



Adventure Therapy: Examples of narratives of change for women with eating disorders

The following narratives are taken from the study:

Richards, K. (2008). *A feminist analysis of developing an adventure therapy intervention for the treatment of eating disorders in women*. PhD (submitted for examination), Liverpool John Moores University.

Brenda

One woman, Brenda, who used IPR was able to understand more fully what her experience of the outdoor activity recorded event meant for her. She wrote in her journal entry at the end of that day how her experience of taking part in one element of a low ropes course (the enclosed net) had symbolised a process of rebirth. She had been experiencing bulimia for many years, and during the adventure therapy experience she identified how she was struggling to free herself from the excessive demands of dependent members of her family. As she took part in an outdoor adventure activity she developed a clearly felt sense of what that entrapment meant for her as she struggled to traverse a cargo net on a high ropes course. As her weight caused the net to close round her she experienced the entrapment created by her family and her binge eating response to them:

“When it was the enclosed net (which I had not realised was enclosed, I realised that I was trapped). I could not push out with my elbows sufficiently enough it give me room and this was because my weight/gravity on my mass was greater than the force I could exert. As it narrowed I felt trapped and exhausted and was between two tree trunks. I felt able to ask the crew to pull the netting away from the tress to give me room. I wanted to be cut out and it and the encouragement and instruction from the instructor was not helpful but not unhelpful either.

I was exhausted but had to consider my options. I could try and reserve or I could try and go on. I decided to try and go on and I took the time with my therapists assuming me I had ‘all the time’ I needed. Once I had my shoulders and arms free I was OK but exhausted –drained. I carried on however, and didn’t feel as if I was pushing myself but only that it was the natural thing to do. I did not complete the very final push and did not feel that was necessary or that I had failed.

The experience was a birthing experience. I wanted to get out and I was trapped. I wanted to be cut out because of the harness and I had to make a decision to come out under my own steam as others couldn’t do much to help, particularly the net. But I couldn’t blame the net any more than I could blame my mother for my birth. It just was - history!

Did I need re-birthing? I think I have just done that on the ropes. I did it on my terms and in my time.

What I have learned (at end of day with activities)

- 1) *That I have to trust – I did trust and it was to the front of my mind*
- 2) *That even when we sort out the ground rules (about needing help and what help we need) we sometimes forget to ask. That is OK.*
- 3) *That sometimes you just have to feel the fear and do it anyway. Only I can do something's for myself. Trust that even if it is difficult and painful, I can do what it takes to make me safe.* (Journal)

Maria

Another woman, Maria, also reported the significance of her experience of taking part in an outdoor activity. The use of IPR was particularly useful as this enabled her to acknowledge how she was becoming more self-accepting of herself and how therapeutic change was in action:

“Today we went on the high ropes I was anxious about it for most of last night and first thing this morning. I had agreed to go first, as yesterday I let (made) Jackie go first. This was doubly scary, as I could not see how anyone else coped with it, I just had to get on with it! (the fear of the unknown). When I got up to the first “obstacle” I became “frozen with fear” and could not move. I was “rooted to the spot” unable to go forwards or backwards and I started to cry at this point. I felt quite silly at first, but then I just let them flow and I felt a bit better for the release. With support and encouragement from the others, I managed to “move on” and complete the course. It was really scary, but I DID IT! And what a sense of achievement at the end. I can conquer the world! And was able to help the next member with the obstacles. It was worth going through the feat to feel GREAT!

I then looked back over the 2 videos of the rope work with the therapist [IPR].. It was a “strange” experience, because I felt so much empathy as I watched “Maria” go around the course. It was like had “stepped back” and “distanced myself” from “me”. I have never felt this way before, I usually “cringe” at the sight (or even the thought) of myself on video, usually with much hatred and self-loathing – but today it was different; nice, comfortable.

I was also able to make some links between all my issues around “fear”, feeling “trapped” etc and my eating behaviour but some of them still need exploring deeper. The therapist mentioned about going into the woods and “crying” with the emotion of its beauty. Because she struck a chord in me, the tears flowed yet again.

I feel like something is really beginning to happen, things are changing and for the better. And I feel I am finally making contact with the “real me”, my “inner strength”, my own healing forces. For me, this trip is proving to really successful to now.”