

Yes, personal narratives can be **effectively used** as an **indirect method** to educate audiences on **sensitive topics**.

1. Introduction

Personal narratives—first-person accounts of lived experience—are increasingly recognized as powerful tools for educating audiences about sensitive, stigmatized, or complex topics. Research across health, education, policy, and advocacy demonstrates that narratives can foster empathy, reduce stigma, enhance engagement, and promote critical reflection among learners and the public (Dudley et al., 2023; McGinty et al., 2017; Heley et al., 2020; Coret et al., 2018; Milner, 2007; Frank et al., 2015; Legere et al., 2013; Parnell et al., 2023; Kagawa et al., 2023; Dahlstrom, 2014). These effects are observed in diverse contexts, from medical and nursing education to public health campaigns, social justice movements, and policy advocacy (McGinty et al., 2017; Trevisan, 2017; Miller et al., 2020; McEntire et al., 2015; Frank et al., 2015; Kumagai, 2008; Parnell et al., 2023). Narratives are particularly valuable for addressing topics that are difficult to discuss directly, such as mental illness, substance use, disability, sexuality, and social inequities, by making abstract or taboo issues relatable and emotionally resonant (McGinty et al., 2017; Heley et al., 2020; Milner, 2007; Frank et al., 2015; Parnell et al., 2023; Kagawa et al., 2023). However, the impact of personal narratives depends on factors such as narrative quality, context, audience characteristics, and the integration of narrative with other educational strategies (Dudley et al., 2023; Shaffer et al., 2018; Polletta & Redman, 2020; Drewniak et al., 2020; Dahlstrom, 2014). While most evidence supports the educational value of personal narratives, some studies caution about potential risks, such as narrative bias or the reinforcement of stereotypes if not carefully curated (Fadlallah et al., 2019; Drewniak et al., 2020; Chen, 2018). Overall, the literature supports the use of personal narratives as an indirect yet effective method for educating audiences on sensitive topics.

2. Methods

A comprehensive search was conducted across over 170 million research papers in Consensus, including Semantic Scholar, PubMed, and other databases. The search targeted studies on personal narratives, storytelling, and narrative-based interventions for education on sensitive or stigmatized topics. In total, 1,018 papers were identified, 718 were screened, 478 were deemed eligible, and the top 50 most relevant papers were included in this review.

