Research and Practice on Youth and Family Mental Health Interventions from a Communication Perspective

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The Escalating Global Crisis

1 in 7
Youth Affected

Adolescents worldwide experiencing mental health conditions
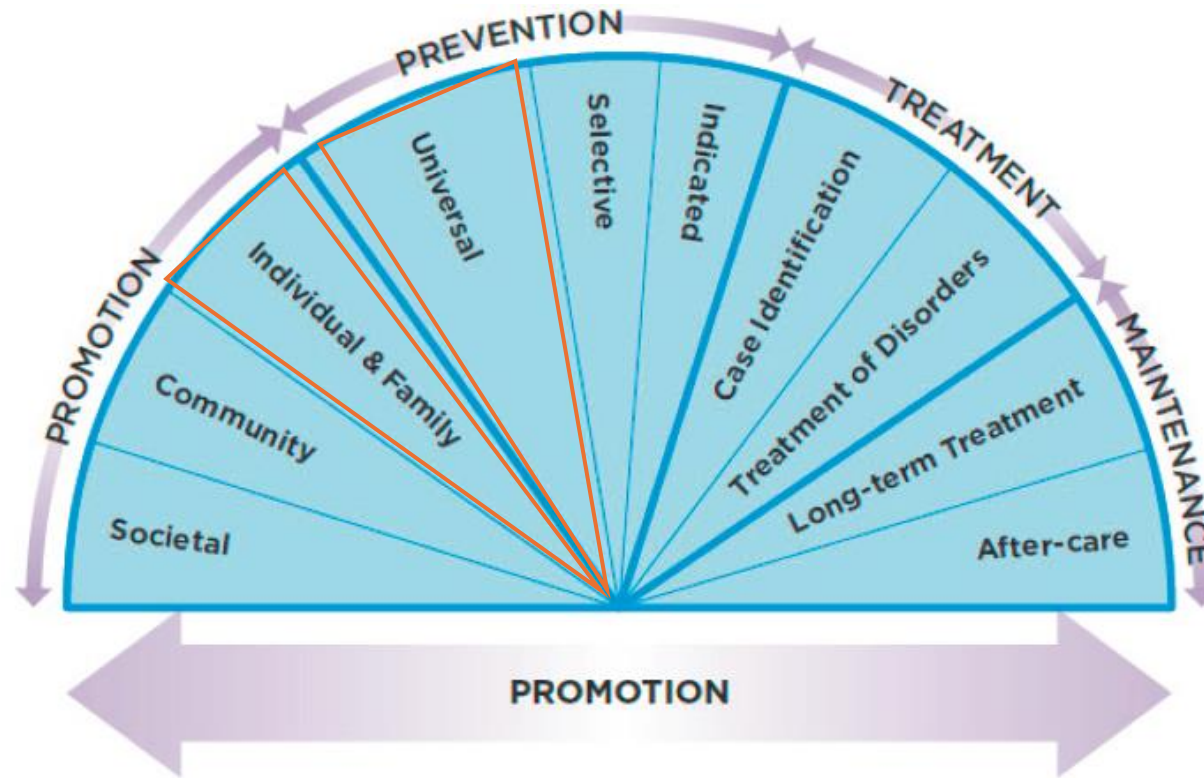
75%
Treatment Gap

