

# BE WELL

## The Wellbeing Benefits of Storytelling

I was inspired to become a lawyer partly by watching lawyers on television tell inspiring and persuasive stories to juries in high stakes courtroom dramas, such as "Perry Mason," "Matlock," "Ally McBeal", and of course, "My Cousin Vinny." As a younger audience member, I did not appreciate just how powerful the art of storytelling can be, not just for winning a case as a future lawyer, but also for our overall wellbeing. After practicing law as a litigator for only a decade, I felt that being in this stressful field was overall a negative for my health and wellbeing. At that time, I left both litigation and the practice of law because I did not feel that being healthy could coexist with practicing law.

Between that time and now, another decade later, I have realized that if you integrate mindfulness into the practice of law, it can be a sustainable, satisfying, and healthy profession. It started with therapeutic yoga healing my body and then my mind, then I moved into meditation. Eventually, in 2016 I started to incorporate these

practices into teaching mindfulness to lawyers because I had realized that it isn't the stressful practice of law that will negatively impact your overall wellbeing, it was how you learned to be with this practice in a healthier way through self-awareness and shifting your relationship with the stress. Stress is now a way to inspire and motivate me, but when I feel myself shifting into a chronic stress mode, I use this self-awareness to shift my nervous system from the sympathetic system into the parasympathetic system where I can destress, rest, digest and heal. And continue to be in the stressful legal profession AND maintain my overall health and well-being.

In this article I want to highlight an important legal art that increases overall health and wellbeing for lawyers: live in-person storytelling. But first, I want to outline how I learned this firsthand in Vermont. I still recall my first legal boss in the complex commercial litigation field, David Boies, advising me and other first year associates. He said that winning lawsuits before a jury is

not about right or wrong, guilt or innocence, it is about the lawyer that tells the best story. And a catchy phrase like, "if the glove don't quit you must acquit," doesn't hurt as a legal ear worm in the jury's minds. Since I was only a junior associate, I never presented a case before an actual jury, but I never forgot the importance of a good story and in small groups realized that I loved spinning yarns, legal or otherwise. It was also around this time in my legal career that I realized that there were three things I could not have because I was a stressed-out busy lawyer working in Manhattan. So, I decided that I would eventually write a memoir about my return to these three important things in my life with the title: "Plants, Pets, and Personal Relationships: One Woman's Quest to Have it All." But this memoir twist was that I planned to tell all of the vignettes contained within as stories told before a live audience. It took another decade until I actually had the time and motivation to start participating in live storytelling events while practicing law in

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Vermont. Sometimes the best things in life are those that you cultivate in the seed or germination state for quite some time.

In 2015 a close friend and artist in Montpelier, Rob Hitzig, said he was telling a story at a storytelling event called Extempo and it was at the coffee shop Espresso Bueno in Barre. The Extempo events were Central Vermont's premier, original, live, true storytelling events organized and hosted by Lovejoy. I went as an audience member just to see the format and experience and I loved it. I started signing up for as many storytelling events with Extempo as I could, with the goal of eventually telling a Moth StorySLAM story. After a year of telling Extempo stories I summoned the courage and attended a Moth StorySLAM event at the Skinny Pancake in Burlington. The StorySLAM theme was "Strict," and I distinctly recall being chosen as the final storyteller that evening after listening to nine variations on Catholic strict stories. I felt like the only recovering evangelical in the room, as my story was about growing up in an evangelical household with many strict punishments that may or may not have been warranted! I didn't win my first Moth StorySLAM, but I was still hooked! The audience was much larger, close to 200, and the energy infused by food and drink at the event was exhilarating. I started to write and tell as many Extempo and Moth stories as I could until December 2019 when I told my last pre-pandemic story, "Lessons learned from the Plymouth Fury." When the pandemic hit in early 2020, all live storytelling events shut down and did not resume until 2023. At that time, I reached out to Lovejoy to determine when she was going to resume hosting her Extempo storytelling events. The answer was, "Never, but if you want to host your own, go for it." She met with me to provide me with all of the event hosting guidelines to do so.

Throughout all the Extempo and Moth storytelling events, my favorite venue was at Bridgeside Books because I got to choose a favorite book to discuss after I told my story. It was this passion for both books and live storytelling that gave me the inspiration to approach my local library in Monkton with the idea to host a storytelling event there and the librarian thought it was a wonderful idea. So, in May 2024 I hosted my first library storytelling event at the Russell Memorial Library in Monkton and it went so well, I created the aspirational goal of hosting a storytelling event at every one of the 185 public libraries in Vermont. I have since hosted four additional events in 2024 and have a booked calendar in 2025, with a new legal-themed storytelling event with the Cornell Library at the Vermont Law and Graduate School on April 1, 2025. I hope to receive



many excited lawyers who wish to tell a legal-themed story at this event after reading about all of the amazing wellbeing effects storytelling can bring into your life.