Search Strategy

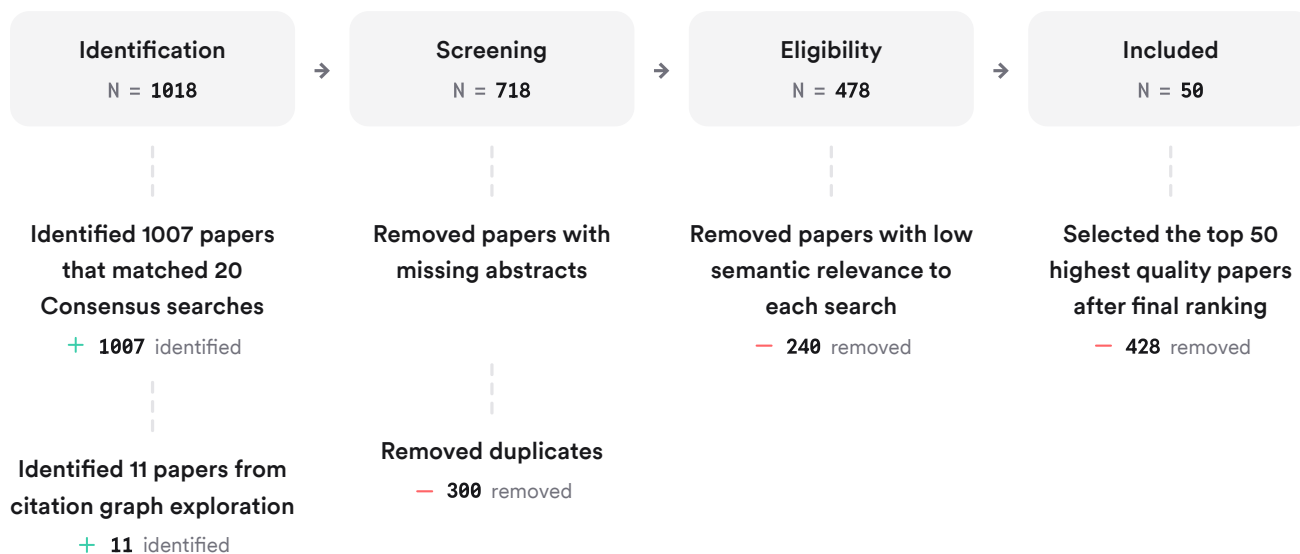


FIGURE 1 Flow diagram of the literature search and selection process.

Eight unique search strategies were used, spanning foundational theory, diverse terminology, critiques, interdisciplinary expansion, methodological diversity, and topic decomposition.

3. Results

3.1 Effectiveness of Personal Narratives in Education

Personal narratives have been shown to increase empathy, reduce stigma, and improve understanding of sensitive topics in both formal and informal educational settings (Dudley et al., 2023; McGinty et al., 2017; Heley et al., 2020; Coret et al., 2018; Milner, 2007; Frank et al., 2015; Legere et al., 2013; Parnell et al., 2023; Kagawa et al., 2023; Dahlstrom, 2014). In health education, narrative medicine and patient storytelling interventions enhance learners' appreciation of patient perspectives and foster humanistic care (Han et al., 2024; Coret et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2023; Brady & Revell, 2025; Kumagai, 2008; Parnell et al., 2023; Kagawa et al., 2023). In policy and advocacy, personal stories can shift public attitudes and increase support for evidence-based policies (McGinty et al., 2017; Trevisan, 2017; McEntire et al., 2015; Frank et al., 2015; Hippalgaonkar et al., 2024).

3.2 Mechanisms and Contexts

Narratives work by engaging emotions, promoting identification with storytellers, and making abstract or stigmatized issues concrete and relatable (Dudley et al., 2023; Frank et al., 2015; Shaffer et al., 2018; Chen & Bell, 2021; Dahlstrom, 2014). They are particularly effective when combined with didactic methods, tailored to the audience, and presented in first-person or multimedia formats (Dudley et al., 2023; Frank et al., 2015; Chen & Bell, 2021; Dahlstrom, 2014). Digital storytelling and visual narratives further enhance engagement and accessibility (Tran et al., 2024; Moreau et al., 2018; Hoffman, 2021; Efthymiou, 2025; Parnell et al., 2023).

3.3 Applications Across Domains

Personal narratives are used in medical, nursing, and pharmacy education to teach about mental health, disability, cultural competence, and ethical values (Han et al., 2024; Coret et al., 2018; Tran et al., 2024; Moreau et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2023; Brady & Revell, 2025; Kumagai, 2008; Hoffman, 2021; Parnell et al., 2023; Kagawa et al., 2023). In social justice and advocacy, crowd-sourced and counter-narratives challenge dominant discourses and promote equity (Trevisan, 2017; Miller et al., 2020; Bhattacharya, 2016; McEntire et al., 2015; Chen, 2018; Qiu, 2023; Vromen et al., 2025). In public health, narrative messages reduce stigma and improve health literacy (Mcginty et al., 2017; Dudley et al., 2023; Heley et al., 2020; Frank et al., 2015; Zexin & Rong, 2025; Drewniak et al., 2020; Dahlstrom, 2014).

3.4 Limitations and Risks

While generally effective, narratives can sometimes reinforce stereotypes, introduce bias, or be misused for persuasion rather than education (Fadlallah et al., 2019; Shaffer et al., 2018; Polletta & Redman, 2020; Chen, 2018; Drewniak et al., 2020). The impact of narratives varies by topic, audience, and delivery method, and not all narrative interventions are equally effective (Dudley et al., 2023; Fadlallah et al., 2019; Moreau et al., 2018; Shaffer et al., 2018; Polletta & Redman, 2020; Drewniak et al., 2020; Dahlstrom, 2014).

