

I'm Not Good Enough: How the Stories you Tell Yourself Are Ruining your Life!

Linda Paulk Buchanan, Ph.D.



“If you ever find yourself in the wrong story, leave” Mo Willems

**Do you ever feel like you're not good enough in some way?
Do you compare yourself to others and feel like you fall short?
Is life not turning out the way you thought it would?**

**Do you find yourself making the same mistakes even though you know better?
Feel stuck but don't understand why?**

USE THIS WORKBOOK TO GET UNSTUCK



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The Author's Story

I have worked as a psychologist for over 30 years. My professional journey began in the 80s when I was getting a master's degree in counseling. Wait a minute. Imagine that you can hear sound effects of a tape rewinding (for those of you old enough to remember that sound and if not, maybe you can imagine a car breaking and going in reverse). Because I have to say that my professional journey began much earlier than my formal education. It actually began as my story developed in childhood.

The first memory that I have attached to my "inner story" was when I was around three years old. I was in the car with my parents (before the time of toddler car seats) standing on the floor board of the back seat with my head stuck over the front seat between my parents. They were arguing about how to pronounce the word *pecan*. My father, raised in South Georgia, pronounced it with the accent on the first syllable and the second syllable pronounced the same as a tin can (PEcan). My mother, having grown up in Atlanta pronounced the word with the accent on the second syllable and the *a* in pecan sounding like *ah* (peCAHN). As is often the case, simple arguments can spiral into larger arguments and the tension was beginning to rise in the car. After listening to them argue for a few minutes, I piped up and asked why we couldn't just say PEcahn or pCAN. Their reaction was immediate and highly gratifying in that they chuckled at my creativity and the argument ceased. I learned two things: I love helping people and nothing feels better than making people laugh. I believe in that moment my destiny to become a psychologist was sealed (although my alter ego wanted to be a stand-up comedian, seriously).



Throughout childhood, I had many more opportunities to practice my untrained attempts at care taking. How to pronounce the word pecan was not the only thing that my parents didn't see eye to eye on and I eagerly became triangulated in their arguments though typically at my own expense. I would try to help them see something from the other's point of view. But since it was unpredictable whether this would be appreciated or resented, my need to help became laced with anxiety. When it helped, however, the outcome was very strong and rewarding.

Additionally, I was the oldest of three children and at a very early age, my father told me and my siblings I was in charge. I developed into a bossy, little girl who thought that she knew everything and was supposed to tell everyone what to do—even my same-age friends. Fortunately, I began to understand my error, in large part to my best friend who was an only child. She told me in no uncertain terms that I better stop telling her what to do! So I changed my behavior. However, it took years or decades to unwind the feeling that I was supposed to be in complete charge of myself and others.

I was also a very sensitive child (I still can't watch bloody movies) and my level of empathy was so high that I often felt physical pain. I remember sitting in a large college classroom one day and a girl came in after me. She sat down in the chair in front of me looking very dejected. I felt a strong sense of pain for her. I realized that my reaction wasn't normal and that I might be feeling even worse for her than she was for herself. I had been teetering on psychology or journalism as majors and this experience of my own high level of empathy swayed me into declaring my major course of study and my life's work. This high sensitivity is based in physiology and often leads to perfectionism, as it did with me.

Therefore, from an early age, I developed a narrative which encompassed the following scripts:

I need to be extremely responsible. I should always know what someone needs. I can control how others feel. I shouldn't make mistakes. Although I always want to do the right thing, sometimes it bothers people. I'm smart but not likeable. My importance comes from what I can accomplish. Nothing feels better than pleasing people (because it makes them seem happier) and making them laugh. This story naturally led to many false assumptions, perfectionism, and ambivalence.

I met my husband in graduate school and he definitely was not a perfectionist! Although he was working on his doctorate, he embodied the *play hard/work hard* mentality. I had the *work hard* part down but had never been very good at play. The saying "It's never too late to have a happy childhood" became real for me after meeting him. I began to learn balance between play and work. He told me that he never aimed for the highest grade in the class which shocked me. Wasn't that everyone's motivation? His approach was much more adult-like as he taught me to learn for my own gratification rather than an external reward. I discovered that it took much less time and work to shoot for a 90 (in my program that was an A) than a 100 which resulted in much greater enjoyment in life. Thus I began to reevaluate the early narrative I had naturally formed into one that was gentler and actually more helpful and productive in the long run.

