

Wake Up to Your Weight Loss

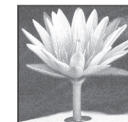
fine, too. Or you can expand the program as well, by taking 2-3 weeks or more to experience the exercises in each chapter.

Lastly, you are free to pick and choose the issues that may be affecting you the most. I have found, in exploring this program with others, that it's best to move through the chapters in order. But if you're suffering, and could find relief in practicing a chapter towards the end of the book, please feel free to do so.

Some of my readers have found that forming a small group, and going through the meditations and follow-up exercises together, is helpful as well. Since added weight sometimes makes us invisible to others, the act of bearing witness, hearing the stories of others, and being heard in turn, can be a very powerful tool to help support your weight loss program.

The main thing to remember, when starting this type of program, is that you are not alone. There are millions of people just like you, all over the globe, struggling with how they want their bodies to look and feel, and how they want to relate to themselves as a wholly integrated human being. We are remarkably resilient, and are truly here to help one another make it through.

Chapter One



How Can a Storytelling Practice Help?

We are, no matter where we come from, or how we engage with the dominant culture, constantly surrounded by stories. As infants, before we even know what words are, we are told stories. These stories help us dispel fear before we go to sleep, learn morals and other societal values, and even establish a connection with our caretakers.

From the time we're at our smallest and most vulnerable, stories are the glue that binds us to others like us. Researchers have found that infants are incredible sponges for information, reading the slightest changes in inflection, facial expression and body language. The same is true for the way we experience stories. Even as adults, we can hear a gripping story and become completely lost, projecting ourselves into the story and feeling all the emotions as if they were our own. Today, "reality" television picks up some of the slack from that phenomenon, allowing us to have love affairs, heal a problem, or go on an amazing adventure, all within an hour-long times lot.

Children often need stories in order to figure out the complex emotional world of adults. Remember hiding out in a tree or other out-of-the-way place, making up stories with your friends? Remember how doing that made it seem like you were in charge of your world, even if that wasn't technically true?

As we grow and develop, though, we leave our stories behind. Kids are always in a hurry to be a fourth grader, or a seventh grader, or a se-

nior in high school. They want whatever's cool, hip, dangerous or seemingly grown up. Often, this doesn't include creating and sharing stories, especially if it involves spending any more time with their parents.

But just as we leave our homes, at eighteen, if we decide to get a job, or after college, we need our stories most of all. We need something familiar, which will help us make this brand new transition in our lives, and we need something that's uniquely ours, so we can keep developing our sense of self. It is the sense of self that will carry us towards our goals, whether they're personal or professional in nature.

Our stories, then, perform three major functions for us:

- Our stories are the connective tissue that reminds us to be human.
- Our stories provide our memory, foundation and “moral compass.”
- Our stories protect us from the lowest aspects of our own nature.

It is at this time of our lives, when everything is changing, that we have to make some quick decisions about the kind of people we'll allow ourselves to become. What will become most important: love, money, family or spirituality? If we want a weekend out with friends, is it all right to pay the rent late? And what if the person we love doesn't love us back?

Stories are one important tool we have to deal with major transitions. But keeping a diary or blog may not work for everyone. Many of my students have said the act of keeping a diary feels like shouting into the void, or as if no one is really listening. Personally, every time I try to keep one, I feel like the most boring person on earth.

So where's a person to start?

A Brief History of Storytelling

Human beings started to keep records of their existence from the beginning of history as we currently understand it. We can only guess that they needed a way to explain the world around them, and to leave behind a record of their experience. No one knows for sure why they did this, especially when issues of survival were so pressing.

The stories of early civilizations often centered around the search for food, including the killing of animals, and the gathering and storing of other foodstuffs. Other important topics were the family structure, especially as it related to the distribution of power and responsibility, and the

building of communities. Establishing security became a primary concern, and any immediate threats to their survival, such as inclement weather or predators, were immediately dispatched with sacrifices, ritual or song.

Likewise, tribes lauded a successful hunt by praising their gods and/or goddesses with elaborate ceremonies designed to curry favor. Other stories sent tribal members into the afterlife, by reaffirming the culture's burial methods and remembering the deceased's life as it had been on earth.

Other legacies of early storytelling can be found in some of the Old Stone Age (30,000 BCE - 10,000 BCE) caves, particularly those in Lascaux and Chauvet, France. Inhabitants of the caves used soil, crushed rocks and plants to make natural pigments, and used sticks and other implements to apply them directly onto the walls of the caves.

