

# **Turning depression on its head:**

## **Employing creativity to map out and externalise depression in conversations with young women**

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This paper explores the counter-effects of creativity on depression, and gives an example of creative narrative therapy strategies in externalising and storying depression in conversations with young women at a New Zealand high school.

Keywords: depression, creativity, narrative therapy, young women

## INTRODUCTION

My interest in writing this article was sparked by hearing young women talk about depression in their lives. As a school counsellor, I have become interested in exploring with these young women their experience of depression, using creative narrative therapy strategies to gaze at depression. In this process, young women have re-positioned themselves with regard to depression. I have also become interested in bringing to light more neglected stories of the operation of creativity in these young women's lives in the hope that this will counter the totalising effects that depression sometimes has on their identity.

## TAKING UP A DECONSTRUCTIVE STANCE IN CONVERSATIONS ABOUT DEPRESSION

As a therapist I choose to take up a questioning stance with regard to conversations about depression. In terms of mapping out depression, I prefer to allow the client to make meaning of depression and how it operates in their lives rather than simply seeing it as a set of diagnosable symptoms.

Stoppard (1997) argues that depression as an object is discursively constructed in language. She believes that people act out social 'scripts' of depression, that we have an implicit understanding of how to 'do' depression and that so-called depressive behaviours are themselves socially constructed (p.28). In viewing 'depression' as constructed in language with specific cultural meanings attached, I choose to take up a curious position with regard to what young women name 'depression'. In many ways I see 'depression' as a label that can override young women's own meanings of their experiences.

Stoppard (2000) highlights the importance of women theorizing about depressive experiences themselves. This arguably allows women more affirming and less stigmatizing ways of interpreting their experience. Counselling can be a space for people to define and frame their own experiences of depression from a position of being the expert in their own life. In my work with young women I explore the meanings they give to their experiences of depression and how this meaning is constructed in the course of their everyday lives. In my role as a

therapist I am interested in questioning depression - not taking it for granted. I am involved in looking at the meanings given to depression by young women and how these young women make sense of their experiences of themselves in the world.

## EXTERNALISATION

In my work with young women around depression, I aim to externalise depression. Shona Russell and Maggie Carey (2004) suggest that once problems are externalised, or viewed as an entity rather than an inherent aspect of a person, they can then be put into story-lines, and their impact and effects can be mapped out. The position of the problem then changes from being internal, where the person is defined by the problem, to being external, where its influence and tactics can be exposed, and the person can gain support from others in responding to it.

By inviting young women to externalise the depression I aim to facilitate a change of perspective for them in relation to the problem. In externalisation, the problem shifts from being internal (where the client in effect 'owns' and is identified by the problem) to external (where the client is able to mediate a relationship between herself and the problem). Through externalisation, the client can 'story' the relationship between herself and depression rather than being the subject of stories about depression. In this way, the client renegotiates her identity in relation to the problem.

Depression can be externalised in a variety of ways, in words and pictures. It has traditionally been represented in metaphors of colour and seasons: the blues, feeling grey, dark times. Experiences of depression can be put into visual word pictures such as 'slipping into a deep hole' or 'being under a dark cloud' (Stoppard 2000 p.37). Drawing pictures of the externalised force, a visual representation, can sometimes enhance the externalisation process (Zimmerman & Shepherd 1993).

## STORYING DEPRESSION - *The gloomy well*

Ebony<sup>2</sup> came to counselling over a period of two years, initially she wanted to discuss friendship and relationship difficulties. At some point, however, the depression came to the fore, expressed in cutting and suicidal thoughts. During the darker times,

Ebony believed she was cursed. She described a fight in her head between the different Ebony's: the happy Ebony, the angry Ebony, the creative Ebony, the smart Ebony (who she believed was dead), and the depressed Ebony. She felt she needed depression and that it fed her. Her care for herself at that time was very low. She had the smallest hope that receiving help would work for her. For Ebony, the depressed Ebony was strongest, and battled with other Ebony's. At this time it was very difficult for Ebony to gain any space from depression, as she identified with it very strongly and felt she needed it.

