

CEP Magazine – April 2020 Storytelling: The best tool you've never used

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Every society since the dawn of recorded history has told stories. Whether the stories were meant to warn, teach, or entertain, they all had one thing in common—they connected human beings. Whether the *Edda*, the *Odyssey*, or even the Hollywood blockbusters of today, great tales are passed from person to person and transcend geographic, generational, and cultural boundaries. Did you know you can use this same tried-and-true communication method to advance the goals of your compliance efforts?

The science behind storytelling

Scientists know that chemicals like cortisol, dopamine, and oxytocin are released in the brain when we listen to a story we connect with. Why do chemicals matter? Because they have a profound effect on our experience.

Cortisol, also called the stress hormone, gets produced when something warrants our attention, like distress. When we hear about potential threats in our environment—or hear something distressing in a story—cortisol focuses our body by suppressing nonessential functions in a fight-or-flight scenario.

The next chemical that may be triggered by stories is dopamine. This gets produced to aid in an elaborate learning system that rewards us with pleasure when we follow the emotionally charged events in a story. While cortisol helps with awareness, dopamine gives us a sense of heightened engagement, rewarding us to stay with the journey.

Finally, oxytocin, sometimes referred to as the “love hormone,” helps us make social and empathetic connections with others. It also helps us be able to identify with the protagonist in a story.

In a nutshell, this trio of chemicals is a trifecta for motivating human beings to potential action. Additionally, our mirror neurons respond when we’re doing an action and when we see someone else doing that same action—they’re likely responsible for why we yawn when we see someone else yawn. In the context of storytelling, our mirror neurons help us feel empathy when we hear the story.

Bottom line: Storytelling helps our mind form and examine our own truths and beliefs, as well as determine how they relate to the belief systems or values of others. Through stories, we can gain new perspectives and a better understanding of the world around us.

“A story is the only way to activate parts in the brain so that a listener turns the story into their own idea and experience.” –Princeton University neuroscientist Uri Hasson

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