

On October 31, 1957, a massive blackout took out power in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Patients died, including a baby who was hooked up to an electronic pacemaker. Earl was so disturbed that he took up the challenge to build something better. Over 4 weeks, he created the first battery-powered pacemaker. Once it was tested and approved, Earl was walking through the hospital and noticed a child wearing a battery-powered pacemaker, with the freedom to play and just be a kid.

The mission statement he wrote, based on that experience, remains the company's North Star more than 50 years later. The company's objective is to research, design, and manufacture instruments that alleviate pain, restore health, and extend life. Stories about brand origins are irresistible.

A venture capitalist behind some of the most iconic names in start-up history once told me, "Storytellers have an unfair competitive advantage." He's right. A healthy relationship in the workplace is based on mutual trust and admiration. Stories break down walls. Stories build up trust. Stories also connect people in a profound way. Storytellers influence one another to dream bigger and move mountains. The end of one story is the start of another. The ancient Greek philosopher Plato once said, "Come then, and let us pass a leisure hour

in storytelling, and our story shall be the education of our heroes." Plato meant that the stories themselves create, inspire, and guide others to play the hero in their own life narrative.

Walt Disney once said that storytellers instill hope again, and again, and again. Storytellers give us hope, and hope is a universal desire.

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How to Be a Storyteller (Even If You Think You're Not)

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All you really have in the end are your stories.

—Burt Reynolds

The books we consider to be great, the talks we want to listen to, and the leaders we choose to follow all tell stories. Stories create meaning, evoke emotions, forge loyalty, and cement memories. In short, human beings are hardwired for storytelling, and as Carmine Gallo puts it, our hunger for fireside stories is as strong as it was for our ancestors. According to an informal Stanford study, 5 of 100 will remember a statistic, whereas 63 of 100 remember a story.¹ Upshot: While statistics inform people on a logical level, stories *move* people on an emotional level. And, as every advertiser knows, it's *emotions* that sell products and build tribes.

We have to do the same in the work that we do. Like advertising, workplace wellness is to a large extent about *persuasion*—persuading senior leaders to support wellness, persuading managers to act as multipliers of well-being for their team members, and persuading employees to take part in initiatives.

As health promotion professionals, we have all learned that persuading people to adopt healthier habits is not just about knowledge transfer (how many people already know it's a good idea to get more exercise?), nor is it about frightening people with scary statistics (how many smokers already know that smoking is bad for them?). Rather, persuasion begins with creating positive, emotionally evocative *experiences* for people—and storytelling is one of the most powerful ways to do just that. Stories light up our brains and accelerate our willingness to put in the sustained effort needed to make change over time.

Meanwhile, most of the wellness programs I come across take a cognitive, or *logical*, approach, primarily focusing on information

delivery and skills building. Too often, these programs overlook the affective, or *emotional*, components of learning.²

What I have come to realize is that if I truly want to start a movement of better health and well-being, and if I want people to *join* that movement, I have to be an excellent storyteller. Every presentation I deliver, every workshop I facilitate, every program I design, and every initiative I oversee must be infused with stories.

All of that said, I would not consider myself a natural storyteller. Rather, it's something I've had to work at—a lot. While I am by no means perfect, I've gotten a lot better. Here are some suggestions to help you also become a storyteller, even if you think you're not.

Storytelling Tip #1: Build Your Story Bank

As health promotion professionals, many of us are good at gathering statistics but struggle to come up with the stories needed to bring these statistics to life. Here are 4 steps to get you started on building your "Story Bank".

- (a) **Clarify your key messages.** What are the key messages you find yourself delivering over and over again? These might be things like "Drink more water," "Spend more time with your tribe," "Move more," and "Manage your energy." Now, that you've got these written out, pick one. Ask yourself: "What story I can tell that will bring this key message to life?"
- (b) **Breathe—and know that you *do* have a well of stories.** Every time I talk about the importance of storytelling, I hear

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people muse, “I don’t have any stories.” Well, actually you *do*. We all do. I liken building your Story Bank to the process of buying a new car. Let’s say you set your sights on a Mini. Before that, you never really noticed Minis. Then, all of the sudden you start seeing them everywhere! Right?

