

It's been said that a picture is worth a thousand words. But maybe words are worth our attention, too. Consider Philip Pullman's comment, "After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world." Stories connect us. They help define who we are. Stories make us care. Turns out science is helping to explain why stories have the power to change our brains.

Stories make us Empathic

When you make a point, engage an audience, or even promote your business a story captures attention in a way that simple facts can't. To help explain this I turned to Paul Zak whose research has uncovered the link between stories, oxytocin and empathy. He says stories engage more of the brain and stimulate oxytocin production. Oxytocin is a hormone and neurotransmitter produced in the brain and blood that has been called the love and connection hormone. When oxytocin levels increase we feel safe and more compassionate toward others. Oxytocin is stimulated in lots of ways. It's long been known that it increases during sex, childbirth and breastfeeding. Petting a loved animal, giving a gift, loving-kindness meditation, dance, praying, hugs, and massage all raise oxytocin levels. A story creates a social connection which also increases oxytocin. I've seen this first hand in my own work. When I tell a story about how a very old person responded in a Compassionate Touch® session people are moved. When I simply point out the benefits of Compassionate Touch® they understand on an intellectual level but that's all. Stories reach our hearts and souls and that old person "comes alive" to the listener.

Mary's Story

There she was, this wisp of a woman in her wheelchair, alone in this big empty dining room. Her eyes had a far-away look and every few seconds she sobbed. Was she in pain? She didn't seem to notice when I spoke to her. She rambled and I could only catch a word here and there. For several minutes I simply sat quietly with her. Saying her name, holding her hand and stroking her arm, she looked at me for the first time. A connection! Mary accepted my touch but the crying jags continued as she gripped my hand. It was time for me to go and as I walked away she said in a weak, but clear voice something that shook me to the core. "I'm so lonely".

The next day I saw her again. She lay in bed, so tiny she was barely visible under the covers. She stared at the ceiling, again crying. I took in the scene as I stood the doorway to her room. Not one picture, flower, card or anything else personal was to be found. Who was this woman? All I knew was the moment. "Hi Mary, its Ann. Can I sit next to you on your bed?" She actually nodded yes! I massaged her hands and softly stroked her hair and cheek, a touch I often use to comfort people with advanced conditions. Still, she cried every few minutes. But she reached up and touched my cheek and even looked me in the eye. I stayed present in her little world. At one point she took my hand to her lips, kissed it and said I love you. It was wonderful to see Mary go from profound loneliness to enjoying our relationship in her own way. As I was leaving, a nurse came in and said "Hi Mary" quite casually like she's probably done a thousand times. And Mary, in a clear voice said Hi! The nurse was clearly amazed. I walked away with a smile in my heart. Mary wasn't invisible anymore.

What's in a Story?
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Reflect: How did you feel about Mary as you read my story? How might you have reacted? What therapeutic benefits can you identify? Do you think Mary's quality of life improved? In what way?

Capture your own story.

We create a story every time we touch someone. True, some are more memorable than others but many are worth capturing—and sharing. But if you're like me the details of a story fade quickly unless we find a way to resurrect them. Here's a tip. Dedicate a notebook or journal as a place to jot down your own stories. It doesn't have to be formal. Quick notes will do. I have carried a journal in my Compassionate Touch® bag that goes with me into homes and facilities. Some stories are just a line or two. The first entry is dated August 2001. A glimpse through the pages just now has brought back such sweet memories of people who have help shaped my work and blessed my life. So share your own stories. They bring to life the power and validity of your service in the world. We'll all be listening!

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