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Write Way to Wellness. Narrative based medicine.

Dr. Elaine Bland & Anika Van Wyk

May 2, 2025



**Primary Care
Strategic Forum**

The Path Ahead

Introduction



Anika Van Wyk

Presenter disclosure

- Grants/research support: none
- Speakers Bureau/Honoraria: none
- Consulting Fees: none
- Other: Calgary Foothills Primary Care Network

Introduction



Dr. Elaine Bland

Presenter disclosure

- Grants/research support: none
- Speakers Bureau/Honoraria: none
- Consulting Fees: none
- Other: ACTT Physician Lead, Intercare Corp Group, Calgary Foothills Primary Care Network, Crowfoot Village Family Practice

Learning objectives

At the end of this you will be able to:

- Define narrative competence
- Use tools to encourage reflection
- Employ simple questions / approaches to increase understanding of the patient experience



Write right away

Six-word memoir

Don't overthink, just keep your pen or fingers moving

- Six words
- Describe today, this week, month, year or life
- Two minutes
- Sharing is optional



For sale: baby shoes, never worn
— Ernest Hemingway





Learn, explore, create, share
equals happiness.

— Anika



British, Canadian, physician,
orphan, dog mom.

— Elaine

First time presenting! Hope it's OK.



Two minutes — just write

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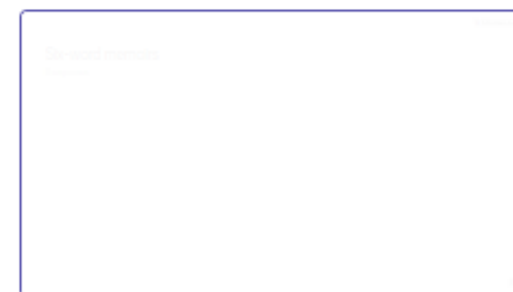


Menti

Six-word memoir share



Choose a slide to present



Write way to wellness

A practice that can help you manage your own wellness, as well as help enrich patient interactions.



Narrative medicine

“Narrative medicine is the clinical and scholarly endeavor to honour the role of story in the healing relationship.”

— Sayantani DasGupta



Narrative Competence

“Narrative competence is the ability to acknowledge, absorb, interpret and act on the stories and plights of others.”

— Rita Charon

How?

- Close reading and listening
- Reflective writing
- Sharing





Benefits

Provider

- Reduced burnout & compassion fatigue
- Enhanced self-awareness & perspective taking
- Increased emotional regulation
- Facilitated grief processing

Benefits

Patient

- Reduced stress levels
- Felt more comfortable & connected to doctors & healthcare team
- Improved communication



Narrative context

Four narrative relationships



Patient – clinician (empathy)



Clinician – self (reflection)



Clinician – colleagues (professional community)



Clinician – society (public accountability/ advocacy)



Narrative competence

Your capacity to

- receive
- interpret
- co-construct &
- bear witness
- to the stories that your patients bring you



“Among the skills for attentiveness that I find most useful to teach are noticing the words we usually ignore ...

I’m always interested in statements such as:
‘My headaches are driving me to despair.’

— John Launer, *The Art of Paying Attention*



“Ninety-nine times in 100 we ask about the headaches and never inquire about the driving to despair.”

— John Launer, *The Art of Paying Attention*



Strategies for using narrative-based medicine

- Ask open ended, plural / tentative language questions
- Listen to hear and not respond. Do not interrupt
- Learn your patients' stories
- Allow them to discuss their concerns
- Ask them to write a one page “impact of my illness” document which you can put on their chart



Question examples

How are we doing so far?

Have I missed anything?

What do you think is going on?

What's the one thing you haven't asked or told me ?



Your Health,
Your Team,
Your Community





Three-minute mental makeover



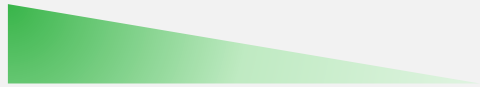
3MMM

Stress results

Practitioner

Pre

3.4



Post

1.8

Patient/family

Pre

3.8



Post

2.9

How did the writing exercise change your relationship with your practitioner?

