



“Your story is what you have,  
what you will always have.  
It is something to own.”

Michelle Obama,  
from *Becoming*

| 01 |

introduction to the  
**POWER of STORY**

## Gearing Up

- » To begin to learn how we all automatically make meaning from the experiences we have and how this meaning informs our personal narrative
- » To begin to learn the foundation and origin of narrative coaching
- » To be introduced to the Big Seven non-cognitive competencies and begin to understand their essential role in student success (confidence, resilience, self-advocacy, emotional intelligence, perseverance, self-control, and growth mindset)
- » To be introduced to the re:MIND methodology
- » To gain greater awareness of how narrative coaching supports common student challenges by reading examples of student/coach conversations

## Where We Are Going

We all do things unconsciously—we immediately find meaning in what we experience. But everyone creates meaning differently and we do not create meaning in a vacuum. This means that factors like our personal dispositions, as well as our cultural, familial, and economic circumstances, shape the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and about how we see the world and our place in it. We've all heard that we're a product of our environment. In this chapter, we will examine which parts you want to take along with you on your college journey, and which no longer serve you and may even threaten your success—however you define that.

To begin to understand how stories are shaped and shared, imagine the following scenario:

Three students are walking to class. While they are walking, they are texting on their cell phones and each of them trips over the same bump in the sidewalk and falls down in front of a crowd of other students. They react as follows:

**Student 1:** *Jumps up quickly, looking embarrassed. The student grabs their belongings without looking up at or speaking to those who have come over to help. They rush away quickly while looking on the verge of tears. The student is thinking, "OMG, THAT WAS SO EMBARRASSING. Everyone was staring and I look like such an idiot. I am such a spasm; why can't I be more careful?!"*

**Student 2:** *Jumps up quickly and yells "TA DA!" while giving an over-the-top bow. The student thanks the audience for their assistance, laughs, and says, "Wow, that bump came out of nowhere!" They continue on to class, thinking, "I need to be more careful! I could have hurt myself. I'm glad those other students were there to help me grab my papers before they flew off into the wind."*

**Student 3:** *Sits on the ground cursing the bump in the sidewalk, the school for not making sure the bump was fixed, and luck for not being there. When people offer assistance, the student glares and says they don't need help, but they do want to know who is responsible for the terrible conditions of the sidewalk. The student gets up but continues to grumble about how terrible the school administration is for not making sure that the walkways are perfect. Walking away, they think, "That was TERRIBLE. Even though I am not hurt, I could have been, and the school will hear about this. Someone should be held responsible."*

Considering the three students and the events, you may notice that the same thing happened to each of them:

1. Each student was walking to class and texting on their phone.
2. Each student trips and falls over a bump in the sidewalk in front of a crowd of people, who come to their aid.
3. No one is hurt physically.

And yet, although the details of the event are exactly the same, THE STORY THAT IS SHARED ABOUT THE EVENT IS ENTIRELY DIFFERENT!

## Essential Gear

Starting college is like heading out on a long, rugged journey: it's important to have resources. You can think of it like packing a suitcase full of essential gear—like a warm coat, underwear, socks, and money for food and lodging (Figure 1). It's not to say that you couldn't reach your destination without them, but it's bound to be a lot harder, far more uncomfortable, and you'll probably repeatedly question why you started in the first place. Without essential gear, it would be much too easy to get cold, tired, hungry, and scared and simply quit. But many students do just this: they start college without their essential gear. It's not their fault, though. There is so much that goes into starting college, and taking that initial step to enroll is to be applauded. This course is meant to expand the way you support yourself and ensure you have what you need for a successful journey and outcome.



**Figure 1.** As with any journey, you need essential gear when beginning college.

What might you pack in your suitcase knowing that you could be encountering all sorts of weather conditions and challenging terrain? Consider thinking about college the same way. You are on a voyage that is filled with all sorts of “weather conditions and challenging terrain” that can make your experience more difficult if you are not properly equipped and prepared. Some examples follow:

- » Managing finances and basic needs
- » Tackling academics
- » Building and maintaining supportive relationships
- » Building and navigating new relationships with fellow students, staff and professors, academic and social clubs, and student organizations
- » Balancing the demands of work and school
- » Caregiving (kids, parents)
- » Maintaining emotional and physical well-being
- » Staying motivated and on track (when in the moment, all you might want to do is stop)
- » Straddling two roles/identities: one as a student and one you have with your family and friends back home
- » Managing challenging feelings like self-doubt, guilt, overwhelm, fear, and worry

Much like you would never take a rugged journey without your essential gear, you should not embark upon the college journey without actively building or building upon the essential gear of seven important non-cognitive skills (Figure 2).