In my career, I have specialized in working with people with eating disorders. I was drawn to these folks because, although I hadn't had a diagnosable eating disorder, I had struggled for a time with food and body image issues and these dear souls tend to be perfectionistic, highly sensitive and very ambivalent. Sound familiar? These were my peeps! I found the most rewarding career imaginable in helping them understand and reevaluate the stories that they were telling themselves. I hope this workbook will help you do the same.

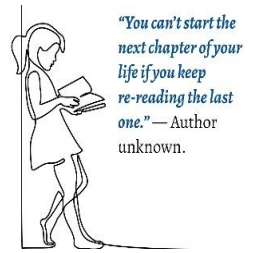
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Introduction

If you are struggling with feelings of insecurity of any kind, it may be that you are being influenced by “stories” that you developed in childhood. We all begin forming ideas about ourselves, others and the world from an early age based on a combination of factors including our circumstances, the age that we experienced significant events and our level of physiological sensitivity. Early beliefs are meant to guide us (don’t touch the stove—it’s hot) but some of the beliefs and rules that you formed may no longer be giving you the best guidance. Rewriting your narrative, doesn’t mean that you are changing the events of what occurred, simply the assumptions about and the interpretations you made of those events. The following are some common consequences of inaccurate stories which will be addressed in this workbook.



The Development of Problematic Behaviors

If you have beliefs that make it difficult to create the life that you wish for, you may have developed problematic behaviors or symptoms such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse or eating problems to name a few, which help you avoid feeling the disappointment. The problem is that since the impulsive or problematic behaviors have to be very strong to keep those feelings at bay, they can become addictive. Additionally, the problematic behavior is often used as a temporary way of managing ambivalence by avoiding taking a stand.

Ambivalence

False stories lead to ambivalence. Say, for instance, that you want to be married and have a family but you believe that people can't be trusted and will eventually leave. You are experiencing two opposing needs; to have a family and to protect yourself from rejection. Opposing needs will create ambivalence as to how to interact with others. Consequently, the need to protect yourself from rejection creates a guardedness that may actually result in people leaving; this then affirms the belief that people will leave. This is referred to as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Sound confusing? It is and this ambivalence regarding needs can have life-crippling effects.

Control Issues

Having a sense of control is good but false beliefs and narratives often result in trying to control the wrong things, such as those things that are outside of your control. Common things that people with inaccurate stories try to control are other people, their own authentic self, and situational outcomes. Since these things can't truly be controlled, your misguided attempts will make you will feel even more out of control, leading to an even greater attempt to control the wrong things. This is a dangerous downward spiral.

Interpersonal Confusion due to Assumptions and Projections

Based on the story that you tell yourself, you likely carry beliefs with you into every situation you encounter rather than evaluating each situation on its own merit. Additionally, every time a thought, feeling or behavior is repeated, the neural pathways in your brain related to this action are strengthened. This explains why we sometimes continue believing things about ourselves in the midst of overwhelming contradictory evidence (you probably know people who are accomplished but still feel inferior). Thus, these beliefs become hardwired in your brain so that you accept them without question, making it increasingly difficult to think in a new way without sustained and conscious effort.

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How to Use This Workbook

After working for 30 years as a psychologist, I have learned so much about what prevents a person from having the life that they yearn for and deserve. This book will help you understand how you developed a story in childhood to guide you that may actually be full of fallacy and causing you unnecessary hardship in adulthood. It is as if you are presently being guided by a child who was attempting to make sense of your unique experiences — but from a child's perspective. The first 15 handouts will help you create a new narrative and handouts 16 through 25 will enable you to quickly identify when your old story is affecting you so that you can mindfully shift to the new narrative, effectively rewiring your brain. This workbook will help you:

“Those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, the power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless, because they cannot think new thoughts.”

— Salmon Rushdie.

- Realize that you make sense
- Understand how your story is impacting you
- Identify falsehoods embedded in your story
- Develop a new story that can change your life
- Learn how to rewire your brain

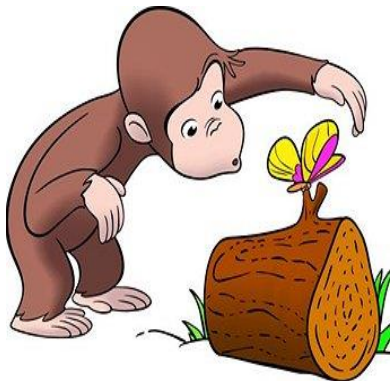
Understanding Why Change is Hard

Habit

Whatever we repeat gets wired in. Every time you repeat a thought, feeling, or behavior, the neuropathway of that experience is strengthened. Your brain naturally functions to *develop associations* as a way of learning and saving energy. For instance, when you get into your car, you can start driving with no thought about where the key goes and how to move out of *park* into *drive*. But try getting into someone else's car for the first time, and it is awkward. Thus change can be like trying to write with your non-dominant hand: awkward and inefficient at first, but improves with practice.

