

## Coping

Exercise

n/a

Client

No

## Rewriting the Narrative with Humor

Everybody gets embarrassed sometimes. The most difficult experiences are the ones that linger and cause feelings of regret. The stories that we tell ourselves are especially important. They help define our worldview and shape our reality. If our self-stories are universally negative, this can have a detrimental effect on our health and well-being.

Narrative therapy targets the stories that clients tell themselves as the root of psychological problems. Rewriting alternative narratives is a vital part of narrative therapy. Not only does this help clients see themselves as separate from the problem, but it also helps change the behavioral script, allowing them to overcome adversity and capitalize on their strengths (Etchison & Kleist, 2000). Narrative therapy is often used in family therapy since stories have an intrinsically social, communicative nature. The approach has recently been used to help couples positively reframe their stories and decrease their fear of intimacy (Yeganehfarzand, Zaharakar, & Mohsenzadeh, 2019).

Humor is a character strength that serves multiple functions for human beings (Müller & Ruch, 2011). It is a communication strategy with the power to bring people together. As an emotional coping strategy, it allows people to lighten their mood and work through difficult emotions. Humor often leads to laughter, a nonverbal expression of joy that signifies and produces feelings of general well-being. Humor interventions may increase happiness and reduce depressive symptoms (Wellenzohn, Proyer, & Ruch, 2016). In a study examining humor's effect on embarrassment, the researchers found that a humor intervention decreased feelings of embarrassment when asked to recall a difficult embarrassing memory (Faulkner, 2017).

This tool utilizes aspects of Narrative Therapy in a humor-based intervention designed to help reduce feelings of embarrassment. The following exercise infuses humorous elements into an existing narrative, helping clients transform a negative experience into a more adaptive, positive narrative.



### Goal

This activity aims to promote emotional well-being and resilience by rewriting a previously embarrassing or shameful narrative with humor.



## Advice

- Clinicians should avoid using this tool with clients who have trauma disorders or traumatic narratives, such as those involving sexual assault or violence, because it could upset clients in these situations. As a guideline, apply this intervention to embarrassing situations, not with clients who feel shame, and situations where clients are doing the action, rather than having something done to them.
- Rather than searching through the client's memory of an embarrassing event, it will be most helpful to use this intervention to address a current event that the client has offered spontaneously. Practicing this intervention more than once may help the client use humor to alleviate embarrassment at the moment and to rewrite past narratives.
- To track the usefulness of this approach, have the client rate his/her subjective embarrassment of memory before and after the exercise.
- An overarching goal of this intervention is to help the client build a sense of humor to take things more lightly when future embarrassing events happen. It may help emphasize the ubiquitous and uniquely human nature of embarrassment and suggest humor as a salve for this unpleasant feeling.
- Clients who have self-esteem issues may benefit from an approach that allows them to recognize the situation's absurdity rather than poking fun at themselves. With repeated practice, these clients may begin to see their behavior as humorous if they can step out of themselves and gain perspective.
- This activity involves a lot of writing. This can be great for some clients and not so great for other clients. If the client is not interested in writing, this activity can be customized to be delivered verbally. However, it may be most effective if the client writes it down.
- An example of a completed exercise is included in the appendix section for the client's reference.



## References

- Etchison, M., & Kleist, D. M. (2000). Review of narrative therapy: Research and utility. *The Family Journal*, 8, 61-66.
- Faulkner, A. (2017). *Cognitive defusion and embarrassing memories: Accepting negative thoughts and feelings with humour*. [Unpublished master's thesis]. Maastricht University.
- Müller, L. & Ruch, W. (2011). Humor and strengths of character. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 6, 368-376. 10.1080/17439760.2011.592508.
- Wellenzohn, S., Proyer, R. T., & Ruch, W. (2016). Humor-based online positive psychology interventions: A randomized placebo-controlled long-term trial. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 11, 584-594.
- Yeganehfarzand, S., Zaharakar, K., & Mohsenzadeh, F. (2019). The effectiveness of narrative therapy on reducing the fear of intimacy in couples. *Journal of Practice in Clinical Psychology*, 7, 117-124.



## Rewriting the Narrative with Humor

Embarrassment is a part of life, but it can be limiting when it results in negative thinking or high stress. This exercise uses the healing powers of writing and humor to help you deal with embarrassing situations.

In this exercise, you will look back on something challenging and find the humor in it. Although it may be painful to look back on this event, it can be fun to write about it with creativity and humor. If you enjoy this exercise, you can make it a mental habit, finding the lighter side of the challenges that you encounter as you go through life.