Key Papers

Paper	Context	Methodology	Key Results
(Dudley et al., 2023)	Science/Health Communication	Scoping Review	Narratives increase engagement, comprehension, and openness to sensitive information
(Mcginty et al., 2017)	Mental Health Policy	Expert Forum/Review	Personal narratives increase public support for mental health and substance use policies
(Heley et al., 2020)	Health Stigma	Randomized Experiment	Narrative messages reduce stigma and shift responsibility attributions for opioid addiction
(Coret et al., 2018)	Medical Education	Mixed Methods	Patient narratives improve comfort, confidence, and competence in working with IDD populations
(Frank et al., 2015)	Health Communication	Experimental	Narrative film increased perceived severity and efficacy for HPV prevention

FIGURE 2 Comparison of key studies on personal narratives as educational tools for sensitive topics.

Top Contributors

Type	Name	Papers
Author	Colleen L. Barry	(Mcginty et al., 2017; Heley et al., 2020)
Author	K. Moreau	(Moreau et al., 2018)
Author	A. Coret	(Coret et al., 2018)
Journal	<i>BMC Medical Education</i>	(Han et al., 2024; Moreau et al., 2018; Parnell et al., 2023; Kagawa et al., 2023)
Journal	<i>Health Communication</i>	(Heley et al., 2020; Frank et al., 2015; Zexin & Rong, 2025)
Journal	<i>Patient education and counseling</i>	(Dudley et al., 2023)

FIGURE 3 Authors & journals that appeared most frequently in the included papers.

4. Discussion

The literature provides strong evidence that personal narratives are effective indirect tools for educating audiences on sensitive topics. Narratives foster empathy, reduce stigma, and make complex or taboo issues accessible and relatable (Dudley et al., 2023; Mcginty et al., 2017; Heley et al., 2020; Coret et al., 2018; Milner, 2007; Frank et al., 2015; Legere et al., 2013; Parnell et al., 2023; Kagawa et al., 2023; Dahlstrom, 2014). They are particularly valuable in health professions education, where they enhance humanistic care and communication skills (Han et al., 2024; Coret et al., 2018; Moreau et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2023; Brady & Revell, 2025; Kumagai, 2008; Hoffman, 2021; Parnell et al., 2023; Kagawa et al., 2023). In policy and advocacy, personal stories can shift public attitudes and increase support for evidence-based interventions (Mcginty et al., 2017; Trevisan, 2017; McEntire et al., 2015; Frank et al., 2015; Hippalgaonkar et al., 2024). The mechanisms underlying these effects include emotional engagement, identification, and narrative immersion (Dudley et al., 2023; Frank et al., 2015; Shaffer et al., 2018; Chen & Bell, 2021; Dahlstrom, 2014).

However, the use of personal narratives is not without risks. Poorly designed or inauthentic narratives can reinforce stereotypes, introduce bias, or be used manipulatively (Fadlallah et al., 2019; Shaffer et al., 2018; Polletta & Redman, 2020; Chen, 2018; Drewniak et al., 2020). The effectiveness of narratives depends on context, audience, and integration with other educational strategies (Dudley et al., 2023; Fadlallah et al., 2019; Moreau et al., 2018; Shaffer et al., 2018; Polletta & Redman, 2020; Drewniak et al., 2020; Dahlstrom, 2014). Ethical considerations, such as protecting the privacy and dignity of storytellers, are also paramount (McElhinney & Kennedy, 2022; Fadlallah et al., 2019; Chen, 2018; Drewniak et al., 2020).

