

Building a Coherent Narrative

MAKING SENSE OF YOUR STORY

How we make sense of our early experiences shapes how we relate to ourselves and others today. Drawing on attachment research — including psychiatrist Daniel J. Siegel's work on emotional integration and the Adult Attachment Interview developed by researchers Carol George, Nancy Kaplan and Mary Main — this exercise invites you to slow down and tell your story in your own words.

What Is a Coherent Narrative?

A coherent narrative is a way of talking about your life story that is organised, honest and emotionally connected. It doesn't mean your story is simple or that everything makes complete sense — it means you can hold the full picture: the difficult parts and the good parts, the facts and the feelings, without the story falling apart or shutting down.

Research using the Adult Attachment Interview found that how coherently people could reflect on their early relationships mattered more for their wellbeing than whether those relationships were easy or difficult.

Why This Matters

- Coherence is linked to a greater capacity for emotional regulation
- Making sense of the past can change how it affects the present
- Reflection can loosen the grip of old patterns, even when we can't change what happened
- A more integrated story often supports steadier, more secure relationships

What Coherence Is Not

- It is not having a "perfect" or entirely happy story
- It is not forcing forgiveness or positivity
- It is not about blaming yourself or others
- It is not a single session — it usually develops gradually, over time

Four Things a Coherent Narrative Tends to Include

01

Concrete Memory

Specific experiences and moments, not just general impressions

02

Felt Impact

Access to the emotions those experiences brought up, then and now

03

Reflection

Some ability to stand back and think about the experience, not just relive it

04

Meaning

A sense of how the experience connects to who you are today

How to Use This Exercise

- 1 Find a quiet, unhurried moment.** This works best without rushing or multitasking.
- 2 Write freely.** Full sentences aren't necessary — write however it comes out.
- 3 Be honest rather than tidy.** Contradictions and uncertainty are a normal part of this.
- 4 Go at your own pace.** You can return to this over several sittings, or revisit it later.
- 5 Consider support.** If strong emotions come up, it can help to process this with a therapist.

You are not writing the definitive account of your life — you are practising the ability to hold your story with honesty, care and perspective.

SOURCES

Siegel, D. J. (2020). *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press.

Siegel, D. J., & Hartzell, M. (2003). *Parenting from the Inside Out*. Tarcher/Penguin.

Main, M., Kaplan, N., & Cassidy, J. (1985). Security in infancy, childhood, and adulthood: A move to the level of representation. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 50(1–2), 66–104.

Your Story, In Your Own Words

A GUIDED WRITING EXERCISE

Take your time with each prompt. There are no right answers — only what feels true for you right now. You can skip a prompt and return to it later if needed.

1 A Memory That Stands Out

Think of an early memory — from childhood or adolescence — that feels significant to who you are today. What happened? Who was there? Try to include specific details rather than a general summary.

2 How It Felt

What did you feel at the time? What do you feel now, remembering it? It's okay if these are different, or if it's hard to name the feeling precisely.

3 What You Needed

Looking back, what did you need in that moment — from the people around you, or from yourself? Did you receive it, partly receive it, or not receive it at all?

4 The Thread to Today

How do you think this experience — or others like it — may have shaped how you relate to yourself or others now? There's no need to be certain; a guess or a hunch is enough.

5 Making Meaning

If you could offer some understanding or compassion to yourself at that time, what would you want them to know? What sense have you made of this experience since?

6 Where You Are Now

As you finish this exercise, what feels different — even slightly — about how you're holding this part of your story?

A NOTE

This exercise is for personal reflection and is not a diagnostic or clinical assessment tool. If this brings up strong or distressing emotions, consider working through it with a qualified therapist.