

Hero's Journey

A New Narrative for People with Long-Term Mental Health Challenges

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ABSTRACT

In this article we introduce a framework, based on the Hero's Journey® narrative (first described by Joseph Campbell in the *Hero with a Thousand Faces*), and its application to the experience of persons with long-term mental health challenges, their recovery process and path toward well-being. We outline the stages of the Hero's Journey and their application as a therapeutic framework for people living with long-term mental health challenges, highlighting the transformational power of this narrative for those individuals. Further, we present preliminary findings of the implementation of the Hero's Journey® Path to Well-Being curriculum (Dorio Burton & Becker, 2015), inspired by Campbell's work. Findings are encouraging in that they suggest that an intervention based on the Hero's Journey shows promise for providing people with long-term mental health challenges an alternative self-narrative, building hope and empowerment as they identify and utilize their "Inner Hero" in daily life.

KEYWORDS

Myth, narratives, mental disorder

Self-stigma and other disempowering self-narratives are significant barriers to recovery from long-term mental health challenges. The Illness Identity model (Yanos, Roe, & Lysaker, 2010) proposes that the internalization of stigma among people with serious mental illnesses directly impacts hope and self-esteem, indirectly impacting suicide risk, social avoidance, work outcomes, treatment engagement, and psychiatric symptoms. Researchers have concluded that identity-related factors need to be addressed with

effective interventions, especially among young adults. Many people with mental health issues have internalized a story of disempowerment, victimhood, and a sense of hopelessness that are associated with their experiences dealing with troubling symptoms, ongoing mental health challenges, and stigma. Individuals often share how they feel disconnected from the world. Some share their experience of depression and self-hatred.

The *Hero's Journey®: Path to Well-Being* (formerly *Hero's Journey® of Recovery*) workbook (copyrighted by Dorio Burton and Becker in 2015) was developed as a direct response to the need to reach people who commonly feel stigmatized by their long-term mental health challenges, including schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, bipolar disorder, major depressive disorder, as well as anxiety and substance use issues. The *Hero's Journey®: Path to Well-Being* curriculum offers individuals opportunities to reflect on, discuss, and share their process of recovery and the self-narratives they have developed because of their experiences with mental health issues and stigma. We have observed that by participating in the *Hero's Journey®* groups, individual narratives shift to increased empowerment, self-responsibility, self-acceptance, and self-compassion. Individuals gradually become more confident and resilient as they come to acknowledge and bring forth their Inner Hero. In groups, participants are asked to identify those heroic qualities such as resilience, strength, courage, resourcefulness, and perseverance that allow them to face their daily challenges. These qualities may be obscured by their self-narrative but are always present. Campbell (1991) reminds us that “the trials of the *Hero's Journey* force a Hero to tap into unknown inner resources and potential.” The curriculum/framework invites individuals to consider a new story for their life experiences that includes acknowledgment of their Inner Hero and the recognition of stages of their journey toward well-being.

The aim of this article is to describe the background and justification for the *Hero's Journey®* intervention, describe the *Hero's Journey®: Path to Well-Being* intervention and its essential components, and discuss preliminary findings on its tolerability and acceptability when implemented among people with serious and long-term mental illness.

The Hero's Journey® Curriculum/Framework

The *Hero's Journey* is the universal story described by Joseph Campbell (1904–87), an American mythologist, writer, teacher, and storyteller

(Joseph Campbell Foundation, www.jcf.org). Campbell, in studying myths from across the globe, identified a recurring storyline that he referred to as “the monomyth.” Each monomyth tells the story of those who accept the Call to Adventure, Cross the Threshold into the unknown, find Mentors and Allies, face Tests, Foes, and Challenges confronting their “Dragon” (the thing, situation, or person most feared), and in this process are transformed (Campbell, 1949).

