# "Fairytale Therapy: A Type of Storytelling Therapy"
by Dr Eric Miller, 2018

Storytelling Therapy is emerging as one of the Creative Arts Therapies.  This article especially concerns one type of Storytelling Therapy: Fairytale Therapy.  The article begins with brief introductory overviews of 1) Healing/Counselling/Therapy, 2) Storytelling, 3) Storytelling Therapy, 4) Fairytales, and 5) Fairytale Therapy.  Then three Storytelling Therapy activities are described, and ways the activities could be customised for Fairytale Therapy are suggested.

## Overviews

### 1) Healing/Counselling/Therapy.

Healing/Counselling/Therapy may involve the client becoming more aware of the defense mechanisms and other negative habits that may have have developed in the client in part as a result of experiencing a trauma.  One way of becoming more aware of such mechanisms is to revisit, in one's memory and imagination, the original scene of the trauma.  In this way, one can get to the roots of one's negative habits, and see where and how these habits came about.  Then one can possibly choose to change, and make a plan for changing.  Working with a client's perceptions of traumas the client has experienced is a primary method of Healing/Counselling/Therapy.

Healing/Counselling/Therapy in general involves a healer/counsellor/therapist who facilitates a client's own ability to understand, heal, and grow.

Two possible reasons a person may engage in Healing/Counselling/Therapy are for self-development (growth), and to solve problems within oneself.

### 2) Storytelling.

Story can be defined as *a series of events*.  Storytelling can be defined as *relating a series of events* (to one or more other people in a social gathering).  Storytelling refers to an activity in which the primary means of communication are one's body and voice, although masks, costumes, props, and various types of visual accompaniments may also be used.

### 3) Storytelling Therapy.

These terms -- from least "institutionalized" to most -- refer to a similar activity: "Storytelling and Healing".  "Therapeutic Uses of Storytelling".  "Storytelling Therapy".

I propose Storytelling Therapy as an umbrella term for all healing/therapeutic approaches that utilize "Narrative Psychology" (1).  An advantage of including "telling" in the term, Storytelling Therapy, is that doing so draws attention to ways the *process* of telling can be therapeutic.

In a sense, talk therapy in general is a form of Storytelling Therapy.  However, various styles of therapy especially utilize story.  One such style of therapy is "Narrative Therapy", which focuses on the client conceptualizing and telling the client's life story so as to recognise and celebrate the client's coping mechanisms (2). Another story-related approach is "Narrative Medicine", which focuses on training the care-giver to elicit and listen to patients' stories of their experiences (3).

When metaphors are utilized in relation to a client's personal-experience narratives,

Storytelling Therapy involves "Metaphor Therapy" (4).  Metaphors may help a client to connect the client's experiences with happenings outside the client, sometimes with processes of nature.  If a metaphor is conventional, using it may remind a client that others have gone through similar situations, and that the client's culture can suggest ways of handling the situation.  Metaphors involve the imagination and emotions: using metaphors can help a client to get a solid grasp on what the client is experiencing emotionally.

All of the characters and objects in a story can be thought of as representing aspects of the storyteller's psyche.  As part of healing/therapeutic -- and growing and maturing -- processes, a client might tell a story from the points of view of the various characters and objects in a story.

## 4) Fairytales.

Folktales are stories that developed in the oral tradition.  Most folktales are timeless and placeless: they occurred *once upon a time*, in, for example, a forest -- but not in any specific forest.  Folktales are developed by communities, and have no individual author.  Fairytales are a type of folktale.  One distinguishing element of fairytales is that they often involve magic.

In Fairytales,

*  A good character (GC) often does something kind, and the kindness is returned to the GC.

*  The GC is often oppressed by a wicked, greedy, self-centered character.  These opposite natures are very pronounced.  In real life, one may have positive and negative aspects within oneself.  In fairytales, these personality traits are often projected onto separate oppositional characters.

*  The GC goes out into the world beyond, often going on a journey.  The GC may make allies, do tasks, and/or compete in contests.  The GC comes of age -- often winning a fortune and an excellent spouse in the process.  Fairytales typically end with a marriage (and one must remember that in the time when these stories came into being, most people married while they were teenagers).  The GC is set to live *happily ever after*.

A formulaic opening for fairytales is, "In the olden days, when wishing still did any good ..."  Thus, wishing often plays an important role in fairytales.  The GC may be granted three wishes.

The GC is optimistic.  The GC often hopes for some way out of a seemingly insurmountably problematic situation.  In such cases, in fairytales typically the GC's dream comes true: help arrives, magically and miraculously.

