

Care Teams and Collaboration

By David Newman

When I started working as a therapist, I often experienced concerns that the usual structure of one-on-one therapeutic conversations could contribute to people understanding their problems as unique to them. I noticed that in the workplaces in which I was employed, I often found myself meeting with one person or a few people in a room that was closed off from the outside world. This sparked an interest to find ways for others with shared concerns to join with us.

A second concern for me involved the way in which one-on-one therapeutic conversations could center the relationship between myself and the person with whom I was meeting. I wanted to de-centre this relationship and contribute to bringing to light the practices of care, help and mutual support within networks in people's lives.

I also wished to find supportive audiences for the stories told to me in therapy. A narrative approach to therapy and community work utilizes a post-structuralist or relational understanding of identity. A significant theme that has been elaborated relates to the performance of identity. As Bruner (1986) has described: "... it is not enough to assert (identity) claims; they must be enacted. Stories become transformative only in their performance" (p.25). Finding ways for people to *perform* preferred claims about their identity has therefore become a central aspect of narrative practice. And in order for a performance to take place, there must be an audience to witness it.

While there are many other reasons why outsider witness work appeals to me, these were three key issues I wished to address in my own practice. The use of outsider witnesses and 'care-teams' has provided a way forward in relation to these matters. To demonstrate this I'd like to tell a story about conversations I shared with Josh and his family.

Josh, Worry and the anti-Worry team

Thirteen year old Josh came with his mother to the youth service I was working at in South West Sydney. I was immediately struck by the ease that Josh showed and the warm and humourous way that Josh and Kirsty spoke with each other. It wasn't long before Josh was speaking about something that we named quite quickly as Worry. This Worry had been bringing some difficult things to Josh's life and family. Worry had Josh very fearful of being left alone. It had him locking every door in the house when he was at home by himself. It encouraged Josh to think it was rarely safe to go anywhere without his mother. Worry would therefore encourage Josh to request lifts from his mother regularly. This brought "fights" with his mother as she experienced pressure as a result of being asked by Josh to pick him up from many different places at many different times. Worry had also been making it hard for Josh to concentrate at school because he found himself regularly thinking about how to get home. Josh would often get into trouble at such times.¹

All of these effects of Worry were negative for Josh. He let me know the kinds of things he would prefer for his life and his relationship with his mother. These included not getting into trouble at school, being easy-going, having a good time with his mum, and having conversations with his mum without the yelling.

I was interested to know who in Josh's life was concerned or would be concerned to hear about what Worry had been up to. My intention was to find out some more about local networks, local support in Josh's life. To my surprise, Josh started talking about an older sister, Rebecca, who had died when she was fourteen and Josh was seven. Kirsty and Josh then started speaking about Rebecca and made particular mention of a special way she had. This special way was how Rebecca would take the time to sit down and listen to others. Apparently these talks had always made others feel better about whatever they were going through.

I was very interested in whether Rebecca's skills could in some ways assist us in our conversations together. So I asked Josh if his relationship with Rebecca was still in his thoughts at times. Josh said "Yes. It feels like she is there for me". I then asked Josh what he thought Rebecca would have to say if she had the chance to join our conversation. Josh had some clear ideas: "It's nothing to worry about", "A lot of people go through worse", and "I'm here and your other family members are here for you."

Many images came to my mind as I heard Josh speak these words. I thought this beautifully outlined an emerging picture of local support in Josh's life. I was curious to find out more about this local support.

I wondered with Josh and Kirsty if they might be interested in what I proposed could be called an Anti-Worry Team, a team of people who could help perhaps water down this Worry. Josh thought that it might be a good idea but we didn't flesh out the details of how it might work as we were running out of time. It was agreed however that Josh's other older sister Cathy would come to our next meeting and we could talk further about an anti-Worry team. In the letter that I sent out to Josh and Kirsty after this meeting I included the following:

I liked hearing about a team who could help you get worry off your back Josh. These people might include Cathy, Peter (Josh's step father), your mum, Rebecca and me! I wonder what you think of this anti-worry team. Is it a good idea Josh? I also wonder what it would be like if all these people were told they could be anti-worry helpers. I wonder if they would like to help get worry off your back and what you think about how they could help.

When we next met, two weeks later, the Worry didn't stop Josh from walking to my workplace by himself. I wondered how he managed to do this and it seemed that all it took was for Josh to use the thought "Mum has to work; she can't be on call all the time".

After some very funny family stories were shared by Josh, Kirsty and Cathy, we started speaking about the idea of an anti-Worry Team. Josh did think it was a good idea and

wanted to talk about it further. Not far into this topic Josh asked spontaneously “do they have to be here with us?” I wasn’t sure what he meant by this question and asked him to say some more. “Like, do they have to be alive?” “No, umm I guess that is why Rebecca is in the team.” I replied. “Well then, I would like to include my Pop” Josh said with certainty. It was a surprising and wonderful moment for me. I was moved by the way Josh was initiating the membership of the anti-Worry team. Josh then filled in a little of the continuing significance of his relationship with his pop. He spoke about how he talks to his pop when he’s in his room, talk that is about everyday life.

