

## **Narrative Therapy Tree of Life Exercise**

**Materials Needed:** Paper, pens. Optional - colored pencils, markers or paint for decorative effect.

**Time:** 15- 25 minutes

### **Purpose:**

This exercise was designed by Ncazelo Ncube (PHOLA) and David Denborough (Dulwich Centre Foundation). The purpose of this exercise is to reclaim your identity and the story of your life through identifying all the different aspects of your identity, including your past, future goals, strengths, and support system.

The tree is a visual representation of your life and the various elements that make it up – past, present, and future. By labeling these parts, you not only begin to discover (or perhaps rediscover) aspects of yourself shaped by the past, but you can then begin to actively cultivate your tree to reflect the kind of person you want to be moving forward.

This exercise can be found in David Denborough's book called, *Retelling the Stories of Our Lives: Everyday Narrative Therapy to Draw Inspiration and Transform Experience*.

### **Process:**

The first step in this exercise is drawing a tree. Don't worry about it looking perfect, or realistic; just draw your version of a tree – roots, trunk, branches, leaves, fruits, and the ground around the tree.

For each part of the tree, reflect on and write your answers to the prompts around it, as follows:

**The ROOTS:** Write down where you come from on the roots. This can be your hometown, province/state, country. This can include the culture you were raised in, specific people that raised you, and any other influential people or communities in your life.

**The GROUND:** Write down the things you choose to do on a weekly basis. These should not be things you are forced to do, but rather things you have chosen to do yourself.

**The TRUNK:** Write your skills and values on the trunk.

**The BRANCHES:** Write down your hopes, dreams, and wishes on the branches. These can be personal, communal, or general to all humans. Think both long and short term. Spread them around the various branches.

**The LEAVES:** Write down the names of the people who are significant to you in a positive way. This can include family, friends, pets, mentors, teachers etc.

**The FRUITS:** Write down the legacies that have been passed on to you. You can begin by looking at the names you just wrote on the leaves and think about the impact they have had on you and what

## **Narrative Therapy Tree of Life Exercise**

they've given to you, or taught you, over your life. This can be material, such as an inheritance, but most often this will be attributes such as courage, generosity, kindness etc.

The FLOWERS & SEEDS: Write down the legacies you wish to leave behind.

THE COMPOST HEAP (optional): Write down anything that would normally go in other sections, but which are now things that you no longer want to be defined by.

These are often sources of trauma, abuse, cultural standards of normality/beauty etc., or anything else that shapes negative thoughts about yourself. These can be written down as places, people, problems, thoughts, experiences.

These experiences don't have to be all "bad", rather lessons, experiences, messages that no longer serve you. The elements placed in your metaphorical compost heap can be broken down and re-sowed back into parts of your life, just like a real compost heap. This is reflected in our processing, integrating, and repurposing the lessons we have taken from our experiences.

### **OPTIONAL NEXT STEPS:**

#### JOURNALING

Journaling can help you explore and identify the connections between your roots, values, skills, people in your life etc. It also creates a space for you to reflect on and articulate new insights and connections made through this exercise.

#### WRITING LETTERS

If you have made a connection between a person, or group of people, and particular values and lessons that you appreciate in yourself, then perhaps you may want to consider writing a letter to that person, or group of people, letting them know what that means to you and how you feel about them. The letter does not have to be sent if you don't feel comfortable. The writing of a letter can benefit you, too.

## Narrative Therapy Tree of Life Exercise

This exercise is about identifying all the different aspects of your identity; including your past, future goals, strengths and support system. For each section, draw part of your tree and write notes around it. There is a tree outline and some examples on the back of this worksheet.

### ROOTS



#### **Where you come from and your family:**

- What roots do you have in your life? How important are these?
- Does your past influence who you are today?
- Do you have any favourite memories?
- Has your perception of your roots changed over time?
- Where were you born? Where did you go to school?

### GROUND



#### **Your present life and day-to-day activities you engage in:**

- What is the ground like in your life? Is it fairly stable or frequently changing? (could represent with flat or bumpy ground)
- What influences you on a daily basis?
- Who do you live with? Where do you go to school/work?
- Do you have a favourite place that you visit?

### TRUNK



#### **Your skills and abilities:**

- What talents and coping skills do you have?
- Can you play an instrument/draw/write? Are you helpful/kind?
- How important are these abilities to you? Do you value them in others?
- Do you find it easier to think of your faults compared to your skills?
- Are there any skills other people think you have?

### BRANCHES



#### **Your hopes and goals:**

- If you could have three wishes, what would they be?
- Do you hope for health, happiness, success, money, family etc?
- Do you aspire to be a nursery nurse, actor, vet, etc?
- How achievable do you feel your aspirations are?
- What would need to happen for you to achieve these?
- Do you have hopes and wishes for other people in your life?