## 5) Fairytale Therapy

The classic European, Scandinavian, and Slavic fairytales came into existence after the outlawing of the worship of numerous gods and goddesses, and the implementation of Christianity (5).  It seems that composing and sharing fairytales have been parts of society's process of compensation and healing after the banishment of its nature spirits, goddesses, and other local divinities.  Many of these fairytales involve characters such as old women who live in the forest, witches, and fairy godmothers.  These characters share many attributes with pre-Christian goddesses.  Thus, it seems likely that lore about these goddesses was recycled into fantasy characters in "harmless" fairytales.  In this way, these fairytales involve the

Divine Feminine, often related to nature (Mother Nature, and Mother Earth). Following this line of thinking, working and playing with these fairytales today could involve both individual and social-cultural healing.

A growing body of literature is being written about Fairytale Therapy (6).

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Following are three Storytelling Therapy activities, and ways they could be modified for use in Fairytale Therapy.

**Three Storytelling Therapy Activities**

**1) The Client Works and Plays with the Client's Life Story.**
**2) The Client Starts with a Real-life situation, and Gathers five or six related stories.**
**3) The Client Creates a Story from the Client's Imagination.**

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**1) The Client Works and Plays with the Client's Life Story.**

A client can be invited to tell a brief version of the client's Life Story.  Options include:

A) One may invite the client to focus on traumas the client has experienced, and on how the client has responded to them.

B) One may invite the client to focus on the client's unique interests, skills, and talents; on how the client discovered them; and on how the client is developing and applying them (and hopes to do so in the future).

Client and therapist can then together identify some of the outstanding turning points, and themes, in the client's Life Story.

Among the questions that can be asked regarding the client's Life Story are:  Might the client like to change anything in the client's Life Story?  Remove anything?  Add anything?  Insert any imaginary characters or behaviors?  Becoming aware of such inclinations can be very illuminating.

One can also ask:  Might the client like to say something to any of the characters? Might the client like to play a character saying something to the client?  A character at any age could speak to any other character at any age.  These are methods that have been developed in Psychodrama: they are also optional methods in Storytelling Therapy.

If the client might be interested in developing a metaphorical story version of the client's Life Story, the client and therapist might think about major motifs in the story, and see if any metaphors for these motifs might come to mind.  A story could then be composed around these metaphorical images, objects, characters, etc.

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**2) The Client Starts with a Real-life situation, and Gathers five or six related stories.**

The six steps of this activity are:
A) Select a real-life situation.

B) Identify and think about important motifs in this situation.
C) Gather five or six similar stories.
D) See if any metaphors for the real-life situation motifs come to mind --
and if they do, use them to create new stories.
E) Tell the above-mentioned stories.
F) Discuss.

To elaborate:

A) One Situation/Episode/Incident/Story in one's Life Story can be chosen to explore. This might be a challenging situation. It may be a situation that has not yet been resolved. It may be a situation that is occurring in the present.

B) Think about Motifs (Story Elements) in the chosen Story: Characters, Relationships, Situations, Actions, Images, and Objects. Do any of these elements seem to be outstanding, remarkable, memorable? Do any of them seem to be Archetypal (universal in human experience, in many places and times)?

C) See what associations come to mind. Brainstorm to come up with similar situations and stories. Consider all types of stories, including i) those from experiences of family and friends, ii) history, iii) movies, and iv) folktales, such as animal fables and fairytales. Seek to recall 5 or 6 similar instances of this motif in stories. Considering different ways various characters have handled similar situations may give the client ideas regarding ways to handle the client's situation.

D) See if any Metaphors relating to the original situation/story come to mind. (We discuss how and why Metaphors can be useful -- to bring up emotions, to connect one with the world beyond oneself, etc). Let one's imagination wander and explore, to possibly represent what occurred with fantasy and symbols. Perhaps create a story inspired by the original situation -- or add to, or otherwise modify, the original situation.

Steps C and D may help one to realize that what one is experiencing is not just a personal issue, but is something many people have experienced.

E) Tell and enact the stories. Role-play methods that can used include:
1) Role-reversal (first play one character, and then the other character, who are speaking to each other); and 2) Doubling (speaking the thoughts of various aspects of a character, possibly involving a debate within a character).

F) Discuss.

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**3) The Client Creates a Story from the Client's Imagination.**

To do this, one can use the 6-Part Story Method (6PSM), or a story model inspired by this method. The 6PSM itself draws upon numerous theoretical models of folktales and epics (7). The 6PSM involves a character wanting something, the obstacles to attaining this goal, and ways the obstacles may be overcome. Thus, stories composed using this formula focus on a character's ability to overcome challenges.

Instead of speaking, it is suggested that this activity begins with the client drawing a character and the surrounding story. It may be that material from the unconscious may come more easily through drawing, rather than words. Of course, the drawn material could be discussed afterwards.

Here is the story-composition method I have developed, which is partly inspired by the 6PSM. This method invites the client to free associate in relation to the character

in various ways:

> Choose and draw a character.  This character can be you.  It can be an aspect of you.  It can be based on some other person or character.  It can also be a purely imaginary character.