In recent years, interest in the Hero’s Journey has experienced rejuvenation in several areas, some in mental health and some in other fields such as the medical field, nutrition, and fitness (Saadia, 2021). A review of the literature found only a few practitioners around the world publishing about their use of this framework with clients in recovery from long-term mental health challenges, although there are a wide variety of applications that have not been professionally researched. Nevertheless, several previous studies have supported the promise of applying the Hero’s Journey® approach with people experiencing mental health challenges. Hartman and Zimberoff (2009) attested to the metamorphoses that can arise during a Hero’s Journey—a Dragon may transform into a Mentor, a Foe, and/or Ally. This demonstrates the ability for the Hero’s Journey to faithfully map onto even life’s strangest and most unexpected turns. Similarly, Lawson (2011) described how the Hero’s Journey® narrative can inform development within therapeutic sessions, providing a map for the natural stages experienced by clients in counseling. Williams (2019) corroborates the usefulness of the Hero’s Journey® narrative in his article and book about the Hero’s Journey as a “mudmap” (Australian slang for a rough guide) for change. In his book and article, he illustrates that the Hero’s Journey puts the client at the center of their narrative and encourages them to use skills and strategies to overcome their challenges and achieve personal transformation and the reward of living a more full and authentic life.

At the core of any therapeutic approach is the relationship. Halstead (2011) described the supportive, guidance role taken by practitioners utilizing the Hero’s Journey® framework and the positive impact this has on the therapeutic relationship. Duffy (2016) discussed the empowering and orienting application of the Hero’s Journey to understanding adjustment disorder, a disorder that describes the life disruptions that lead to the beginning of the Hero’s Journey. Furthermore, Keck et al. (2017) affirmed the usefulness of the Hero’s Journey® model in clients recovering from trauma and PTSD, citing its affirming and empowering aspects in clients who oth-

erwise feel stigmatized and broken by their trauma. Most recently, Kerr et al. (2019) promoted the Hero's Journey® as an effective narrative tool for relating to those in recovery of mental illness, while MacRory-Crowley and O'Malley (2019) in their article attested to the power that identifying with a Hero can have on a client. Although most discussions of the Hero's Journey have not been empirical, and more research needs to be done to demonstrate the effectiveness of the Hero's Journey with a variety of populations, there is justification for applying the Hero's Journey as a therapeutic approach.

The Hero's Journey® Path to Well-Being

The *Hero's Journey® Path to Well-Being* curriculum was inspired by the various stages of the monomyth Campbell described and is based on the archetype of the Hero. The curriculum offers people with long-term mental health challenges a new narrative, inviting them to consider the recovery/well-being journey as their own Hero's Journey. Using examples of Hero's Journeys from poetry, movies, and art, and intentional self-reflective questions, this curriculum gives individuals with challenging and persistent mental health issues the opportunity to consider a new self-narrative to understand and articulate their recovery process. The group setting also provides participants with valuable connection with others experiencing similar challenges. This Hero narrative allows them to become acquainted with, even befriend, their "Inner Hero." This idea of the Inner Hero is comparable to similar concepts found in Buddhist thinking such as Basic Sanity (Trungpa, 2005) and Marsha Linehan's description of Wise Mind (2015). Such concepts emphasize an identified part of the individual living with mental illness that remains intact and facilitates access to recovery and well-being.

The curriculum is versatile and applicable to individual counseling sessions as well as structured group settings. Sessions typically last for 8 weekly 90-minute sessions, but the curriculum may be altered to fit a variety of time frames. Two people best facilitate Hero's Journey groups. Each group participant has a workbook that becomes a guide for self-reflection and discussions. Facilitators have a background in the mental health field, are skilled in group facilitation, and have an in-depth understanding of the Hero's Journey as it applies to mental health. Ideally groups are limited to no more than 12 participants and no less than 6, allowing adequate time

for personal sharing within the group. Concepts and ideas from the workbook can also be used to stimulate discussions in more informal settings such as support groups. A “train the trainer” program has been initiated, where mental health interns participate and observe the facilitation of the groups. Weekly supervision is then provided to these interns to ensure the integrity of the program.

In the group setting, participants are encouraged to become each other’s allies in the process of reframing their personal narrative and accessing their Inner Hero. This group dynamic also utilizes Bandura’s idea of self-efficacy and the potential increase in self-efficacy learning through the behavior of others (Bandura, 1977). Participants learn from each other as each shares their strategies of dealing with Tests, Foes, Challenges, and their Dragons. Further, as isolation and negative social stigma are common aspects of long-term mental health issues, the protective factor of social connection is enhanced through group dynamics. Peer Support Specialists help facilitate both formal and informal discussions and may also step into the role of mentor and ally for participants on their journey. These Specialists may also become future co-facilitators of Hero’s Journey groups on completion of the “train the trainer” program. Curriculum development will continue as the authors deepen and expand their study of Campbell’s work.

