CHAPTER 3

The ManyStory Approach

In Chapter 2, we noted that we always have many stories available to us about the same reality, though we may not normally be aware of that fact. Typically one story dominates our understanding, and is perceived by us as reality. For example, if I have a good working relationship with my manager, my story about her might be that she is stimulating, supportive and so on. But in a moment of difficulty or crisis, if I feel let down by her, I may find myself thinking *'Deep down, she's always out for herself!'*

Therefore, it is clear that both of these stories may co-exist in my understanding of her. But I usually attend only to one of them, which we call the dominant story. Normally I am quite sophisticated in the way I construct meaning and thus develop my stories. However, when I am under pressure or feeling stressed, it is easy for me to allow a simple and unhelpful story to become dominant. As we discussed in Chapter 2, when an unhelpful story remains dominant for a while, that can have very negative consequences.

This chapter suggests an approach to working with unhelpful stories, built on the understanding outlined in the previous chapters. I call this approach the ManyStory Approach. I base it on these assumptions:

- it is helpful to recognise that our experience of reality, and our understandings, are stories
- there are always many stories available to us about any person (including ourself) or situation
- finding ways to access more than one story is helpful, especially if the dominant story is unhelpful
- this is difficult: because our dominant story feels like reality, for the reasons discussed in Chapters 1 and 2

- new stories can be found or brought into being that create new possibilities for positive actions

How does a ManyStory Approach help?

The ManyStory Approach provides us with interesting opportunities to change unhelpful stories. In this chapter, we will discuss a framework that allows us to loosen the grip of unhelpful stories, discover more helpful stories, and then enrich those more helpful stories.

As we become more skilled at recognising and working with stories some interesting possibilities open up. For example, we can:

- recognise and re-write any unhelpful stories we have about ourselves and others
- consider what helpful stories we want to be living and work to make them come true
- seek to understand others' stories about themselves, us and the relationship between us
- help others to re-write unhelpful stories that are causing them problems

The question is: how can we change unhelpful stories, once they are established? It is not an easy thing to do, but it is certainly possible. In this chapter, therefore, I present and explore a framework for achieving such change.

The ManyStory Framework

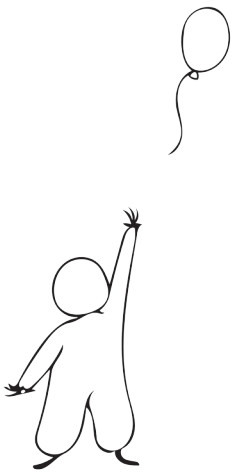
Simple frameworks are often helpful as ways to organise our thinking; they can provide stimuli that remind us of possibilities when we are navigating difficult human situations.

Here, then, is a framework to bear in mind when working with these ideas: it is meant to be thought-provoking rather than

prescriptive or predictive. There are three phases in the ManyStory Framework:

- loosen the grip of unhelpful stories
- discover more helpful stories
- enrich the plot of more helpful stories

1. Loosening the grip



This stage seeks to address a two-fold problem. Firstly, a good story is compelling. We have constructed it, collected evidence and proved it to ourselves, told it to others and had them confirm it, and so on. Given what we know about confirmation bias, the longer we have believed a story, the more evidence we will have collected and interpreted (largely outside of our conscious awareness), and the more true we will believe it to be. Not unnaturally, it has a hold on us: we are convinced of its accuracy and truth - to the extent that we don't see it as a story, or our interpretation of reality, at all: it is simply 'how things are.'

That has a very definite effect on how we respond to other ideas or possibilities. If, for example, someone raises a different possibility, we will naturally check whether it fits with the story that we perceive as reality. If we see the new idea as contradicting the existing story, we are likely to reject it out of hand: because it doesn't fit with 'how things are,' and is therefore demonstrably wrong. What this means is that if we are properly to consider alternatives, we need to loosen the story's grip on us.