“Deeper, more personal. Feel like a real team.”

“I think it helped my son and myself be more at ease with the doctor. It was nice to see my son actually share information.”





Three things you're grateful for

Example

1. My dog
 My dog when she does something silly and makes me smile
2. I've had breakfast and coffee this morning
3. No tomatoes thrown yet



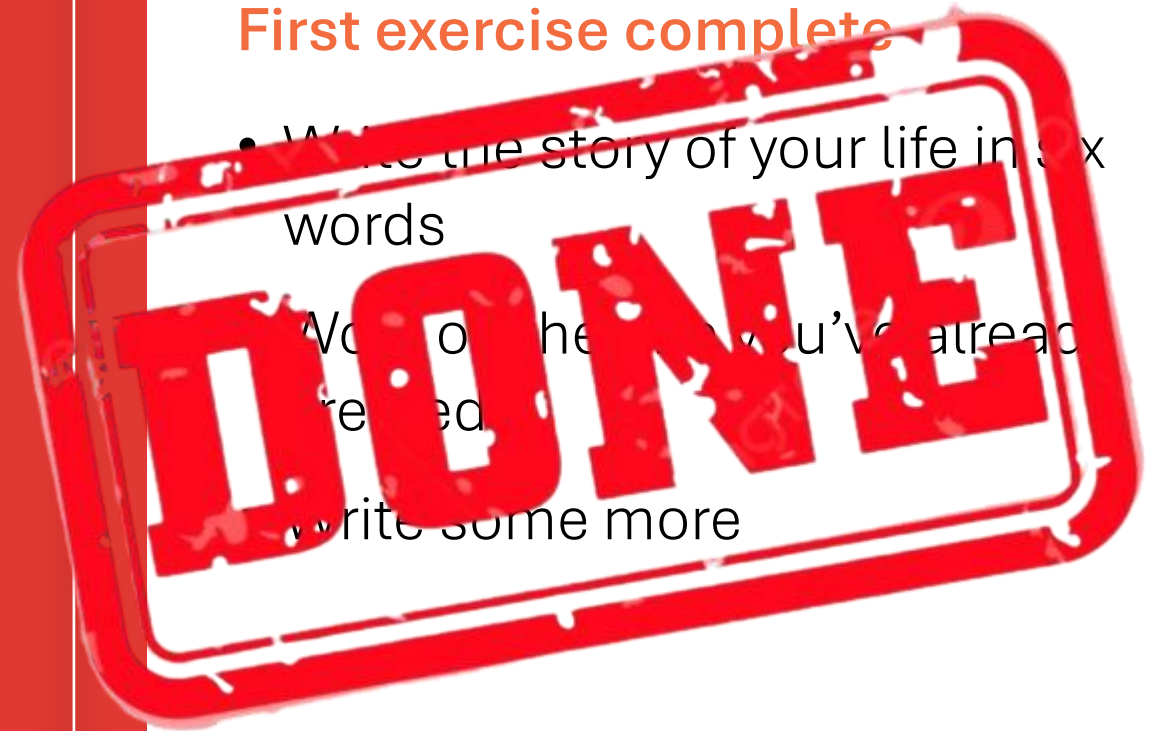
Six-word memoir

First exercise complete

- Write the story of your life in six words

Words on the page you've already created

write some more





Three wishes

Example

1. My dog lives as long as I do
2. We can simply teleport when we go travelling ... arrive in seconds
3. There isn't a lineup at the washroom after this presentation

Two minutes — 3 things you're grateful for & 3 wishes



Sharing

Ground rules

Sharing is optional.

