

Developing a strong family narrative key to overcoming COVID-19

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He uri ahau o Waitaha, Kāti Māmoe, Kai tahu. Ko Carrie Clifford toku ikoa.

Carrie is currently completing her Doctorate in Psychology at the University of Otago and is also a student in the Clinical Psychology programme at Victoria University Wellington - Te Herenga Waka. Carrie is passionate about improving culturally-responsive clinical practice and developing Māori approaches to mental health. Her doctoral research aligns with these passions, exploring the cultural and therapeutic benefits of pūrākau, narratives, and Māori storytelling practices.

This piece is deliberately written with a non-academic audience in mind and serves to highlight the importance of whānau friendly science communication in the psychology domain. My hope is that this piece will help community members and those working with whānau to develop a narrative of resilience around Covid-19.

Narratives create meaning and frame the way we view the world around us. They are important in shaping identity, help us make sense of the events in our lives, and bring order in a chaotic, unpredictable world. Shaping our reality through story allows us to provide a context for the impact of Covid-19 on our lives, our livelihoods, and our families. How we frame the events of Covid-19 is important to mitigate the potential long term psychological impacts.

Connecting our current experiences with larger intergenerational narratives provides us with a greater sense of purpose and belonging. In a recent Covid-related article, Professor Richie Poulton and Atawhai Tibble detail the strengths that New Zealand brings to bear on the current pandemic. They outline several reasons to be hopeful, the third reason being - our DNA - explaining that New Zealanders have many stories of overcoming adversity to draw upon. The history of Aotearoa New Zealand includes brave voyagers with vision, incredible innovation, and a history of resilience. There are also many stories of pain, struggle and deprivation in New Zealand including land confiscations, the Great Depression, WWI and WWII, and the Spanish Flu pandemic. Our country is built upon a legacy of overcoming challenges and hardship. Poulton & Tibble state that Covid-19 “presents us all with a chance to admire, and be inspired by our ancestors” and contribute to that story of resilience and overcoming adversity. Perhaps, knowing that many of those who have gone before us have experienced similar hardship helps us to normalise our current experience and feelings, and gives context to today’s realities.

New York Times best-selling author, Bruce Feiler argues that the single most important thing you can do for your family is to develop a strong family narrative - if you want a happier family, create, refine and retell a positive story of your family’s positive moments and ability to bounce back from the difficult ones.

International research supports the importance of storytelling and narrative creation for children and families in the face of adversity including national crises. In 2001, researchers Dr Marshall Duke and Dr Robyn Fivush from Emory University in the USA developed the “Do You Know?” scale, which asks children twenty questions about their family stories to determine if children who know more about their families are more resilient and can handle challenges better than those with limited knowledge. They found that children who knew more about their family’s history had a stronger sense of control over their lives, higher self-esteem, and believed that their families functioned more successfully.

Two months after Duke and Fivush’s research was completed, September 11 took place. Although the families involved in the study were not directly affected by the events, the children had experienced the same national trauma

at the same time. Researchers reassessed the children and found that those who knew more about their families proved to be more resilient, meaning they could reduce the effects of stress. This finding suggests that knowledge of family history plays an important role in resilience during national crises. Further research also found that knowledge of family history is also related to higher self-esteem, better family functioning, lower levels of anxiety, and less behaviour problems.

While every family has a unifying narrative, not all stories are equally beneficial. Family narratives tend to follow three different styles: (1) the ascending family narrative, also known as the rags to riches story; (2) the descending narrative, the riches to rags story; and (3), the oscillating family narrative, identified as the most healthy. This contains stories about ups and downs and how the family worked through both:

“Dear, let me tell you, we’ve had ups and downs in our

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family. We built a family business. Your grandfather was a pillar of the community. But we also had setbacks. You had an uncle who was once arrested. We had a house burn down. Your father lost a job. But no matter what happened, we always stuck together as a family.”

Importantly, the oscillating family narrative shows the family overcoming hardship.

Feiler states when happy families are faced with a challenge, it becomes a new chapter to their life story that shows them overcoming the hardship. With regards to Covid-19, in the coming months and years, families could benefit if they can identify core values, and tell a story of their family’s positive moments as well as their ability to overcome hardships. The development of such a narrative may have a significant positive impact for generations to come.

Storytelling is not new to Māori and Aotearoa. Māori have long understood the therapeutic benefits and value of intergenerational storytelling practices. Pūrākau are handed down from generation to generation. These narratives transmit Māori values, provide advice and insight from our ancestors, and highlight ways to overcome adversity and promote wellbeing. Māori have

many powerful whānau, hapū, and iwi narratives to draw upon and guide us through the current period in our history. Whether it be the vision and bravery of Polynesian voyagers, the courage of the 28th Māori Battalion during WWII, the resourcefulness and curious nature of Māui, or the resistance shown in the face of colonisation and land confiscation. Looking to these narratives, we know that we are the embodiment of our ancestors and possess the same whakapapa, skills, strengths, perseverance, and mana that they did. As Māori, we inherently have a tremendous ability to remember, shape, and create narratives. This ability remains as relevant and important today as it has ever been.

The seemingly simple skill of creating narratives may have a huge impact on our ability to cope with Covid-19 and the challenges ahead. The words of this whakataukī, *Kia whakatōmuri te haere whakamua*, I walk backwards into the future with my eyes fixed on my past, remain true, relevant, and meaningful. Now, more than ever, we must draw upon the stories of our past, and consciously create a narrative of our present, to ensure a better future for our tamariki and mokopuna.

References

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