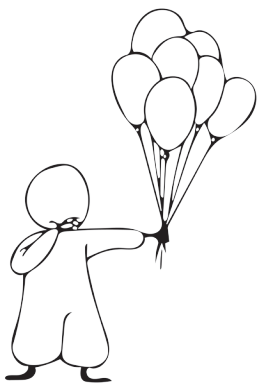
The second issue that loosening the grip seeks to address is similar, but different. Our stories are useful and comforting. They make sense of our world and of our experience. They may reassure us that we are right, or that our intentions are good, and so on. Once we have told others our story, we have a natural desire

not to be made to look foolish by changing it. So as well as our story having a grip on us, we tend to grip it too.

These problems become more intense if we have internalised the story to the extent that we believe it to be a truth about ourself - for example, if I have a problem with a work relationship and believe that it is because I can never build good working relationships.

So the idea of loosening the grip is both to loosen the story's hold on the individual (whether that is ourself or someone we are seeking to help), and to loosen the individual's hold on the story.

2. Discovering more helpful stories



This stage seeks to work towards a solution. The underlying assumption is that there are many stories available to us. Here we seek to find or create more helpful stories. A more helpful story is one that has more of the following characteristics than the unhelpful dominant story:

- it opens up more positive possibilities for the future
- it accounts for more of our experience (including those things that were previously disregarded as they didn't fit the dominant unhelpful story)
- it provides a more plausible interpretation of our experience (e.g. it doesn't assume others are mad or bad as a starting point...)
- it is based on positive values

Of course, there may be many helpful stories available to us; however, in practice it is often most useful to select one as the focus for this work. The reason for that is that we want to adopt a new story, check that it is both more helpful and more credible

than the old, and work to strengthen it and bring it to full reality. That is less easy if we have several competing alternatives. Of course, if we find that the story we have chosen does not work, we can go round the cycle again, and develop a new, more helpful story, in the light of our learning.

3. Enriching the plot

This stage seeks to make the more helpful story strong enough to survive. Typically, long-established stories do not give up without a struggle. For example, we may have convinced ourself that our manager is not really all bad, but one difficult interaction can allow the old story to rush back to dominance and we find ourselves thinking: *'You see, she's always like that, really.'*

Enriching the plot is a deliberate strategy to make the new, more helpful story sufficiently robust that it can withstand such a counter-attack.

The Three Stages in More Detail

How to loosen the grip

We will discuss the stages in more detail, as we would use them when we are working with someone else and her story. The process for working on our own story is the same, but it is easier to describe if we use the example of someone else's story. Let us call that person Sue.

If we wish to loosen the grip of a story that Sue finds unhelpful, the first thing is to respect that story. It has not come from nowhere - it has some meaning and serves some purpose for Sue. So we inquire into it respectfully, seeking to

understand it fully. We do not correct Sue as she tells the story if we notice any leaps of logic or any prejudicial interpretations, although we may remember these for later discussion.

Our first priority, then, is to listen, and to demonstrate that we have heard and understood her story: that will build trust. It will also give us the basic understanding we need in order to help. A useful skill is to summarise the main points, to demonstrate that we really have heard and understood. We will discuss this further in Chapter 5.

We also pay attention to any exceptions that arise: examples of experiences or behaviours that don't fit - or might not fit - this story. However, we do not draw Sue's attention to these yet, as we do not want to challenge the story until we have demonstrated that we fully understand it, and have established some empathy with her.

Once we have heard the story, it is often helpful to explain the way in which we create stories, as outlined in Chapter 1, and invite Sue to give this story a name. For example, if her unhelpful story is that a colleague dislikes her, she might name that story Bill Hates Me.

Naming a story helps us to refer to it briefly, summarising all that has gone before. It also helps us and Sue to treat it as a story, rather than as reality. That helps to open up distance between Sue and the story. Often, the name also reveals a degree of exaggeration (e.g. 'hates'). That may help Sue to see that the story has taken on a life of its own, beyond the bounds of plausibility.