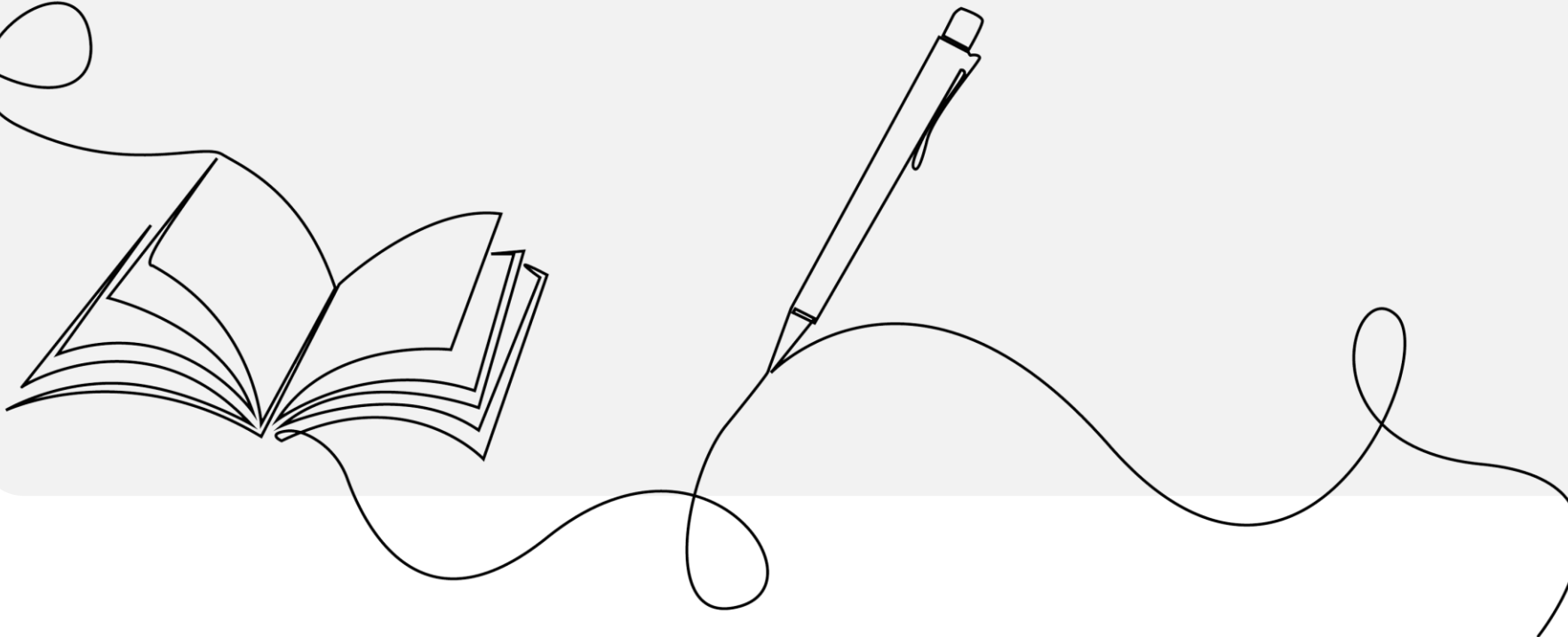
- Confidentiality
- Generous listening — give your whole attention
- Only **positive** feedback
- All voices are equal





Other ideas — Writing your way to wellness

- Creative writing, stories/poetry/songs
- Two-minute story
- Storytelling groups
- Image inspiration
- 55-word story (exactly)
- Haiku or Tanka



Pens dance on
notepads,
doctors trade
charts for haiku—
laughter in the
room.

Wellness found in
quiet words,
healing ink on every
page.



Everyone Has a Story



Thank you for joining us

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Your Health,
Your Team,
Your Community



References / further reading

References

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- Launer , J. The art of paying attention. BMJ 2022;378:o2294
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- Practitioners and families writing together: The three-minute Mental makeover. Perm J. 2020;24(1):19.056. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7812/TPP/19.056>



References / further reading

Further reading / viewing

- Learning narrative-based medicine skills
- Narrative-based medicine and the general practice consultation
- What is narrative-based medicine?
- Narrative-Based Medicine Lab
- How to do a 3-Minute Mental Makeover
- Medicine and the Muse
- Ted Talk Medicine and the Muse

Courses

- University of Toronto
- Columbia



Thank you for attending

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