Young people with mental health needs who don't receive appropriate care

50%
Early Onset

Mental health conditions that begin before age 18

Mental Health Intervention Goals

Spectrum of MEB Interventions
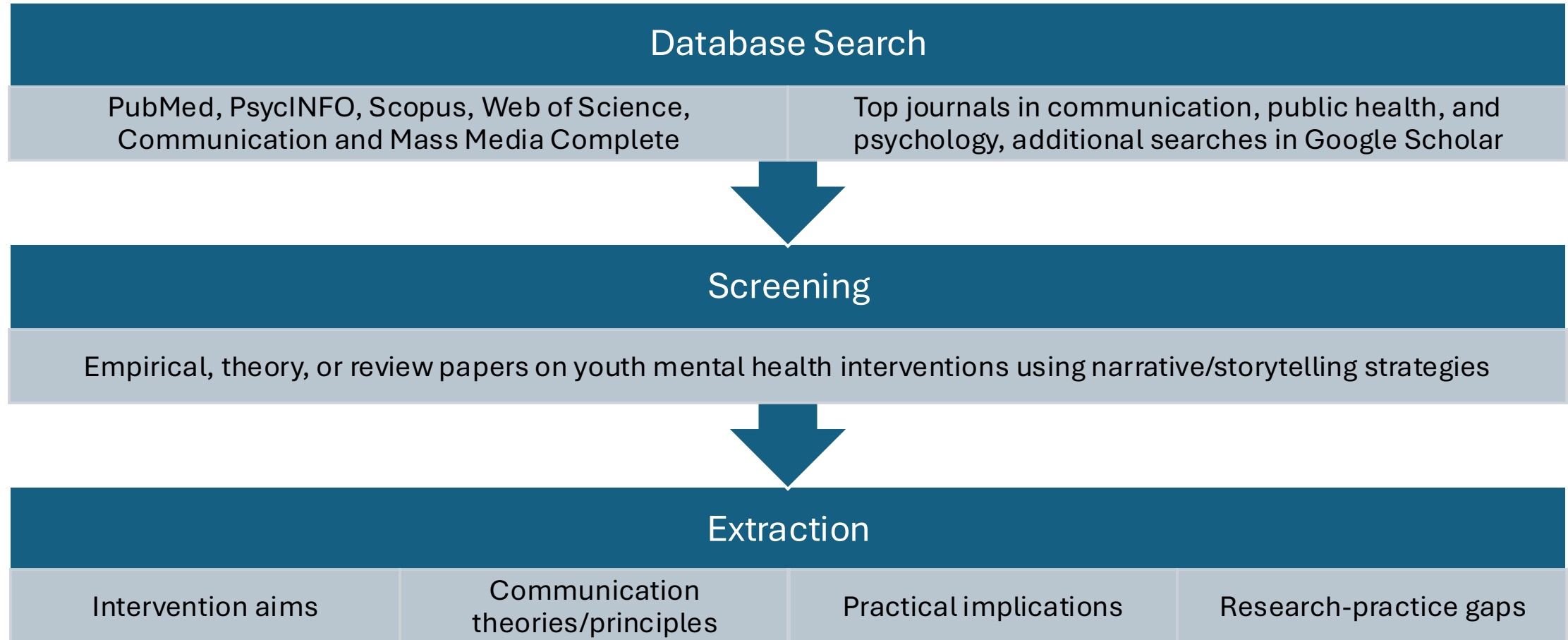National Academy Press, 2019

Story-based Mental Health Interventions

- Defined as "connected series of events" with characters, temporality, and causality

- Stories can be used as *promotional* and *therapeutic* tools

- Switch focus from people who construct their stories to broader populations

Overview

- A review communication theories and research
- A case of digital storytelling intervention
- A translational guide for mental health practices

A Translational Review

Database Search

| PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, Communication and Mass Media Complete | Top journals in communication, public health, and psychology, additional searches in Google Scholar |

Screening

Empirical, theory, or review papers on youth mental health interventions using narrative/storytelling strategies

Extraction

| Intervention aims | Communication theories/principles | Practical implications | Research-practice gaps |