It is also helpful to ask how the others involved might name the story. In this case, we might ask Sue how Bill might name the story of what has gone on between them. That starts to open up the idea that the story may be seen quite differently by others. And that in turn can help when we seek to explain that there are many stories available to Sue about the same set of events.

Another helpful thing we may do is to ask Sue to take a stand in relation to the story: is it OK or not OK with her? It is

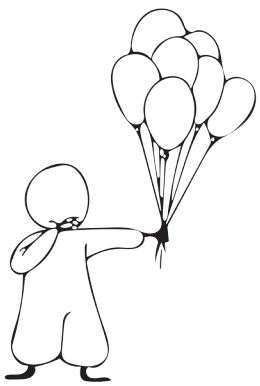
surprising how that simple question can help someone to take a stand, and feel more powerful in relation to a story that has been troublesome to her.

While there is no single answer or set of strategies that will be effective in every case, all of these have been useful in some cases:

- listen to the dominant, unhelpful story and honour it
- explain the way in which we create stories
- invite the individual to name her unhelpful story
- start to open up distance between the individual and the story
- invite her to consider how others involved might name the story
- ask her to take a stand with regards to the story

Each of these has a particular rationale and possible benefits that will be explored in a more context-specific way in the following chapters.

How to discover more helpful stories



To discover more helpful stories, we start by exploring exceptions. Exceptions are times when things did not go in the way the unhelpful story would have predicted, or times when the story was not so dominant in her life. For example, in the case of Bill Hates Me, we might ask Sue if there were any examples of things that did not fit the story. These might be incidents when Bill behaved more considerately.

It is true that Bill interrupted her at the meeting and opposed her ideas. It is also true that he walked in this morning without even acknowledging her. However, it is also

true that he offered to help her last week with a tough deadline. And Sue had forgotten that until prompted, because it hadn't fitted her story about Bill. In fact, it was an exception to that story. Exceptions are very valuable in further loosening the grip, and in suggesting alternative, more helpful stories.

Another type of exception to explore is any time when the unhelpful story was less dominant in her relationship with Bill. These may be times before she had decided that he hated her, or more recent times. It is worth exploring these in depth. The fact that there was a time in the relationship when she did not think Bill hated her is a valuable resource. Even more valuable are times when this story was less dominant. By exploring these exceptions with Sue, we may help her to discover other stories that were coming to the surface at that time, or behaviours or strategies that may help to stop the unhelpful story from dominating her thinking.

A third type of exception might be other people's perceptions of Bill and the relationship between them. If other people, especially people whose judgement Sue trusts, don't think Bill Hates Sue is the most likely story, that view can be treated as an exception. We can ask Sue what such people do think and to consider the merits of that story.

In all cases, it is valuable to explore the exceptions in some detail. First, giving them time and attention is a way of giving them additional weight. That helps to counter-balance the effect of confirmation bias, which will incline Sue to disregard them.

Secondly, we may find strategies Sue already has to undermine the unhelpful story. Or we may discover other ways to understand Bill or the relationship between Sue and Bill, that differ from Bill Hates Me.

Another important area to explore is the implicit positive values. The unhelpful story is normally unhelpful because it negates one or more of the positive values of the individual whose story it is. These may not be explicit in the unhelpful story, so we

deliberately seek them out. That is why they are called implicit positive values.

For example, if part of the reason that Sue believes Bill hates her is that Bill never has any time of her, we know that making time for people is an important value for Sue.

Identifying these positive values and making them explicit is very helpful. It gives us a frame of reference as we seek more positive stories, and provides a profound motivation to commit to such stories. For example, the more positive story may require Sue to engage more with Bill (even though she may not feel like doing so). If Sue considers that need in the light of her positive value about making time for people, it will be easier for to commit to doing so.

Once we have found some exceptions, and identified the implicit positive values required of the more helpful story, we can start to search for possible stories that fit all of the evidence better. That means that they must account for everything in the original story, and also the exceptions we have identified. Moreover, they must be grounded in Sue's positive values, because that means that they will have more positive possibilities inherent in them.