The Stages of the Hero’s Journey

The *Hero’s Journey® Path to Well-Being* curriculum adopts the stages outlined by Campbell (1949), making them accessible to a wide variety of participants. As noted by Williams (2017), regardless of individual life circumstances, the Hero’s Journey “provides a timeless map, providing information about where you are in your own journey and what to expect . . . it is a guide that shows how life is, and how to move through it” (Williams, 2017). As a universal myth, the Hero’s Journey faithfully reflects the recovery experience and should be considered a valuable lens through which to understand and guide this process. While the term “journey” means different things to different people, a Hero’s Journey can last a day, a week, a year, a lifetime. Similarly, one can have several journeys occurring at once and therefore be in different stages of different journeys at the same time. When described in order, the stages may seem linear, but akin to the recovery experience, setbacks will be experienced. The Hero may feel they



Fig. 1. The Cyclical Stages of Hero's Journey

are back at the beginning of their journey when feeling stuck, and they may meet Tests, Foes, and Challenges repeatedly. The end of the journey does not signal the end of recovery, nor can any Hero or person in recovery from mental health challenges ever return to the life they lived before they began this journey. They have been transformed: changed. The circular structure of the Hero's Journey signifies that every time one journey ends another begins (see Figure 1).

Departure Stage:

Everyday Life; The Call; Refusal; Crossing the Threshold

Campbell (1949,1993) referred to the first phase of the Hero's Journey as Departure/Separation, where the individual is separated from life as they knew it. Each monomyth typically begins with an outline of the Everyday

Life of the Hero, their role, work, and relationships. Campbell referred to this as the Ordinary World. Stage Two, what Campbell referred to as a Call to Adventure, signifies a shift in these everyday circumstances, where the Everyday Life of the Hero is either significantly disrupted or left behind.

The Call may be planned and intentional, spontaneous, or serendipitous, or unwelcome and/or unwanted (Williams, 2016). The individual may feel either prepared or caught by surprise by the change of circumstances. The Call may involve external or internal shifts in circumstances such as starting a new career or losing a job, falling in love or the ending of a relationship. The Call might be dealing with health issues, contending with legal issues, becoming a parent or caregiver, or a gnawing sense that something is not right with their life. Regardless of the shift in circumstance, the individual must grapple with whether to accept the invitation or decline.

Every Call to Adventure presents the individual with both internal, cognitive-emotional as well as external, real-world challenges. Internally, anxiety arises as the person becomes aware of the risks and sacrifices they may face if they embark on the journey of addressing these shifts in circumstance. For some, the decision to accept the Call as an invitation for change will come more easily. For some facing an unwanted and unwelcome Call, months, even years, may be required before they step into the journey. Others still may never answer the Call, choosing to live their life in the same manner, despite the notable change in their life circumstances. Whatever the type of Call to Adventure, a disruption has occurred that may trigger fear, anger, and grief. The Call to Adventure is a wakeup call resulting in an emotional arousal necessary to consider a new way of living. Externally, the individual now dealing with a distinct set of life conditions must learn new skills. These might include developing skills in self-care, activities of daily living, job seeking and retention, interpersonal relationships, self-advocacy, dealing with new environments, dealing with change, and resolving conflict effectively.

Despite the unique nature of each person's Hero's Journey, the beginning of every journey comes with a multitude of emotions and new demands upon the individual. Inevitably, the individual will consider the significant life changes of the Call to be overwhelming. Almost all will experience a period of Refusal, taking the stance that they "can't do" what the journey may entail or feel that the journey itself is impossible (Williams, 2016). This occurs even though the individual may want their life to be dif-

ferent and claim they are sick and tired of being sick and tired (Williams, 2016). The desire to change exists simultaneously with the feeling of threat to one's safety and security. At this point, the person may also refuse to take responsibility for the significant life changes and blame other people, things, and situations for what has occurred. Typically, this state of Refusal remains until there is a shift. This shift may be the realization that action is required regardless of the level of fear. The shift may also occur when the desire for change is greater than the comfort of the familiar. The shift may also be facilitated by the arrival of a Mentor. This person, who typically has experienced a similar Call, offers encouragement, guidance, and evidence that momentous change is possible. For most, the Refusal stage will be temporary. At this point, they decide to engage in action and are ready for the next part of the Hero's Journey: Crossing the Threshold, where the work of answering the Call begins.

