



Module 3: Separating Fact From Story

Stories are the way your brain makes sense of the world. Think about the stories you loved as a kid. They taught you about love and friendship; about danger and adventure; about family and relationships. There is a formula to most stories.

- Characters – that’s you
- Setting – where you are when the story takes place
- Plot – details that move you from the beginning to the end
- Conflict – problem that needs to be solved
- Resolution – otherwise known as “happily ever after”

Now think about your stories. They hold your history. They serve as markers in time for what you did right OR wrong. They can be mined for the lessons and gifts you gained by experiencing the actual events. Some fade over time and others remain as vivid as the day they happened. Some you love to tell, others make you wince when someone else tells them at a family gathering.

Your story line probably goes something like this:

- Favorite grade school teacher
- Best Christmas/Birthday ever
- Childhood best friend
- That time mom embarrassed me
- First boyfriend/girlfriend
- First diet you were ever on
- Prom
- Graduation
- First time you had sex
- College
- Marriage
- Birth of kids
- Divorce
- Online dating – bad dates
- Conflict with your mother

Notice a mixture of happy and sad stories. Why do we continue to share the painful ones? The answer is in the way our brain constructs stories. Your brain is neurologically wired to seek out patterns. When it finds a match, it “runs ahead” filling in the details to complete the story. Accuracy is not important. Completeness is the goal.

Think about reading a great book. As you move thru the story, your mind starts to leap ahead to guess what is coming next. It is one of my favorite things about reading. Sometimes you’re right and that gives your brain a jolt of adrenaline. Sometimes you’re wrong and the author takes a different twist. It’s a perfect demonstration of the way healthy brains process information.



One of my favorite authors, Brene Brown, describes this neurological brain process

“Our brains reward us with dopamine when we recognize and complete patterns. Stories are patterns. The brain recognizes the familiar beginning-middle-end structure of a story and rewards us for clearing up the ambiguity. *Unfortunately, we don’t need to be accurate, just certain*”

Listen to that last line again: “your brain rewards you for clearing up the ambiguity”. Every time you tell one of your painful stories, your brain attempts to get the answers to “WHY”. Why did that happen to me? Why can’t I stand up for myself? Why am I always on the outside looking in? In the absence of real answers, your brain makes them up based on the things you believe.

For example, for years after my divorce, I told anyone who would listen about how awful my ex-husband had treated me. And it’s true (from my perspective) that he did some very underhanded, duplicitous things during that space of time. As I spilled the details, I would begin to feel unlovable and worthless. I had no answers of how we got to that place. I could feel anger and bitterness swell inside my throat. I hated him all over again – even though we had been divorced for more than 20 years.

The facts of your stories are unchangeable. It is a fact that I was married to him. It is a fact that I am divorced from him. It is a fact that we share two children. The rest of the story is made up of my thoughts and the emotions those thoughts create. That’s where stories get dangerous. They can act as crutches that keep you permanently disabled.

Since your brain is hard wired for story, it is important to learn skills that allow you to do two things:

1. See the valuable gifts and lessons
2. Let go of painful emotion instead of renewing it

Let’s focus first on seeing the gifts and lessons. Storytelling is how humans learn and pass on wisdom to others. How many things can you name that your mom, your sister, your best girlfriend, your boss, your spouse taught you?

Stories also help us spread joy and gratitude. They show us ways we are the alike and ways we are different. They let us poke fun at ourselves when we get too serious. They can build community and trust.

Even sad stories can reveal gifts. My two grown sons were gifts from that fractured marriage. I learned how to use my voice to ask for what I needed. I gained confidence as I figured out how to be a single mom. I even got some information about what I needed in a partner when I got ready to date again.

The danger in stories is when you over identify with them. You are not your stories. Your past does not predict your future. You get to choose what to believe BUT the old stories invite you to continue to believe their messages of failure, worthlessness, hopelessness, sadness, anger, guilt and shame.

And your brain is always listening. Its job is to find evidence that what you believe is true. If all your external and internal conversation is about past stories, guess what it is focusing on.