The key wellbeing benefits of live storytelling events include:

1. **Emotional Regulation<sup>1</sup>:** When a person becomes vulnerable enough to share a personal story about their life with an audience, it can help them process their emotions around that event or situation, it allows them to express themselves in a safe place, and this experience may enable them to manage or even lessen their stress about the content of their story. I have felt this sense of emotional co-regulation at every storytelling event I have attended because the audience truly holds a supportive place for a storyteller to share from their heart. The ability to improve self-regulation has also been shown to increase overall resiliency through more effective conflict resolution.<sup>2</sup>
2. **Oxytocin Production through Empathy and Connection:** As with mindful practices, participating in a storytelling event will generate the creation of oxytocin in both the storyteller and the audience members. Oxytocin, AKA "the cuddle chemical," is a natural hormone that is generated in the brain. It influences social recognition, sense of trust, relationship formation, romantic attachment, parent-infant bonding, and long-term emotional attachment. Overall, it promotes positive feelings, but it is also anti-inflammatory, it decreases stress and anxiety levels and promotes improved sleep. By stepping into the storyteller's shoes through their story, the audience can develop empathy and understanding towards others, which fosters strong social and community bonds. A storyteller's willingness to be vulnerable, honest, and speaking from the heart plays a large part in the depth of the connection created with the audience.<sup>3</sup> At the end of every storytelling event I have participated in, either in the audience or as a storyteller, I feel bonded and closer not only with those that attended the event, but all of humanity. The world feels like a better and safer place after leaving a storytelling experience. This is why "stories don't just inform us – they transform us. They inspire trust, spark emotion, and motivate action in ways no other form of communication can."<sup>4</sup>
3. **Cognitive Function:** We all know as

lawyers the intense mental gymnastics that must occur to both memorize and deliver a story before a live audience – be it a judge or jury, but the engagement of the listeners also stimulates their brains. And every storytelling event I have participated in required the storytellers to memorize their stories and tell them without any notes or cue cards. At a storytelling event, both the storyteller and the audience will improve the functioning of their brains in the areas of memory recall, cognitive processing, and overall cognitive fitness by activating different areas of their brain, especially the gray matter, which is responsible for short term memory.<sup>5</sup> But, especially as a storyteller, this is a wonderful mindful practice as the stress hormones will be generated. The use of mindful practices, such as deep breathing and feeling your feet on the ground, will enable you to slightly shift your nervous system to a more calm/parasympathetic state so you can recall your memorized story.

4. **Personal Growth:** Whenever I teach a mindfulness session, I emphasize that my main goal is to increase each participant's overall self-awareness. Similarly, when a storyteller reflects on their life through personal stories,

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it leads to increased self-awareness, personal insights, and an overall better understanding of their values and motivations in their life. Like journaling, expressing ourselves through stories can enable us to see ourselves more objectively, which creates space between the story of who you are and defending it to protect yourself. In an opposite fashion, the audience sees themselves in the story and feels a deeper human connection to a complete stranger through similarly lived experiences or emotions. They may even be able to increase their own self-awareness through this interaction and connection. This therapeutic benefit of storytelling can help participants “can new perspectives on their experiences, redefine their identities, and find new ways to move forward...[which is] key to building resilience and thriving in the face of adversity.”<sup>6</sup>

5. **Stress Reduction:** Both listening to and sharing positive and uplifting stories can promote overall feelings of relaxation and reduce feelings of anxiety.<sup>7</sup> This occurs because this ancient and intimate act of sharing stories with an audience produces the same “Happy Chemicals” (essentially hormones and neurotransmitters) that are created when you practice mindfulness and shift your nervous system from the sympathetic (stressed) state to the parasympathetic (rest/digest/heal) state. These natural production of Happy Chemicals includes: (1) Dopamine is the chemical messenger that plays a role in helping us feel pleasure as a part of the brain’s reward system; (2) Serotonin is a natural mood booster that helps balance mood and experience pleasure; (3) Endorphins are known as the “Happy Hormones” and have many health benefits including pain relief, stress and anxiety reduction, improved mood, self-esteem, and cognitive function, and reduced inflammation; and (4) Oxytocin (as previously noted) is known as the “Cuddle Chemical” or “Love Hormone” and can make people feel a variety of powerful bonding emotions, such as: trust, love, empathy, relaxation, safety and social sensitivity. Even a minor shift in our nervous systems through participating in a storytelling event can alter the trajectory of the rest of our day because we move into a more relaxed and responsive state of being.
6. **Community Building:** As I have been hosting storytelling events at various Vermont communities, I have felt

such a strong sense of community at every event, which fosters both belonging and connection. Each event has built the network of both storytellers and audience members and now the email list is more than 200 people, and in a state as small as Vermont, this constitutes a significant portion of our population.