## Non-cognitive Competency

the attitudes, behaviors, and strategies which facilitate success in school and workplace, such as motivation, perseverance, and self-control



SELF-ADVOCACY



CONFIDENCE



EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE



RESILIENCE



PERSEVERANCE



SELF-CONTROL



GROWTH MINDSET

**Figure 2.** These non-cognitive skills are your essential tools in managing the challenges of college.

We are not saying that you need to have all of these yet; like everyone else, you are a work in progress. Additionally, we are not saying that you do not already have some or even most of these. Our goal is to help you grow in strength and purpose by learning how and when to leverage these competencies. These seven **non-cognitive competencies** are going to be key tools in defending your dreams against the influence of the stress and challenges in your life.

## The Power of Narrative

In response to bad news, such as receiving a low grade on a test (**Figure 3**), you may have heard someone (or yourself) say something like

“I knew that was going to happen. It’s no use even trying.”

“I always do badly on tests. It’s what I expected, really.”

“I hate this subject. I will never be able to pass this class.”



**Figure 3.** Getting a low score on a test can lead to negative beliefs about yourself.

If we’re honest, most of us have said one or more of these things at one time or another. Those statements represent a very powerful belief system baked into our everyday thinking patterns. These thinking patterns represent our **personal narratives** or life-scripts that we often follow without question or protest. In particular, did you notice the presence of words like “always” or “never”? When we use those words, they are often our first clue that we might be caught in the grips of a disempowered but habitual pattern of thinking. Did you also happen to notice that the news only seemed to confirm an already deeply held belief system? This is not to say that we think bad things “into happening”—we are not getting metaphysical here. What we are saying, however, is that we all—each one of us—possess personal beliefs about who we are and what is possible for us. And then, as an extension of this belief system, we either live up or **live down** to that narrative.

## Personal Narrative

the story you tell yourself about yourself and who you are; your concept of the world, based on internalized experiences that have shaped your perception; your life script (often unexamined)

## Live Down

to live to a lower expectation than you are capable of because it has become part of your personal narrative

## A Starting Place

You see, our narrative is simply the starting place, albeit a powerful one. Once a negative personal narrative has taken hold, then possibilities quickly start to diminish. If a student already believes that she is not capable of performing well on tests in general, then she is less likely to work with a tutor, or put in the study hours to disprove that narrative. The narrative is so powerful that she just assumes the worst; so why put in the effort when she is already convinced of the outcome?

What if we possessed more positive personal narratives? Again, not just positive thinking, but consciously cultivated a narrative that we lived up to? Imagine how a more positive narrative would support better outcomes. It might sound something like, “I plan to do well on this exam, so I am going to take every action to support that expectation—like working with a tutor.” And then when challenges arise (as they often do), we actively worked to tackle them, rather than seeing them as more evidence of a negative foregone conclusion. Moreover, what if a powerful personal narrative became an extension of not just what we expect, but who we are: “I plan to do well on this test because I am a hard worker, so I am going to take every action to support how I see myself and what I expect.”

Cultivating positive narratives that you can live up to is not a “what if.” Cultivating positive narratives is exactly what you will be learning in the chapters to come!

In the narrative approach to your student success, you get to take ownership of your narrative and experiences as you define who you are. That’s the key: redefining who we are, which is informed by who we are when we are the best version of ourselves. For all of us, there exist many examples of who we are when we are at our best that remain under-explored and under-resourced. That is about to change.

## Narrative Coaching

**Narrative coaching** is an approach that actively engages you in a process of examining your beliefs about who you are and what you see as possible. The approach serves to liberate you from personal stories that disempower you, and no longer fit as you embark upon your college experience. This is done by providing compelling stories, questions, and learning activities that teach you to more thoughtfully examine your own personal narratives through an entirely different lens. Providing a new lens allows you to become aware of outdated thought patterns that may only serve to derail you, and to begin the process of cultivating preferred and updated narratives that are more aligned and supportive of your values, strengths, and goals. Through a strategic process, you are invited to inquire into other, more positive stories from your past or current life that equip you to discover inherent strengths, values, and skills you will need to depend upon along your path to success. When you feel more connected to your strengths and values, you are more courageous, open, and willing to utilize critical student support resources and to cultivate important relationships in the face of challenges that you may otherwise have resisted or not actively pursued.

The goal of narrative coaching is for you to stop identifying yourself as the source of your problems, and instead externalize them. Doing so will help you view yourself as separate from your problems, allowing you to gain distance and perspective about yourself and your relationship to your challenges, and in so doing, eliminate shame and defensiveness. When this happens, you are more able to actively pursue your dreams by practicing essential non-cognitive competencies as integral to who you are and how you see yourself (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** We need to develop a more positive narrative for ourselves.

