

Strategy: Swapping a toxic coauthor with a healthy coauthor

Key parts of anyone's stories are who they identify as "coauthors." Coauthors can be toxic or healthy, but either way, they help you write the story of who you are. Coauthors are individuals who are in our lives and who help us shape the stories of ourselves.⁵⁶

There is a technique you can use with a person when they tell you that they can't do something. In this technique, you have an individual recall an incident that was negative. You ask them who was present when that happened. What were the comments that were made? Then you ask them for the name of someone who was very supportive of them. Ask them to switch out the "negative" coauthor with the "positive, supportive" coauthor. Then you replay the scenario with the comments from the positive coauthor.

I, Ruby, have a friend who had a very negative parent. This parent constantly berated him, particularly in middle and high school. I asked him if he had had an adult in high school who liked him. He said yes, so I asked him to replay a scenario he remembered with the positive adult rather than the negative one. What would the positive person say? He was amazed. Basically, this exercise can allow the negative memory to be significantly reduced. It helps a person understand that any situation can be played out several different ways depending on the coauthor who is present.

"The present rearranges the past. We never tell the story whole because a life isn't a story; it's a Milky Way of events, and we are forever picking out constellations from it to fit who and where we are."⁵⁷

How to apply this information in your workplace

Questions to ask yourself about yourself:

1. If you met someone new for the first time, what story would you tell them about yourself?
2. What is a story your mother (caregiver, grandmother, father) tells about you?
3. Can you tell me about something that happened to you in grades K–3? In grades 4–8? In high school?
4. Who is a person you have known your entire life and who knows you? Do you care about them?

5. How much freedom do you have to make your own choices? Use a scale of 1 (never) to 10 (always).
6. When you think about your life, do you have more happy stories or more sad stories?
7. Have you had bad things in your life turn out for the best?
8. How are you the same as you were five years ago? How are you different?
9. Did anything that happened in elementary school help you with high school?
10. What is something you will remember forever?
11. In what ways are you different than the movies and social media like TikTok and Instagram say you should be?
12. Who at work has helped you coauthor who you are at work?
13. Who have you helped coauthor?
14. What biases do you have when you are interviewing someone?
15. Do you feel safe from violence at work? Is there someone who makes you uneasy?

What these questions mean

Question 1: Identifies basic parts of identity. What do they identify as important to know?

Question 2: Stories other people tell about us—particularly our caregiver—are crucial in forming identity.

Question 3: Does their story make sense over time?

Question 4: How solid are their connections and belonging over time?

Question 5: Autonomy is key in allowing someone to determine identity.

Question 6: The ratio of good to bad stories forms identity.

Question 7: Can you take a “bad” event and make it into something good? This is critical for integration and personal growth.

Question 8: Coherence and continuity over time.

Question 9: Integration of past into present.

Question 10: Defining moment. Usually a disruption and crisis point. Almost always motivates change.

Question 11: Can you integrate culturally and have a sense of who you are?

Question 12: Identifies your mentors and collaborators.

Question 13: Identifies mentees and indicates impact at work.

Question 14: These are areas to work on.

Question 15: Talk to someone in the human resources department if you feel unsafe.

Excerpted from *Navigating Emotional Realities with Adults: Emotional Poverty at Work* (Payne & Ott).
© 2023 by aha! Process, Inc.