The other truth I want to share with you is that emotions - any emotion - lasts only 90 seconds in the brain. Neurological studies have proven that the electrical pulse generated by emotion dissipates in 90 seconds. I can hear you saying “Then why does pain last so long.”

(end of recording)

The answer is you continue to renew that 90 second clock with your thoughts. It is the equivalent to punching yourself in the face on purpose over and over again just so you don't forget how much that hurts.

Every time you tell the story, you generate thoughts that generate emotions and round and round you go. I'd like you to meet your inner mean girls BFF, your Drama Queen. This girl is that gossipy chic you avoided at all cost in high school. She loves stirring things up and then offering you food to help you calm back down.

If you're anything like me, finding out you have a Drama Queen is not a welcome piece of information. What I've learned and want to share with you is that your Drama Queen has been living in that brain basement of unfelt emotions your Inner Mean Girl has been guarding all these years.

Have you ever had a really bad case of cabin fever? Maybe you've spent a few days alone and you think you're doing ok. But then you engage another person and all of a sudden you're talking a million miles a minute. You realize you are hungry for interaction and conversation. That's your Drama Queen – bad case of cabin fever.

She is Rapunzel locked away with no one to talk to but herself – unless she can get someone to listen to her stories. She gets her value from being your historian. She never throws anything away. She values quantity over quality. She has more emotional baggage than she can handle. And she loves to open the bags, sift thru them and revisit all your “stuff”.

Left to her own devices, she could literally talk forever. One story makes her think of another story and then that reminds her of the really embarrassing story. She has no filter and no awareness that your body is having an emotional reaction to her words.

Similar to your Inner Mean Girl, your Drama Queen was born as a coping mechanism. They work in tandem to manage your emotions. Like watching an old Lucy and Ethel routine, it usually does not end well.

Your Inner Mean Girl whispers

“You better watch that pile of anger over there. It's not safe to let it out.”

Your Drama Queen uses food to douse the embers of anger.

Your Drama Queen whispers

“I can't take this pressure too much longer. I'm going to explode.”

Your Inner Mean Girl talks smack to you about how worthless you are so that you'll grab the bag of Doritos and eat. Which douses the embers on the anger.



You are riding an out of control roller coaster with them. You eat because you're ramped up and you eat to calm down. Rinse, repeat.

GREAT BIG FRUSTRATING CIRCLES OF SABOTAGE

The skills you need revolve around sitting down with your Drama Queen and going thru the baggage. She thinks everything there is valuable. You are beginning to see that it is not. Imagine walking into that brain basement with suitcases, trunks and bags filling the entire space. Like a bad episode of Hoarders, you push thru them to find your Drama Queen in the middle – eating.

You invite her to stay seated and to let you do the leg work. You grab the first suitcase and open it. What stories does it hold? What will you do with all that emotion? The short answer is FEEL IT. Who wants to sign up for that? Maybe you can just sneak out and close the door again. That's the equivalent of what you do every time you quit a diet. When uncomfortable emotions show up, you retreat.

In Module 4, I will teach you the skill of feeling these emotions. It's not nearly as hard as you imagine. I'll leave those details for that lesson. For now, put yourself back with that open suitcase and let's talk about how to sort thru it.

(end of recording)

There are two kinds of stories. The ones with happy endings do not need your introspection. They are proof your life is working. The ones that are painful to tell and cause chaos in your life are where your work starts.

It's interesting that humans tell the painful ones much more often than the happy ones.

All stories have two elements:

Fact: these are things easily verifiable by more than just you. For instance, I have brown eyes is a fact. I have ugly creepy brown eyes is a story.

Narrative (read emotion): these are things that are subjective to your individual thinking. This is where your inner Drama Queen shines. She pets and cultivates and entertains all the pain connected to a good story.

The skill of separating fact from story is life altering. It is the skill of feeling emotion as it happens and then letting it go. No more basement door for your Mean Girl to guard. No more eating to avoid feeling. This is the beginning of real permanent sustainable weight loss.