In one session, I began by inviting Ebony into a consultant role for other young women struggling with depression (Epston & White 1992). Ebony was

interested in being a consultant for others. She spoke very knowledgeably about how depression seemed to come between her relationships with others, how there was a 'chain reaction' when others realise you're feeling low and are affected by it. She talked about 'pretending to be happy' and then eventually feeling better and happier. She introduced the metaphor of depression as a 'well'. I asked her more questions about what the well was like and how she experienced the well. Together, through conversation, we carefully elaborated this metaphor. At the end of our discussion, Ebony said she'd felt 'a massive blast of inspiration' as we'd been talking, and would continue to think about it all day. She was happy for me to write up our co-elaboration as a story.

### **EBONY'S FIGHT WITH DEPRESSION**

– *in which she holds onto what she's learned and what she knows*

*After many years of depression Ebony knew depression quite well. It was familiar; it could suck you in. Depression was like a well; a daunting, dark and gloomy well. It was made out of grey stone, and had sides to it. When she was at the bottom of the well, she couldn't climb out of it.*

*Ebony learned that you've just got to stop yourself reaching the bottom of the well.*

*She'd also learn that others can help you up. Some people can do this without even realising it. She knew from experience that once you were in the well, it was very hard to climb back up. She could fall back down the well by letting one thing get to her.*

*There were times when Ebony could see herself perched on the edge of the well, sitting on the top; feeling unsteady, swaying, waiting for one gust of wind to push her off balance. All she could do was to try to fall back instead of forward; back onto the grass, rather than forward into the well. Even though falling back would be difficult and painful, it would be better than falling into the well. It was all relative. Up on the grass, she had people there to break her fall, people to support her. That was the advice she wanted to give herself: fall back instead of forward. It will eventually get better. The grass was soft and there was shorter to fall. She just needed the courage to fall back.*

*This was difficult because the well was very familiar, and falling backwards involved complete trust. There was something slightly welcoming to her about the well. There was so much comfort in the depression. No-one else seemed to understand that. But down in the well she knew would become accustomed to being alone in a cold, dark place. It felt safe down there; no-one could harm her. But then she would look up and see something beautiful – a bird, a butterfly, someone's face, and this would give her determination to climb up.*

*That wasn't easy sometimes. The cold water in the well was numbing. There was a certain mental numbness that came with the depression. But it was also about focus. Looking up she could see the sky, and the light. It motivated her. She knew she had to keep on looking for something that would make her happy.*

*Ebony knew about the power of the well, how it seemed to pull her closer, how it offered comfort. She'd been in that well before. The first time, something pushed her in; perhaps it was her mother's*

*death. That took time to hit home, but at some point the well became safe, known. At that time she couldn't imagine herself in a nice place. The well seemed a lot safer than the world outside. Ebony would get that feeling when she was approaching the well. It started with a pain in her chest, that familiar weight. It would cling to her, like an imp – weighing her down, not letting her go, and hanging on tightly to her chest. There were times lately when she could see the well coming, she could sense it. She was learning from her own experience that you've just got to stay away from the well.*

This kind of writing, in which I took notes of Ebony's words from our conversation and turned them into a story, has been referred to by Ingram & Perlesz (2004) as 'ghost-writing'. Once Ebony read this, she was pleased with this version of her story of struggle with depression. She liked the fact she could recognise her own words in it. She included the metaphor of the well in a poem she wrote which she brought to counselling but did not want to publish.

## EXTERNALISING DEPRESSION

In my work with Ebony, I was looking for opportunities to separate 'the depression' from Ebony linguistically, to enable her to gain a new perspective on it. The change of position occurred when Ebony was invited to act as a consultant for other young women struggling with depression. When she was invited to name some of her learnings and expertise in fighting depression, the problem became de-centred, and Ebony's knowledge and skills came to the fore (Russell & Carey 2004).

By co-elaborating a visual metaphor, Ebony was able to richly describe the characteristics and effects of the problem, and to develop a powerful story about the pull of the well. In this way, Ebony's story as she told it was productive as well as descriptive of her experience. As Michael White has noted, 'Stories are shaping of life ... they have real, not imagined effects - these stories provide the structure of life' (2004).

Once depression was visualised in this creative way, Ebony could 'play' with the externalisation and develop it. She had an awareness of different positions it was possible to take in relation to the well: down the bottom, looking up, climbing up, sitting at top, lying on grass, walking towards it, walking away from it. In this way, by storying the depression, Ebony was able to reclaim some power back from it.