We are not the first to bring a narrative approach into the educational arena. The following three projects did just this, and as a result, created positive outcomes. This information comes from the Dulwich Centre and provides information about the evidence-base for narrative practices used to cultivate qualities like resilience in students. Each of the projects implemented a narrative approach either through providing a narrative “text book” or a narrative intervention directly with students:

- » **Hero Books:** 77% of learners’ academic performance as measured by an average mark for all three learning areas (home language, first additional language, and life orientation) improved overall for a group exposed to **hero books**, or documents that invite students to “author” their own story as they challenge obstacles in their lives, as opposed to 55% in the control groups. This finding suggests that the hero book intervention might be pursued purely on its potential as a methodology to enhance academic learning outcomes, and any improvements in the psychosocial wellbeing of learners is an added bonus of the intervention.<sup>1</sup>
- » **Team of Life:** Quantitative findings from pilot work evaluating feasibility and outcomes for the “Team of Life” program within a UK secondary school setting include significant positive change in goal-based outcomes as well as significant reductions in emotional and behavior difficulties measured by a child behavior checklist. Qualitative thematic analysis of participant feedback indicates benefits relating to the experience of shared understanding, confidence, peer support, and the positive impact of sport.<sup>2</sup>
- » **Tree of Life:** Results from quantitative analysis from using the “Tree of Life” strength-based narrative intervention in schools found a significant improvement in pupils’ self-concept post-intervention. The pupils also reported positive improvements in cultural understanding of themselves and others.<sup>3</sup>

## Narrative Coaching

an approach that actively engages you in a process of examining your beliefs about who you are and what you see as possible

## Hero Book

a document that invites students to “author” their own story as they challenge obstacles in their lives

We are not aware of any substantive narrative programs or courses within the field of higher education, but this book’s author has been implementing this coaching approach one on one with students for the past 12 years, as well as teaching and training organizations to do the same through one on one coaching. She has found that narrative coaching has been the only reliable framework when advising, coaching, mentoring, or using available resources have failed to engage students and connect them to the source of their disengagement: disempowered beliefs. Narrative-based coaching is often able to unearth student belief and to support the process of liberating them from disempowered mindsets. Students change their behavior and care for themselves differently when they see themselves differently.

## Introducing the Big Seven Non-Cognitive Competencies

We will be investing in your mindset by exploring seven non-cognitive competencies. Non-cognitive competencies are often referred to as “non-cogs” or “soft-skills,” although there is nothing soft about them. Honestly, we do not think the term “non-cognitive” accurately reflects the concept, but until there is a better term, we will use it.

Though all non-cognitive competencies are important, we chose seven that we consider to be the most fundamental and could serve as “launching pads” or “jumping off places” for the growth of other non-cognitive competencies. These non-cognitive competencies represent the desire to establish a fundamental starting place from which more expansive narratives can flourish.

## Confidence

Maintaining and building **confidence** as a new student can make a big difference toward future successful outcomes. Confidence is not the belief that you are the smartest person in the room, nor is it exhibiting any semblance of swagger. Having confidence as a new student really means developing a strong sense of yourself. Here is what that would look like:

- » You ask for help when you need it.
- » You form trusting relationships with others.
- » You are open to feedback.
- » You try new things.



**CONFIDENCE**

**Confidence**

the feeling or belief that one can rely on someone or something; firm trust

**Resilience**

the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness

Confidence is ultimately about believing that when (not if) you experience a setback or make a mistake, you trust you will have the ability to handle and work through the setback or mistake (*Figure 5*). You believe you can be your own safety net. That safety net is represented by both your belief in yourself, as well as your ability to develop trusting relationships with others who will be there for you when things are hard.



**Figure 5.** Confidence is believing you can work through any setback or mistake.

## Resilience

**Resilience**, or being able to recover from difficulties, is essential because college is often hard. When things are hard—either inside or outside the classroom—it’s critical to be able to have a strong enough sense of yourself, your strengths, and your values so that you can recover quickly and continue to drive forward. It’s like having mental and emotional flexibility as life throws its curveballs. Resilience and confidence go hand in hand. Following are some examples of practicing resilience as a college student:

- » You recover your emotions quickly after receiving a lower grade than what you wanted or expected.
- » You take healthy risks without fear of failure because you see setbacks and stumbles as a normal part of the college journey and something to learn from.
- » You see the process of learning as equally or even more important than measures of success like grades.
- » You understand that common experiences of loneliness or homesickness are normal for new students and you trust that with time they will pass.

Our intention is for you to grow in your belief that you can “bounce back” from setbacks by reflecting on examples of resilience in your own personal histories, so that you can take a more active role in practicing resilience as you encounter setbacks.