The Role of Communication Research

- To inform the *design* of the content of youth mental health intervention

- To understand how people *respond to and engage with* the intervention

- To facilitate intervention *implementation* and *dissemination*

Designing intervention content

Engaging with the intervention

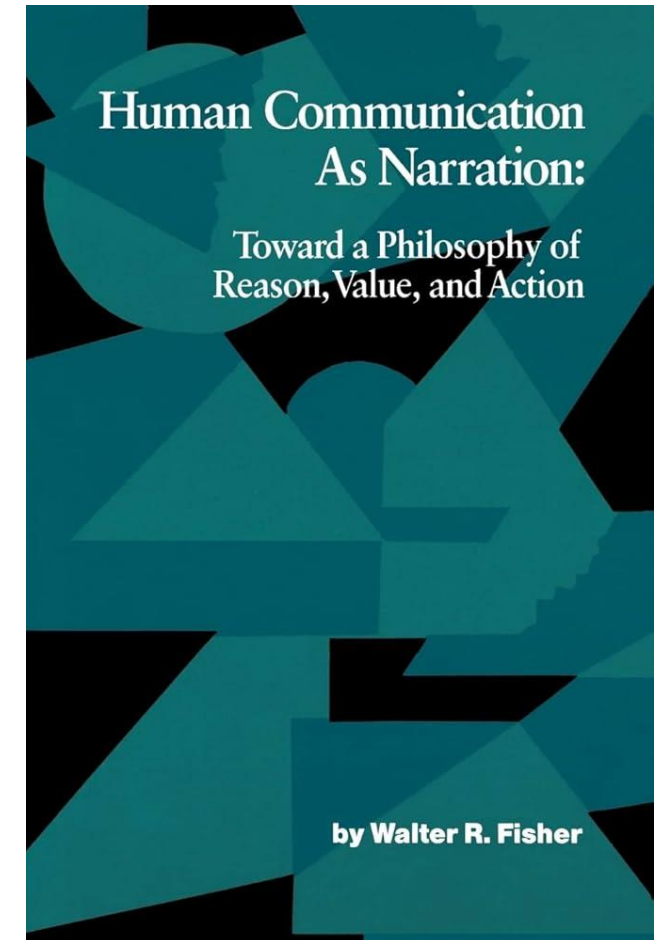Disseminating the intervention

Informing the Design

How stories are created

Narrative Paradigm

- People are storytellers
- Narrative probability—whether the story is coherent
- Narrative fidelity—whether the story rings true

Human Communication As Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action — by Walter R. Fisher

Transportation and Narrative Persuasion

- A process of being immersed into the story world
  - Focused attention
  - Emotional engagement
  - Mental imagery
- Reduce resistance to persuasion and promote story-consistent beliefs and behavioral intentions

Green, M. C., & Appel, M. (2024). Narrative transportation: How stories shape how we see ourselves and the world. In *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 70, pp. 1-82). Academic Press.

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Character-Audience Relationship

- Identification (Cohen, 2001):
  - Loss of self awareness
  - Take the perspective and goals of the protagonist
  - Experience self-other merging
- Parasocial relationship (Giles, 2002):
  - Long-term connections with the protagonist
- Dual empathy (Dill-Shackleford et al., 2016)

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

Effects of Egocentric Projection and Identification on Narrative Persuasion in Foodborne Illness Messages

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[2]Department of Communication, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, USA

This study conceptually and empirically distinguishes two mental processes in narrative processing of food safety health messages—identification with and egocentric projection onto story characters. Two studies examined the effects of narrative autobiographical accounts of contracting foodborne illness (salmonella) because of careless food preparation. Both studies consistently found that identification increased, but egocentric projection decreased audience members' behavioral intention to perform safe food handling practices, indicating that egocentric projection and identification represent unique mental processes and yield distinct persuasive outcomes. In addition, confirmatory factor analyses provided evidence that egocentric projection and identification are distinct constructs. Implications for the role of identification and egocentric projection for understanding narrative processing and for health persuasion are discussed.

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Narrative Framing

What to emphasize in the story?

- Personal or Social

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The promises and pitfalls of personalization in narratives to promote social change