On the Road Stage:

Meeting with a Mentor; Test, Foes, and Challenges; Allies; Approach; Ordeal or Turning Point; Reward

On all Hero's Journeys, once the decision is made to accept the Call and the Hero Crosses the Threshold, the journey begins. The Hero meets people along the way who become Mentors and Allies. Mentors typically are those who have completed a similar Hero's Journey. They are wise to the challenges of engaging in significant life change. Allies are those who help the Hero along the way. They encourage and support, as well as decrease the Hero's sense of isolation. Inevitably, the Hero encounters numerous Tests, Foes, and Challenges that try their resilience, inner strength, and commitment to moving forward. Tests, Foes, and Challenges may come from external events (e.g., fired from a job), or they may arise from within (e.g., limiting beliefs). In effect, Tests, Foes, and Challenges create opportunities for individuals to bring forth their heroic qualities from within, qualities that they did not know they possessed. Over time, the individual develops a change in perspective—seeing Tests, Foes, and Challenges as sources of learning and growth. Despite this, Tests, Foes, and Challenges do trigger the fight/flight response. Such reactions are a sure sign that the Hero is facing the trials of the Hero's Journey (Williams, 2016).

Further intentional questions from the curriculum are used to prompt discussions to increase awareness about avoidance and help participants

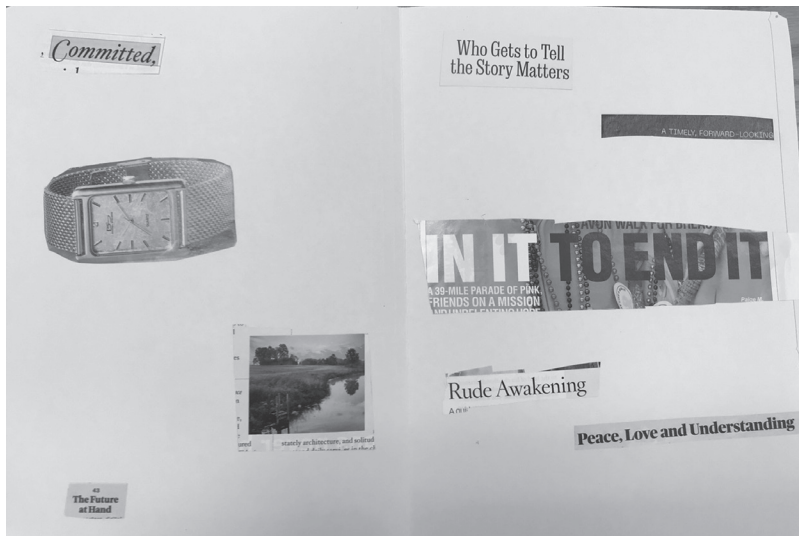


Fig. 2. Committed, Who Gets to Tell the Story Matters, In It to End It

identify specific fears and limiting beliefs (internal foes). Though such fears and beliefs are unique for everyone, common themes occur such as the fear of rejection, fear of connection with others, fear of failure or success, fear of being responsible for one's life, and fear of being overwhelmed by feelings. The curriculum aims to forewarn participants of what may be involved in undertaking their specific Hero's Journey. Similarly, the curriculum emphasizes to participants that courage, confidence, resilience, and self-esteem grow and strengthen as the individual faces these fears and challenges. Through this process, the curriculum poses questions that guide participants to identify and evaluate their present coping strategies (e.g., using street drugs and alcohol, avoiding conflict, isolating) that may not support the journey. Evaluating these coping strategies allows for learning through the discussion and exchange of ideas as well as incorporating new ones.

Group discussions prompted by the curriculum questions emphasize that developing and mastering new skills, strategies, and approaches may take years. The curriculum articulates that such skills will occur on two distinct levels: an internal, psychological level and an external, real-world aspect. Further, the curriculum again forewarns participants that skill de-

velopment will happen in an “opposite” manner. Through trial and error, internal, psychological strategies will require the Hero to do the “opposite” of what they have been doing (Williams, 2016, 2017). This may include tolerating difficult emotions rather than avoiding them, facing fears rather than running away from them, challenging limiting beliefs rather than accepting them, being risk tolerant versus risk averse, finding one’s voice rather than remaining silent, learning to trust rather than be suspicious, and taking responsibility for one’s life rather than blaming others. Real-world, external strategies may include developing more effective interpersonal communication skills, deciding to use medications, seeking the support of Mentors and Allies, joining a self-help group, engaging in meaningful activities and work, identifying and expressing needs to others, and caring for oneself. As the Hero takes risks and empowering strategies take root, old habits start to fade.