A good place to start in adopting a more helpful story is to consider what other possible stories there are available to Sue:

- does she have any other stories that have been submerged by the dominant story, about her relationship with Bill?
- were there any prior stories, before Bill Hates Me became the dominant story?
- does she know what stories other people have about Bill, or about her relationship with Bill?

Such questions can help Sue to see that there are many possible stories available to her. Once she has accepted that, we can encourage Sue to consider how her implicit positive values might inform a new story. Can she think of examples of Bill making time

for anyone else? Have there ever been times when Bill has made time for her?

If we have not identified any of Sue's positive values, we can consider some fundamental values. I find faith, hope and love to be a rich set that can be powerful to ask about. So, for example::

- I might ask Sue what she really believed about people. Is there good in all of us? Or I might ask what she really believes about relationships. Are they ever beyond mending?
- I might ask about her hopes. What would it be like if she could transform this unhelpful story into a more positive one?
- I might ask her about love. What would it take for her to believe that Bill really liked her; and that she really liked him?

Based on all of that, we can invite Sue to choose the best story she can imagine. Of course, opinions may vary about which story is 'best', based on differing assumptions, values, beliefs, prejudices and so on. Some criteria to consider are:

- how positively the new story interprets the evidence that informs the original, unhelpful story
- how well the new story accounts for any additional evidence, discovered when exploring exceptions
- how well the new story is grounded in positive values
- how helpful the new story is in terms of creating possibilities for the future

For example, if we are seeking positive alternatives to Bill Hates Me, Sue might try out this more helpful story: Bill Respects Me, But Does Not Always Agree With Me. Further he is honest and impulsive, but does not have great social skills. He is very busy, and gives what spare time he has to support more junior staff. That story also includes the positive value we identified as implicit

in the unhelpful Bill Hates Me story (giving time to people is important).

Sue can then consider if this more helpful story better accounts for all the evidence, or whether there are exceptions to this story, too. If there are exceptions, she can take them into account and try to construct yet another story. Clearly, this more helpful story would set up much more likelihood of a positive, pleasant and effective relationship with Bill than the unhelpful story that he dislikes her, so it is preferable on those terms.

Once we are happy that we have a more helpful story that is credible and positive, we invite Sue to name the more helpful story, just as she named the unhelpful story. She might, for example, choose to call it Painfully Honest Bill.

We can also invite her to take a stand with regards to it. Is this a story in which she can believe and which she is prepared to commit to?

As always, there is no single answer or set of actions that will be effective in every case, but it is often worth trying several of these:

- seek and explore any exceptions to the dominant, unhelpful story
- seek out the positive values implicit in the unhelpful story
- search for possible stories that fit all of the evidence better
- choose the best story
- name this emerging more helpful story
- take a stand with regards to the new story

Each of these has a particular rationale and possible benefits, which will be explored in a more context-specific way in the following chapters. However, they are not always enough to ensure that the more helpful story survives, which is why the third stage is to enrich the plot of the more helpful story.

How to enrich the plot

We will only believe in, and live, the new more helpful story if it has more credibility than the story we are seeking to replace. The old story starts with some advantages. One is that it has been a part of a habitual way of thinking for a period of time, and we are likely to fall back on it if anything stimulates us to do so. Another is that we have grown accustomed to interpreting events in the light of it, so new events will tend to look as though they fit the old story straight away. So we need to convince ourselves, and keep reminding ourselves, that the new helpful story offers a better account of reality than the old.

Therefore, the purpose of this stage, enriching the plot, is to ensure that the new helpful story is strong enough to survive. The old unhelpful story may fight back at any moment, to re-establish its dominance. Inevitably, some things will go wrong, or someone will revert to old habits of behaviour that were typical of the time before the change. At these moments, there is the risk that the old story will re-emerge. So it is important to make the new helpful story as strong as possible. There are several ways to help people to do this.

