



KARYN SHANKS MD

Heart, Hope, Healing

How to Empower Your Healing Story (What are Stories?)

BY KARYN SHANKS MD | AUGUST 27, 2019



Introduction: Claim Your Healing Stories

We're Stuck

If we didn't get stuck, we'd all be healed, wouldn't we?

Low energy, chronic illness, burnout, depression—you name it. We don't ask for it. We don't want it. And for many of us, we know *exactly* what to do. How many times have we started out on those changes that we know are absolutely *perfect* for us?

So, why don't we? Why don't we just freaking heal?

We know why: we're stuck.

Stuck in what?

Our fatigue and suffering? Our finances? Lack of information? Hopelessness and pessimism? The doors that keep closing? The solutions that never come?

More likely we're stuck in our stories. Our stories about those things. Stories that get in our way. Disempowering stories that slam the brakes on our healing every time.

I can't. I don't know how. I don't have time. This is my truth. I am this disease, this diagnosis, this suffering. This is my story. This will never change.

We Need Healing Stories

We need *healing* stories. Stories to take us where we need to go. That don't hold us back, shove us down, or suck our souls. We need stories of power and hope to restore our energy, reverse our suffering, and give us our lives back.

Healing stories are the gateways to reaching our full energy and potential. But what does that even mean? Where do we start? How do we dismantle those old stories that get us stuck and create the new ones that lead us to fresh perspectives and possibilities?

We Must Learn That Our Minds Are Infinite

Our minds are our greatest tools and advisors, but they are tricksters too. They serve our highest intentions as well as survival. Who's the master?

Our higher, integrated selves know exactly who we are—whole, beautiful, strong. There was never a question.

While our survival-oriented brains jump into the past, and the future—making assumptions, weaving tales, fearing what has not yet come to pass. Creating anxiety to protect us from our worst-case-scenarios. (You with me here? Sound familiar?)

Already whole, many of those stories disempower us—guilt, shame, hopelessness. They must be cast away.

Already beautiful, the stories of isolation or unworthiness are not ours—they never were. They must be rejected.

Already strong (yes, you are!), the stories of helplessness and needing others to fix us make us forget our infinite potential and innate power to heal.

Yes, our minds are complex. Our minds can tell us conflicting stories. Our minds can hold us

back.

But our minds are also infinite. We're infinite. We can call our power back. We can claim our healing stories. We can empower our healing.

A Story About My Life Story

Please indulge me the telling of my own personal story of deep healing. This one taught me the shocking power of our internal stories to control our lives—for both good and bad. In truth, this story smacked me right upside the head and changed my life forever.

My Son's Hero Story

When my oldest son was in high school, the students in his class was asked to pick the person they each most admired—their heroes—and write about them. He told me in his casual and offhanded way that he had chosen two people because he couldn't decide between them.

The first person he chose was Papa, his grandfather. This I so understood. My father-in-law was someone who overcame all odds to become a world-famous neurosurgeon, was highly respected for his innovative work as well as for his kindness, commitment, and generosity. He was the tireless worker. The model scientist and clinician. Techniques he developed are in commonplace use today. And he was kind, patient, and loving. Although he has passed away, his students and patients still write to my mother-in-law every Christmas, remembering him and his effect on their lives. Papa was every bit the quiet hero.

But after my son told me he had picked Papa as one of his heroes, he said something else that floored me: his other hero was me.

And in his quiet, thoughtful, straightforward way, he explained why. "Of course, Mom (you dumb head!), look where you came from. You overcame so much in your life to achieve so much."

Toppling My Old Story

I was dumbstruck. I didn't just not know what to say, my brain simply couldn't recognize what he was talking about. I'm just *me*, Mom, not a hero. I do my best and am a good person—but a hero? Like Papa or the other amazing heroes his classmates chose? No way!