It turns out that the same is true with stories. Just by starting to *pay attention* to the stories in everyday life, you will start seeing stories *everywhere*.

- (c) **“Scratch” for stories.** In her book *The Creative Habit*, choreographer Twyla Tharp compares the process of generating new ideas with “scratching,” or rooting around for inspiration and looking beyond the obvious.³ Scratching can include anything from going to a museum to walking in a different neighborhood to reading the newspaper. The idea is to channel your inner detective and actively *look* for stories.

Below are a few of my standby sources you might turn to:

- *Testimonials.* This is probably the most common source for the stories in our field. You might see testimonials posted on a wall. Or, perhaps, you might hear them from a senior leader. For example, Toby Cosgrove, former CEO of Cleveland Clinic, kicked off every company-wide meeting with sharing testimonials of individual employees who made strides in their health. A word of caution here: As Brian Passon rightly points out, avoid the trap of sharing yet another “before and after” story about someone who lost weight, for example. Instead, craft a story that’s worth listening to, and one that evokes an emotional response.
- *Inspiring people in history.* Who are people that inspire and make for good story material? Sir Ernest Henry Shackleton and his team’s quest for survival in the Antarctic lends itself well to a discussion about resilience. Or, Nelson Mandela’s ability to endure 27 years in prison exemplifies the power of focusing on what we can control—as opposed to what we cannot.
- *In the news.* The daily news offers another great source for stories. To lighten things up, I often insert celebrity vignettes. What’s Kim Kardashian doing that might evoke a laugh? Or, to make the point of someone who is not managing her energy well, what about a mention of Lindsay Lohan?

On a more serious and uplifting note, what about the story of Jamie Dimon, CEO of JP Morgan? After going through treatment for throat cancer, he famously wrote a memo that went out to every employee. “As always,” he wrote, “and especially since my diagnosis, I followed the advice I give to others—take care of your health first—nothing is more important.”⁴ I use this story to tee up an exercise in which I ask managers in a leadership training program to write their version of a “Jamie Dimon memo” to go out to their team.

- *People in your life.* The people you spend the most time with are a terrific source for stories. I follow the lead of author, motivational speaker, and business consultant Marcus Buckingham who wows audiences and unpacks complex business concepts by telling stories about his kids. In my case, I often relate stories about my fiancé (more on that in a moment).
- *Observations in daily life.* There are also the little incidents that we witness in our everyday lives. These are

great fodder for stories. For example, one time I passed by 2 mommies sitting outside a café with their strollers—or so I thought they were mommies. Turns out each “mommy” was cooing over a dog in a stroller. This story serves as a perfect lead up to a key point, namely, “We are all sitting too much—even our pets are sitting too much!”

- *Fables, fairy tales, and children’s stories.* Finally, we cannot discount stories from our childhood. One of my favorites is *The Search for Delicious*,⁵ which I often use to introduce the message: “Drink more water.” Briefly, a page is given the task to embark on a journey to find the food or beverage that defines the word “delicious.” After traveling far and wide, visiting kingdoms and villages in which he is served meals and drinks that are more delicious than the ones before, he arrives upon a village that has been without rain for months. When at last the water begins to flow and everyone drinks it with gusto, the page thinks to himself, “Ah! That’s the definition of ‘delicious’: water when you are thirsty!”
- (d) *Put it all together.* Now, it’s time to start putting these together, using a Story Bank Template. Notice how I’ve organized several of the stories from above into this chart. This is also a good way to bank your stories for future use.

Story Bank Template

1. Message	2. Source	3. Story
“We get to choose how we respond to challenging circumstances.”	Inspiring Stories	Nelson Mandela
“Manage your energy.”	In the News	Lindsay Lohan
“All of us are not moving enough—even our pets!”	Daily Life	Dogs in strollers
“Drink more water.”	Fairytales	<i>The Search for Delicious</i>

Storytelling Tip #2: Incorporate Your Stories

In a nutshell, storytelling can either (a) serve as an illustration to *follow* a key message or (b) create an experience to *precede* a key message.

