

The Hero's Journey of Patients and Health Professionals

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Think of your three favorite movies or books.

What narrative elements do they have in common?

The transformation of the main character after facing unknown and threatening situations? The encounter with a teacher, guide, or philosophy that makes him rethink his identity? Various acts of bravery and leaps into the unknown? A battle or confrontation against external or internal dragons? Are you coming home with a renewed personality?

You have likely answered YES to several or all of the questions. This is not a coincidence. The essence of the stories that resonate with us follows a predetermined pattern that has been dubbed "The Hero's Journey."

The Hero's Journey, or monomyth, is a term coined by anthropologist Joseph Campbell to define the basic model for many epic, mythological, or artistic accounts of civilizations throughout human history. From biblical narratives, stories of creation, and myths, to the basic archetype of almost all Hollywood movies: from Star Wars to The Matrix, from Toy Story to Harry Potter.

The fact that these films or stories (and I mean all films in general) resonate with us and "change our lives" is because these narratives -which, although they seem fantastic or fictional-, really are a reflection of those of us watching from this side of the screen. The characters and stories in these movies constantly whisper to our ears: "This is your time to do what you've always wanted to do."

The Hero's Journey is not a metaphor for how life works; it is a description. As such, all of us have gone through various Hero's Journeys throughout our lives. Every crisis, every fall, every loss, every illness has its moments to rethink the story we tell ourselves. Moreover, after a few battles that required us to reach places that we previously thought impossible, we managed to re-invent ourselves and realize that we have always carried that potential within us. Once we have passed these battles and learnings, we can now return to our community and empower our fellow humans in their own personal, professional, spiritual, or health journeys.

Because Health is also a Hero's Journey. For patients as well as health professionals.

THE PATIENT'S HERO'S JOURNEY

We all are and have been patients of different diseases. Some illnesses, such as acute episodes, usually do not require a Hero's Journey to heal because they can usually be resolved with medications, surgeries, or short-term treatments.

On the other hand, chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes, asthma, depression, hypertension, arthritis, cancer, and many others are multi-causal diseases intimately related to our identity and the way we perceive ourselves. And because these diseases can last a lifetime, the way we interpret the disease and the degree of feeling empowered to integrate it into our life are very decisive in the type of life that we can have, not "despite," but "thanks to," the particular ailment we carry.

If you are a health professional: How many benefits could your patients obtain if you make them see that their disease is putting them on a Hero's Journey that they can live in the epic story of their lives?

Here is a brief description of the PATIENT'S HERO'S JOURNEY

- 1. Life before the health problem:** It is the patient's world before his diagnosis, treatment, accident, medical condition, or search for a healthier life. The patient is unaware of subtle unhealthy circumstances that will accumulate over time. Although the patient is aware that certain behaviors are not the healthiest, the consequences will not present until much later, so they believe there is no urgency to pay attention yet.
- 2. Call to restore health:** Something happens, and the patient realizes that he has a problem and that a difficult journey awaits him. This usually happens after a diagnosis or the loss of a loved one.
- 3. Refusal to seek medical help:** Fear, self-doubt, or anxiety prevent the patient from accepting the reality or committing to a recovery path. The patient continues in a stage of denial or negotiation to not have to take charge of his health.
- 4. Meeting with the health professional:** The doctor or any other health professional can play the role of "wise old man" who encourages and helps the patient at the beginning

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of his journey. Many times, the patient is not sure who is the “wise old man” he should follow. Often, he begins by following the one who proposes an easy, fast and cheap solution and not the one who will accompany him in the difficult challenge of self-transformation.

5. **Commitment to diagnosis:** The patient accepts his condition and realizes that he has a lot to do to regain his health. He makes the first commitment to begin his journey towards wellness voluntarily.
6. **Treatment:** The “new” world presents many challenges that test the patient’s strength, courage, and consistency. He makes allies on his way to recovery (family, friends, other patients, and health professionals) who offer their support and guidance.
7. **Approaching the most significant test:** The patient faces setbacks in the treatment or action plan, which often requires profound changes in his personality and habits. The patient hesitates and looks for quick solutions because he is not yet ready for the great test that is approaching.
8. **Biggest ordeal:** The patient faces death or faces the greatest fear that he has been trying to avoid all along. The tools of his “old” self are no longer helpful, and he has to get new ones that require enormous courage and energy. He is unsure about his capabilities. The most significant test is precisely the need to stop being the person he was to become someone new. After this profound confrontation with external and internal forces, there is a rebirth, and the patient manages to overcome the burdens and limitations that had him ill.
9. **Reward:** The patient celebrates his journey’s success, but the threat has not been completely eliminated.
10. and 11. **The road back and resurrection:** The patient sets on his way back to a new normality, where he finds that his new personality still has many adjustments to make. Frequently the patient faces a final test before returning to a new normal. (For example, a diabetic patient may face the temptation of the old lifestyle; a rhinoplasty patient may face his inner demons (self-esteem, confidence); a cancer patient may face the challenges of staying in remission.) However, these challenges are integrated with greater awareness and responsibility, and there is a renewed confidence in oneself and in life. The disease is re-interpreted, but it is still part of the patients’ journey.
12. **New normal:** The patient returns to his daily life with a physical and mental reminder of his journey and has a new story to tell himself and the world. The patient shares his newfound confidence, healthy mindset, and wisdom with his peers. His transformation is complete, and he is ready for new adventures.