I can't overstate my shock and awe at my son's choice of me as one of his heroes. First, this was coming from a seventeen-year-old. He was already staking his claim as a young man, independent of his mom. There were times I wasn't sure if he even liked me (silliness on my

part, but the whole teenage transition is hard). Second, not only had I never complained about my past struggles, I had purposefully protected both of my sons from parts of my story. I wanted my parents and my sons to forge their own bonds without my history getting in the way.

Where My Old Story Came From

Yes, I had challenges growing up. My son knew that I was on my own by the time I was seventeen, and that I left high school early because of bullying at the inner-city San Diego high school I went to. I was an undergraduate for eight years while I explored who I was and what I wanted to do. I panicked about whether I even belonged in college and didn't even know I was smart until I "accidentally" aced a science exam. Until then I was not at all confident about my ability to achieve and accomplish. I worked throughout college and paid my own way. I was so poor during those years, I'm not sure what I ate or how I clothed myself, but I managed.

I got an associate's degree in psychology from San Diego City College, then enrolled at San Diego State University as a nursing major. On the first day of my first class as a nursing student, the teacher said, "Nursing is not medicine." She was trying to say something positive about nursing, how it was more about human relationships than medicine, but I realized in that moment that I *wanted* to be in medicine. Being a doctor wasn't anything I had ever dreamed of or imagined I could do. But then, I started to dream. And when I applied to medical school at the University of Chicago, I got in. That in itself was a miracle to me, but was further miraculous because it was where I met my future husband and my boys' father.

Since then my proudest accomplishment has been creating a safe, loving and nurturing home for my family. But I never for a moment thought of myself as a hero. That wasn't my story.

But as well as I knew my story, as certain as I was of its details, my son saw something different.

A Young Boy Sees Me Through a Fresh Lens

He knew there was a lot of challenge and stress for me growing up. He watched me build my own medical practice. As a young boy he hung out at the office after school while I worked and heard all about how I worried and researched and went to bat for my patients who had chronic complex illnesses. He lived and grew and thrived within the embrace of my greatest legacy, our family, our home, and what we all created together.

From a place of unconditional love, stability, and calm, my son had observed all that went on around him. To my surprise, he saw me—*really saw me*—and many of the details of my life. And his conclusion was that I was a hero.

My Son Taught Me a New Life Story

My son's clarity and love and admiration blew my mind right open. He made me realize that there was an entirely different way to understand my life, one that he could see and that I had failed to. This idea catapulted me out of my old life story.

As we'll talk about in this article, we all have our life stories. It's how we see, understand, and relate to all that's happening to us. It's the framework through which we view all the various aspects of our lives—bodies, minds, and spirits.

My life story—the one I claimed for myself—had been one of shame and abandonment. It was a story of unworthiness and working hard to compensate. But through my son's clarity and love and admiration, he delivered a message in a way that cut through all my layers of hardwired dogmatic self-judgment to change how I felt.

Through him, I learned that my story is a story of freedom. My story is a story of courage. My story is a story of a scrappy girl finding her way early in life and how that taught her essential skills she would not have otherwise learned. That forced her to decide for *herself* what was right instead of being tethered to the conventional norms of society or those of her family.

Seeing My Life Through the Lens of Love

I saw that every experience, every bit of that past that I had previously believed had held me back, had actually taught me important lessons, cultivated strength in me, and made me who I am today. It was Life School, and it prepared me to do what I'm doing today.

Thanks to my son, I was able to take my old story and transform it into one that was more ennobling, that looked at my past through the lens of love. But I've since learned it doesn't have to take a spectacular revelation like I had to figure these things out. We just have to understand that everything we believe about ourselves and our lives *are* stories—stories that may not contain all the facts. How truthful are they *really*? How well do they serve our highest good?

Healing Stories Means There's Work to Do

To fully embrace my new story, there was much work to do. There was a lot of muck to clear out: I had to let go of blame, accept responsibility for who I was, and claim the freedom and power that I had even back then. To realize that *nothing anyone did to me was personal*. It was not about me. Not any of it.