This key message could, in fact, be a statistic. For example, 80% of Americans are not getting enough physical activity, according to a new report released by the federal government.⁶ Now, I could follow up this statistic with the story about the 2 “mommies.”

Let’s take this a step further. Here are 2 different learning frameworks to position your stories:

Learning Frameworks^a

Didactic Learning Framework ⁷	Experiential Learning Framework ⁸
Information	Experience
Illustration	Debrief
Practice and feedback	Information
Application	Illustration
	Practice and feedback
	Application

Components of Learning Frameworks^a

Component	Description
Experience	Provide an experience (in this case, a story).
Debrief	Debrief the experience—and connect it to the key message that you're delivering.
Information	Now, deliver your key message. (Here's where a statistic would go.)
Illustration	Demonstrate your key message by using an example (in this case, a story).
Practice and feedback	Lead participants in interactive exercises to allow them to engage with the content and make sense of the material on their own terms.
Application	Issue a "call to action," for example, what you would like participants to do once they walk out the door

^a Adaptations by Kris Schaeffer of Gagne's Nine Levels of Learning, along with Pfeiffer and Jones' Experiential Learning Model.

- (a) *Apply a didactic learning framework.* In this first case, insert the story into the "illustration" step. Below is an example of what this might look like (walking through the first 2 steps):

Information: Financial well-being is subject to social comparison, meaning that how well we think we are doing financially is often measured by how we are doing *relative* to others. According to a Harvard study, people are happier when they are making less money on an absolute scale but *more* money relative to their peers—as opposed to making more money on an absolute scale but less money relative to their peers.⁹

Illustration: I live with my fiancé in a perfectly nice apartment in a beautiful neighborhood. Our apartment even has a deck! Meanwhile, just 4 doors down is a \$10 million mansion owned by a young, single guy. *Every* time we walk by that house, my fiancé grumbles: "Grrr. I *hate* that guy!"

- (b) *Apply an experiential learning framework.* In the second case, deliver the story in order to create an initial experience (and then connect with the key message). Here's an example of what that could look like (walking through the first 3 steps):

Experience: In 1995, a preemie was struggling to stay alive. Separated from her stronger twin, a nurse decided to break with hospital protocol and brought the twins into one incubator. The stronger of the two threw her tiny arm around the other—and almost immediately, the weaker twin's heart rate went up and her vitals stabilized. With one "small interpersonal move,"¹⁰ the stronger twin saved her sister's life.

Debrief: As highlighted by this story, compassion is one of our deepest needs. Our lives literally depend on it. This is true not just for preemies in a neonatal intensive care unit; it's also true for adults in the workplace.

Information: This is why we need to "awaken compassion in the workplace," as suggested by researchers Monica Worline and Jane Dutton. As a manager, you can do this within your team by conducting small interpersonal moves, like writing

thank you notes or by simply making a point of getting to know your team members on a personal level.

Storytelling Tip #3: Deliver Your Stories

When I was in high school, I took a semester long course on the Civil War. The class was not only unforgettable, it was magical. My teacher Freddy Kiger didn't just teach history; he told *stories*. Moreover, in the storytelling tradition of the South, he told *long* stories.

- Keep it short.* Telling long stories is an art—and unless you're as gifted as Mr Kiger, you're likely to lose your audience very quickly. Instead, keep your stories short—and even use short sentences. This means being judicious in the details that you include, sharing only the ones that help to move the story forward.
- Pause.* Delivering stories requires that you dig deep. It's really about tapping into what matters most to you. As Shawn McCann, Jody Barto, and Nancy Goldman explain, storytelling can even act as a healing device, both for the storyteller and the listeners. This is why it's essential to pause after delivering a story with emotional punch. Give yourself a moment to take it in and, at the same, give your audience the time it needs to feel the affective impact.
- Show instead of telling.* I often tell stories about my grandmother, who was married not once, not twice, but 5 times! While shopping with her, a store clerk inquired about our shoe sizes. My grandmother responded with, "Well, my size is 8, but 9's are so comfortable, I wear a 10." With this short vignette, I *show* what she was like.