Shuo Zhou and Jeff Niederdeppe

Vivien Shuo Zhou

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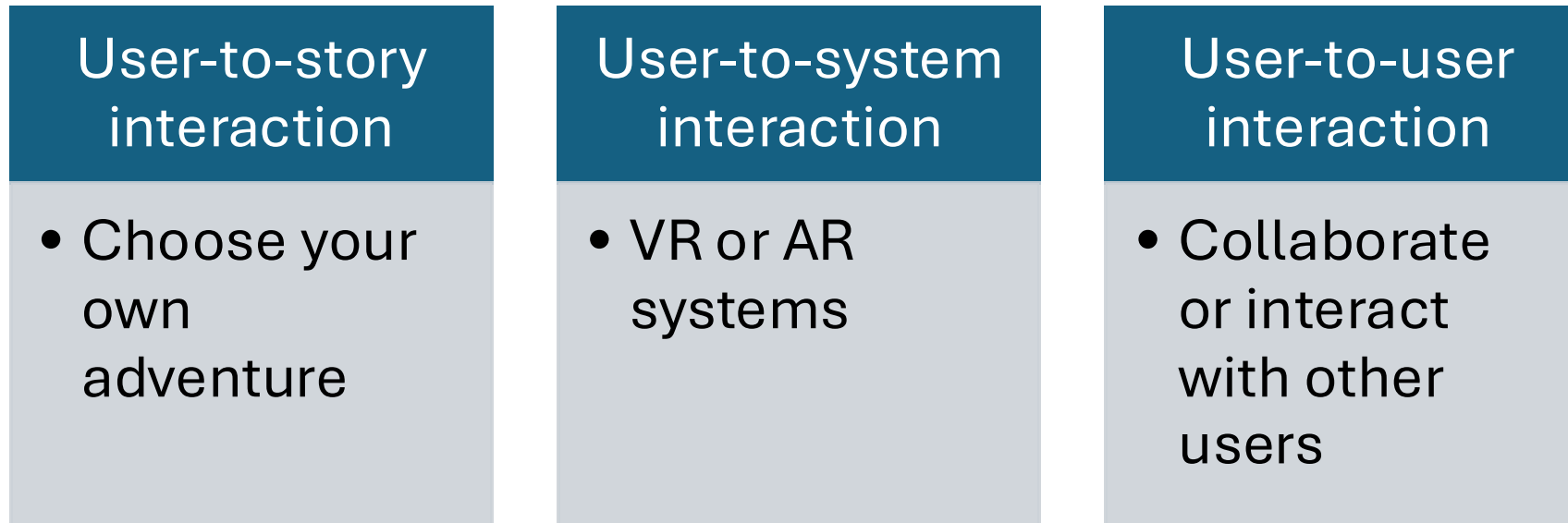
Narrative Framing

What to emphasize in the story?

- Ongoing vs. Completed recovery process

- Recovery narratives are diverse, complicated, and may include unresolved issues

- Open-ended, non-linear narratives that emphasize ongoing transformation may be more authentic and beneficial (Llewellyn-Beardsley et al., 2019)

Informing Intervention Engagement

How people process and respond to the story

Interactive Storytelling

User-to-story interaction	User-to-system interaction	User-to-user interaction
• Choose your own adventure	• VR or AR systems	• Collaborate or interact with other users

- Readers enjoy greater control over the narrative
- Increase engagement and enjoyment (Zhou et al, 2025)

Narrative Co-creation

- Families construct shared narratives about challenges and communal coping strategies
- Storytelling and reading as resilience building strategies
- Digital storytelling (DST) can facilitate story co-creation

Entertainment Education

- Rich, interactive stories with emotional, entertaining, and relational elements drive engagement

- Watching a live play of "People like Vince" reduced primary and middle school students' mental illness stigma

Hubley, S., Moldow, E., Robbins, C., Harper, B., Martin, C., & Zhou, S. (2020). The impact of entertainment education for social and emotional learning in elementary schools. *American Journal of Health Education, 51*(5), 299-309.

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Informing Implementation & Dissemination

How stories scale and normalize

Transmedia Narratives

- Present the same story across different media channels (print, video, audio, app, in-person)

- Different media have different affordances for meaning making

- Reduce resistance, increase exposure, reinforce the health message (Shata et al., 2025)

Social Diffusion of Stories

- Identification, realism, and emotional arousal facilitate further sharing through social and interpersonal networks (Lee et al., 2016)

- Emotional arousal of social media story posts increases user storytelling and emotional support (Zhao et al., 2024)

- Intervention-induced interpersonal discussions enhance intervention outcomes (Jeong & Bae, 2018)