Then Josh, Cathy and Kirsty came up with clear ideas for how the anti-worry team might work. I was also interested in the ways that it was already working. Cathy spoke about an example the other day when she was leaving the house for a short while, leaving Josh alone. She said to Josh “I’m on your anti-worry team, I’m only going to be twenty minutes and you have my mobile phone number to call me if Worry gets at you”.

After the meeting I wrote the following in the next letter to Josh, Kirsty, Cathy and Peter: *The anti-Worry team could do the following:*

- *If Worry is giving Josh a hard time, Josh can talk to people on the anti-Worry team about it.*
- *People on the anti-Worry team can take Josh aside if they think Worry is getting to him. They can ask him what’s going on and say something like, “Listen we’re family, we love you, we just want to make sure you’re OK.”*
- *Kirsty, Cathy or Peter can speak to Josh about what Pop or Rebecca would say at a time when Worry is pushing him around. Josh said this would not be upsetting for him, as he doesn’t want to forget his Pop or Rebecca; he wants to remember them.*
- *If Josh doesn’t feel like talking, and the team then has Worry giving **them** a hard time about this, Josh could help by writing down something on paper. This could be, for example, “Could you give me my space? I’ve had a bad day, I’ll tell you about it later.”*

My sense was that we had done a fairly thorough job at planning how the anti-Worry team might work and how Josh might assist them with their care. Through this process we had also made visible the ways that the anti-Worry team was already working, and we had found ways that Pop and Rebecca could be included in the anti-Worry team.

Four weeks later

Josh, Kirsty, Cathy and I met four weeks later. Things seemed much better. Josh had walked home by himself every day for ten days and had not been calling Kirsty nearly as much. He had also been joking much more. We traced some of the emerging skills that had helped shape this change. These skills included Josh saying to Worry “I did this last time (walked to my workplace by myself), I can do this again.” and Josh telling himself, “I’m here to get better at this, so I’ll give it a go.”

This part of our conversation was building an emerging alternative story-line; a story as yet unnamed, but was based on Josh's increasing ability to lessen the influence of Worry in his life. However, one of the team members suddenly changed tack and said, "I think that the Worry is getting worse, not better" and this team member then spoke about a number of things she had noticed that meant for her that Worry was just as pushy as ever in Josh's life.

At this point, I remember feeling a little saddened and I looked over at Josh. He looked deflated and I wasn't sure what to do. I wanted to be respectful of this team member's concerns, but then Josh himself spoke up. He said, "The job of the team is to help me remember the times when Worry isn't around". In the letter I wrote to the family after this session I included the following:

Today we also clarified another job for anti-Worry team members. It seems that one of the jobs of team members is to notice those times and ways that Josh is outsmarting Worry or getting Worry to back off. The job description of anti-Worry team members also includes avoiding emphasizing too much where Worry seems to still be giving Josh a hard time.

I spoke with Josh again recently and he told me that the Worry had 'just gone' shortly after that last meeting. He had 'just stopped thinking about it'. I wondered if anything else had helped this to occur, and he mentioned his mum.

Reflections

This is just one story of the use of outsider witness practices and care-teams. It is one example of how Josh's worry ceased to being located as his unique isolated problem and instead became a predicament that was addressed through collective, collaborative action. My relationship with Josh was not at the center of this work. Instead, Josh was linked to his mother and sister with whom he lived, and with his sister Rebecca and his Pop who are no longer alive but are very much part of his life and identity. As Josh began to recover his life from the influence of Worry, these four figures were all audience members to a preferred story of Josh's identity. He had a team to witness the steps that he was taking.

The meetings we shared together had me thinking about many things. First of all, how important it is for me to remember that negotiations with audiences and team members are continually negotiated. There may always need to be further clarifications, for instance the need for team members to focus on alternative story developments. My conversations with Josh also reminded me that young people often carry with them precious stories of people they remember but who may no longer be physically around. These stories are like treasures that may not be immediately shared with us. If we show delicacy and care in our conversations then we may get to hear about such relationships. Then, and only then, can we find ways to include these figures as an audience to our therapeutic conversations and to the steps that young people are taking to address the concerns in their lives.

Note

In hearing about this Worry I tried to learn about its origins in Josh's life. In particular, I was interested to investigate the possibility that Josh had been subject to abuse or perhaps bullying and whether this might be continuing. Josh and Kirsty both traced the emergence of Worry to an incident where Josh had been harassed by a group of boys when coming home from school one day. I was reassured that he wasn't being subjected to ongoing bullying or abuse.

References

Bruner, Jerome (1986) *Actual minds, possible worlds*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.