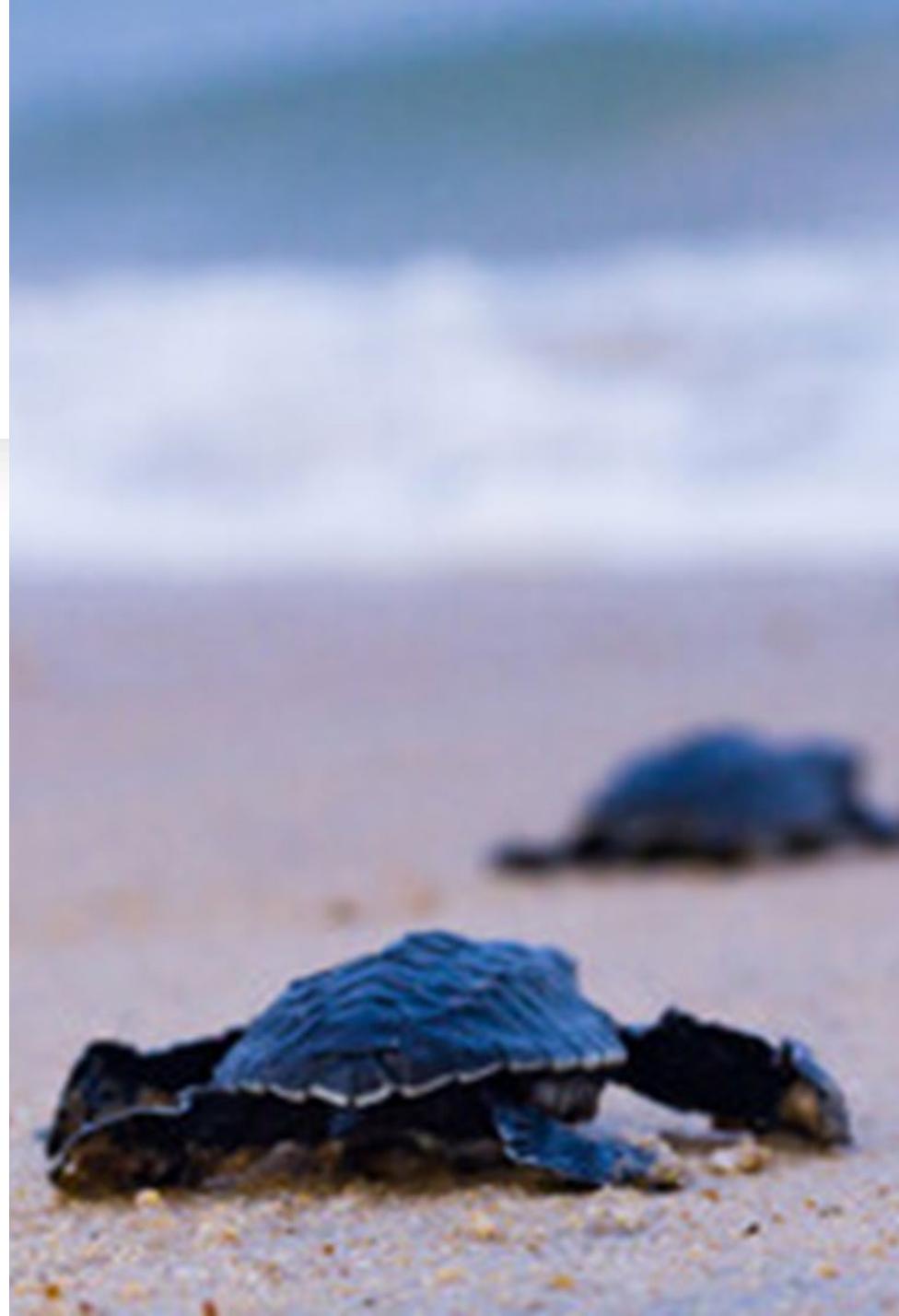
Closing Thoughts

- Patients, clinicians, and caregivers each experience the journey from diagnosis through survivorship in unique ways
- Shared storytelling helps us reframe this journey often leading to transformation and growth
- Through collective meaning-making, we connect, validate, and honor each other's stories
- Sharing our stories opens space for healing, helping patients, caregivers, and clinicians find meaning and connection during their cancer journey

Thank you

We must be willing to let go of the life we planned so as to have the life that is waiting for us

Joseph Campbell



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