**RESILIENCE**

## Self-Advocacy

**Self-advocacy**, or representing your own views or interests, can be very uncomfortable to practice initially. This is quite normal as you may not yet feel comfortable asking for what you need or representing your opinion with conviction, especially if those opinions or needs are not reflected in your immediate surroundings. Being a new college student can feel like you’re being thrown into foreign territory where it is easy for the priority to be simply blending in as you adjust to your new life. However, blending in and not speaking up can increase your sense of separateness and personal doubt, leading to more fear and isolation, and the neglect of important and timely needs that you deserve to have met (*Figure 6*). Some examples of self-advocacy in a college setting follow:



**SELF-ADVOCACY**

- » You proactively communicate your needs, specifically if you anticipate you will struggle or you begin to struggle.
- » You demonstrate appropriate, timely, and respectful in-person and email communication regarding any concerns you have with college faculty and staff.
- » You take initiative in learning about and then accessing college resources as needed to support your needs and success.



**Figure 6.** Simply blending in with college life will not give you the self-advocacy you need.

As your confidence grows, you will find yourself more comfortable with sticking up for yourself, asking for help, and expressing your wants, needs, and perspective. You will do this by finding examples in your personal histories when you stood up for yourself or others, either through words or deeds, and begin to externalize the problems that have historically made practicing self-advocacy challenging.

## Emotional Intelligence

**Emotional intelligence**, or the capability to be aware of and control one's emotions, is an important competency to develop as a new college student because you will be navigating a lot of new experiences and relationships. Your ability to self-reflect, develop, and possess personal awareness, insight, and accountability as you negotiate these new encounters will enable you to practice sound judgment, establish healthy boundaries, and manage your feelings without becoming overcome by your feelings. This will be especially important as you increase your ability to practice stress management and self-care. Here are some examples of practicing emotional intelligence as a new student:



## EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

**Self-Advocacy**  
the action of representing oneself or one's views or interests

**Emotional Intelligence**  
the capacity to be aware of, control, and express one's emotions, and to handle interpersonal relationships judiciously and empathetically

- » You practice self-care in response to challenging emotions.
- » You understand the feelings and emotions of others in order to communicate effectively, even when someone is different from you or holds a different opinion.
- » You set boundaries by creating and maintaining supportive and reciprocal interpersonal relationships with peers.
- » You are self-aware or know when you need to take a break and when you need to push through obstacles.

You will grow in your ability to self-reflect and connect with others. You will be able to practice empathy, self-awareness, and self-care, including setting healthy boundaries with family and friends. And you will begin to externalize the problems that have historically made practicing emotional intelligence challenging for you.

## Perseverance

College can be hard, and when it is (whether from completing an assignment, making friends, or managing financial aid), you may experience a time or two when all you're going to want to do is grab a fist full of your hair and scream (Figure 7). And that's fair. But the more you develop your capacity to practice taking steps forward despite difficulties or delays, the more you can see those moments as difficult but normal. Learning to apply effort in the face of obstacles is the practice of **perseverance**, and it serves as the only way through to the outcome you want to achieve. Here are some specific examples of what that would look like:

- » You see current hardship as a normal and important stepping stone toward a future goal.
- » You utilize tutors and other learning resources when you feel stuck, rather than giving up.
- » You focus on the task in front of you, rather than getting overwhelmed by the length of the journey ahead of you.

Ideally, you will grow in your capacity to stay the course and stay on track with difficult tasks. You will explore personal examples of when you have done so, and begin to externalize the problems that have historically made practicing perseverance challenging.



PERSEVERANCE



**Figure 7.** Perseverance is what keeps us from pulling our hair out when things get rough.

### Perseverance

persistence in doing something despite difficulty or delay in achieving success

### Self-Control

the ability to control oneself, in particular one's emotions and desires or the expression of them in one's behavior, especially in difficult situations

## Self-Control

Imagine you're doing your homework and you're really struggling with the assignment. Now, imagine that as you're doing your best to focus, you start getting phone messages: your friends are grabbing pizza and inviting you over to watch your favorite show. How hard is it for you to resist? Yes, you were the one who enrolled in college—you want to create a brighter future—but *right now* immediate gratification can cloud your thinking and hinder your long term goals. Learning to practice **self-control**—the ability to control yourself, particularly your emotions and desires, especially in difficult situations—more frequently will serve you well as each decision you make in the moment paves the path to the future you're striving to shape. Here are some examples of doing just that:

- » You push back or fight against immediate gratification and temptation.
- » You see the relationship between your everyday choices (large and small) and their impact on your future success.
- » You practice sticking to a routine.
- » You create contingency plans when sticking to a routine is not possible.



SELF-CONTROL

Throughout this course, you will begin to grow in your capacity to resist immediate gratification and to build your ability to postpone it. Ideally, you will create a stronger relationship between current habits and future goals, both by finding examples from your life when you have done so, and by beginning to externalize the problems that have historically made practicing self-control challenging.