Just like sorting laundry, there are some rules. All the whites go together. All the colors go together. Delicates in a separate pile. Break the rules and you end up with red underwear.

There are no shortcuts thru this process. You pick up one suitcase, sort thru it until it's empty. Pick up the next one. Your Drama Queen is going to want you to stop over and over so she can retell the stories. This is your opportunity to use the skill of self-kindness you've been cultivating.

Your stories are her prized possessions. She is going to offer some resistance. Be patient with her. She's been on that roller coaster for a long time.



As you start pulling stories out of will sort into four stacks:

1. Facts – things that can be proven
2. Emotion – everything from tears to screams to smiles to giggles
3. Gifts – Good things that have come to you
4. Lessons – Things you've learned (good and bad) that changed you

Identifying the facts appears to be an easy task. BUT thoughts – the meaning you assign to a fact – often masquerade as facts. Again, the power of practiced thought. If you repeat it often enough, your brain is hard wired to accept it as a given. So who decides what fact is and what is thought?

FACT: It can be proven or agreed upon by all involved.

THOUGHT: The “truth” as you experienced it.

**Example: 2 Eyewitnesses see the same crime happen.
The crime is also caught on camera.**

FACT: anything they say that can be verified by the camera

THOUGHT: any details they remember in error or motive
they assign for crime being committed

Example: I've lost 100 lbs twice and gained it back because weight loss is so hard.

FACT: I've lost 100 lbs twice and gained it back (I have Dr. records that document it)

THOUGHT: because weight loss is so hard (what I believed to be true about weight loss)

The magic is that when you get down to just the facts, your stories lose the ability to take you out at the knees with emotion. They are just the facts. They don't take long to tell. They don't take up much space. They just ARE.

Then you are left with a pile of thoughts to do a second sort thru. Your best tool for this portion of the job is curiosity. Why do you think that? Why do you believe it is true? What else is equally true? What does thinking that thought make you feel? Is that what you want to feel? Do you have a choice or are you stuck with what shows up? That is where the bulk of coaching happens. Knowing WHAT you think and WHY you think it is the beginning of changing the direction of your life. It gives you the ability to literally pivot in a short space of time and have all those things you thought would never happen.

The next pile is emotion. Emotion is where your work is. In the beginning, you might stack them all together. You are only at the separating phase for now. You will learn the skill of feeling them and releasing them in Module 4. What you will most likely experience is the same emotion showing up over and over. You'll see that most of your stories have anger in them. Or shame. Or guilt. Or fear. Or doubt. As this stack grows, put like things together. All the anger together, all the shame, etc.



Just hearing this you may be feeling an urge to either distract yourself with some other activity or to eat. Don't panic. That is normal. You've been conditioned to believe two things that I'll offer are not true.

1. Feeling emotions has no value
2. Feeling emotions is hard and takes forever.

Emotions come factory installed on every human body. Negating them as useless is the equivalent to buying a brand new Cadillac and choosing not to use the power windows, seats, cruise and navigation system. Why would you do that? Those things are kind of the reason to buy a high end car.

Same with your emotions. Think about people in our society that have no emotions. They are the fringe described as sociopaths. They feel no empathy, no accountability, and no emotions. They are usually deviants and sometimes serial killers.

Emotions give your life depth and texture. Think about Pinocchio or The Tin Man or the Cowardly Lion. Even our fairy tales are written about wanting these human qualities. Emotions come as a package deal. It is impossible to block the negative ones and still feel the positive ones. You must learn the skill of being willing to feel them all. You've heard it said that you only know what happiness feels like because you've felt sadness.

(end of recording)

Understanding that emotions have a limited shelf life so that nothing lasts forever is a key to being willing to feel the lows. Recognizing that there is a cyclical nature to emotions enables you to anticipate the end of the lows and the arrival of the highs.