The curriculum also reminds individuals that Ordeals, Turning Points, and Setbacks are part of the journey, which may appear to take a person back to the Departure Stage. Such Ordeals, Turning Points, and Setbacks, however, can prompt the Hero to reevaluate their Approaches (knowledge, skills, and plans) used and gauge their effectiveness. This reevaluation is a critical part of the journey. For example, participants may need to be reminded of the importance of accessing support and using Mentors to help them stay on course. Such reflections assist participants to realize that while they may feel or think their efforts have failed and they are back at “square one,” repeated failures are necessary to master new skills. This increased insight reframes reality for participants, informing them that progression is never without setbacks and that while they are challenging, they are an inevitable aspect of their recovery/well-being journey. A film excerpt is discussed to demonstrate this curriculum content. Participants learn from Dory in *Finding Nemo* to “just keep swimming.” These new and problem-focused strategies can help the participant maintain a healthy attitude and stay motivated.

Thus, the curriculum teaches participants that Ordeals and Turning Points help with the culmination and crystallization of knowledge and skills obtained on the journey. Such moments offer the opportunity to strengthen and utilize support, knowledge, and skills at critical points. Now, the facilitators discuss an excerpt from the *Lion King*. The scene depicts Simba hearing the voice of Mufasa, his father, reminding him who he is. This reminder or Turning Point shifts Simba from a sense of object



Fig. 3. Are You on the Right Course? Unearth Your Gem Journey, Find Your Vision, Your Story will be a Breed Apart

failure to renewed commitment to complete his journey. Group discussions emphasize that feelings such as being unmotivated, fatigued, or disillusioned are inevitable but not permanent.

Importantly, the curriculum then introduces the idea of Rewards to participants. All stories of Heroes' Journeys include Rewards as an aspect of any Hero undertaking their Call to Adventure. A Reward is any benefit following the successful undertaking of Tests, Foes, and Challenges. The question is posed: Can you recognize the rewards of your journey that may be external—such as new friends or a job—or internal—such as increased self-confidence and increased insight?

This section of the curriculum ends with a warning for participants. Discussion around the journey thus far—Tests, Foes, and Challenges, facing Ordeals and Turning Points, and experiencing Setbacks and Rewards—ends with a reminder that participants need to monitor and navigate their newly achieved accomplishments, changed expectations, new responsibilities, and emerging identity and steer away from self-sabotaging behaviors. These discussions play a key role for participants who may over-identify and confuse the qualities of the inner hero with a fictional narrative from a movie, comic, or book.

The On the Road stage ends by asking participants to identify and share their Rewards from being on the recovery/well-being journey. Participants identify a multitude of internal and external rewards. Internal Rewards include experiences such as “feeling proud of themselves,” “getting back to me,” “having more hope about the future,” “gaining more insight and realizations,” understanding that “I can make mistakes but I’ve learned that doesn’t mean I’m a failure,” being “less self-centered,” and being honest and “outright with her illness.” Participants’ external Rewards included beginning or returning to meaningful activities such as volunteering, furthering their education, or seeking employment.

Return/Transformation Stage:

The Road Back; Bringing Forth the Hero; Sharing the Elixir

As with every Hero’s Journey, the Road Back signifies the realization by the Hero of their Inner Hero and its potential use in everyday life. Having journeyed through the Tests and Ordeals, the Hero experiences a renewed spirit, a deeper understanding of their journey, with more confidence in their abilities to live an authentic life. A transformation has occurred, and their perceptions of self, others, and the world have changed. They realize they can never be what they were previously. Further, expectations from others and oneself may now be different when the transformed individual begins to live more authentically with their new skill sets. The Hero moves forward with increased acceptance and strength because of the obstacles surmounted. They experienced a multitude of Tests and Ordeals, which lead to an increase in resilience, self-confidence, and the ability to manage fear and anxiety and still act.

