Be your own hero

You can boost well-being and achieve your personal goals by taking control of your self-narrative, finds David Robson

EVERYONE knows what makes a good story. Our hero starts their journey as a flawed but relatable being with a personal goal. In scene after scene, they face challenges and setbacks that push them down new paths. By the end of the tale, they have prevailed and become a better person in the process. Just think of Jane Eyre, Luke Skywalker or Gilgamesh.

We love these plots in the novels we read, the films we watch and the video games we play. But the principles of a good story offer much more than entertainment. Recent research shows that the narratives we tell ourselves about our lives can powerfully shape our resilience to stress. People who generate tales of struggle and redemption from their own lives appear to have much better mental health. You could describe this as the flawed hero effect.

Better yet, psychologists have found that spinning our memories into a well-told life narrative, and viewing our future as an extension of this story, can help us achieve our aspirations for self-improvement. And if you want to turn over a new leaf, it helps to choose a significant date that signals the start of a new “chapter”. Contrary to popular scepticism, resolutions made on 1 January are more effective for this reason. So, whether your goal is saving money, studying for exams, quitting smoking or getting fit, there is no better time to start. You just need to know how to harness the power of self-narrative to boost your willpower, improve your well-being and create a better you.

The original protagonist in the burgeoning field of narrative psychology is Dan McAdams at Northwestern University in Illinois. A humanities major for his undergraduate degree, he had always been drawn to the grand narratives of novelists like Leo Tolstoy. Then, when he switched to studying psychology, he began to think about the story we tell about ourselves and wondered whether this is, in fact, the essence of individual identity.

Previously, psychologists had seen identity as a combination of someone’s values and beliefs, their goals and their social roles, with a particular emphasis on the ways they compared themselves with others. McAdams doesn’t question the importance of these elements, but he proposes that a personal narrative, based on our autobiographical memories, binds them all together. It is our reflections on this story that give us a strong sense of who we are and, crucially, shape how we interpret current and future events. “An identity is supposed to integrate your life in time,” he says. “It’s something in your mind that puts together the different roles in your life and situates you in the world. And like every story, it has characters, it’s got a plot and it’s got themes that run through it.”

McAdams formulated this idea, which he calls the life story model of identity, in the 1980s. Analysing people’s recollections and questioning them about their sense of self, his work suggested that people’s identities really are drawn from their life stories in this way. Over the past two decades, his hypothesis has attracted increasing attention from many other psychologists.

Much of the early research focused on the origins of our self-narratives. McAdams and others found that young children tend not to see their lives as a story made of interconnected events. Instead, their autobiographical memories are fragmentary. It is only in adolescence and early adulthood...
A positive personal narrative could help motivate you to volunteer

that most people start to engage in more sophisticated “autobiographical reasoning”, which involves reappraising the meaning of our memories and slotting them together into a more coherent structure. “The cognitive operations that are required to create narrative in your life don’t really come online until the teenage years,” says McAdams. He describes this as transitioning from the role of “actor” to “author”. As a result, for example, a typical 10-year-old is unlikely to see their parents’ divorce as a turning point in their life, whereas a 15-year-old will tend to.

It has also become clear that the basic structure of our personal narrative resembles that of a book: we organise our life story into specific chapters representing important transitions in our identity. “You think of life in terms of periods: the time where I was in elementary school, the time where I lived in this house or this city or the time I was in this relationship,” says Dorte Kirkegaard Thomsen at Aarhus University, Denmark.

Creating a coherent narrative about your life can have huge benefits to your well-being (see main story), but children take years to develop this skill. Psychologist Elaine Reese at the University of Otago, New Zealand, has spent the past two decades examining the ways that parents’ conversations with toddlers can help.

Recalling a trip to a natural history museum, a young child may say a single word, such as “bones”. Many parents will simply let the conversation drop at this point, but Reese asked those in her study to pay attention to such cues and to follow them up with open-ended questions, encouraging their child to elaborate on the story. “That’s really the key to the technique, getting them to give voice to their memories,” says Reese. The parent should then affirm the child’s answer, and build on it, as an active sign of their interest.

Reese found that parents given these guidelines were still applying the strategies a year later and that this improved the detail of the children’s autobiographical memories compared with their peers. Astonishingly, these differences were still apparent in adolescence. When Reese interviewed the same children at age 15, she found they were better than others at telling coherent stories about possibly tricky turning points in their lives. “They were able to draw more meaning out of the difficult event,” she says. This, in turn, was linked with better emotional well-being.

soon became apparent that people vary in their ability to create a personal narrative. By analysing people’s accounts of important life events, researchers can judge the coherence of their stories – whether they have a definite chronology with obvious causality between one event and another. Such studies show that some people’s stories are full of details, while those of others are much vaguer, with important knock-on effects for their well-being. People with more coherent narratives tend to have a stronger sense of identity and they feel their life has more meaning, direction and sense of purpose. Such people show greater overall life satisfaction too.

McAdams and his colleagues have also investigated the link between well-being and certain narrative themes. They discovered that agency – whether someone describes having had some control over events in their past – is an important predictor of mental health. “People who are depressed or overly anxious often describe their life narratives in a kind of non-agentic way,” says McAdams. “They have the sense that ‘I’m being pushed around by forces that I can’t control’.”

Another key theme is redemption, which involves finding some kind of positive meaning after stressful events. “People could talk about gaining knowledge or personal growth,” says McAdams. His research shows that this is often missing for people with mental health conditions such as depression. “They create these stories that they’ve ruined everything or that they can’t create positive relationships and that they are destined to live that out forever,” he says.