## Growth Mindset

**Growth mindset** is the belief that your abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work. Practicing a growth mindset is at the core of developing more capacity in each of the previous six non-cognitive competencies (Figure 8). You will not become more confident and resilient, practice more self-advocacy, and demonstrate more emotional intelligence and self-control over night. You will stumble and you will fall. But in the falling, the goal is to reflect, recalibrate, and try again, employing new insights and strategies and appreciating that, with increased commitment to embodying a growth mindset, you are becoming stronger, smarter, and more capable every day. You are a work in progress, and embracing a growth mindset in the face of both academic and personal challenges is the best strategy in growing these competencies as essential parts of your personal narrative. Here are some real-life examples of practicing a growth mindset as a college student:

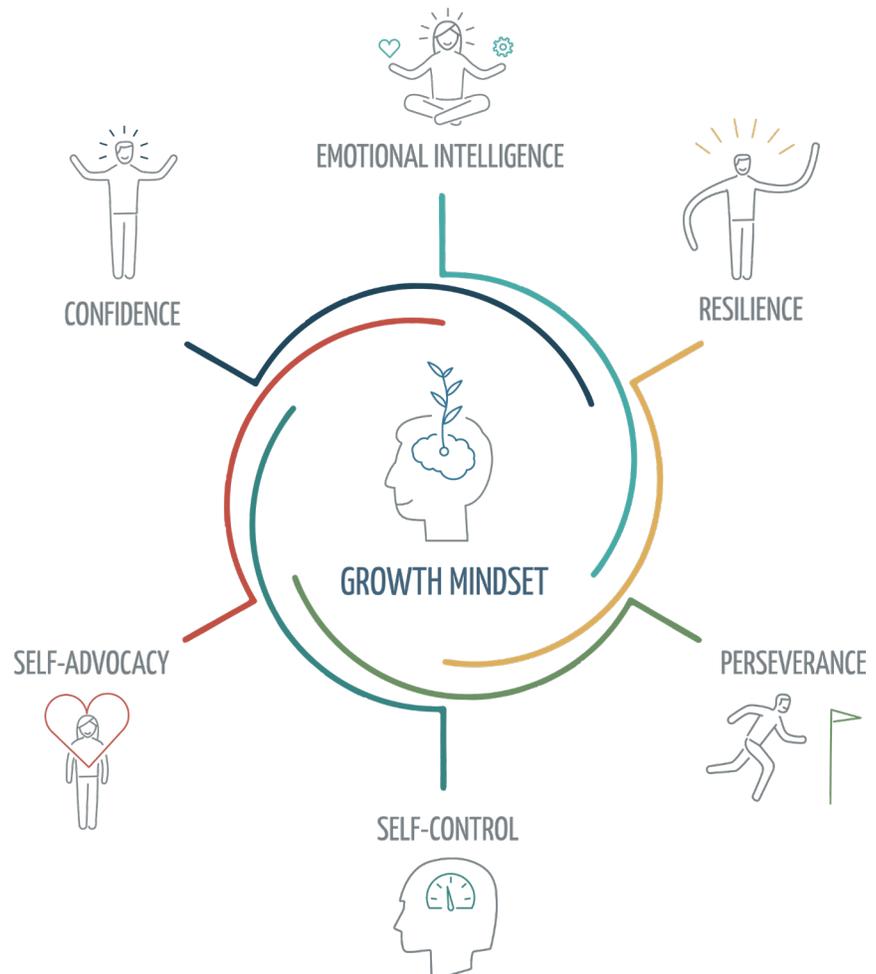


### GROWTH MINDSET

#### Growth Mindset

the belief that abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work—brains and talent are just a starting point

- » You ask a question even if you're worried it's a "dumb" question.
- » You seek feedback when you struggle with an assignment.
- » You practice patience when you're not "getting something" as quickly as you'd like.
- » You celebrate the wins of others, and learn from their mistakes.



**Figure 8.** Growth mindset is at the core of the seven non-cognitive competencies.

You will cultivate a growth mindset and believe that your abilities (and non-cognitive competencies) can be developed through effort, strategy, and hard work and that "talent and brains" are just the starting place.

“Perseverance, diligence, self discipline, determination, decency, and kindness to others—these types of traits help students adapt to their environment, deal with setbacks, overcome frustrations, relate to others, and enjoy being with them. Students who are not determined to make things work, who get easily frustrated and who have a difficult time taking responsibility for their own happiness, are more likely to drop out of school than those who exhibit the opposite characteristics.”