In one cave, a racing herd of animals can be seen (these are thought to be horses or red deer), along with geometric designs that some believe stand in for the phases of the sun and/or moon. A series of large dots, a semicircle of smaller dots, a V-shaped bat like symbol—no one knows for sure what these meant to the original cave-dwellers.

What is most touching about the cave paintings of Lascaux and Chauvet are the red silhouettes of human hands. These appear to have been made by blowing or spraying pigment over the artist's hand, and are present in almost all of the ancient caves. When I look at the pictures of these hands, it's easy to connect with the fact that there was a person on the other end of this experience, and that he or she was trying to be seen, across millennia, just as you or I do today.

The Five Reasons We Need Stories

In studying how stories have been told over the years, I have found that there are five main reasons we need stories in our lives:

- An Explanation of the World Around Us
- A Way to Honor the Supernatural
- A Way to Entertain Ourselves
- A Way to Gain Immortality, by Connecting with Our Ancestors
- A Way to Express the Beauty of Human Existence

Each of these reasons corresponds with a deeper need within us—to be seen and heard, to understand the mysterious, to play, connect and ex-

press ourselves. And many of these needs often go unmet in our daily lives, whether we're trying to lose weight or not.

Our experience with stories began when we were very emotionally pliable. Our brains were developing, and we were at our most receptive, simply so we could survive. But that way of experiencing stories doesn't seem to change all that much as we age. Even today, stories are able to get deeper into our consciousness than other methods of communication. Just as beautiful music sometimes penetrates the way we see, engendering powerful emotional responses while bypassing any emotional guard we may have constructed, stories can trigger very old responses that may have been stored in the mind, or even in the tissues of the body, from the time we were children.

We do not cease to need stories when we pass a certain age, or when society decides we're adults. Even if we're working at a job, engaging in a creative project, or raising a family, we need our stories to help us make important decisions.

After all, what is "Cinderella" but a manual for finding and dating the right man?

What is "Snow White" but a cautionary tale about jealousy?

What is the story of King Solomon but an illustration of true parental love?

And what is "The Emperor's New Clothes" but a lesson in telling the truth?

Identifying your own stories, and developing a practice that allows you to tell them on a regular basis, can help you learn more about yourself and your true feelings in a safe way (this can especially apply if your true feelings are undesirable in nature, since we tend to want to disown these). Additionally, incorporating a storytelling practice in your life can help you discover reasons you may be holding onto excess weight, and reveal unique, internal strategies to help you realize your weight loss goals. Lastly, this practice can help build confidence, and help dispel false messages that may have already been internalized by living within a narrow cultural definition of beauty.

The Six Ways We Use Stories

Along with the five ways we need stories, there are also six ways that we tend to use stories in our daily lives:

- Healing from Abuse or Neglect
- Connecting with Relatives and Family Members
- To Leave Something Behind
- To Express Ourselves and the World We Live In
- To Become More Visible
- To Ensure That Our Way of Life Continues

Establishing that we need stories in our lives, to help us recognize and achieve our goals, as well as dispel any obstacles that may reside inside us, is one thing. But in order to create a storytelling practice that can help us achieve real results, we will need to look into how we're already using stories in our day-to-day lives.

All of us do it. We come home from work, shuck off our coat and put down our purse or briefcase. Then we talk to our mates, friends, children or roommates about the events of our days: the triumphs and the painful parts, the irritations and moments of excitement and joy. In essence, we are telling the story of our day, embellishing it with different voices, if we had a fight with the guy at the post office, or funny asides, to illustrate what might have been going through our minds at a particular moment. Unconsciously, we use these stories all the time.

We may be trying to convert someone to our way of seeing things, if we've had an argument, or to garner support, if we've had a bad day. We may be trying to prove a point, if we feel righteous about a wrong that has been committed, or even draw ourselves closer to someone, if we can share a similar tale that's happened to us.

The bottom line is that stories are part of our lives on a moment-to-moment basis. All you have to do is recognize that you have them, and that you're already using them. Once that happens, you can learn to channel this power towards whatever you want to achieve. For example, if you're always fighting with people, from the guy at the post office to the people in your family, you may wish to look at how you're "storytelling" about anger. If you're always complaining about having to take on more work than you're comfortable doing, you might look into your "storytelling" on fear or duty.

This is more complicated than simply thinking about it, or even writing about it in a journal. Creating and nurturing a storytelling