One way is to assume the truth of the new, helpful story, and look back over all our relevant experience, and re-interpret it in the light of the new story. That is, we are re-writing our interpretation of the past so that it is all part of our chosen story.

For example, if we are trying to enrich the plot of the new story of Painfully Honest Bill, we invite Sue to consider all those occasions that contributed to her story that Bill hated her. The task is to check if Painfully Honest Bill provides a credible account for all of them.

The next step is to look forward, and to identify what evidence Sue will need to see or create in order to sustain the new helpful story. Likewise she can consider whether there is any

evidence that she will need not to see, or not to create, as it would re-invigorate the old unhelpful story.

For example, Sue could look ahead and recognise how she wants to behave around Bill if the new helpful story is true, and what behaviours she wants to avoid if the old unhelpful story is to be undermined. That might lead to a positive effort to spend time with Bill, to be non-defensive, to talk with Bill about his enthusiasms, and even to give Bill positive feedback about his refreshing honesty.

We can also ask Sue questions about who else will support the new story. That support from others can come in various ways. One way is a confirmation that the new story is credible. So a powerful question to ask Sue at this stage is *'Who will not be surprised at this new story, Painfully Honest Bill?'* That will typically prompt Sue to identify people who already see the world in ways that accord with this new story. And that in turn lends further strength to the story: it is not simply a rose-tinted fiction, if others already see things that way.

We can also ask who might support her more actively in living the new story, and how she can get that support. Who does she trust to help her to make the new more helpful story come true?

It is very valuable to document the new story. The idea is to counteract any remaining confirmation bias in favour of the old story. To do this, Sue can collect evidence that Painfully Honest Bill really is a better story. That might be because it offers a more sophisticated understanding of her reality; or it might be because living that story leads to more constructive interactions with Bill. Sue can collect evidence of either, or both, of these positive aspects and write them down in a journal or learning diary.

Another way to enrich the plot is to celebrate successes. So we can ask Sue how she will make sure that she notices successes, and how she will celebrate them.

Once again, there is no single answer or set of strategies that will be effective in every case, but it is often worth trying several of these:

- look back: go back over the past in the light of the new more helpful story
- look forward: ask what evidence the individual needs to create, in order to demonstrate the reality of the more helpful story
- identify any support the individual will need, to live the new more helpful story, and how to ensure they get such support
- engage other trusted people in the process
- write down the new helpful story and record examples of things that demonstrate it is coming true

All of these ideas will be explored in various ways in the rest of this book, with examples from real situations as case studies, and discussion of how the ideas may be used in different contexts.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we have seen that a ManyStory understanding opens up new possibilities for dealing with difficult situations. There are three phases to taking a ManyStory Approach.

The first phase is to loosen the grip of unhelpful stories. That may involve:

- exploring the unhelpful story
- considering how we create stories
- naming the unhelpful story
- opening up distance between the person and the story
- considering how others might name the unhelpful story
- taking a stand with regards to the unhelpful story

The second phase is to discover more helpful stories. That may involve:

- exploring exceptions
- seeking out implicit positive values
- searching for possible stories that fit the evidence better
- choosing the best story
- naming the new more helpful story
- taking a stand with regards to the new more helpful story

The third phase is to enrich the plot. That may involve:

- reinterpreting the past
- looking forward
- seeking support
- documenting the new story
- celebrating successes

There are many actions one can take at each stage, and normally a combination of several of them is necessary to shift the old unhelpful story and enable the new more helpful story to thrive.

In the following chapters, we will examine case studies, and explore the practical application of the ManyStory Approach in the contexts of coaching, working with teams, helping people though change, and addressing conflict.

Values

The term 'positive values' implies that we can make a judgement that some values are more positive than others. But what are these values, and how can we claim they are more positive?

If you are interested in exploring or discussing what makes a good set of values, visit the blog (see last chapter for details).