Robert Massa,  
Senior Vice President  
for Enrollment and Institutional Planning  
at Drew University

## The re:MIND Methodology

Our goal is to provide a strategy that enables you to grow in your belief in yourself, and in your mastery of the big seven non-cognitive competencies. We engineered the re:MIND process to help you discover your unique capabilities that will be the cornerstone of your success in the face of challenges (*Figure 9*). In the chapters to come, you will first learn to understand the importance of exploring who you are now and who you are becoming as a critical component of your student success. You will also learn to recognize the unwelcome influence of self-doubt and how it can shape your beliefs in who you are. From there, you will explore each of the steps that lead to creating your game plan for successfully navigating the various challenges of school and life. These steps include

### 1. **Recognizing Problem-Saturated Stories and Identifying Problems**

Throughout the course, we will be referring to “problems” or “problem-saturated stories.” Because re:MIND is focused on cultivating your mindset and building non-cognitive competencies, it’s important to clarify exactly what we’re referring to when we use the word “problem.” We will be focusing on **mindset problems**—things like fear, stress, avoidance, worry, anger, procrastination, blaming, and so much more. We are taking this approach because when these problems are skillfully and thoughtfully addressed, you can develop a much greater capacity to deal with **situational problems**—things like finances, academics, and other substantive barriers that serve to make the journey from enrollment to graduation extremely challenging for many. By introducing the concept of **problem-saturated stories** and how they can dominate the personal narrative, you will learn how to identify your own problem-saturated stories. This will lead to identifying the underlying issues that could keep you from successful outcomes.

### 2. **Managing Feelings and Emotions**

You will learn to identify, acknowledge, and accept the feelings and emotions that are a part of problem-saturated stories and learn how they can affect your personal narratives. You will be introduced to techniques that allow feelings to move through you and minimize the chance of emotions becoming bigger or new problems.

### 3. **Practicing Cognitive Reframing and Externalizing the Problem**

In addition to learning the concepts of neuroplasticity and cognitive reframing, you will learn how to look at problems from different perspectives and begin to practice the skill of externalizing problems. This is an important step toward understanding that the problem is the problem and that you are not the problem, as a step toward successful problem-solving.

### 4. **Identifying Exceptions and Recognizing Wins**

Through the use of narrative coaching techniques, you will learn how to find exceptions to problem-saturated stories and recognize wins even when you feel immersed in challenges. At this point, you will also apply the concept of cognitive reframing to your own personal narratives and learn how to mine your strengths.

## Mindset Problems

(internal) problems based on personal attitudes, opinions, feelings, perspectives, and belief systems

## Situational Problems

(external) problems based on situational factors outside of oneself, like finances, physical health, and academics

## Problem-Saturated Stories

when problems achieve and maintain dominance in our lives

### 5. Knowing Your “Why” and Practicing Courage in the Face of Fear

By this step you will have done a lot of work in identifying, externalizing, and understanding problems that can keep you from or make it harder for you to achieve your goals. Now you will examine your values and get connected to your personal “why,” the underlying motivation that drives you forward and inspires you to succeed. Additionally, you will gain an understanding of fear and courage that will help you fight back when challenges arise and fear threatens to dominate.

### 6. Creating Your Game Plan

You will take everything you’ve learned and create a game plan that you can apply to any existing or new problems that threaten to undermine you on your path to success. Additionally, you will be tasked with identifying your current main problem scenario and learn how to apply your game plan to face that problem head-on.

The last few chapters focus on troubleshooting challenges proactively, growing your non-cognitive skills, and revisiting your personal narrative to ensure that you have ALL the gear you need to be prepared, empowered, and successful as you embark on your college journey.

# the re:MIND PROCESS



**Figure 9.** The re:MIND process will help you discover your capabilities and overcome challenges.

## A Snapshot into Shifting Mindsets the Narrative Way: Three Student Stories

Each student is very unique. But there exist themes that many students share. These themes present themselves in the form of problems—problems that express themselves as things like doubt, overwhelm, perfectionism, guilt, and so much more. The challenge is that once a student is caught up in the grip of the problem, they also become caught up in a very compelling and often familiar but disempowered personal narrative that has shaped their mindset and their ability to navigate an obstacle (*Figure 10*).



**Figure 10.** When faced with an obstacle, students can experience doubt, overwhelm, perfectionism, and guilt.

Here are the beginnings of three different conversations where the author introduced the narrative approach to support a shift in mindset. For each of these students, the shared challenge is that the bookstore is out of the book needed to complete their first assignment. Notice how it is first necessary to support the personal narrative of the student, before attempting to problem-solve the book ordering dilemma.

### Jada's Story: A Lack of Belonging Leads to Doubt

Jada was a 27-year-old single mom who enrolled in college as a way of improving her economic circumstances for herself and her kids. She was overcome with doubt in the face of the obstacle. Her disempowered narrative was, "I have no business being a college student—what was I thinking?"

Me: "Jada, first I want you to know that your feelings are very understandable."

Jada: "I just don't see how this is going to work if I am already losing points before I even start."

