

# NARRATIVE IDENTITY IN MENTAL HEALTH ACTIVISM

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*How much do Renee Yohe and TWLOHA have in common with narrative therapy?*

## RENEE YOHE AND TWLOHA:

To Write Love on Her Arms (TWLOHA), a non-profit organization, works to challenge stigmas associated with depression, Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, addiction, self-harm, suicide, and related problems and conditions. TWLOHA often emphasize storytelling in their attempts to offer hope and resources to those who feel drained and silenced by personal suffering.

TWLOHA began not as an intentional non-profit, but as a simple story published on Myspace about a young woman, Renee Yohe, who was going through drug rehab. Now Yohe has published a collection of her journal entries, titled *Purpose for the Pain*. Yohe remains a mental health advocate, working often with TWLOHA.

## MAKING CONNECTIONS

Yohe's journals and TWLOHA publicity materials share at least a superficial similarity to the beliefs and practices present in Epston and White's narrative therapy. Scholarly studies of TWLOHA and Renee Yohe's work are not readily available.

This project will examine how well Yohe and TWLOHA translate narrative therapy ideas to a mass audience, and how that translation affects them and their audience. I will question whether or not Yohe and TWLOHA encourage and model growth towards positively formed narrative identities.



Renee Yohe.



TWLOHA Shirt Design & Logo.



## NARRATIVE THERAPY:

Narrative Therapy is a branch of practice within psychology. It was founded by Michael **Epston** and David **White**. Narrative therapists believe that storytelling about the self—particularly storytelling regarding difficulties, wrongs suffered, and traumas—profoundly affects people's ability to cope with life's challenges.

### Narrative therapists:

- Train patients to be aware of the way that they use stories to form their own identity
- Teach patients to “revise” harmful, disempowering patterns of talking and thinking about their own lives.

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## KEY NARRATIVE THERAPY CONCEPTS

**Personal Agency and Victimhood:** Narrative therapy recognizes that there are multiple sources of social power in the world. Subjects are sometimes **victims** of oppressive outside sources, however, the subjects are also sources of power. This power to determine the self and to make changes is called **agency**.

**Unique Outcomes:** Unique outcomes are places in a subject's past in which she or he showed resistance to a circumstance, person, attitude, or condition that was limiting, causing pain, or creating problems. Unique outcomes can be present in even the lowest points of a person's story, and are a source of courage as the patient moves into a self-created future.

**Externalization:** Subjects are encouraged to view their problems as distinct from themselves. A person suffering from depression will be encouraged to word that fact as "I am experiencing feelings of depression," rather than the simple "I am depressed." The later statement implies that the identity of the person is the problem. The former statement allows the person to verbalize that they are not the problem, but rather that they are acting in *relation* to the problem, and they might be able to become independent from it in the future.