Tree of life activity

# Denborough, D. (2014). *Retelling the stories of our lives: everyday narrative therapy to draw inspiration and transform experience*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co

## The tree of life

An activity for creating a preferred storyline – originated in Zimbabwe, developed by Denborough and psychologist Ncazelo Ncube. It allows you to record what you value, what is significant to you. It is not a storyline about problems, it is about what you value, what you stand for – a preferred storyline.

*Draw a tree with leaves, roots, branches, fruits, flowers/seeds and show the ground level, then annotate each part as follows:*

### The roots – where we come from

Where you come from, your language, culture, your favourite place, song, etc, those who have taught you most in life. Don’t spend more than 5-7 minutes.

### The ground – what we choose to do

This represents some of the activities you *choose* to do in a week – nothing that you are forced to do.

### The trunk – what we care about and our skills

What you value. Look at your ground – why do you choose to do these things? Include skills, abilities, accomplishments – don’t have to be grand. Ask what a friend would say, if finding it difficult. Does anything flow from your roots?

Try to trace the history of the things you care about, your skills, abilities – where/from whom did you learn them? How long important to you

In this way you start to build connections between different parts of your tree of life

### The branches – our horizons

Shared hopes, dreams – not necessarily just for your own life – for others, for your community, etc. But do include some for you, hopes, dreams, for the coming week or the distant future. Include some longer & shorter term wishes, for you, for others.

Trace the history of these wishes – how long, where from? How have you held onto them? Has anyone or anything helped? This may lead you to make additions to other parts of your tree.

### The leaves of the tree – those who are significant to us (in a good way)

People who are close to you, who have influenced you directly. This could include pets, and people who are no longer alive:

Did you have good times with this person? Write about it next to their leaf.

What was significant about this person?

Would this person appreciate you adding them to your tree?

### Fruits – legacies bequeathed to us

Gifts that have been passed on to you, or contributions made by others – look at those mentioned on your leaves. The gifts might be abstract – patience, courage, etc – or material.

### Flowers and seeds – the legacies we wish to leave

These may be similar to the gifts you have received. Or they may be things you were never offered but which you wish to pass on, perhaps to somebody in particular, because you have learned the value or you don’t want them to be without.

### An optional theme – the compost heap

One client placed the bad people in her life in a compost heap at the foot of the tree – there they could rot away and be turned into nutrients that would eventually feed and strengthen her tree. Who would you put in your compost heap?

### Making connections

Take another look at your tree – can you see any further connections between parts of the tree? Think about times when your values or skills were important to you, consider their history, think bout who else was involved