> Draw the character's hair and clothing.  Is the character holding anything?  Is anything next to the character?  Might any animals be present?  Where is the character?  In what environment is the character?  What expression is on her face?  What is her posture?  Is she posed in any particular way?  Does the character seem to have any special abilities, powers, areas of expertise (for example, can the character understand the language of a particular type of animal?)  How does the character feel?  If the character might be feeling any particular emotion -- imagine why the character might be feeling that way.  What might have happened that has led to the character to feel this way?

> Has the character recently come from somewhere?  If yes -- Why did the character go there?  Did the character get something, do something, or meet someone there?  Does the character want anything?  Has the character lost anything?  Is the character seeking anything?  Does the character want to go anywhere?  Want to do anything?  Make anything?  Meet anyone?  If yes, what happens along the way? -- what adventures, twists and turns, advances and setbacks, helpers (teachers, friends, etc) and enemies, obstacles and solutions, etc, occur?

> What happens at the end of the story?

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Using these three approaches, the client and/or therapist might find or compose a story that especially feels like a Healing Story for the client.  Healing Stories can inspire, guide and stimulate the client towards healing and growth.

**Customizing the Three Storytelling Therapy Methods for Fairytale Therapy**

**1) The Client Works and Plays with the Client's Life Story.**
*To Customize this Activity for Fairytale Therapy:*

First, the therapist could ask the client if the client might be interested in representing the client as the good character (GC) in a fairytale?  If yes:

To create a fairytale-ish version of a Life Story:  One might look for a point in the story where the GC feels distress.  Where does the GC really need help?

Metaphorical characters and/or objects could be created to represent how the distress comes, and how the help comes.

The GC in a fairytale is kind to someone or something.  The GC may suffer, or be in danger.  The GC remains good and kind.  The GC is saved and rewarded -- set for life -- by a magical, miraculous occurrence.  Does any of this relate to the client's Life Story?  If yes, see if any fantasy versions of the Life Story come to mind.

Has anyone been like a fairy godmother who helped the client, in the client's Life Story?  The fairy godmother role might have been played by a senior family member, or a teacher.  Have there been incidents in which things worked out, or did not work out, seemingly by coincidence or luck?  If yes, at what points in a fairytale-ish version of the client's Life Story might a fairy godmother (or some other magical or divine

character) appear, and what might this character do at these points?

In real life, gifts are often intangible, such as expressions of praise, encouragement, and support.  Could such gifts be represented by objects?  In a fairytale, the inner self of a character is often represented by objects that are manifestations of the character's inner self.  For example, gold may come to a good character, whereas dirt may come to a wicked character.

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**2) The Client Starts with a Real-life situation, and Gathers five or six related stories.**
*To Customize this Activity for Fairytale Therapy:*

When gathering associated stories (Step C):  Look especially for fairytales that relate in some way to the real-life situation.

When looking for metaphors for elements of the real-life situation (Step D):  Look especially for metaphors that might relate to fairytales (talking animals, magical spells and transformations, etc), and use such metaphors to create fairytale-ish stories.

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**3) The Client Creates a Story from the Client's Imagination.**
*To Customize this Activity for Fairytale Therapy:*

One might ask these questions:  In the past, present, or future --

Has the character suffered in some way?

What kind of help might the character need?

In what ways has the character been kind, gentle, and generous?

To whom might the character be kind, gentle, and generous?

Who has helped the character?

From whom might the character like to receive help?

Who might the character like to help?

Might the character like to make a wish?
Who or what might be able to grant the characters wishes?
What might happen if the character's wish(es) might come true?

Might the character be hoping for some kind of transformation?
Might the character benefit from some kind of transformation?

Might there be some special object the character is hoping to obtain?  If yes, what is it?  What might this object be useful for?  Might it represent something?

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Notes

1) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative_psychology .
2) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative_therapy .

3) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative_medicine .
4) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaphor_therapy .
5) "The Divine Feminine in Fairy Tales," by Carolyn Emerick, 2017,
http://tinyurl.com/m8mvrb6 .
6) For examples:
a) "Fairytale Therapy", by Benessere.com, 2016,
http://storytellinginstitute.org/225.pdf .
b) "Into the Dark Forest: The Fairytale Heroine's Journey," by Theodora Goss, 2016,
http://storytellinginstitute.org/237.pdf .
c) "The Use of Harry Potter and Fairytales in Narrative Therapy," by Laura Oldford,
2011, http://storytellinginstitute.org/238.pdf .
d) "Fairytale Therapy in Work with Adults and Children", by Loginova Olga, 2015,
http://olga2901l.narod.ru/skazkoterap_ingl.html .
7) For a discussion of the 6PSM and related approaches, please see my essay,
"Story and Storytelling in Storytelling Therapy and Expressive Arts Therapy," 2017,
pages 7-12, at http://storytellinginstitute.org/368.pdf .

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