The Road Back inevitably contains the final confrontation with one’s Dragon, the thing, person, or situation most feared. Some of these will be internal, psychological challenges while others will be external, real-world events and experiences such as stigma and discrimination. In facing these Dragons, the Hero comes to a place of acceptance and self-compassion. The Hero recognizes various Dragons have been holding them back. In many Hero’s Journeys, drawing out and identifying the Dragon diminishes the power it has over the Hero. Deep-seated fears and limiting beliefs, living by societal “shoulds” and “don’ts” and being fearful of living authentically, are some of the Dragons a Hero may face. Others include feeling undeserving or unworthy of happiness and experiencing self-hatred. Dealing

with external Dragons may consist of an individual becoming involved in social and political advocacy or terminating an abusive relationship.

For some, the Hero may learn to befriend their Dragons by asking them, “What are you here to teach me?” The Hero may also learn not to run from their Dragons—developing self-compassion, acceptance, forgiveness, and kindness toward themselves. The Hero learns that using skills such as mindfulness, acknowledging and understanding the need for human connectedness, and developing compassion for themselves and others softens the struggle that one has had with their Dragons. Once the Hero has faced and befriended their Dragons, the transformation of the individual has been so powerful and significant that they may choose to offer what they have learned—referred to as Elixirs (knowledge and the skills)—to help others just starting out. Key Elixirs center around learning about the power of self-acceptance and forgiveness. Others involve such changes as acquiring a distinct perspective in life, developing new skills and strategies, discovering and living from your true/authentic self, engaging in life more fully, and having hope, trust, and connection with others.

Preliminary Research on *Hero’s Journey: Path to Well-Being*

To date, our team has conducted two uncontrolled studies examining the impact of the *Hero’s Journey®: Path to Well-Being* intervention approach. The first study was conducted with a group of 11 young adults receiving treatment at a private mental health service provider, located in Boulder, Colorado, serving a predominantly white and higher socioeconomic status population, with a mixture of serious mental health diagnoses (depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and schizoaffective disorder). Home-based services are provided by a therapeutic team consisting of a Supervisor, Psychotherapist, Care Coordinator, Mental Health Counselors, and in some cases a live-in home attendant/house mate. Social opportunities, educational classes, and supported employment services augment the team approach and are encouraged. Participants in this implementation attended online groups weekly over an 8-week period (90 minutes each session) and were administered the Empowerment Scale (Rogers et al., 1997), a measure of factors related to subjective recovery related to mental illness, which includes the subscales “self-esteem/self-efficacy,” “power-powerlessness,” “community activism and autonomy,” “optimism and control over the future,” and “righteous anger.” Analyses of

pre- and post-data using repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that participants improved significantly over time in the self-esteem/self-efficacy subscale ($n=11$, Baseline Mean = 16.6 ± 3.7 , Follow-up Mean = 15.3 ± 4.5 , $F = 5.6$, $p < .05$) of the Empowerment Scale. In addition, this study found that participants were engaged in groups, regularly attended them, and showed no evidence of adverse reactions to the groups.

Although the above findings were promising, our team wished to explore if the *Hero's Journey®: Path to Well-Being* would also be feasible, tolerable, and effective in a culturally diverse, urban public sector setting serving middle-aged adults with significant mental health challenges. For this reason, our team collaborated with the Gateway Counseling Center to implement Hero's Journey® groups in that setting. Established in 1989, Gateway Counseling Center (Gateway) is a 501c3 nonprofit located in the Bronx, New York, that provides behavioral health services. Gateway operates outpatient programs for adults diagnosed with developmental disabilities or with psychiatric illness. The Hero's Journey® project was conducted with clients of the Continuing Day Treatment Program (CDTP), located in a predominantly Afro-Caribbean community in the Bronx. This program assists clients who are classified as experiencing serious and persistent mental illness. Clients of the CDTP are diagnosed with a psychotic disorder, including schizophrenia and schizoaffective disorder. Treatment provided uses a range of approaches, including psychoeducation, medication therapy, group therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, social skills training, and rehabilitation readiness development through a recovery-oriented approach. The facility is open 7 days per week, 365 days per year.