Claims and Evidence Table





Claim	Evidence Strength	Reasoning	Papers
Personal narratives increase empathy and understanding of sensitive topics	 Strong	Multiple studies show improved empathy, engagement, and comprehension across domains	(Dudley et al., 2023; Coret et al., 2018; Milner, 2007; Frank et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2023; Brady & Revell, 2025; Kumagai, 2008; Parnell et al., 2023; Kagawa et al., 2023; Dahlstrom, 2014)
Narratives reduce stigma and shift attitudes on stigmatized issues	 Strong	Randomized and qualitative studies show reduced stigma for mental illness, substance use, and disability	(McGinty et al., 2017; Heley et al., 2020; Frank et al., 2015; Legere et al., 2013; Parnell et al., 2023; Kagawa et al., 2023; Devendorf et al., 2024)
Narrative interventions are effective across diverse educational and advocacy contexts	 Strong	Evidence from health, policy, and social justice domains	(Trevisan, 2017; Miller et al., 2020; Coret et al., 2018; Milner, 2007; McEntire et al., 2015; Frank et al., 2015; Kumagai, 2008; Parnell et al., 2023; Kagawa et al., 2023; Vromen et al., 2025)
Effectiveness depends on narrative quality, context, and audience	 Moderate	Impact varies by delivery, topic, and integration with other methods	(Dudley et al., 2023; Fadlallah et al., 2019; Moreau et al., 2018; Shaffer et al., 2018; Polletta & Redman, 2020; Drewniak et al., 2020; Dahlstrom, 2014)
Narratives can introduce bias or reinforce stereotypes if not carefully curated	 Moderate	Some studies report risks of narrative bias and misuse	(Fadlallah et al., 2019; Shaffer et al., 2018; Polletta & Redman, 2020; Chen, 2018; Drewniak et al., 2020)
Ethical and privacy concerns must be addressed in narrative-based education	 Moderate	Risks of identification and exploitation of storytellers	(McElhinney & Kennedy, 2022; Fadlallah et al., 2019; Chen, 2018; Drewniak et al., 2020)

FIGURE Key claims and support evidence identified in these papers.

5. Conclusion

Personal narratives are a well-supported, effective indirect method for educating audiences on sensitive topics, with demonstrated benefits for empathy, stigma reduction, and engagement. Their impact is maximized when narratives are authentic, contextually relevant, and ethically integrated with other educational strategies.

5.1 Research Gaps

Despite strong evidence for the effectiveness of personal narratives, gaps remain in understanding their long-term impact, optimal delivery methods, and potential unintended consequences. More rigorous, comparative, and longitudinal studies are needed, especially in non-health domains and diverse populations.

Research Gaps Matrix

Topic / Attribute	Health Professions	Policy/Advocacy	Digital/Visual	K-12 Education	Longitudinal Impact
Empathy/Attitude Change	12	6	5	2	1
Stigma Reduction	8	4	3	1	GAP
Policy/Behavior Change	5	7	2	1	GAP
Narrative Bias/Ethics	3	2	2	GAP	GAP
Comparative Effectiveness	4	2	2	1	GAP

FIGURE Matrix showing research coverage by topic and study attribute; gaps indicate areas for future research.

5.2 Open Research Questions

Future research should address the long-term effects of narrative interventions, best practices for narrative design and delivery, and strategies to mitigate risks of bias and ethical concerns.

Question	Why
What are the long-term impacts of personal narrative interventions on attitudes and behaviors regarding sensitive topics?	Most studies measure short-term outcomes; understanding sustained effects is crucial for policy and education.
How can narrative interventions be designed to maximize empathy and learning while minimizing bias and stereotype reinforcement?	Optimizing narrative design will enhance benefits and reduce risks in diverse contexts.
What ethical frameworks best protect storytellers and audiences in narrative-based education on sensitive topics?	Addressing privacy, consent, and potential harm is essential for responsible narrative use.

FIGURE Open research questions for future investigation into personal narratives as educational tools.

In summary, personal narratives are a powerful, evidence-based tool for indirectly educating audiences on sensitive topics, but further research is needed to optimize their use and address ethical considerations.

These papers were sourced and synthesized using Consensus, an AI-powered search engine for research. Try it at <https://consensus.app>

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