Learning to feel those emotions is a multi-layered skill that takes time to learn and time to practice. It is based on the truth that you can feel an emotion without acting on it. Take anger for example. Think of the last time you were really pissed off. The kind of anger that comes on you quick and makes the top of your head blow off. Until now, you've known about two options:

1. Let Drama Queen drive
 - a. Overreact in the expression of the emotion
 - b. Possibly embarrass yourself
 - c. Beat the crap out of yourself afterward for losing control

OR

2. Suppress the anger
 - a. Pretend you don't feel it
 - b. When asked "What's wrong" you answer "Nothing! I'm ok."
 - c. Let that toxic emotion connect with other unfelt anger already inside you
 - d. Let Drama Queen write the story about how you always get a raw deal
 - e. EAT to calm down

The skill I will teach you is to allow emotion (any emotion) to appear uninvited, flow thru you, and move on. Feeling it is REAL. It appearing uninvited is REAL. Holding onto it or stalling it's forward progress by putting it in the basement is a core reason for your body carrying extra weight.



What stories do you expect to find as you start this cleanup process with your Drama Queen? Knowing your patterns is a foundational element in **permanently** losing your extra weight. There is no shame in having stories. It is human. Defining stories usually include words like always and never. They are very black and white.

Defining stories are a subset of your total life stories. They are the ones you would tell if you were limited to say FIVE. What FIVE would I absolutely need to hear in order to get to know you? Mine look like:

1. Not going to college
2. Leaving the religion I grew up in
3. Raising 3 kids as single mom
4. Weight
5. Meeting my Ken

I'll bet based on the fact that you found this work that weight is also on your top FIVE list of stories.

When did your story about weight begin?

What do you know about you on a diet?

Do you always cheat on day 3?

Do you lose focus after the first week?

Do you eat in secret?

Does a 5 lb loss on the scale trigger a sabotage disguised as a "reward"?

Does a 5 lb gain on the scale trigger a "This is never going to work" binge?

All of that information is in play every time you re-decide to lose weight. Your Drama Queen finds the old stories and trots out the details to remind you that this one does not end well.

Here's where all that sitting digging thru baggage and sorting starts to pay off. Your brain loves patterns and repetition. How you think about ONE thing is how you think about everything. So if you think you are broken – that shows up other places in your life besides weight loss. If you can solve it there, you will get traction when you circle back around to weight loss.

For instance, for years, my most painful stories centered on leaving my religion of birth. The stories were full of emotion and would drive thoughts I had no skill to address other than binge eating. I spent a ton of energy trying to prove to people who no longer spoke to me (I almost said turned their backs on me – which is a thought not a fact) that I was still a good person in the world.

That's the kind of dysfunction that comes from renewing emotion that in this case is 23 years in the past. I have no actual contact with those folks today. I have an amazing life I've created on purpose. But story can take me out of this present moment and have me back there begging for acceptance from an audience that has moved on.

The second payoff for those man hours is that SHAME cannot live in the light. Packed away tight in among all those old stories in a trunk in the basement of your brain, it grows. But as soon as you sort it into a pile separating it from the facts and thoughts that created it, it starts to shrivel.

A third payoff is the room created for new memories – new stories to live. Like a conveyor belt that only holds so many boxes, as you create new stories, old ones you no longer need fall off the back and your mind releases using them as evidence against you.



What if you found it hard to grab for a story more than 10 years old? That was so tantalizing to me. I am 51 years old and would wince anytime someone would tell some of my darker stories from my teens or 20's. This work invites you to define yourself by the present reality you are creating rather than the things you chose when you were less mature and had no tools.

(end of recording)

You will start to see recurring themes appear as you sift thru the facts, thoughts, emotions, gifts and lessons of your stories. These form the basis of your decision making about every area of life. Remember, how you think about one thing is how you think about everything. Your brain loves patterns and efficiency. What themes do you already know about yourself? How are they affecting your quality of life?

Here are the FIVE I see most often in my coaching practice.

1. Guilt / Shame
"I SHOULD..."

Anytime you hear the word should, you can guarantee you are in the middle of a story. When you live at the mercy of what you "should" do, emotions that make you eat appear. No grown person in the world likes to be coerced, convinced or manipulated. The most common emotions connected to "should" stories are anger, resentment, guilt and shame.