Negativity Bias

Brains are also hard-wired to **learn more efficiently from negative events than positive** (it's more important to know where the bear lives than where the daffodils grow) thus negative messages may be very deeply ingrained. This is often referred to as a negativity bias which is helpful for life-threatening events but not helpful with daily living. This workbook will help you shift your focus to the positive.



Be Curious

You will get the most out of this workbook if you can develop an open, accepting and curious attitude toward yourself. You will learn that you and your story make sense given all the factors involved. The first part of the workbook will help you reevaluate this story from an adult perspective resulting in modifying your story to one which will work much better in guiding you through the rest of your life. However, since, as mentioned above, change is hard, the second part of the book will offer strategies for reducing ambivalence and making behavioral changes and rewiring your brain with the new story.

The Three Cs of Success

Curiosity **Compassion** **Courage**

Frequently Asked Questions

What do I need?

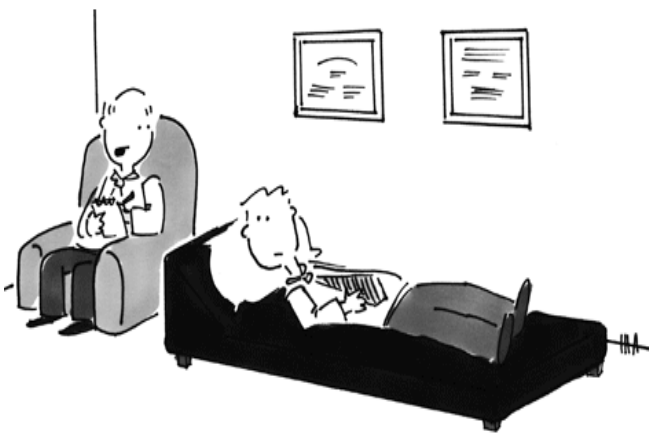
One of the great dichotomies in life is that you must accept yourself in order to change.

As mentioned before, the most important thing that you need in order to get the most out of this workbook is a curious, open and kind attitude toward yourself. Real change does not come about through self-judgment or shame. It is also helpful to consider self-awareness and growth as honorable values which require a commitment of time. Beyond this, you will only need a pen and extra paper for doing more in-depth journaling. Some people like to dictate rather than write responses to these questions. This is good, however, writing is better because it slows the process which often allows time for increased awareness and requires you to use more parts of your brain.

A Word about Blame:

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"What do you say we blame your parents and knock off early?"

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It is natural to either place blame on others or, in contrast, to resist exploring your unique story because you don't want to blame anyone else. Neither of these perspectives will help you move forward. If you resist due to a fear of blaming someone else, you may be left with shame related to your needs. It is important to be open to all the reasons that you think the way you do. Conversely, it may feel gratifying to blame others for your pain. This is natural, however, the better approach is "eyes on you." It's true that people hurt each other, however, once the pain has been experienced it becomes the "property" of the one that felt it. Thus, **your pain is yours to manage and to heal.** The great news is that you don't have to wait for anyone else to change! Although this is good news, some people feel lonely when thinking about letting go of the wish that things had been different or they feel angry that they have to make the changes on their own. These feelings are understandable but they will keep you stuck.

I recommend a nonjudgmental stance toward yourself and others while using this workbook

Should I be in Therapy?

Although this workbook is written in a self-help style, the simple answer is yes. Definitely! If you can. I recommend that if you are struggling in parts of your life, working through this with a therapist will produce better results as you will have someone to keep you focused and to allow for diving more deeply.

Practice Makes Progress

Do I Really Need to Do the Practice Exercises?

I intentionally did not say *practice make perfect* because striving for perfectionism causes more problems than it solves. But you will make progress if you work through and practice the concepts shared. You will get out of this workbook exactly what you put into it. I would recommend spending at least a half hour a day working through the exercises and reflecting on your responses. Consider it part of your self-care routine.

After working for 30 years as a psychologist, I have heard every conceivable excuse people can make for not spending time on their own personal growth. I have summarized some of the most common excuses along with my responses. I hope it inspires you to push past the typical resistance in service of your future self.



