

# The Power of Doodling: Why Our Brains Need Storytelling

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**S**ince the moment ancient humans began communicating with each other in meaningful ways, we've been storytellers. For our entire history, we've been trying to understand who we are as a species and what our role is in the greater narrative of existence, and our ability to tell stories has been central to that process. Our very survival has depended on it.

As social creatures, we rely on our ability to tell stories in order to help us convey our inner experiences to others. We can use them to examine our lives from different perspectives. To imagine possible explanations for situations we don't understand. They help us infer the motivations of other people and explain their reactions. Human culture, in general, is in fact, one massively elaborate, millennia-long narrative about how we relate to one another, to nature, and to the unknown.

It shouldn't come as a surprise then that our brains crave narrative, and that effective use of our storytelling abilities are key to success in all aspects of our lives.

## **Storytelling and the Human Brain**

Storytelling is not only intrinsic to our psychology, it is woven into the very fabric of our brains. Over the course of evolution, specific neurons developed, along with other structures that allow us to effectively share experiences and learned wisdom with others. These structures are at the root of empathy, a uniquely human trait that allows us to experience other people's stories in compelling and emotionally gratifying ways. This shared experience binds families, tribes, and communities together, and is a key to our survival as a social species.

Empathy neurons were first identified in the 1990s. Coined mirror neurons, they were discovered in macaques by Neuroscientist Giacomo Rizzolatti, MD at the University of Parma (published in 1992 in *Experimental Brain Research* (Vol. 91, No. 1, pages 176-180). Mirror neurons in a primate's brain fire in response to specific actions or situations, whether that action or situation is happening to them or to someone else. In macaques, they found a certain mirror neuron might fire in response to the macaque grasping a banana. But it would also fire if that macaque watched another macaque, or a person, grasp a banana. The brain reacted the same way to a specific action



regardless of who was doing it.

Later researchers found mirror neurons in human brains as well, and since then study after study, using advanced brain imaging techniques have confirmed that human brains react to situations happening to other people as if they were happening to themselves. This is the reason we gasp in horror when someone else suffers an injury. Mirror neurons create empathy and shared experiences, and they are pivotal in the power of storytelling. Because when someone relates a story to another person, their brain experiences it, on some level, as if it happened to them.

But the connection between storytelling and brain chemistry goes even deeper. Uri Hasson, a Princeton professor of psychology and neuroscience discovered that human brains actually sync activity when engaged in a meaningful exchange of ideas. Hasson gave a fairly famous TED Talk in 2016 in which he shared the results of his research. What he discovered is that when a skilled storyteller speaks to another person or a group of people the activity patterns found in the speaker's brain are emulated in great detail in the listeners' brains. As he puts it, communication is, "a single act performed by two brains." Storytelling may be unidirectional, but to our brains, it's a cooperative experience.

## **The Importance of Storytelling**

This research, and more like it, points to the importance of improving our storytelling abilities if our goal is to engage effectively with other people. Because our brains shape our world through narrative. We are the hero at the center of an epic tale we've been telling ourselves since our first memories, and it continues through to the present moment. When we understand on a deep level that all the world is a story we tell ourselves, then we can recognize that altering the story can alter our reality and the realities of other people. This can help bring about the positive changes we want to see in our lives and the world around us.

Physical reality isn't literally changed by the stories we tell about it, of course. But how we relate to that reality, and what it means for us can be radically shifted by effective communication. This means a skilled storyteller can influence other people in profound ways. And being truly understood by others is an extremely fulfilling experience. Storytelling is a skill that can benefit all aspects of your life. Storytelling also helps with creative problem-solving. Our minds string facts together into consistent narratives. By changing the narrative we can change how those facts relate to one another. Powerful storytelling allows us to re-contextualize difficult problems, granting us fresh perspectives.



Storytelling connects us. A powerful story can spread from brain to brain, each time linking the teller to the listener in a remarkable way. Two brains, synced as one, sharing direct experiences through verbal transmission.

## **How Doodling Can Improve Your Storytelling Abilities**

Doodling, it turns out, can be an excellent help in this area. According to Afnan Qutub, in an article she wrote for Monash University's Colloquy journal:

“Doodling allows the unconscious mind to communicate in symbolic expressions; these can have universal as well as personal meanings. When one is stuck on an answer to a problem or looking for a creative idea, doodling will often release the hidden symbolic abilities of the unconscious mind.”

Doodling gives you a window into the hidden processes of your own mind. It can help you learn to watch your brain create narratives throughout your day, and see how each and everything that happens to you is filtered, contextualized by the stories you've told yourself before, and then turned into the next chapter of the story of your life.

Doodling also offers a way to move from linear thinking, which limits creativity, to more abstract thought, which enhances your brain's ability to experience sudden insights. A study performed at the Israel Institute of Technology in Haifa in 2014 found that a doodle can spark a “dialog between the mind and the hand holding a pencil and the eyes that perceive the marks on paper”, according to Gabriela Goldschmidt, the study's author. The brief break in focus, doodling affords the mind gives it a chance to digest its experiences, and the motion of the hand, eye, and brain moving in concert can spark novel connections you may not have noticed otherwise.

Now is your chance to experience the power of doodling for yourself. The Doodle Challenge game is a great way to foster your own inner storyteller and to train your brain to form new neural pathways and build bridges of communication to the outside world. You have the power to alter the narrative of your life and the lives of the people around you for the betterment of all. To learn more about the Doodle Challenge visit us at [www.TheDoodleChallenge.com](http://www.TheDoodleChallenge.com).