

Narrative Identity

The story you tell about who you are

Narrative identity is the inner, evolving story you build about your life, weaving together a remembered past, the present and an imagined future into a sense of who you are. It isn't just **what happened** to you, but **how you have come to make sense of it**, and that story can grow and change.

LEVEL 1 · THE ACTOR

Traits

Broad tendencies, such as how outgoing or anxious you usually are.

LEVEL 2 · THE AGENT

Goals & values

What you want, strive for and care about at this stage of life.

LEVEL 3 · THE AUTHOR

Your life story

How you make meaning of it all: the story that gives your life unity and purpose.

Dan McAdams' three layers of personality (McAdams & Pals, 2006)

01 One event, two tellings

The shape of a story matters

The same event: "I lost my job last year."

REDEMPTION SEQUENCE

From bad to good

A hard beginning gives way to growth, meaning or connection.



"It was frightening, but it pushed me to rethink what I wanted, and I found work that fits me better."

CONTAMINATION SEQUENCE

From good to bad

Something good is spoiled or overwhelmed by what follows.



"I loved that job. Losing it ruined everything, and I've never trusted any workplace since."

02 What researchers listen for

McAdams & McLean, 2013

Agency

A sense of influence over your life

Communion

Love, friendship and belonging

Redemption

Bad turning toward good

Contamination

Good turning toward bad

Exploration

Reflecting deeply on hard events

Meaning-making

Lessons or insight drawn from events

03 What the research suggests

In adults and students, **redemption** in life stories was linked with greater wellbeing, and **contamination** with lower wellbeing.
McAdams et al., 2001

During therapy, clients' stories showed **growing agency**, and this change came before improvements in mental health.
Adler, 2012

Across many studies, narrative identity predicts wellbeing **beyond personality traits** alone.
Adler et al., 2016

04 My life, in chapters

Give each chapter a title

1

EARLY YEARS

2

GROWING UP

3

A TURNING POINT

4

NOW

5

THE NEXT CHAPTER

What is a low point in my life that I now see a little differently?

Do I tend to tell stories of redemption or contamination? Where do I notice it?

Is there a story I could retell in a way that feels both truer and more whole?

A gentle note

Redemption is not pretending something painful was good. Some experiences stay painful, and meaning can take time. The aim is an honest story that also leaves room for who you are becoming. This can be explored gradually, and with support.

SOURCES

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