For the research project, two groups, each 90 minutes long, met for 10 days over the course of 2 weeks. Each group had two group facilitators: a Mental Health Worker and the co-author of the curriculum. Each participant was given the curriculum in workbook form, which was collected after each session. Participants would enter responses to the questions and take notes as the sessions went on. They received their workbook at graduation. Group size was limited to allow for comfortable personal sharing and the development of group cohesion. Participants were asked to share what they hoped to get out of the group on the first day. Once group agreements were created, they were introduced to the Hero's Journey® narrative and Joseph Campbell. The group sessions were guided by a PowerPoint that outlined the curriculum. Each group session that followed used in-

tentional self-reflection questions, discussions from popular movie scenes, poetry, and creative activities from the curriculum as a springboard for group discussion. Notes were taken in-vivo on flip chart paper and transcribed as a record of participants' responses.

Participants at the Gateway CDTP were approached for potential participation in Hero's Journey® groups. Nineteen clients from Gateway agreed to attend Hero's Journey® groups and were approached for potential participation in a supplemental research project evaluating the effectiveness of groups on a range of psychosocial outcomes (all participants in the groups agreed to the supplemental research and provided informed consent). These participants were predominantly middle aged (Mean = 52.63, SD = 12.29), male (68.4%), high school educated (Mean years of education = 11.06, SD = 1.92) and diagnosed with schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder (68%). Participants were culturally diverse, predominantly identifying as Black, African-American or Afro-Caribbean (39%), Latinx or Hispanic (16.7%), or Other (33.3%).

Volunteers were asked to complete brief interviews before and after the intervention where they were administered three scales assessing components of subjective recovery: the Empowerment Scale (ES; Rogers et al., 1997), the Internalized Stigma of Mental Illness Scale-Brief version (ISMI-10; Boyd, Otilingam, & DeForge, 2014), and the Recovery Assessment Scale (RAS; Corrigan et al., 2004), along with demographic questions and two open-ended questions about their experience with the intervention ("What insight or skills have you learned as a result of the groups?" "What impact have the groups had on you?"). Participants were compensated with a \$20 Dunkin Donuts gift card after each interview. Trained research assistants conducted the interviews at the Gateway Counseling Center Continuing Day Treatment Program in private rooms in the week prior to and after the delivery of the intervention.

Group participants attended groups regularly, with 17 of 19 (90%) attending at least 8 of 10 groups, and 9 of 19 (47%) attending all 10 groups. There was no evidence of any adverse reactions, including among the two participants who did not attend at least eight groups. Regarding quantitative scales, there was no evidence for any statistically significant changes between time 1 and time 2 in the ISMI-10, ES, or RAS subscales. Further, although there was no notable evidence of trends toward change in most scale, there was evidence for the subscale of "Non-Dominance by Symp-

toms,” where participants increased from a mean of 3.53 at time 1 to 3.70 at time 2 (an increase of 1/3rd of a Standard Deviation). Unfortunately, our sample size was not large enough to detect an effect in this subscale, and a power analysis indicated that a sample size of 54 would be needed to find an effect of this size to be statistically significant.

Regarding open-ended responses about the Hero’s Journey® groups, comments from participants were positive, except for one participant who did not note any insights or skills. Responses from two participants were notable in that they described specific ways in which the Hero’s Journey had helped them. Regarding insights and skills, one participant stated: “I learned to be courageous. I learned to be normal, and not be too sick if you are too nervous. People don’t like that behavior and are afraid. I learned to stay in a positive way. I think a person should take their medication every day. I try to be responsible towards everybody.” Another participant shared, “I learned about the future skills to take into your life. I can learn from my mistakes and [do] the best I could.” One participant stated, “I learned to have many qualities like trustworthiness, honesty, fun, resilience, and caring for myself and believing in myself. All these qualities are important in my life.” “You go [got] to learn about yourself, about how to go on a journey by yourself, like taking a vacation, helping others out in everyday life struggles. Someone passes away or something like that. It helps you to focus on past experiences in life with [supportive] people who do good things for you.” Similarly, regarding impact, another participant stated: “I evaluate all things and my Inner Hero shines out and I am determined and persistent. And I will meet Challenges and Foes and I can overcome all things because my Hero is stronger. I can call on my mentor and ally when all things seem to be going wrong.”