Research-Practice Gaps

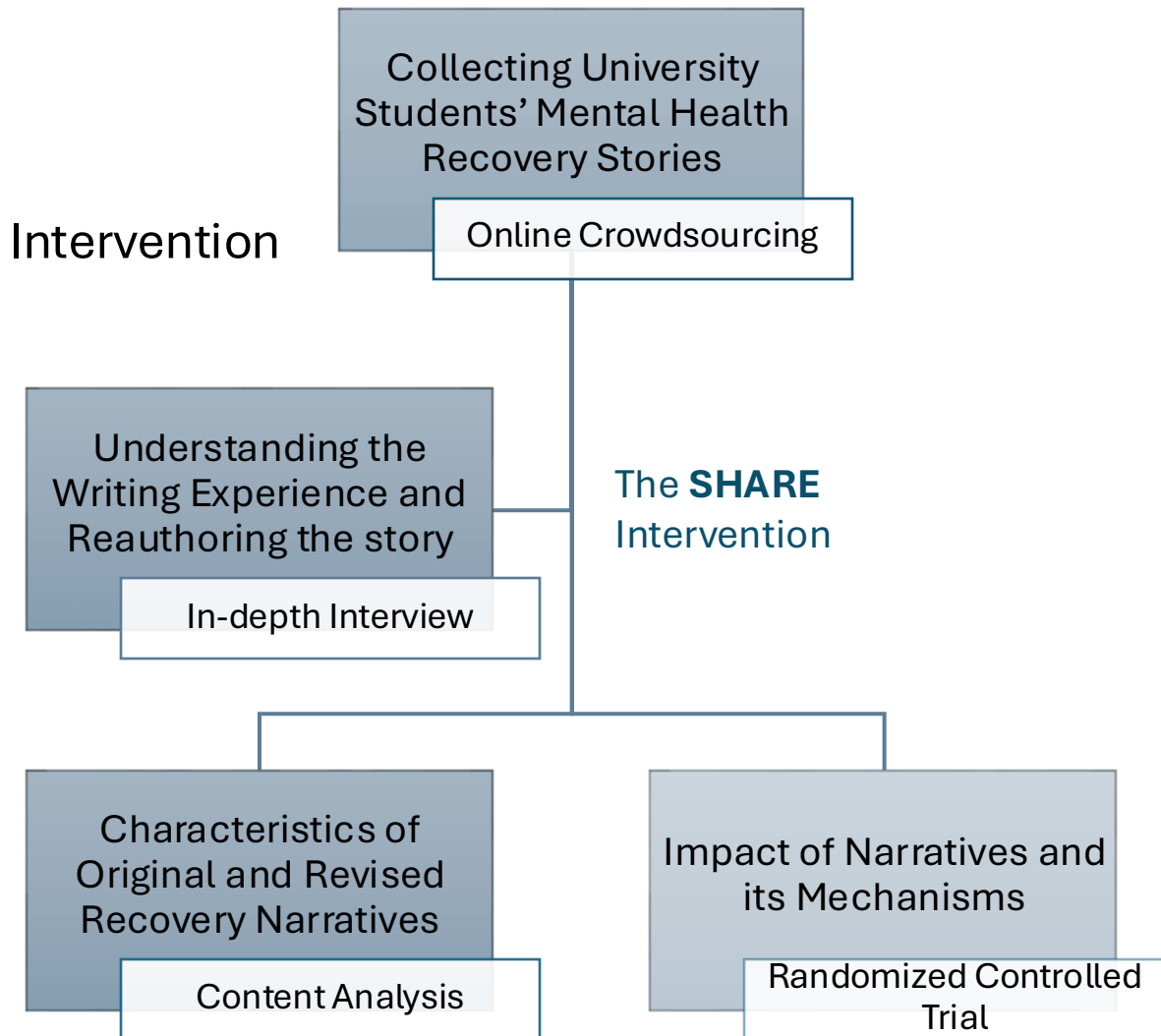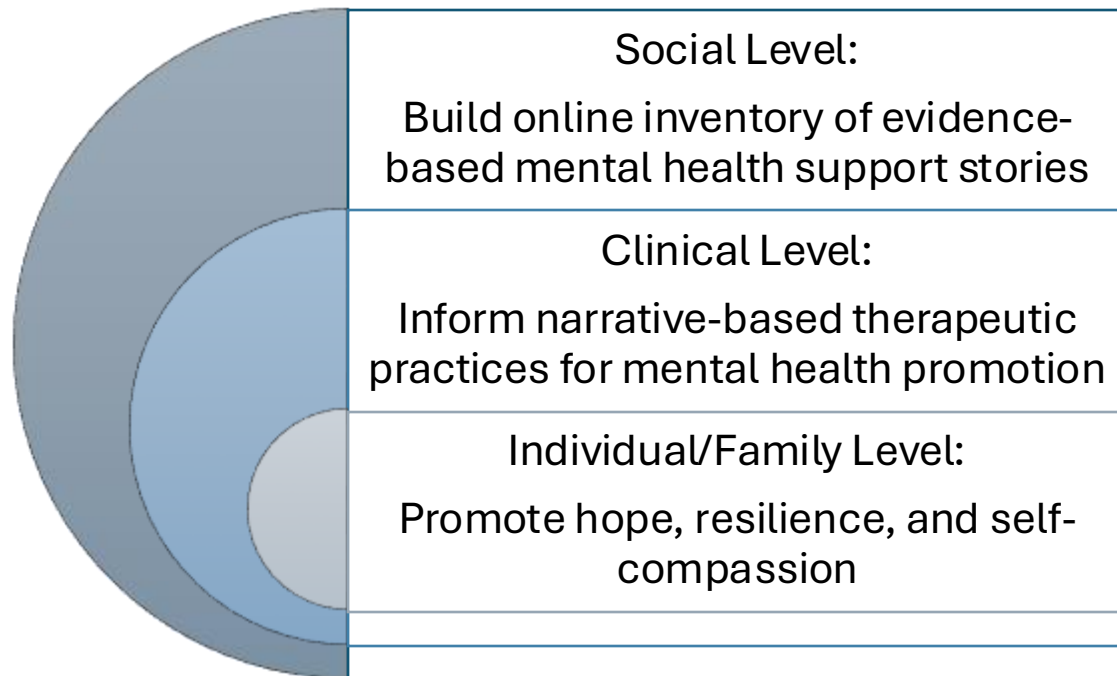- Current interventions often focus on isolated communication strategies
- Few communication theories have been applied into practices
- Hard to transform complex evidence into accessible, actionable guidelines for frontline implementation

