

A Counselee's Relationship with His Mother

Yen-Shan, Ho

Case Briefing:

One evening in the year of 2011, this particular counselee approached me and told me that he had begun to seek help from a psychiatrist. He held a tendency to linger on the rooftop of his own house and other buildings for a period of about two to three hours. At the time, even though I had already started attending philosophical counseling courses, I believed that he should be placed in better hands, I referred him to a more experienced counselor than myself, from whom I would receive regular feedback on the counselee's mental condition and counseling progress. The counselee remained with the counselor for one year before terminating the counseling sessions due to feeling dissatisfied with the methods being employed by that counselor. I was not able to be there for him as I was at the time heavily engaged academically. Knowing that I still had his confidence, I took the initiative to contact the counselee before I embarked on utilizing the training in logic-based therapy (LBT) with him.

Before the LBT workshop began, I set up a meeting with the counselee for an in-depth discussion regarding the problems he had had over the past three years.

At the end of October, 2011, the counselee began to seek medical assistance and receive medication from a psychiatric clinic where no counseling service was available. Despite the fact that the psychiatrist offered to refer him to a counselor if need be, the counselee rejected the proposal on the account of high counseling costs and disapproval from the counselee's mother, who not only managed the counselee's finances but disagreed with the counselee's claim of having poor mental health. His psychiatrist advised that he stay under medication for his problems with insomnia, and so he did. By 2014, his prescription showed that he was on two antidepressants, two anxiolytic drugs (dosage adjusted from time to time), and one sleeping pill. When the counselee felt the need to increase dosage, he would request the psychiatrist to do so and it would be done.

Problem statement and application of LBT during the first counseling session

In the first session, I began by asking why he had trouble sleeping. Having observed the counselee for a period of three years, I was repeatedly told by the counselee that he suffered from nightmares. On the day of the session, it was sunny and breezy. I took him to the Dharma Drum Mountain, one of the most influential Buddhist organizations in Chinese Buddhism in Taiwan. I chose this location intentionally; I had always felt that counseling locations should vary according to the different natures and needs of the counselee. The area around Dharma Drum Mountain had a peaceful and calming feel to it, which I believed would be conducive to the session and he could feel safe, secure and hopeful. We sat on the floor in a relaxed manner and I raised my questions for him regarding the content of his bad dreams and when they first started.

"In 2011," he began, "I started to see zombies and ghosts in my dreams, like those ones from *Resident Evil*. Sometimes I was chased by them, and other times it was the other way around. It was me chasing them. But either way, I was always alert and tense in my dreams."

I continued to ask what happened in 2011. He said, "I lost over NT\$ 1 million in that year. I was jobless. I felt pressured and not understood by friends and family, who urged me to find a job. Although I wanted to find a job with steady income - I was even willing to be a bricklayer - there was something in my heart that I just could not overcome." The counselee emphasized that he wanted more than anyone else to find a job.

To investigate whether his understanding of his own emotions came from his psychiatrist's observation or his own perception, I asked what he felt when he had trouble sleeping and were jobless. He replied, "I felt depressed and panicked. I felt powerless towards both people and things, while in my heart I really wanted to pull myself together. Two to three months before I began taking meds, I found myself spending a lot of time on rooftops, looking down at people passing by for three to four hours each time."

I followed up on this lead by asking what he felt or what went through his mind when he looked down from the rooftop. He remained silent but I was certain that he heard me. In

our second counseling session, he brought the subject up on his own and gave me his answer. "I looked at things and people down there for long enough that my body began to feel lighter and I began to enter a state of trance. That feeling is difficult to describe."

He had moved out of his own house - now leased to his friend as a storefront - and rented a house in a harbor front community in Danshui, Taipei. He said, "It wasn't until I moved out to Danshui that I began to understand why Mencius' mother made her famous relocations¹. By changing the environment you are surrounded, you are changing yourself, too. It's sunny today. My current room allows sunlight to come in from three directions whereas my old room has no window at all and therefore allows no sunlight. Now I can open the curtains and windows, and feel comforted. However, despite this I still feel like leaving the world. So I need to find a reason good enough for me to stay around." As he spoke, I noticed that he was in a state of loneliness, despair, helplessness, and powerlessness. He felt that he did not fit in, did not belong, and wished to get away from everything.