Discussion

The Hero’s Journey®: Path to Well-Being is an established framework/curriculum offering new language and concepts about the journey of recovery and well-being that are affirming, empowering, and humanizing. Therapists, psychiatrists, and Peer Support workers may become participants’ Mentors. Family, friends, co-workers can become Allies who provide support, inspiration, and hope. As participants venture through the stages of the journey, they start to view their recovery/well-being journey in a different light. Struggles became a vehicle to accessing the heroic qualities

within. Adversity, challenges, and tests are considered an expected part of their journey. The framework/curriculum emphasizes that the journey is not easy, and the Hero must examine strategies and personal perspectives that may be ineffective. To move forward, participants must develop new ways to deal with the challenges presented. Ultimately, Heroes must call upon all that they have gained thus far on the journey to face their Dragons—the symbols of the things most feared (Campbell, 1991). These Dragons represent the most salient aspects of a Hero's life that have been holding them back and must be dealt with directly. In this struggle participants realize the strength and rewards they gain from the battles. Each group session affirms that through their own Hero's Journey they begin to surrender “the old way of meaning making and start to give birth to a new manner of seeing (themselves and) the world” (Lawson, 2005, p.138). This new narrative is powerful and has had a transformative effect on participants. Allison et al. (2019) and Williams (2016) emphasize personal transformation is key in recovery. The images of the art collages included in the article suggest such transformations participants experience in the groups (see Images 1 and 2).

Although the research base is at a preliminary level, we believe that this intervention is promising, feasible, and well-tolerated. Some of the challenges that were identified in the research project included:

- Length of the intervention. Groups have traditionally been held for over an 8-week period, not over a 2-week period as in this pilot research project. We propose that the longer period allows participants to more fully integrate the concepts presented.
- Small group size made it difficult to achieve statistically significant results. Larger numbers of research participants would provide more robust data.
- Wearing a face mask as required by COVID-19 protocols. This made for difficulties in speaking and understanding each other and reading facial expressions.
- Time of day. Participants who met in the morning were more engaged in discussion. This was the first group session of their day. For those in the afternoon group, the session was their third group of the day. Their mental stamina was diminished.
- As the curriculum uses metaphors, this may challenge those with diminished cognitive abilities who may have some difficulty extrapolating the meanings due to a more concrete world view. Facilitators may need to adapt the curriculum for such participants.
- Individuals with a limited and rigid core self-concept may have difficulty with the idea of the Inner Hero, which excludes the possibility of acknowledging their own potential heroic qualities.

Conclusion

As this work is still in a developmental stage, the authors recognize the need for continuing research on the application of the Hero's Journey® narrative as a cross-cultural therapeutic framework. As a strength, the framework utilizes a universal and timeless myth postulated by Joseph Campbell. It is an engaging, affirming, and versatile framework that creatively uses the archetype of the Hero's Journey in describing the recovery/well-being journey. It also is a powerful tool for practitioners for evaluating coping strategies, areas of strength and challenges, and identifying the journey stage where individuals presently abide. Further, the group discussions create positive external experiences for participants that can help negate stigmatizing societal experiences. Simultaneously, as a member of an empowered collective, the individual's recovery journey then includes the group experience. The group experience supports the individual participants to mobilize and stand against stigmatizing beliefs and attitudes. We can envision participants of these groups traveling to legislative centers to advocate for improved mental health concerns and educate the public around issues of mental health stigma. Together they can embark on a new collective Hero's Journey.

The archetype of the Hero's Journey seems to resonate with many young adults with long-term mental health challenges; however, some do not relate to the concept due to their individual experiences or over-personification of movie "superheroes." This can be a challenge when presenting the Hero's Journey® curriculum. Alternative, relatable names/frameworks that are aligned with the Hero's Journey can include Journey of Recovery/Wellbeing, Journey of Self-Discovery, and Journey of Finding your Authentic Self. Likewise, some find it hard to acknowledge their "Inner Hero" because of low self-esteem and depression, while others may over-identify with this concept, placing their future mental health in jeopardy. Group facilitators would need to lead discussions that help participants reframe their journey as well as define the specific qualities of the "Inner Hero."

Finally, recovery/well-being has a variety of meanings. The intent of using this framework does not imply a "cure" or symptom-free life. The framework allows for the organization of experiences but is not prescriptive of the way recovery unfolds nor does it impose a value judgment of those experiences. The authors welcome input from those in recovery from long-term mental health concerns about their Hero's Journey.

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