I get this; I don't need to work at it: After 12 years of graduate school, I certainly had earned the right to tell myself that I had a great understanding of human personality and behavior and that my education alone would solve all my problems. Why would I need to practice to create change? That kept me stuck in some old patterns that could have changed much earlier. This is like a star athlete saying “I have natural talent so I don't need to practice.” Again, insight and knowledge alone will not create the change that you want.

This feels awkward: Yes, it will seem awkward at first because that is the nature of change (like writing with your non-dominant hand). Telling yourself that you're good enough will not feel natural after years of striving for perfectionism. It will feel like you're lying to yourself. However, the actual “untruth” was your earlier formed belief that you were unworthy if you weren't perfect. Change by definition IS awkward.

I tried it, but nothing happened: These strategies will take time to produce change and you already know why: you are having to rewire your brain. You probably didn't give up if you fell the first time you tried to ride a bike.

This is just a gimmick: This reminds me of the saying: “it's just a cliché” to which I want to answer, sure but what made the saying turn into a cliché in the first place? The truth behind it. Of course you will be using tricks or gimmicks at first to create behavior change. These strategies have been *connived* to help you create change.

This might work for other people, but not me: I hate to be blunt but this is what we in the profession call “terminal uniqueness.” You think that you are somehow different from others and that you can't have or don't need what most people do. When I hear this, I like to gently point out that you aren't that different or special from everyone else. If your brain functions somewhat normally on a physiological level, these will strategies work.

If you notice that you are thinking any of the above excuses (or any others that have come up for you), try to override that thought with another thought or just ignore it (it will pass) and do the exercise anyway. Some strategies will work better than others, based primarily on preference, so pick the ones you like best. It does take time and commitment but the outcome can be life-changing.

Part I: Understanding and Rewriting Your Early Narrative

Developing Your Inner Story



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Meet Kayla. Kayla came to therapy for help with an *anxiety disorder*. Kayla had to drive a great deal for her job and she *obsessed* about the weather whenever she had to travel. Several days before each trip she *compulsively* checked the weather up to 50 times a day. She was also very lonely, having no significant relationships since college. In therapy, she related that her mother, who could be very affectionate, suffered with periodic bouts of depression during her childhood. Kayla was an insightful and sensitive child and she tried to monitor her mother's moods to detect subtle changes that might signal an oncoming depression. Her dad, who did spend time with her in sports, was rarely home and not very affectionate. At the age of 13, her parents divorced and her father moved to another state. She believed deep down that he left because **she** couldn't keep her mother happy and that he was tired of her and her mother's mood swings.

Kayla was conscious of a script that said "I need to be prepared in case something bad happens" that resulted in the compulsive weather checking and insomnia. This script then triggered a deeper narrative related to *loss of control* and a dangerous world about which she was only partially aware. Kayla had come into therapy feeling ashamed and very self-critical about her ridiculous fears; however, her relief was palpable when she first realized that her fears made perfect sense in light of earlier experiences! After doing many of the exercises in this workbook, she became aware of the story that she created in childhood:

*Mom is happiest when I'm obedient and cheerful but sometimes **I'm not good enough** and she gets sad again. I need to **try harder** to keep her happy. But no matter how hard I try, sometimes she still gets upset. I must prepare for any kind of bad thing to happen because you never know when it will and I need to be very cautious around people because even when things are good, it won't last. **People are confusing** and unpredictable and men mainly care about themselves. It's good enough that someone will spend time with me, **I shouldn't need affection** too.*

What factors do you think played a role in developing her assumptions and beliefs?

The first factor is Kayla's **sensitive temperament**. Level of sensitivity is a trait that varies based, in part, on brain chemistry. Kayla was highly aware of her mother's moods. The harder she tried to help her mom, the more inadequate she felt about who she was and then she just tried even harder. She paid more attention to her mother's needs than her own from an early age. This is common for children under stress since they are dependent on their adult care-takers.

The second factors were her **experiences**, particularly of her mother's mood problems and her parent's divorce. Also impacting her reaction was her **age**. As a young child, she assumed responsibility for her mother's moods due to the egocentric nature of her cognitive development. At the time of her parent's divorce, she was less egocentric but still fairly concrete in her cognitions so she developed a global belief that men are selfish and give up easily. Therefore, she made assumptions that, although understandable, were incorrect.

Her **attachment** to her parents was characterized by insecurity and anxiety, always feeling like she inadequate and unlovable. Kayla was very aware of the part of the story that she told herself about needing to prepare for any danger. She was less aware of the part of her that expected things to go bad and how it was affecting her work and relationships. She was totally unaware of how desperately she wanted to be loved for who she truly was. Thus, the more she tried to control outcomes, the more she would feel inadequate when things went wrong, which increased her urge to control. Additionally, her belief that she was unlovable and that men couldn't be trusted was keeping her from what she desired most, healthy relationships.