She came up with some advice for herself: 'Don't go near the well'<sup>3</sup>.

## THE COUNTER-PLOT: THE RETURN OF CREATIVITY

As we were talking, I was also aware that another theme was emerging from our talk, namely the operation and activity of creativity in Ebony's life. This was a very engaging story, and one that was resonant for her.

Ebony had talked to me earlier about the role of creativity in her life. I had learnt that her father had noticed her creativity and had built an art room for her. Her friends had also noticed her creativity expressed through drawings, sketches, and books of poetry. For Ebony, with creativity came her will to live. When she had writer's block, she couldn't face being alive. The writer's block seemed to be operating with the depression. Creativity gave her motivation and purpose. At the beginning of one of our conversations, Ebony mentioned that she had noticed her creativity coming back.

*Sarah:* I'm really interested in the creativity.  
I wonder – do you think it's mysterious  
and it comes and goes as it pleases,  
or can you stir it up?

*Ebony:* I think you can stir it up yourself.

*Sarah:* How can you stir up creativity?

*Ebony:* With books, music, some people.

Later, we talked more about how Ebony could intentionally stir up creativity. I was also very interested in how she noticed the return of creativity. I have included here a letter I wrote to Ebony towards the end of our counselling sessions together.

Dear Ebony

*It looks like we're coming to the end of our time together, and I wondered what stands out for you in our conversations?*

*We've talked a lot about being at school, and how for you school is like maths, with everything square and rigid. You've talked about how much you dislike conformity. But we've also talked about your 'creation', as you call it. Would it surprise you to know I've noticed how you've managed to keep your creation alive at school, through dressing in your own style (blended with school uniform), listening to the Smashing Pumpkins on your discman, and carrying around your book of writing, photos and sketches?*

*What is it like for you to know you've managed to keep your creation alive? Who else has noticed that you've managed to keep your creation alive even within the conformity of school? You said that keeping your creation alive is very important, because with it comes your will to live. What ideas do you have about how you can keep your creation alive once you've left school?*

*You also talked about the 'return of creativity' and how it seems to mysteriously return sometimes. What are the first signs that it has returned? At what point do you notice that creativity has returned? I'm interested in the way creativity appears and re-appears in your life. What kind of future does creativity predict for you?*

*All the best for the future*

*Sarah*

The theme of the 'return of creativity' was an important counter-story to Ebony's experience of depression. This counter-plot was thickened through questions which brought to light Ebony's qualities, abilities and knowledge (Freedman et al, 1997). Michael White (2004) suggests that in developing alternative stories, we look for clues as to what resonates with the person. These resonances can be

points of entry into the terrain of the alternative story, other territories of their lives, and what is important and of value to them. For Ebony, the concept of 'creativity' (or 'creation' as she called it) resonated strongly for her. Finding ways to richly describe creativity and the skills associated with it, contributed to diminishing the power of depression.

## **DRAWING DEPRESSION – MIRIAM'S STORY**

In conversations about depression, I have also found it very helpful at times to invite young women to draw as part of our externalising conversations. I will offer a short example here.

Miriam came to counselling feeling low. She was having trouble sleeping and felt tired all day. She was feeling tearful and sad, and was having trouble concentrating in class. Some of her thoughts were that 'life is bad'; that 'it moves so fast, it's short and then it's over'. She named this as 'depression'.

I invited Miriam to draw the depression, either on the whiteboard or on a large sheet of paper. On the white board with different coloured markers she drew a large hole. In this hole was loneliness and sadness. I asked her where she was in the picture. Miriam firstly drew herself at the bottom of the hole. At the bottom of the hole she also located loneliness, sadness, and some spiritual questions she had about life. She then drew herself standing on the top of the hill, in a better light, where things looked different; in her own words - 'a shiny place'. In looking at this picture, I became interested in how Miriam had got up the hill. In response to my questions, Miriam drew a ladder and also drew people helping her out. I was very interested in what had helped her put the first foot on the ladder. Miriam replied her friends did this for her, and we talked more about how this happened.