7. **Healing and Resilience:** Some of the stories told help individuals cope with a traumatic or challenging experience by providing a narrative structure to their lives and help them process it through the simple act of sharing it with others.<sup>8</sup> Thus, storytelling can diminish the power the traumatic event may have over someone’s life. During one of the storytelling events a storyteller recounted the stressful events around fostering a four-year old boy through the state of Vermont, Agency of Human Services, Department of Children and Families services. It was emotional, but also uplifting in its vulnerability and honesty. At the conclusion of the story, the storyteller shared that they had never told it to anyone before and it felt really good to lift that burden off their shoulders. After their story, there were many teary-eyed audience members and even as the host I choked up and cried a bit, as that story enabled me to recount my own experience growing up in a family that housed many foster children. After the event a small crowd gathered around the storyteller as we all realized that many of us had worked in the child welfare realm and their story reunited us all.

As lawyers, we are all storytellers in our own ways, whether written or verbal. Now, we can reframe this talent in a more positive and healing light as there are so many wellness aspects associated with it. I would like to provide the legal community with many opportunities to join me in receiving these wellbeing qualities by participating in the live storytelling events to be held in the remaining 180 public libraries in Vermont. The schedule is below includes a special law student/legal ONLY event in April at the Vermont Law and Graduate School. I do hope you join me either as storytellers or audience members to reap these amazing wellbeing benefits throughout the rest of 2025.

*Here is a list of the scheduled 2025 Vermont Library Storytelling Events, and one is specifically for the legal community, co-hosted by the Cornell Library and VBA at VLGS! If you would like to sign up to tell a story at ANY of the events listed, please contact Samara (anderson\_samara@ya-*

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1. Feb. 27 – Cabot Library
2. March 26 – Richmond Library
3. April 1 – Special Legal Storytelling Event Co-sponsored with the VBA (open to lawyers and law students), South Royalton, Vermont Law & Graduate School, Cornell Library (refreshments will be provided)
4. May 29 – Jeffersonville Library
5. June 26 – Essex Library
6. July 31 – Hardwick Library
7. August – NO EVENT DUE TO END OF SUMMER TRAVELS & HOLIDAYS
8. Sept. 25 – Charlotte Library at the Charlotte Grange
9. Oct. 23 – Lincoln Library
10. Nov. 20 – Vergennes Library
11. Dec. 18 – Best of 2025 Storytellers Event, South Burlington Library

*Samara Anderson is an attorney and the co-chair of the VBA’s Lawyer Well-Being Section.*

<sup>1</sup> Pasupathi M, Wainryb C, Mansfield CD, Bourne S. The feeling of the story: Narrating to regulate anger and sadness. *Cogn Emot.* 2017 Apr;31(3):444-461. doi: 10.1080/02699931.2015.1127214. Epub 2016 Jan 8. PMID: 26745208; PMCID: PMC5584785.

<sup>2</sup> Tillott, S., de Jong, G., & Hurley, D. (2024). Self-regulation through storytelling: A demonstration study detailing the educational book Game On for resilience building in early school children. *Journal of Moral Education*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2024.2403992>

<sup>3</sup> Bradley, Monique, *The Heart of Communication: How Storytelling Creates Connection and Empathy* (January 6, 2025) (available at <https://moniquebradley.tv/the-heart-of-communication-how-storytelling-creates-connection-and-empathy/>).

<sup>4</sup> Id.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Dorer, EdD | Brain Development, Emotional Intelligence (EQ), Emotionally Healthy Children, Executive Functioning, ML 2021, Montessori Teachers, School Leadership, Story-telling, The International Montessori Council (available online at <https://www.montessori.org/storytelling-and-executive-functioning/#:~:text=Storytelling%2C%20story%20listening%2C%20participation%2C,flexibility%20and%20E2%80%9Cognitive%20fitness.%E2%80%9D>).

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Kate Truitt, *Healing Through the Art of Storytelling*, excerpts from her book, *Keep Breathing* (available at <https://drtruitt.com/healing-through-the-art-of-storytelling/#:~:text=Through%20storytelling%2C%20individuals%20can%20gain,in%20the%20face%20of%20adversity>).

<sup>7</sup> Robyn Flvush, Ph.D, *Storytelling is Good for Us and our Bodies: Sharing stories lowers stress and increases empathy*, *Psychology Today* (posted June 10, 2021) (available online at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-stories-of-our-lives/202106/storytelling-is-good-for-us-and-our-bodies>).

<sup>8</sup> East L, Jackson D, O’Brien L, Peters K. Storytelling: an approach that can help to develop resilience. *Nurse Res.* 2010;17(3):17-25. doi: 10.7748/nr2010.04.17.3.17.c7742. PMID: 20450085. (available online at <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20450085/>).