Healing

I finally understood that *I* get to decide who I am and what I'm worth. I had courage, and I rose up out of difficult times. And I'm pretty cool. Pretty damned cool. Through the clear eyes of my precious son, through the eyes of love, I see myself as a hero. And it is through that lens of love that I've come to choose to see myself and to see others and life itself.

OUR MINDS WERE DESIGNED FOR STORYTELLING

Stories are powerful things. They're how we see, understand, and relate to all that's happening to us. They're the framework through which we view all aspects of our lives—our minds, emotions, bodies, and spirits.

These stories of ours can represent our power—they can strengthen, fortify, and nourish our healing journey.

But our stories can also stop us soundly in our tracks.

Stories Contain Our Wisdom

In times before writing, stories were how people passed down knowledge, wisdom, and aspirations. Even now, we listen to stories at the feet of our parents and remember them to tell our children. We read and listen as we share common stories across time and across culture. Stories are the very breath of our humanity and our spirit.

Stories Keep Us Alive

As we've developed as a species, stories have also kept us alive. Is the rustling in the grass next to us a tiger or just the wind? Is the withering of the leaves just the first signs of fall or a failure of the harvest? Being able to understand what is happening now and remembering it in exquisite detail in the future has great survival value.

We're Wired for Stories

When you consider how useful stories have been to our species, it's not hard to see that we are wired to create them. They're in our DNA. They're how our brains evolved to help us work and succeed.

Our prefrontal cortex, the large front part of our brains, distinguishing us as humans, is designed for storytelling. We call this our intellect. It endows us with the ability to pull together all the available data from our lives and rapidly arrive at an understanding about what's going on, followed by a plan and action.

“The” Truth is Really “Our” Truth

Stories and their lessons can save us in times of danger. Most of the time, however, we aren't in any *real* danger. But we still make rapid, unconscious assessments about what's going on that serve as the foundation for our beliefs and understanding. We do this all the time. Many of our assessments are laser sharp and spot on. But jumping to conclusions can be wildly problematic under the more ordinary circumstances of our lives.

Our Stories are Not the Facts

We often forget that our stories reflect our own uniquely biased interpretations of the facts rather than the facts themselves. Our stories represent only a singular view (our own) of what's happening. We're all familiar with the well-known observation that groups of people looking at the very same set of circumstances (a crime, for instance), tell vastly different accounts of what happened. The details of their stories were determined by the unique lenses through which they saw the facts.

We Misconstrue Our Stories As “the Truth”

We draw conclusions about our subjective understanding of what the facts mean. We create stories, calling them “understanding,” or “the truth,” or “how it is.” But there is danger in holding on too tightly to what we think we know for sure.

We are often lured into believing that our stories *are* the facts themselves. But, really, our stories are assumptions *about* the facts—assumptions that may be incomplete, or not at all true. And in limiting ourselves to these assumptions, we lock in the story, not leaving room for something better to emerge.

Our Life Stories Are Not Fixed

When I had the chance to see my own life through a new lens and tell myself a new story—a positive and beautiful and shiny story—everything changed. I see the old things differently. I relate the elements with love, not judgment. And new things that are bright get even shinier as I add them to my brilliant story.

Understand that this is not a choice to see things through rose-colored glasses. It's a conscious choice to reframe the facts as we know them and to allow that we don't have *all* the facts. It's the perspective shift of a mature mind.

We Can Unleash Our Potential

We are never trapped by our stories. We do not have to be limited, defined, or maligned by our stories. While we are powerfully influenced by them, we are not our beliefs or our stories. They are *constructs* of our brains. We create them, but they are not *us*. And this is our ultimate point of control over our lives and our potential to claim our energy and healing.

Stories on the Brain: Neural Networks and Neuroplasticity

Our stories have a biology. In the body we call stories *neural networks*—brain pathways that integrate all our experiences, learning, and beliefs. These pathways are comprised of specialized nerve cells and the connections between those cells. They converge to create meaning (stories) and strengthen function in response to the incoming “data” and “facts” of our lives.