Should implies that something is wrong with what actually is. Practice removing the word should from your vocabulary. Ask yourself questions like "Why?" "Says who?" "So what?"

2. Fear / Doubt
Fear of Failure and Fear of Success

Fear of Failure is driven by perfectionism and people pleasing. It shows up as procrastination. Its stories are often about dreams you had at one time that never materialized. You are up close and personal with the details about why you haven't made the leap of faith or taken the steps to move you closer. Doubt makes you rethink every tiny decision and it feels safer to just self-protect by not trying.

Fear of Success is driven by thoughts like "Who do I think I am?" It practices thoughts like "I'm a fraud and everyone is going to find out." Because you don't believe you deserve to thrive, you opt for behaviors that sabotage and drag you backward to whatever your comfort level is. You see this often in weight loss when you lose only to return to be "weight your body likes". Doubt makes you think it can never be different and uses past examples as proof you should stop trying.

3. Less Than / Not Enough
Fitting in, taking the temperature of the room, extreme people pleasing

This theme has you constantly in comparison mode with other people and you always view yourself as deficient. Someone else is smarter, prettier, sexier, friendlier, more likable, more lovable, and luckier than you.



The result is no one, including you, ever knows the real you. Nothing stays constant. You change (I use the word morph as in metamorphosis) into whatever version you think is acceptable for the people present. The emotion that results is loneliness and resentment. Because you want to fit in, you do not use your voice to have an opinion. You say yes to things you do not truly enjoy and you then fester anger at people for taking advantage of you. But they don't know the real you, they know the "appropriate" version you've introduced to them.

4. Unworthy / Marginalizing
Hiding – making yourself invisible

Hiding takes Less Than to another level. You isolate yourself because who wants to hang out with you. You take neutral situations like a text not being returned and make it personal. Thoughts like "They don't like me. They never answer back." OR "I'm not important enough to hang out with them."

When you must be in public, you hide by being silent. By dressing in dark colors. By never offering any input or opinion. By hanging on the edges waiting to be invited forward. You see other people as more important and more deserving of everything from a chair at a crowded table to a boyfriend who loves them. The emotions here are depression, frustration, pain, brokenness, and hopelessness.

5. Victim / Martyr
"The whole world hates me."

OR

"I do everything and still get a bad result."

Victim believes they are at the mercy of whatever shows up. You live in reaction mode and are always one step behind. It drives behaviors like constantly explaining yourself and looking for others to agree with you. After all, you haven't done anything to deserve the things that are happening and you have no power to change them – at least that's what your stories want you to believe as fact. Emotions here are resistance, anger, self-righteousness and overwhelm.

Martyrs are almost always over givers. You get your self-esteem from giving to others. You have no ability to receive and see asking for help as weakness. You are also rigid about the way you do things and even when your process does not work, you repeat the process and then complain about getting a bad result. You are the one who takes over ever event you ever attended, made it a success and then gossiped about how no one wanted to help you. Emotions here are confusion, exhaustion, neediness, and determination.

Do you recognize yourself in any of these? Have some others come to mind that you know are keeping you stuck?

There is no judgment in having stories. Humans are wired for story. Nothing has gone wrong. But there is power in knowing what your stories are and feeling emotions AS THEY HAPPEN so



that they do not go into long term storage along with the facts. Feeling the emotions also helps you identify thought patterns that are not serving you so that you can get curious.

When you change your thoughts, you create different emotions. When you create different emotions, you take different actions. In the next module, we will start to learn the skill of feeling the feelings you've identified. So looking forward to taking this journey with you.

Don't forget the worksheets attached to this Module. They are designed to move these tools from intellectual information down into your heart. You've invested in yourself. You deserve to let some of that old baggage go – NO MATTER WHAT YOUR STORIES ARE TELLING YOU!

Love you Beauties!

Mean It!



Melinda



Melinda Sohns - Emotional Baggage Coach