

Identifying with Your Health Story

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*In this excerpt from the first chapter of **Change Your Story of Your Health: Using Shamanic and Jungian Techniques for Healing**, Carl Greer, PhD, PsyD, discusses what he means by "identifying the story of your health" and some of the reasons we might have chosen that particular narrative...*

We might say about ourselves, "I am a shy introvert" or "I'm a people person." However, we might not realize how much we identify with our physical selves and our current state of health. Typically, we don't identify with illnesses unless we develop a pattern of distress and write a story in which we are a "chronic migraine sufferer" or "a person with a weak constitution" or "someone who has always had a weak stomach." The language we use to describe our experiences is worth considering.

" Whatever your health condition, you can change the story of your health and let go of your identification with it.

The names of diagnoses have power, too. For example, waking up during the night and having trouble falling back to sleep can seem more serious and hard to address if you think of it as "insomnia" and yourself as "someone who is battling insomnia." You might choose to observe the change in your sleep pattern and learn more about it, so that you can work around it and begin to think about it differently. Perhaps you will decide to journal or read if you can't get back to sleep after a few minutes, using the time productively. You might look more closely at how much sleep you need and find solutions that you wouldn't have thought of if you were simply focused on "overcoming insomnia" and sleeping straight through the night consistently. Letting go of the term "insomnia" might reduce your worry that having this "condition" means your sleep will be inadequate and you will always be groggy during the day.

As we start to develop chronic ailments and experience reduced flexibility and balance, decreased strength and physical stamina, and the signs of aging and disease, we may start to identify with the illnesses we are experiencing and lose faith that we can cure or overcome them. I have noticed this in my work and try to help people find new identities and write new stories for themselves after they have become convinced that their health condition is unchangeable, even though that isn't necessarily the case.

If you feel you can't change your story, it can seem comforting to identify with it. Seeing yourself as "a diabetic" or "an asthma sufferer" could offer certain payoffs depending on the health story you write. Those payoffs might include receiving sympathy from others, getting out of social situations you would rather avoid, or being part of a group of people who share a common experience of having diabetes. The payoffs might also include excuses for why you haven't been productive and achieved the goals you set for yourself. You might not even be conscious of these payoffs; if you were, you might decide there are better ways to achieve your goals and feel a sense of control over your life. Expanded-awareness practices can bring to light unconscious obstacles to achieving better health.

The truth is you are not your condition, your disease, or your pain, and you might have more power to manage them than it appears on the surface. You can relate to any condition differently. When you identify with your health challenges, you lose your ability to work with them, and they begin to control you and dictate what your health story is.

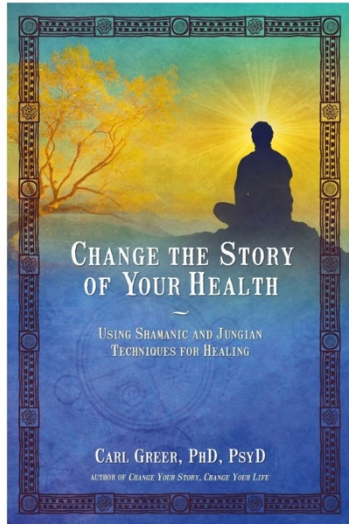
Sickness or disease can make you doubt whether you will ever be able to return to your previous state of wellness or even improve upon it. Uncertainty about your physical health and mortality can make you even more aware of your mortality and question whether you have enough time left to do all you would like to do. Although these topics can be painful to explore, they can also lead to transformation. So, for example, men who are dealing with prostate cancer and women who are dealing with the loss of a breast due to cancer may feel they have lost their sexuality and sexual attractiveness. Realizing that sexuality encompasses more than what they once thought can free them of the old story of their health that isn't working for them and perhaps give them more confidence in themselves and their attractiveness. They can fashion a new, more empowering identity around their new beliefs and their new experiences.

As you work on changing the story of your health, you might find it difficult to imagine a health story that does not include physical ailments or symptoms of a chronic health condition. Maybe what you desire is impossible, so your new health story will include a theme of acceptance. Some people have trouble accepting that they can only lose so much weight without making other sacrifices they are not willing to make. Acceptance works the other way, too. A person might go many years cancer-free, yet have trouble identifying as a cancer survivor or simply as someone who once had cancer but overcame it. Whatever your health condition, you can change the story of your health and let go of your identification with it.

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