



# Compassion: Not Sold in Stores

By Barbara Kennedy, MPH, MSW

In recent decades, healthcare has increasingly become technology-driven, which has afforded people the opportunity to live healthier and longer lives — even with disease. The need for cost containment and maintaining a profit margin is now a fact in healthcare, and delivery of care has inarguably become more industrialized. However, when patients and families face terminal illnesses, disabilities or dementia, healthcare is also about providing emotional support.

In the healthcare business, where we dispense services to human beings who are

in various degrees of physical and emotional pain and at various stages of their lives, compassion can sometimes seem to be in short supply. Unfortunately, it can neither be manufactured nor found in a generic form. But what if you could manufacture a drug that helped everyone — the patient, the family and the wellness team — feel better, comply more willingly and communicate more effectively? Odds are that, even then, you'd quickly realize that a more cost-effective, readily-available and easier-to-administer substitute would still never compare to true, heartfelt compassion.

## Think of compassion as thinking from the heart

One complaint about today's corporate healthcare system is that few seem to understand the importance of that human connection. Those in the system sometimes seem more concerned with prescribing medications, avoiding litigation and determining how much insurance coverage is available. Yet, for effective healing to take place, there must be a real connection between the patient and the rest of the healthcare team.

Compassion puts the "care" back into healthcare. It goes beyond a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by suffering or misfortune. It's accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate pain or remove its cause, to give time and space for every human being to be a whole person, and not be reduced to a chart or a professional's perception of a broken bone, a malignancy or depression.

Compassion is about allowing yourself to be vulnerable enough to enter into the of the patient — to understand the nature of their suffering, their strengths and fears, and to provide comfort. In other words, it goes far beyond the simple mechanics of writing a prescription.

## A readily available OTC remedy

True healers are compassionate by nature, but to varying degrees. For example, a patient may come in with a broken arm. He needs his arm set and it might not be important for him to connect with his caregivers on an emotional level (unless, of course, abuse is suspected). However, when dealing with people who suffer from chronic or incurable conditions, it becomes much more important to the healing process that patients and their

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caregivers are able to connect on a deeper level.

Doing so successfully often means going beyond just putting on the “white coat” (figuratively speaking), reviewing charts or lab tests, and asking, “How are you doing?” It may mean seizing the opportunity when patients respond, “Oh, fine,” to ask again — perhaps more forcefully, but always compassionately — “No, really, how are you *really* doing?” In doing so, you’ll probably find that patients, like everyone else, respond more genuinely, and become more willing to share their suffering and communicate

their needs when they know that you truly *do* care.

Building warm-hearted relationships can be surprisingly easy and mutually energizing. But first, you’ll have to overcome the longstanding clinical paradigm that you should keep your distance in order to avoid excessive involvement, burnout or compassion fatigue — a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion caused by long-term involvement in an emotionally demanding situation. While it’s true that you may absorb some of your patient’s emotional pain, Fred McDaniel, Executive Director of HospiceCare in Missouri, offers this counterbalancing view: “In order to address and transform compassion fatigue, it helps if you love your work, or some important aspect of your work.

It must become more than a job, and you have to build in some general self-care strategies in order to survive in your work. You have to be in touch with how much you can give. Moreover, know enough about yourself to know what pushes your limits and how to keep your batteries recharged. If you do it right, being compassionate should energize you, not drain you.”

Unlike a drug, compassion has no known adverse reactions, allergies or side effects. When administered with care, compassion works as advertised. So let’s start distributing more of this over-the-counter elixir. ☺

# Tailoring



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secretive thoughts in diaries locked and hidden away. Yet regardless of who tells the story or how it is told, all stories share a common thread: they are comprised of selected memories that shape one's view of life. In other words, stories are a means to organize the information from a person's life, and guide how one thinks, feels, acts and makes sense of his or her experiences. Stories have the power to control one's perception of past and present events.

### **A snapshot of narrative therapy**

Because individuals tend to become the stories they tell, narrative therapy focuses on how the most influential stories can be written and rewritten.

This alternative therapy proposes that people use certain stories about themselves like they would the lens on a camera — to refocus on different details and ultimately reshape one's perception.

Often by the time a person seeks therapy, feelings of isolation, defectiveness and depression prevail. For these individuals, life has become completely dominated by problem-saturated stories that can hinder mental and physical wellness, often leaving them feeling victimized.

Narrative therapy strives to draw out and amplify the most meaningful intentions, influential relationships, key turning points and treasured memories. It focuses on how such positive storylines interconnect and helps the patient understand his experiences.

# Storytelling and Re-Authoring as a Way to Wellness

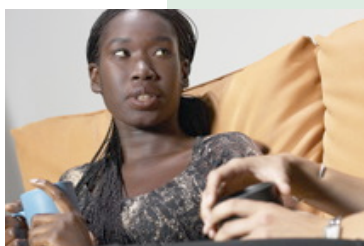
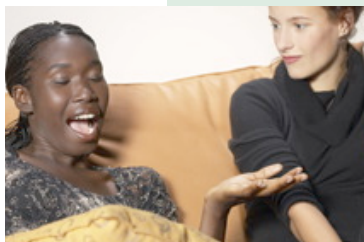
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**S**torytelling is a tradition as ancient as the time the first person picked up a stick and scribbled a message in the dirt. Today, stories are told by all — from motivational speakers who inspire others to nanas who spin yarns passed down from prior generations to teenagers who write their most

## Narrative Therapy at Work

Narrative therapy deconstructs unproductive stories in order to reconstruct positive ones. In the process of re-storying experiences, especially where negative emotions such as anger, fear, anxiety and depression dominate, new and more empowering events can restore lives. The therapy operates from the view that most people don't want problems in their lives. By stepping away from problem-saturated stories, and focusing on the intentions, dreams and values that have guided their lives, individuals can discover the untold but preferred account. Often, the very process of writing brings back memories that have been overlooked — occasionally surprising stories that speak of forgotten competencies, strengths and even heroism.

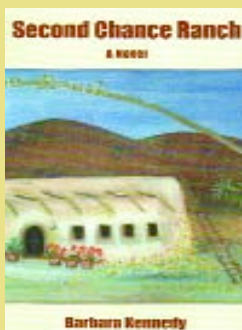
Discovering through new stories the hidden possibilities and strengths contained within patients' lives is referred to as *re-authoring*. By listening to patients and helping them to externalize problems, deconstruct pessimistic life stories, and convey unswerving confidence in their ability to re-champion certain events, we have a powerful tool for change and healing. ☉



**First draft:** When I was four, I remember my mother was screaming. It was pitch black outside and I felt helpless. Then she pushed me out of a second story window.

**Second draft:** My mother was shaking me. It was dark and I smelled smoke. A man in a big coat appeared at the window and my mother handed me over to him.

**Thirddraft:** There were a couple of times in my life when I was really scared. One time was when our house caught on fire in the middle of the night. My mother and I waited for the fire engine together. "Be brave," she instructed me, as she wrapped me in a blanket and led me to safety. And I was.



*Barbara Kennedy, MPH, MSW, is an advocate for narrative therapy as a means to re-author history and discover hidden or forgotten strengths. Kennedy is author of Second Chance Ranch, a narrative about the journey of a courageous caregiver who is tending to her dying husband. This fictional novel is a 2005 Southwest Book of the Year and a National Hospice Foundation selection. All proceeds are dedicated to the organization. Available for purchase at Amazon, Borders and Barnes & Noble.*