Ultimately, the task that lies ahead for all of us is to move beyond programs—and connect with what matters most to people. We need to start a *movement* of better health and well-being. Thomas Robinson, MD, MPH, professor of pediatrics and medicine at the Stanford University School of Medicine, explains, "When people get involved in social movements, it changes their behavior more dramatically than what we've seen with more cognitive-based approaches."¹¹

Storytelling is one of the most powerful tools we can use to launch a movement, and as Elena Valentine describes, storytelling can cut through stigmatization and offer a platform for unity. You can become a "movement builder" by first taking heart in knowing that you *already are* a storyteller. Then, using the tools described above, focus your efforts on (1) building your Story Bank, (2) incorporating your stories into your talks and programs, and (3) delivering these stories in a way that will engage your audience. Whether it's starting a movement or engaging in a one-on-one conversation, perhaps, stories really are all we have in the end.

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The Power of Storytelling for Behavior Change and Business

Brian Passon, MS¹

What Is It About Storytelling That You Feel Makes It a Critical Skill for the Health Promotion Field?

Stories have immense power on our emotions and our brains. Recognizing and leveraging the power of story has the potential to transform our health promotion efforts. Research has shown that a story can enhance positive human behaviors like altruism or kindness¹ and improve grades in students.² In fact, one study revealed that storytelling can be effective in changing health behaviors, like blood pressure.³ Stories provide the teller a chance to share insights and observations with a listener in such a way that the listener not only gets involved in the story but can objectively think about and discuss a real-life issue without feeling affronted or defensive. A crafty storyteller uses their gift of wordsmithery to pull people into a story, then discusses the meaning or moral of the story, and then waits as the listener realizes that they are actually one of the characters in the story . . . thus giving the listener an “AHA!” moment.

Jennifer Aaker, a professor of marketing at Stanford University's Graduate School of Business, says that stories are up to 22 times more memorable than facts alone.⁴ When we listen to and process a story, our brain fires up more than just the language centers of the brain, and it's almost as if we are experiencing the story for “real.”⁵ Thus, we are more likely to remember and retain the information shared in story form. So if you are 22 times more likely to remember a story than facts, then maybe the charts and graphs we all share with our executives or during industry conference sessions should become more like graphic novels than PowerPoint jargon.

How Else Could Storytelling Play a Role in Our Work?

Organizations have a plot just like a story has a plot. A business' strategic plan is a lot like a plot. It sets the goals, determines how to achieve them, and establishes a time frame for completion. Organizations often spend countless hours with senior executives and consultants to set their plot but then spend little to no time crafting a story to

connect to the people they are trying to serve. The story is the heart, it's the who and the why things happen, and ultimately connect people to the plot. If we want to tell a great story, we have to understand that “plot” and “story” are inextricably linked and yet distinctly different. The story answers the questions “what is this about?” and “why should I care?” Story gives an organization a chance to connect the people to the purpose/vision/mission/values of the business. If we get too absorbed in strategy/plot, we lose our human connection. If we get too involved in the heart of the story, we can lose our vision and purpose.

Consider how you would answer this question: Why do people work for your organization? Would your answer be a list of health-care benefits, retirement packages, profit sharing, or the company's 5-year S&P 500 performance? If so, you missed the chance to tell a story and connect in a human way first. Watch a few television commercials and notice how they are less focused on the products they are selling and more focused on highlighting the story about their company, their product, the social good you get to be a part of, or the new amazing story your life will become once you buy/use the product. Modern businesses use story to connect people to their organizations, both from an internal (employee) and external (customer) perspective. Storytelling is the start of a hook, a way to connect people to an organization and transform the relationship beyond just being transactional and into a relationship of mutual care and trust.

There Is an Emerging Interest in Incorporating the Discipline of Customer Experience Into Health Promotion Initiatives. How Is Customer Experience Related to Storytelling?

If our goal is positive behavior change, then we should be creating amazing experiences that have the power to be “sticky” for people.

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