THE HEALTH PROFESSIONALS’ JOURNEY

Not only as patients but as Health Professionals (HP), doctors, psychologists, and nutritionists, have also lived and are living their own Hero’s Journey. Often, their journeys have to do when they have had problems with disease and have had to find their way to redefine their life in the light of it. Once they return to “normal,” they share their learnings and insights with their patients.

Regardless of whether a Health Professional (HP) has had an episode with a disease of their own, many of them face the Hero’s Journey because they are very disappointed with their chronic patients’ outcomes. In other words, the HP is dissatisfied with his work because he has not had the tools to help his patients in an effective and lasting way. This makes the HP confront his own identity and the expectations that culture and custom have imposed on him for years as a HP.

Thus, in a world where the paradigms that dictate the “correct way” to practice their profession are changing, the HPs find themselves at various crossroads where their academic training and the canon of their profession are confronted with the need to really empower their patients to thrive and not just cope with illness.

Similarly, as with the patients’ Hero’s Journey, HPs also have transformation voyages that can be described through the monomyth narrative. In doing so, the HP can redefine the role that the disease will have in his life and the role of “wise old man” that he may have played with his patients. However, to become “wise,” the HP has to go through his own transformation story.

Here is a brief description of the HERO’S JOURNEY OF HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

1. **Life before the problem:** It is the world here the HP studies and prepares academically. This period also covers the first years of his clinical practice (although sometimes these first years can be many). The HP establishes long-term relationships with its patients, although patients keep returning with complications derived from the same underlying problems in many cases.
2. **Call to expand the clinical toolbox:** The HP intuits that with his current knowledge and his way of practicing, he is falling short in the generation of Health. For a long time, he has seen himself as someone who is there when the patient brings new problems, but he is not dedicated to empowering them to prevent those problems from happening in the first place. The HP wishes he could help his patients more but realizes that he is not prepared and that his profession has not given him the tools for it.
3. **Refusal to seek help:** fear, self-doubt, and inertia of so many years prevent him from accepting the reality or stays in a vicious cycle blaming how his profession was taught or blaming his patients for not adhering to his advice.
4. **Meeting with the “wise old man”:** Usually, a colleague who had a similar academic preparation to that of the HP, but who continued to study and learn from other unconventional sources, serves as the “wise old man” to show that another path is possible. This path, however, is a path that each HP must find for himself and there is no a-priori proof that his efforts will bear fruit. The role of the “wise old

man” can also fall on a lecturer, author, or even an institute that teaches the profession from a different perspective than the conventional one. This new possibility resonates strongly with what HP is looking for, and is excited about the possibilities that lie ahead.

5. **Commitment:** The HP accepts his limitations and makes the first commitment to begin his transformation journey. Frequently this involves stretching his schedule even further so as not to lose what he already has and at the same time preparing and training in the new programs and certifications.
6. **Multivariate learning:** The “new” world presents obstacles and challenges that test the strength, courage, and consistency of the HP. His agenda is complete because he continues seeing patients while preparing to re-invent his clinical practice. The new things that he is learning expose several essential contradictions on how “health,” “wellness,” and private practice are defined. The HP makes allies with colleagues and friends who are in similar pursuits and feels at “home” with colleagues who are also questioning the past paradigms and are daring to create new ones.
7. **Approach to the most crucial test:** The HP faces setbacks of many kinds, among them the constant criticism and ridicule from colleagues and friends who do not understand why they are going off the conventional path. The new learning is demanding profound changes in his personality, habits, and the way he relates to others. He still does not know how to calibrate times, how to charge for new services, and with whom to partner. The HP hesitates and looks for quick exits and magic solutions because he is not yet ready for the great test that lies ahead.
8. **The greatest test:** The HP faces his greatest fear that he has been avoiding all along: he has to announce to the world that his way of working is different from the expectations set on him. The tools of his “old” self no longer work, and he has to retool. This requires an enormous amount of energy and courage. Out of this situation, there is a rebirth. The HP manages to legitimize himself and begin practicing in a way that resonates much more with his new identity and his ideal of what an HP can be.
9. **Reward:** The HP celebrates his journey’s success, but the threat has not been completely removed. He has to continue learning many lessons, many economic models that he has to solve, and he has to be patient with his patients to see results.
10. and 11. **The path of return and resurrection:** The HP sets out to establish this new way of working and establish it as a new routine. Many times, he faces a final test before returning to a new normal. (For example, he has to quit his job and start a practice of his own, or he has to reduce his income for a while because the new model is not yet consolidated)

However, these challenges are integrated with greater awareness and responsibility, and there is a renewed confidence in oneself and in life. Professional practice is re-interpreted, and this fills him with hope.

12. **New normal:** The HP achieves new daily stability with a physical and mental reminder of his journey and shares his new confidence, mindset, and wisdom with his patients and colleagues. His transformation is complete, and he is ready for new adventures.

THE HERO’S JOURNEY

The only thing that differentiates us from being victims to being heroes is the story we decide to tell ourselves. Every transformation journey (and therefore of Health) begins with a fictitious dream at first, but once the obstacles are faced, they become a reality.

Whoever your hero is, Michael Jordan, John Lennon, Marie Curie, Buddha, Mark Hyman, your mom, or Patch Adams, they are your heroes because of the courage and determination with which they lived their lives. Telling a patient that they are a potential Hero is perhaps the greatest gift that an HP can give. As HPs, believing that we are heroes is the best way to change our paradigm of disease to a paradigm of Health. We do this by what Joseph Campbell calls BLISS:

“If you follow your bliss, you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the while, waiting for you, and the life that you ought to be living is the one you are living. Wherever you are—if you are following your bliss, you are enjoying that refreshment, that life within you, all the time.” - Joseph Campbell.