### Step 1: Think of an embarrassing experience

Think of an embarrassing experience. Make sure to choose an experience that is currently weighing on you. For example, being stood up on a date or being the only one in costume at a Halloween party...

Briefly describe the experience below:

### Step 2: Rate your level of embarrassment

On a 10-point scale, where 1 means not embarrassing at all and 10 means extremely embarrassing, how embarrassing would you rate this situation?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Not embarrassing at all

Extremely embarrassing



### Step 3: Rewrite the narrative

Rewrite the experience in step 1 using one of these techniques for infusing humor:

1. Rewrite the experience as if it were a sitcom screenplay, writing in spaces where the laugh track would play.
2. Rewrite the experience from the perspective of an alien who is witnessing human behavior for the first time.
3. Rewrite the experience in an entirely different (and somewhat ridiculous) setting, such as a waterpark, a spaceship, onstage at a concert, in a hot-air balloon, etc.

### Step 4: Read aloud and reflect

Read your newly rewritten humorous memory out loud. It may be helpful to read it to someone, such as a partner, trusted friend, or therapist. If the person you are reading to laughs or smiles, do your best to laugh and smile along with this person. This will help lighten your mood and transform the embarrassment.

After you are finished reading, please take a moment to reflect on how it felt to write and read this new narrative.



### Step 5: Re-rate your level of embarrassment

On the same 10-point scale as before, where 1 means not embarrassing at all, and 10 means extremely embarrassing, how embarrassing would you rate this situation as you've written it now?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Not embarrassing at all

Extremely embarrassing

### Step 6: Repeat

This exercise aims to develop your sense of humor and your ability to see the lightness in the situations that seem the darkest. As embarrassing experiences come up for you, repeat these steps with the new experience. With practice, this process can become automatic for you, helping you cope with embarrassment more easily.

## Appendix: Example of completed exercise

### Step 1: Think of an embarrassing experience

Think of an embarrassing experience, for example, being stood up on a date or being the only one in costume at a Halloween party...

Briefly describe the experience below:

*This weekend, I was stood up on a date at one of my favorite Thai restaurants. I sat at a table, waiting for my date for a long time. I could feel the staff and other diners looking at me. After 45 minutes, I stood up and left the restaurant without telling the waiter.*

### Step 2: Rate your level of embarrassment

On a 10-point scale, where 1 means not embarrassing at all, and 10 means extremely embarrassing, how embarrassing would you rate this situation?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not embarrassing at all					Extremely embarrassing				

### Step 3: Rewrite the narrative

Rewrite the same narrative above using one of these techniques for infusing humor:

1. Rewrite the experience as if it were a sitcom screenplay, writing in spaces where the laugh track would play.
2. **Rewrite the experience from the perspective of an alien who is witnessing human behavior for the first time.**
3. Rewrite the experience in an entirely different, ridiculous setting, such as a waterpark, a spaceship, onstage at a concert, in a hot air balloon, etc.

*The human sat alone for a long time. At first, it was unclear whether this human was waiting for someone or had a dining companion of some invisible life-form. After half an hour, when the human started crying into the water glass, it became clear that the person was stood up. Eventually, the human left abruptly, causing more disturbance than if this person had just ordered a dish. The food at the restaurant was delicious, and if the human had stayed, the taste of the noodles might have made up for such an unpleasant experience.*



#### Step 4: Read aloud and reflect

Read your newly rewritten humorous memory out loud. It may be helpful to read it to someone, such as a partner, trusted friend, or therapist. If the person you are reading to laughs or smiles, do your best to laugh and smile along with this person. This will help to lighten your mood and transform the embarrassment.

After you are finished reading, please take a moment to reflect on how it felt to write and read this new narrative.

*It felt liberating to tell this story, which has been bugging me for the past week, and turn it into a funny story. By seeing this experience from another perspective, I feel like I've gotten some distance from it, and I can see the brighter side of what happened. Next time, I will order something to eat and make the best of it.*

#### Step 5: Re-rate your level of embarrassment

On the same 10-point scale as before, where 1 means not embarrassing at all, and 10 means extremely embarrassing, how embarrassing would you rate this situation now after you rewrote it?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Not embarrassing at all

Extremely embarrassing

#### Step 6: Repeat

This exercise aims to develop your sense of humor and your ability to see the lightness in the situations that seem the darkest. As embarrassing experiences come up for you, repeat these steps with the new experience. With practice, this process can become automatic, helping you cope with embarrassment more easily.