Me: "I'm assuming you signed up to change your life and now here you are, hitting your first real obstacle. My intention in talking with you is to make it so that you can stay on track to change your life, and there is a route forward, if you're willing to let me shift our focus. Can I get your permission to do this?"

Jada: "Um, okay.... But I don't have much time and this needs to get resolved."

- Me: "I understand. I am going to dive right in. Share with me a typical morning—meaning, what is involved in just getting yourself and your children out the door?"
- Jada: "I am not sure where you are going with this, but yeah, it's hard. I get up at 5 a.m., make the kids' lunches, and pack their bags for daycare. I then get ready myself, wake the kids up, get them breakfast, dressed, and we're out the door so that I can make it to work on time."
- Me: "That is a lot. What level of organization and effort does all of this take?"
- Jada: "I have to stay very organized and it's hard every day."
- Me: "Jada, here's why I am asking about your morning: so much of what you do and how you do it every morning makes you uniquely prepared to be a student in many ways. You are already practicing many of the life management skills it takes other students some time to develop. Does that make any sense?"
- Jada: "Sort of, but I am not sure I am totally following you...."
- Me: "Well, let me ask you another question: when you think about other moms doing the same thing, what words would you use to describe them?"
- Jada: "I guess I would say that they love their kids.... I don't know. I guess that they're hard working?"
- Me: "Yes, that's a good start. What about disciplined, focused, and organized?"
- Jada: "For sure."
- Me: "Great. I also hear that they, like you, don't sweat the small stuff."
- Jada: "Oh, definitely!"
- Me: "So, we've landed on the fact that you're hard working, disciplined, and focused. Does that sound about right?"
- Jada: "Pretty much."
- Me: "Jada, are you starting to figure out why I am asking you these questions?"
- Jada: "I think I am starting to."
- Me: "Good. What you demonstrate—every single day—is a capacity to stay the course, even when life is hard, because of those personal qualities."
- Jada: "I see where you're going."
- Me: "Where do you see me going?"
- Jada: "I might be able to handle this being a student stuff more than I give myself credit for. Yes, this book-ordering nonsense is aggravating, but I have dealt with harder, so let's figure out a plan."

## Raquel's Story: A Desire for Perfection Leads to Overwhelm

Raquel was 18 years old and enrolled in college right after high school. She always performed well academically and was actively involved in sports. Her parents played a very active role in her life and did as much as they could to shield her from stress because they did not like to see her anxious. Raquel's disempowered narrative was, "When there is an obstacle, I don't trust my ability to manage it, which makes me very anxious."

- Me: "Raquel, first I want you to know that I can see how frustrating this situation is for you."
- Raquel: "I don't think you understand. There is an assignment due that requires the reading material. The last thing I need right now is to start the term having already lost points!"
- Me: "I am aware of that. My intention in talking with you is to make it so that you can stay on track and do well, but there is a route forward, if you're willing to let me shift our focus. Can I get your permission to do this?"

- Raquel: "I guess, but this is really stressing me out."
- Me: "I hear that. So, I am just going to dive right in. I hear how important it is for you to do well—that's really admirable."
- Raquel: "It is important to me. I need to do well enough to get into graduate school and cannot afford any slip-ups."
- Me: "Raquel, what I am hearing is that you are someone who is very ambitious and very driven. I see here that you're also an athlete. I know this might sound unrelated but can I ask you about that?"
- Raquel: "I am not sure what playing soccer has to with getting those books, but okay."
- Me: "Raquel are you as ambitious and driven on the field as you are academically?"
- Raquel: "Completely."
- Me: "Does that mean that you do everything perfectly and never make a mistake on the field or lose a game?"
- Raquel: "Of course not."
- Me: "And do you ever get injured, bruised, trip, or miss a shot?"
- Raquel: "Of course!"
- Me: "That's right, of course. When things don't go well in the first half of the first game of the season, is the whole season lost?"
- Raquel: "I see what you're doing; of course not."
- Me: "Right. How do you keep perspective on the soccer field?"
- Raquel: "It's part of the game and I try to learn from mistakes and use them to get more focused."
- Me: "Great. These are some serious strengths. What words would you use to describe your ability to have perspective and to bounce back when you've made a bad move?"
- Raquel: "I am just tough, and determined, and I don't spend too much time worrying about a bad shot."
- Me: "That's right. That sounds like that's just who you are on the field, yeah?"
- Raquel: "Absolutely."
- Me: "Does that part of yourself need to only exist on the field?"
- Raquel: "I guess not."
- Me: "What would it be like if you were to practice leveraging those qualities now? You manage stress and setbacks as an athlete well; I bet that could translate well to managing the stress of this situation too."
- Raquel: "I guess so, but it's still frustrating."
- Me: "It is, but now that you have some perspective on what you bring to a frustrating situation, does it help to put you in a better frame of mind to get solution-focused regarding the books?"
- Raquel: "It does."