The power of redemption

Themes of redemption may be particularly important when we are trying to overcome a bad habit or addiction. One study asked new members of Alcoholics Anonymous to describe their last drink. Some gave straight factual descriptions, while others described a personal moment of realisation, leading to a positive change in themselves. One individual, for instance, described finding his strength again: “I feel like this obsession has been lifted from me again, and I need to see everything I did wrong last time to make it better this time.” More than 80 per cent of the people telling a redemptive story remained sober over the following four months, compared
themselves, including their self-confidence. Participants reported more positive perceptions of themselves, compared with people who instead wrote about the lives of famous figures such as James Dean. “Thinking about narrative chapters gives you a stronger sense that you have value as a person,” says Kirkegaard Thomsen. “And the writing process makes it feel substantial.”

The good news for anyone trying to turn over a new leaf in 2023 is that this bolstered sense of empowerment can improve your self-discipline too. McAdams, working with Northwestern University colleagues Brady Jones and Mesmin Destin, asked 14 and 15-year-olds to write about a time when they had failed and a time when they had succeeded. Half of them were then given extra instructions to describe the ways they had made their success a reality (encouraging reflection on agency) and how the failure had changed them for the better (encouraging reflection on redemption). Eight weeks later, members of this group reported greater persistence in their schoolwork, and they had better grades.

Such findings have led psychologists studying narrative psychology to wonder whether people can be taught to tell better stories about themselves – ones that would bring about positive personal growth.

A first inkling that this might be possible came in 2010. A team led by Sharon Danoff-Burg, then based at the University at Albany in New York, asked three groups of participants to complete questionnaires about their mental health, before spending 20 minutes writing about their past. Some were asked to give a factual description of a house they had once lived in. Others were encouraged to express their deepest thoughts and feelings. A third group wrote about a specific event and were told to focus on storytelling elements, such as the background to what occurred, the details of how it unfolded and the outcome. The essays of this last group showed greater narrative structure and coherence than the others and these people also experienced improvements in their mental health over the next month. A few people in the expressive writing group had naturally written in a narrative style too and, tellingly, the more coherent their stories, the better their subsequent well-being.

New research indicates that it is even possible to improve the storytelling skills of toddlers, with long-lasting benefits to their well-being (see “Story time”, left). Meanwhile, multiple studies show the equally impressive benefits of simply writing down your self-narrative. Kirkegaard Thomsen, for example, found that this can boost self-esteem. In three separate studies of more than 400 participants in total, she and her colleagues asked people to write about specific life chapters before being questioned about their opinions of themselves, including their self-confidence. Participants reported more positive perceptions of themselves, compared with people who instead wrote about the lives of famous figures such as James Dean. “Thinking about narrative chapters gives you a stronger sense that you have value as a person,” says Kirkegaard Thomsen. “And the writing process makes it feel substantial.”

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As exciting as these results are, Kate McLean at Western Washington University in Washington state sounds a few notes of caution. Her first concern is that, hearing about the power of redemptive narrative, many people may feel compelled to find a positive spin on traumatic events. If they can’t, they could end up feeling guilty about having somehow “failed”, which will only exacerbate their distress. McLean says that Western culture – and particularly US culture – already pushes people to look for the silver lining behind every cloud. “That pressure can be really problematic,” she says.

McLean also warns that the self-esteem boost that comes from focusing on our life narrative might sometimes undermine efforts at self-improvement. Working with Lauren Jennings, then also at Western Washington University, she gave participants false psychological feedback suggesting they were prejudiced. This led to a serious dip in their self-esteem. However, if they then wrote a story detailing a high point in their life, they quickly recovered from the uncomfortable feelings this produced and reverted to viewing themselves as tolerant people. “We can tell ourselves stories so that we don’t need to think about something uncomfortable, or change our behaviour,” says McLean.

New Year, new you

Clearly, narrative interventions aren’t a panacea. And when confronted with a harsh truth about ourselves, we would do far better to see that as a reason for change than simply discounting what we have learned. Nevertheless, if you are aspiring to self-improvement, you can use the findings about self-narrative to good effect – and the New Year is an ideal time to start.

Consider the work of Katy Milkman, who studies behavioural change at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Inspired by research on narrative psychology, she examined whether we can use significant dates to signal the beginning of a new chapter in our lives – and if this, in turn, can motivate us to forge healthier habits. New Year’s resolutions are the most obvious example of this principle in action, and polls suggest this temporal landmark is indeed a motivator: around a third of people manage to keep all their resolutions and half stick to at least some of their goals for the year. Milkman’s findings indicate that the effect isn’t limited to New Year: things like a birthday, a new academic term or moving to a new house can also inspire change. In one study, she and her colleagues found that simply labelling 20 March as “the start of spring” boosted people’s motivations to adopt a new habit, such as increased gym attendance, on that date.

Milkman’s team didn’t check whether those good intentions translated into action, but a large field experiment, led by John Beshears at Harvard Business School, found that this strategy can bring real change. The team worked with four US universities to offer 6000 employees the chance to increase their savings with a new retirement plan. Some participants were given potential start dates that signalled a new beginning, such as their birthday, New Year’s day or “the first day of spring”, while others got less salient start dates, such as “in two months”. It worked exactly as expected: nudging people to think about a new life chapter significantly increased the take-up of the programme.

Whether or not you plan to make any specific New Year’s resolutions, the start of 2023 is the perfect opportunity to reflect on your life story – and to think about your future. Perhaps you will decide to take up journalling to help build a more coherent narrative of your past as a way of understanding your present. Or maybe you can look ahead to important moments in the coming months that will allow you to make a fresh start on some important goal. Our lives may not be as dramatic as those of our favourite fictional characters. But by recognising ourselves as the hero at the centre of our struggles, we can, in a very literal sense, become the author of our own destiny and change ourselves for the better.

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