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An Example: SHARE

Stories for Hope and Resilience Empowerment Intervention

Social Level:
Build online inventory of evidence-based mental health support stories

Clinical Level:
Inform narrative-based therapeutic practices for mental health promotion

Individual/Family Level:
Promote hope, resilience, and self-compassion

Collecting University Students' Mental Health Recovery Stories

Online Crowdsourcing

The **SHARE** Intervention

Understanding the Writing Experience and Reauthoring the story

In-depth Interview

Characteristics of Original and Revised Recovery Narratives

Content Analysis

Impact of Narratives and its Mechanisms

Randomized Controlled Trial

An Example: SHARE

- Design:
  - Based on real-world lived experiences —fidelity
  - Facilitated story refining process —coherence
  - Rate the level of narrative transportation —transportation
  - Select the stories that are representative and resonate with the target population —identification
  - Reframe the stories emphasizing ongoing transformation and solutions —framing

An Example: SHARE

- Engagement:
  - Build an online platform for people to choose topics and stories —interactive
  - Encourage commenting and creating new stories —co-creation
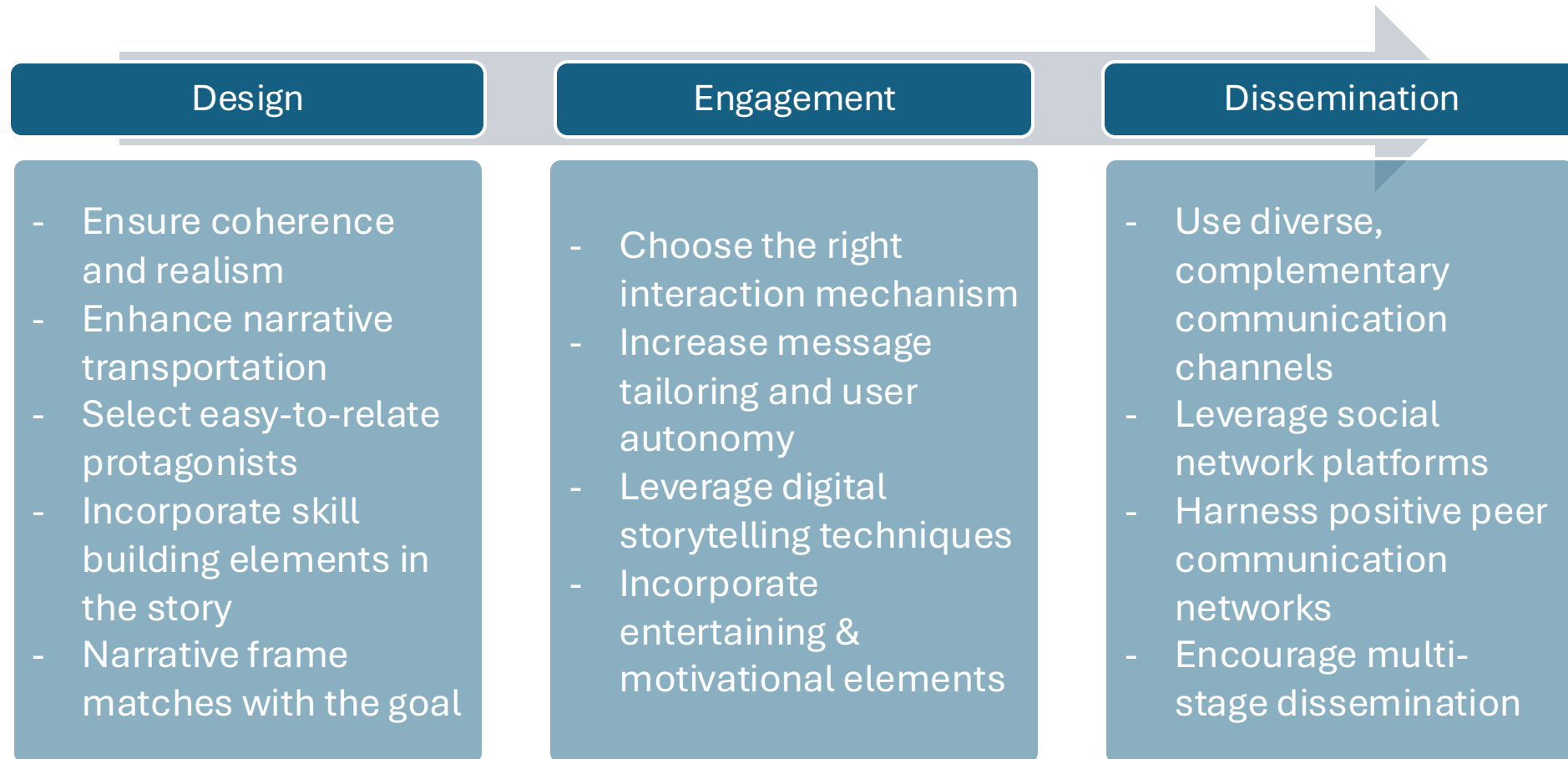 - Reward mechanisms —entertaining/motivational

An Example: SHARE

- Dissemination:
  - Multiple channels: same themes but different format and content
  - Find key opinion leaders
  - Easy sharing with peers and families

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A Communication Guide for Narrative-based Mental Health Practices

Design

- Ensure coherence and realism
- Enhance narrative transportation
- Select easy-to-relate protagonists
- Incorporate skill building elements in the story
- Narrative frame matches with the goal

Engagement

- Choose the right interaction mechanism
- Increase message tailoring and user autonomy
- Leverage digital storytelling techniques
- Incorporate entertaining & motivational elements

Dissemination

- Use diverse, complementary communication channels
- Leverage social network platforms
- Harness positive peer communication networks
- Encourage multi-stage dissemination

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Challenges and Potential Unintended Effects

Dilemma of Personalization

- Stories are highly personal
- Biased attribution and decision making
- Information cocoon

Exaggeration

- Over-sensitization
- Form unnecessarily high levels of perceived risk and benefit

Activation and Imitation

- Trigger negative emotional responses
- Risky behavior

Reactance

- Explicit intention still cause reactance
- Especially stories inconsistent with their own experience

Future Directions

Story Tailoring

Developing algorithms to customize intervention content based on needs, preferences, and background

Prevent Unintended Outcomes

Identifying and developing strategies to address unintended effects of narrative interventions

AI-Assisted Co-creation

Exploring how conversational agents might facilitate therapeutic story co-creation

Q&A

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