Perhaps it was because of the calming effect of the religious Dharma Drum Mountain, but soon the counselee began to tell me about his school years.

Counselee: Everyone I met during school - from junior high to university - said the same thing about me. They said I was nice, but weird.

Counselor: What did you feel when they said that you were weird.

Counselee: Feel? Feel what? What do you mean by that?

Counselor: When called a weirdo, some people get angry and say something like "I'm not weird. YOU are weird;" some people begin to think critically; and some become sad, feel discriminated against, etc.

Counselee: Nothing in particular. It didn't affect me.

Counselor: People called you weird throughout those years. Have you ever asked them why they thought so? What is it about you that they found strange?

¹ Here the counselee is referring to the famed Chinese legend where Mencius' mother moved their house three times - from beside a cemetery to beside a marketplace, to finally beside a school - before finding a location that she felt was suitable for her son's upbringing.

Counselee: How come I myself never thought about asking them that? I have never asked them why they thought I was weird or what it was about me that they found strange. But when everyone around you said that you were wrong and only you felt that you were right, after a while you begin to think that you were wrong and they were right after all.

Counselor: So do you think that you are weird?

Counselee: I feel that I may be a little different from others, but I don't think I'm as weird as they think.

I put away my notes. We got up for a walk and some fresh air in the mountainous area. None of us exchanged a word for a while until he broke the silence. "Why do you have the courage to come see me? Why aren't you afraid of me? Do you not think I am weird?"

I responded by saying, "Only weird people find other people weird. I don't think you are ill and I don't see you as a patient. Everyone has their own set of logic that they use to survive and live and the source of the logic varies among people. You were the top of your class back in the Mathematic Department in university and now I would like you to think with me, using your logic. I'm sure you are better than me with this."

We began to outline his irrational logic:

Rule: If people throughout high school and university say I am weird, then I must be weird.

Report: People throughout high school and university say I am weird.

Conclusion: I must be weird.

Rule: If everyone else is right, then I must be wrong.

Report: Everyone else is right and I am wrong.

Conclusion: I must be wrong.

At the end of the first session, the counselee asked, "Is that it?" I confirmed that was it.

The first session was aimed at addressing his tendency to just believe what others thought by helping him see how he was being blindly and unrealistically obedient to the views imposed on him by others, and then finding and refuting his irrational premises based on this. It was deemed necessary that he develop transcendent virtues such as courage and temperance to support the formation of metaphysical security within him that would eventually free him from his reliance on medication.

Meanwhile, I requested the counselee to document his interactions with his mother if and when he went home for a visit during holidays as comments from the counselee with regard to this area were few over the past three years. Also, there were some questions raised by me in the first session were not answered by the counselee. He needed more time to think them over and he expressed his intention to reflect on those questions before our next meeting.

To address his tendency to just believe what others thought of him, my assigned reading material for the counselee was Chapter Four of "Being Your Own Person" from the book *The New Rational Therapy: Thinking Your Way to Serenity, Success, and Profound Happiness*, the content and reflection on which was to be discussed in our second meeting.

Problem statement and application of LBT during the second counseling session

The Chinese New Year holiday happened to fall before our second session and the counselee had an opportunity to spend two days with his mother. In our first session, I had asked the counselee about his past interaction with his mother and how he felt about it but his answer did not provide much information other than the fact that there was an disagreement between the counselee and his mother. She did not think the counselee was mentally ill and did not wish for him to see a psychiatrist. His response to his mother was, "This is just what I am like right now and the psychiatrist gave me medicine for it." At the end of the first session, I did not offer any suggestions or prescribe any antidote as I intended to observe how the counselee interacted with his mother after the first session.

In the second session, I began by asking the counselee how things went when he returned to his mother's house over the Chinese New Year holiday and what other possible approaches there could be in order to address his inclination to blindly believe what others thought of him. In my opinion, this inclination was only one of the more superficial irrational fallacies that were troubling the counselee; this alone was not sufficient to cause and sustain the feeling of loneliness, helplessness, powerlessness and despair. Yet I proposed the question to him anyway because my observation of the counselee's mental and physiological conditions over the past three years convinced me that a gradual approach to identify his core irrational fallacy would be more appropriate in this particular case.