The story that had guided Kayla throughout her life was actually creating the very scenario that she was trying so hard to avoid; feeling inadequate and being alone. This story was ruining her life.

Handout 1: Putting the Pieces together: What Led to Your Story?

Early Experiences: Childhood experiences are probably the most significant factor related to developing inaccurate stories. Any stress that you felt, difficult transitions, family dynamics and trauma will certainly influence how you think about yourself, others and the world. Briefly list your childhood stressors.

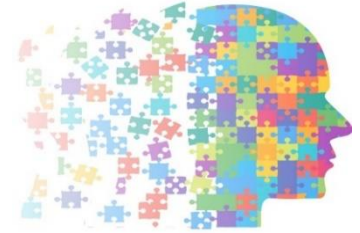


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Level of Sensitivity: Based on physiological factors, some of us are born with a higher level of sensitivity than others. Check the statements that might apply to you.

- ☐ I sometimes feel what others feel as if it's happening to me.
- ☐ Friends seem to come to me with their problems.
- ☐ I've been told that I'm too sensitive or worry too much.
- ☐ I tend to be perfectionistic.
- ☐ I don't like intensity in some areas (noise, bloody movies, bright light).
- ☐ It's important for me to try to keep the peace.
- ☐ My feelings seem bigger than other people.
- ☐ I try to hold in my feelings.
- ☐ I find myself overreacting at times.
- ☐ Other

Age: The ages you were when you tried to make sense of your unique experiences and how you think it might have affected your interpretation of them.

Type of attachment: The type of attachment that you have to parental figures will all greatly affect how you function. This helps explain why two children in the same family, with quite similar experiences can react very differently. How would you describe your attachment to your primary caregivers (strong, relaxed, insecure, etc.)?

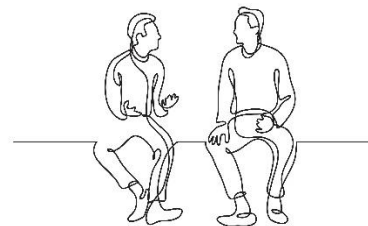
Brain factors: (see page 6)

Handout 14b: **Becoming and Finding Your Authentic Self**

Step 5. Be your own friend.

In word, tone and deed: As you consider your thoughts and behaviors, treat yourself like you would a good friend. Consider the choice of words, your tone of voice and even the expression on your face when you're listening to a friend. Now adopt the same attitude as you consider something that you are distressed about.

In time spent: You know that to cultivate a lasting relationship takes time. You've probably invested plenty of time with the people that are important to you. But how much time have you actually invested in yourself? It may be strange to think of developing a relationship with yourself, however if you think about it, you already have a relationship with yourself. It involves the way you talk to yourself, judge yourself, etc. To find and create your authentic self, you will need to cultivate a positive relationship with yourself.



Step 6. Find purpose: Consider ways that you can find purpose by either starting something new or by simply acknowledging things that you already are involved in that give you purpose. It doesn't matter how big or small, all that matters is that you find it rewarding to contribute. If you are a person of faith, consider your purpose in light of your faith.

Step 7. Be honest: If you find yourself hiding aspects of yourself or making up excuses for yourself, attempt to become more honest. Is it okay for you to be a person who has your thoughts and beliefs? Is it okay for you to be a person who is imperfect or who sometimes needs help? On the next few lines write down the things that you try to hide or lie about (even white lies) and write an honest response.

I'm late because there was a bad accident!	I had a bad morning and didn't get off on time.

Step 8. Step away from the thought: Stand up! Yes, you literally need to be standing up to do this exercise. Come on, you're worth the effort! Consider a negative, non-authentic thought that runs through your mind and do the following exercise.

As you're thinking this thought, label the emotions that it produces.

Notice any physical sensations that accompany this thought.

Take a step to the right and turn and look back at the thought.

Consider the history of the thought and any distortions embedded in it.

What would you like, now, to say to that thought from your new narrative?

What would it feel like to turn your back to the thought?

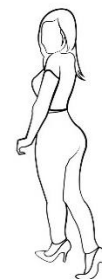
Imagine that a friend just stepped into the thought you were having and were thinking it now.

How would you feel about that?

How would you help your friend?

Now step back into the thought and help yourself in the same way you imagined helping your friend.

Can you now walk away from the thought?



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