## Mario's Story: Leaving Family Behind Leads to Guilt

Mario was a 19-year-old first-generation, low-income student who was, in large part, motivated to earn a degree as a way of bringing honor to his family and helping them economically. But he also felt guilty, like he was leaving his family behind when they needed him. His disempowered narrative was, "Who am I to abandon my family when they need me? The book thing might be a sign not to start."

- Me: "Mario, first I want you to know that I can see how challenging this situation is for you and your frustration is completely understandable."
- Mario: "It's very hard. I am worried about my family and thinking that maybe it's just a bad time to start."
- Me: "I can hear how much you care about them. Mario, my intention today is to support you in the direction that will both honor your family and support the future you want for yourself and them. To do this, I need to shift our focus in this conversation. Can I get your permission to do this?"
- Mario: "Okay."
- Me: "Mario, what I am hearing is that you are someone who holds a great deal of respect and love for his family, and a great deal of responsibility."
- Mario: "Yes, that's true. I don't want to let them down and they need me."
- Me: "Does it feel like you're straddling both worlds?"
- Mario: "Sometimes."
- Me: "Mario, who in your family is your biggest fan?"
- Mario: "I guess I'd say my mom."
- Me: "What does she see in you that is sometimes hard for you to see in yourself—maybe even something that helped you get into college in the first place?"
- Mario: "Hmm... well, she sees me as compassionate and smart. She sees me as a leader."
- Me: "How can you best honor those qualities that she so values in you?"
- Mario: "I am not sure right now. Part of being compassionate is being there for my family!"
- Me: "You are very loyal, too—that's clear to me. I hear the bind. I hear that you want to give back to them, and do whatever is in their best interest, too."
- Mario: "I do."
- Me: "Is there any part of you that sees earning a degree as a way of giving back to them? Like, with a college degree, how might you be able to express your loyalty, compassion, intelligence, and leadership even more in a way that supports them, too?"
- Mario: "Well, I know it will make my mom proud, and it will help me find a job that can really help support them in a way I can't now. I'd like my mom not to have to work so hard."
- Me: "It sounds like that vision of being able to support you mom is a big part of your motivation as a student?"
- Mario: "It's huge for me."
- Me: "How might seeing yourself through your mom's eyes help you manage this bind?"
- Mario: "She wants me to do well. I know she does, and if I do well, then I've got a better shot at helping her, too."
- Me: "This is not going to be easy, but it sounds like you just made an important discovery."
- Mario: "Okay, you're right. This isn't going to be easy, but I think it's the right direction for my family and me. So, what's the first step in taking care of this book issue?"

## All Bumps Big and Small

As you start this course, you may think, “You know what, I am feeling pretty problem free right now.” If that feels true for you, yay you! That’s fantastic and we do not want to fabricate problems just for the heck of it. But you’re human, like the rest of us, so problems will surface (even if they’re little), and we want to make sure that you are well-equipped to handle them.

The good news is that our stories are not final (as long as we’re alive). They are dynamic and always available for re-examination and updating. This is not about changing who you are, or becoming more of a positive thinker. This is about looking at who you are through a different lens: a lens that offers greater possibility, more capacity, and more **personal agency**—your ability to take action, speak up in an effective way, and influence your own life in a conscientious and assertive way by collaborating with others or taking individual action to shape your future—in the face of investing in your education and/or career when the landscape of your life both inside and outside of the classroom is demanding.

The proverbial bumps in the road are not going to suddenly disappear, but you have an opportunity to see yourself as more whole, creative, and resourceful in perhaps ways you’ve never explored before (*Figure 11*).

### Personal Agency

your ability to take action, speak up in an effective way, and influence your own life in a conscientious and assertive way by collaborating with others or taking individual action to shape your future



**Figure 11.** There will always be bumps in the road, but you have the opportunity to grow.

The reality is that, for some students, the proverbial bump is not just one mere bump. For many it’s a boulder given unjust systemic barriers (economic, social, racial, gender, academic, etc.). For others there may be less systemic barriers but barriers nonetheless as a result of difficult relationships, learning challenges, or a lack of experience, just to name a few. For all of us there may exist a bump in the road as a result of our own habits of thinking. That bump may not seem huge to others, but it can feel huge to us. It’s the metaphorical “bump” that exists between our own ears.

What if there are both a ton of bumps along your road and unexamined thinking patterns that make the route from where you are now to where you want to be difficult?

Well then, welcome! **YOU ARE NOT ALONE AND THERE IS A BETTER PATH FORWARD.**

We can’t make the bumps in the road disappear, but what we can do is build your capacity to bounce back from them.

Give yourself some credit  
for the days **you made it**  
when you thought  
you couldn't.



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