Neural Networks (and Stories) are Not Fixed: Neuroplasticity

Our brains and their neural networks change from moment to moment. The biological energy behind this change is called *neuroplasticity*. This process operates constantly to shape structure and function. It is influenced by our thoughts, memories, intentions, actions, and condition of our health.

Given the right circumstances (say, a healthy body, and loving, positive, hopeful outlook), neuroplasticity is the promise of how our brains can change to serve and support our best lives.

Learning to Walk: The Neural Network of Locomotion

A universal example of neuroplasticity is how we learn to walk by ourselves as small children, with no prior experience. No one really teaches us to walk. We yearn for the motion that will transport us toward what we are curious about. We struggle and experiment and fail, but we

don't give up.

Our practice leads to the development of the neural networks of locomotion. Our brains change as the circuitry for strength, balance, coordination, and muscle memory grows and expands. We gradually, miraculously, master this complex skill. The energy of neuroplasticity lays down the neural networks to support the growth and precision of our new skill.

The Neural Networks of Stories

We create and guide the development of stories in the same way that we learn a physical skill, like walking. Through the genius of neuroplasticity, what we learn, remember, imagine, decide, and do, all converge to create and strengthen our stories. Like walking, with enough practice, our stories become our reality.

Practice Strengthens Our Neural Networks (and Our Stories)

If our tendency is to ruminate about all the bad things that have happened to us, we're practicing a negative way of being. We strengthen the neural networks that perceive our life stories through a negative lens (self-condemnation, disempowerment, being a victim, for example). Our brains will operate according to these "facts." We will persist in seeing our lives this way ("the way it is"), and all new experiences will be seen through this lens, reinforcing the old stories and limiting our ability to change.

Neuroplasticity: Our Hope to Succeed at Change

Neuroplasticity is also what gives us the ability to change our stories—not the facts, but our stories about those facts.

If we practice perceiving our life stories through a positive lens (brave, scrappy, hopeful), our brains enter this data into our neural networks, and we see the world more brightly. We add new experiences to our stories that reinforce the positive, and we realize there are no limits to what we can do.

We Control Neuroplasticity: We Can Change Our Stories

In other words, we can consciously *choose* to create new, more positive life stories—by harnessing the energy of neuroplasticity through our intentions and actions. The new neural networks of our creation will compete for space in our brains, growing and strengthening as

we practice.

Healing is All in Our Stories

The take-home? Healing is all in our stories. Our brains and our bodies *quite literally* change as a direct result of our thoughts, intentions, and actions. Our potential function evolves by how we practice. We can apply this power to any aspect of our lives we want to change. By actively choosing and defining our stories and the lens through which we choose to see the world, we can change our physical being.

We can heal.

Passively Living Our Stories Invites Chaos and Fear

Our Brains Have a Culture

Our brains are an organization much like a business. In the business world it's said that all organizations have a "culture." A culture is the way things are done, the written or *unwritten* rules that everyone knows.

Sometimes a culture is consciously developed by the organization, but even if an organization doesn't actively work to build a specific, desired culture, one will still exist. It will be random, undefined, unclear, and may very well work *against* the organization's goals.

Stories are just like that. We *all* have stories—at every moment, about *everything*. They may serve us well or they may not.

Conscious Development of Our Story Culture

We can reflect on our lives and consciously develop and define our stories, or we can passively accept what comes. Although passivity may seem easier, our brains are designed to be defensive, to keep us from harm, to be afraid. Fear is the path of least resistance and the way our brains were designed to keep us alive.

Passivity Favors the Negativity Bias

So, the default stories our brains keep coming back to will be fearful. This phenomenon is widely known in psychology as our brain's innate "negativity bias." Passively accepting the

random culture of our brains will lead to more fear and resistance to positive change.