Miriam also mentioned the sadness in her life and I invited her to draw this. On a piece of paper, she drew herself falling through the ocean. She had been floating on the surface and was now in the middle of the ocean, falling through to the deepest part. She described how the ocean for her represented sadness. In seeing this drawing, I became interested in what Miriam could do to strengthen herself in this ocean? In response to my questions, Miriam drew a pair of flippers, and an oxygen tank. She also represented in drawing how



she could be rescued after she swam to the top of the ocean: this involved a helicopter and letting off flares! Miriam also drew wings on herself, although she felt the wings may not work very well if they were wet.

Miriam also mentioned that she sometimes fell down to the deeper part of the ocean. When she was in this part what Miriam liked best was having a flashlight with her. With the flashlight she was able to see, even in the deepest part. This helped her to see others around her and enabled her to know she was not alone. For Miriam, this flashlight represented her phone, and being able to call someone when she needed to.

In a later session, Miriam spoke of the depression as 'a big hole opening up'. Again, I invited her to draw this. She had visualized depression very clearly in her mind, in vivid detail. The depression was like a pool in front of her, rippling and deep. Around the pool were waves crashing near her. She drew the waves in green, purple and blue.

Miriam had a sense of the pool rippling and moving, opening and closing in front of her. I asked Miriam what it would be like to fall into this pool and she replied that it would be as a result of 'desperation'. She said that once she fell in, 'there would be nothing good in there'. It would be 'the real deal'.

Miriam had drawn herself as facing the pool and an oncoming storm. So I asked her what she could do to strengthen herself and she drew herself holding an umbrella. She also drew herself with a rope tied around her waist, chained to a peg in the ground further away. When I asked what the peg represented, Miriam explained to me that this represented the people who care for her, her friends and family. As it appeared that Miriam was facing the storm, I was interested in what she would see if she turned around and looked in another direction, towards her friends and family.

I invited Miriam to draw what she would see if she was looking in the other direction. In response, on another piece of paper, Miriam drew an alternative story, of the operation of peace in her life. Her friends were associated with peaceful times. She drew a river flowing gently, and her books, and music, which represented in her own words: 'peace, love and understanding'. In speaking about this

drawing, Miriam described that she had a sense of sitting in the sun with her friends talking and not worrying.

I was interested in how different these two pictures were, and how she could gain more access to the scenes depicted in the second drawing. Through the externalising conversations we had shared, and the drawings Miriam had created, an alternative story was now emerging. In future sessions we were able to further explore this together in ways that have enabled Miriam to revise her relationship with depression.

## REFLECTIONS

In this article, I have focussed on how depression can be externalised and storied in conversations with young women. I have looked at how counter threads of alternative stories can be noticed and elaborated upon. A special focus has been paid to creativity. During my talks with Ebony, with Miriam and with other young women, I have been consistently aware of the 'chemistry' of creativity within our conversations. Together, we were able to venture in directions previously unexplored, and look at situations from new perspectives. In this way, I have witnessed how creative ways of working have enabled us to break new ground - not only for the young women, but also for myself. We are travelling together, exploring new territories, never knowing quite where we will end up ...

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Sarah Penwarden is a narrative therapist working in schools in Auckland with the Anglican Trust for Women & Children, and at Selwyn College.
- <sup>2</sup> All names and identifying features of clients have been changed for their protection. Miriam and Ebony have given me permission to reprint their stories in detail, using a pseudonym.
- <sup>3</sup> The idea of encouraging a client to draw the metaphor presented in the talk, to draw themselves in the picture, and then to 'strengthen' their sense of self in it comes from workshops I attended in 2003 in Interactive Drawing Therapy. This modality was created by Russell Withers in Auckland, New Zealand. I have found IDT particularly useful when the client draws 'catastrophes' i.e. drowning, burning, being lost etc. I can then actively strengthen the client's sense of self by co-elaborating the drawing so that the client is aware of the resources they can call on, internal and external. In some situations, as with Miriam, the client readily moves onto an alternative story, and this too can be externalised in drawing.

? Smith & Nylund (1997) write about enlisting young women as co-researchers in the effects of depression on their lives. They work with clients to assist them in finding their own ways out of depression, for example, by being 'selfish' or by developing their own unique spirituality. Smith & Nylund focus on honouring the strengths and skills of the client (p.358). In working with young women around depression, I think it is important for them, through externalising, to be able to verbalise what advice they would give themselves, and to become re-acquainted with their own problem-solving abilities.

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