### LEAVES



#### **Important people in your life:**

- Who plays an important role in your life?
- What type of influence have they had? If they've helped, how?
- Do you feel that you have played an important role in their lives?
- How might your relationship change in the future?
- Are there who have passed away - leaves in the wind?

### FRUIT



#### **Gifts from important people:**

- Have these people provided you with a shoulder to cry on/support/compliments?
- What have your parents taught you?
- Have they ever given you a material gift which meant a lot to you?
- How have these gifts helped you?
- What have you given them in return?

### STORMS

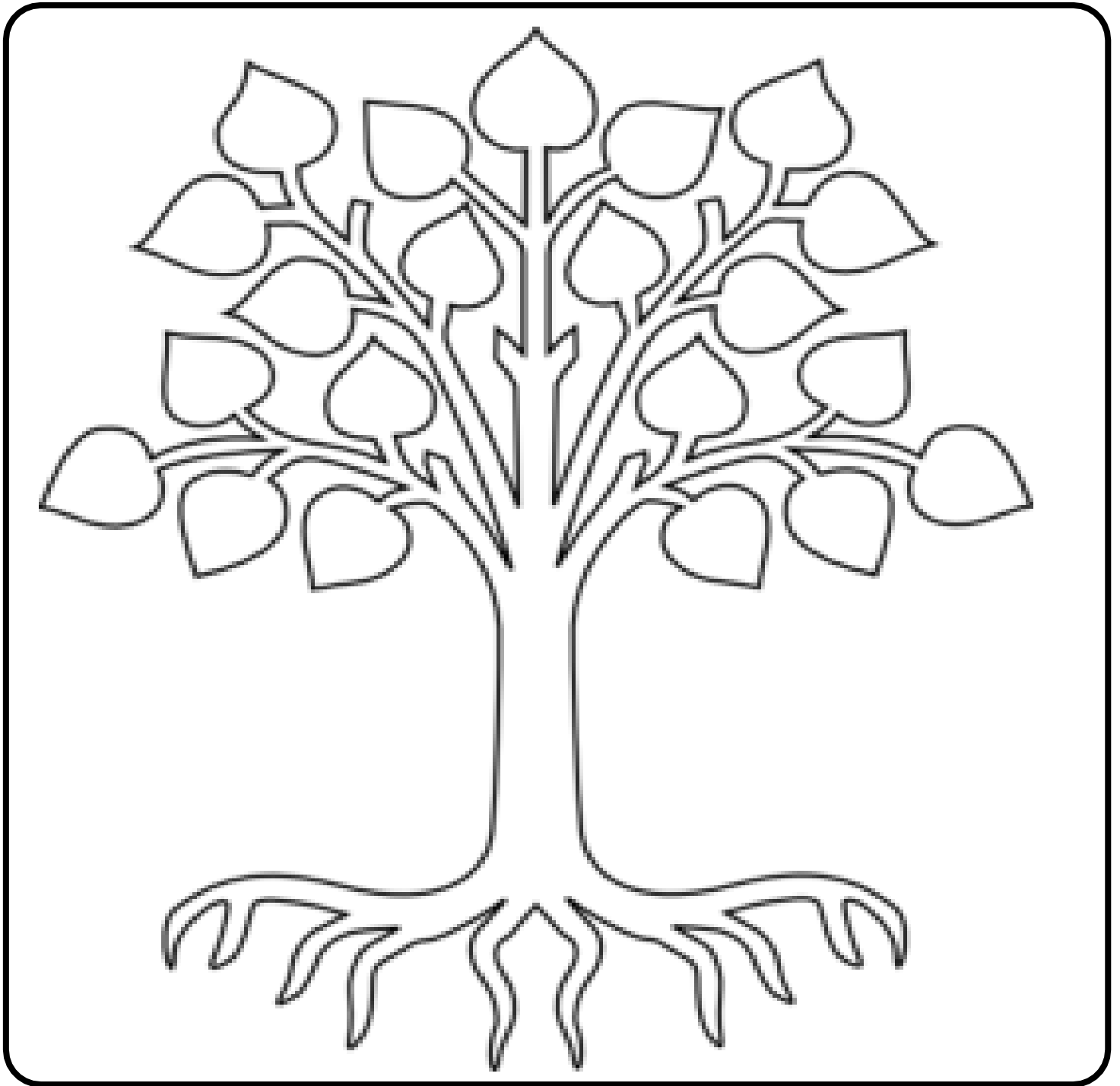


#### **Challenges:**

Include everything from family conflict, mental health problems, lack of resources, loss of important people in your life, etc.

- What storms have you experienced in the past?
- How did you manage with these?
- What storms do you think there might be in the future?

## Narrative Therapy Tree of Life Exercise



### EXAMPLES