BIG STORIES THAT STAND IN THE WAY OF OUR HEALING

Okay, so we know that we have the power to heal by changing our stories. We have the science that explains the biology of it. We have the life experiences to lay the foundation of our stories. All the information we need is right here at our fingertips to lead us on a journey of profound healing and energy restoration. So, why don't we just do it? What stands in our way?

Do any of these statements sound familiar to you?

I can't.

I don't have time.

Who am I to... ?

These are the preambles we use to explain how we've become stuck in the face of our common and powerful life stories. These are the stories that stomp on our lives and sap our souls. Here's what they sound like, in their various forms, as my clients say them out loud in my consultation room:

Powerful Stories of Being Stuck

"There is nothing more that can be done for me." (Says who? You're the expert on you!)

"I am a diabetic." "I am depressed." "This is who I am." (Really? I thought you were an artist named Sarah, not a diagnosis.)

"My doctor knows best." (Does she? Who says? I'll bet she makes mistakes too.)

"My symptoms are all in my head." (So is your insightful and incredibly intelligent brain! What's it telling you about your symptoms?)

"I'm just like my mother (or father)—this is my destiny." (Epigenetics, anyone? Your genes are not your destiny!)

"I am trapped." (No, hon, you've just lost the creativity to find a way to move on. Let's get that creativity back as a first step.)

"I am alone." (Not anymore! There's a whole bunch of us working through this and we're happy to welcome you along.)

"I can't change." (You already have. You decided to read this! Congratulations on your first steps.)

"My diagnosis is..." (Your diagnosis is just a name, perhaps just a symptom. Tell me about you.)

These are all very real stories I've been told.

They are beliefs and assumptions that are held as *the truth*, but are not based on all the facts, or any facts at all. They're stories based on judgments and fears that are learned, latched onto, and become obstacles to positive change and healing. We adopt them unconsciously from our experiences, perceptions, and the world around us. They may accurately reflect how we *feel* or what we truly believe, but they are not *the truth*. They can all be changed.

Empowering Our Healing Stories

To help us think about how to get past some of the major roadblocks to healing, I want to focus on five different stories that often get us stuck. It is important to remember that each of these stories, while often fearful products of our cautious primal brains, can also become stories of strength and potential for growth:

1. *The story of our power.*
2. *The story of our worth*
3. *The story of how we belong.*
4. *The story of fear about uncertainty and change.*
5. *The story of not having enough time.*

These are the stories of our lives that must be reckoned with to see ourselves as we are, filled to the brim with potential. These are the stories that must be transformed to empower our healing.

Now, let's take a deep dive into these stories in my next article:

[How to Empower Your Healing by Reimagining These Five Stories]

Resources

Karyn Shanks MD. [How to Empower Your Healing by Reimagining These Five Stories.](#) 2019.

Karyn Shanks MD. [How to Empower Your Healing Story \(A Manifesto\).](#) 2019.

Karyn Shanks MD. [How to Empower Your Healing Story: Lessons in Story Mining.](#) 2019.

Karyn Shanks MD. Heal: A Nine-Stage Roadmap to Recover Energy, Reverse Chronic Illness, and Claim the Potential of a Vibrant New You. 2019. (in press—will be released soon!)

Norman Doidge MD. [The Brain's Way of Healing: Remarkable Discoveries and Recoveries from the Frontiers of Neuroplasticity.](#) 2015.

Norman Doidge MD. [The Brain that Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science.](#) 2007.

KARYN SHANKS MD

Karyn Shanks, MD, is a physician who lives and practices in Iowa City. Her work is inspired by the science of Functional Medicine, body-mind principles, and wisdom gleaned from the transformational journeys of thousands of clients over her twenty-five-year career. Her work honors each individual and the power of their stories, their inner wisdom, and innate healing potential. She believes that the bones of healing are in what we do for ourselves. She is the author of *Liftoff*, a manual of energy recovery and healing through essential self-care practices.

[READ MORE ARTICLES](#)

[CONTACT KARYN](#)

[GET INSPIRED](#)