As we entered the main course of the session, we began addressing his issues with nightmares.

About sleep, he deduced the following:

Rule: When I have nightmares, I can't sleep.

Report: I have nightmares.

Conclusion: So I can't sleep.

The pattern was later revised by the counselee as follows:

Rule: Because I have nightmares, I don't think I am asleep.

Report: I have nightmares now.

Conclusion: I don't think I am asleep.

I inquired what he thought the cause of the nightmares might be, such as watching horror movies, thinking too much before going to bed or any other potential reasons.

Counselee: I used to watch horror movies but that was a long time ago. I don't think too much just before going to bed. I think too much all the time. My mother is not a witch. She is a very important person to me. In fact, she is one of the most important people in my life.

The counselee proceeded to talk about the girl he used to like and his mother.

Counselee: In 2011, in addition to losing over one million dollars, there was also something else that I could not get over.

Counselor: Do you mean the time when you liked a girl and she didn't like you back? (When he started taking medication in 2011, he told me that he had had romantic feelings for a girl that year.)

Counselee: Yes. I saw her in a crowd and she was the only thing I could see. We started off pretty nicely. We had some interactions, but then it seemed like she started to avoid me. I could only keep my feelings inside and I felt extremely powerless.

Counselor: Did you try to ask her why she stopped talking to you?

Counselee: No. My mind was occupied by questions like why it turned out like this and why it ended before anything could even start.

Counselor: What did you feel when you saw her?

Counselee: Before I opened my mouth to speak to her, I would feel something pressed against my chest and my body would go stiff. When I spoke to her, I stammered and I couldn't move or act normally.

As I came to sense that he was characterized by a high level of sensitivity and receptivity towards an extensive range of things and beings, I pressed forward with further questions in other areas; however, when I asked what people thought about him, he was unable to provide a detailed description of his feelings as he did earlier when speaking of the girl that he admired. Having noticed that he seemed accepting with people calling him a 'weirdo', I continued to ask that if there was anything that he could not accept and would cause instant emotional reactions. His answer was his mother. He elaborated by saying that he could not put up with the comments from his mother, who thought he was a perfectly normal person, questioned the psychiatric help he was receiving, and believed that he was in fact responsible for making a mess of himself.

Counselor: Why do you care so much about what your mother says or does?

Counselee: I wish that she could recognize what I do as right and stop finding fault with me.

Counselor: What do you mean by finding fault with you? Can you give me an

example?

Counselee: I entered the Mathematics Department as an honorary student with an early offer while other students still had to take a national standard examination for the government to place them according to their test scores. I was the top student in many subjects within the Department. But soon I got bored with all that and decided to drop out. Later on, someone I cared for very much encouraged me to finish this degree so I went back to university but only to get kicked out this time. My mother is a school teacher² and she thinks that my failure embarrasses her. But what better jobs can I get at the age of 40 even with a bachelor's degree? I would still be receiving the lowest wage of NT\$22,000. My financial condition is quite different from others. I don't have much money, but I don't lack money, either. My father left me with three houses and I can live my life on the rent I receive from the houses. Not long ago, I made NT\$250,000 in two weeks in the stock market, but only to lose NT\$300,000 later on in one day. And that wasn't my own money. It was my mother's. My mother is also the source of my income. She thinks that I am her possession, she is always right and I should listen to her. I was okay with all that before, but when I started to suffer from insomnia in 2011, I just couldn't take it anymore. I will try to hang in there but I really wish that she could be more supportive.

Major Premise Rule 2: If I don't have my mother's recognition and support then my mother must be right.

Bridging Premise: If my mother is right, then I am wrong in my choices and I don't deserve to live anymore.

Major Premise Rule 1: Therefore, If I don't have my mother's recognition and support then I am wrong in my choices and I don't deserve to live anymore.

Report: I don't have my mother's recognition and support---she thinks I am her

² Unlike in some cultures, teachers in the Chinese culture have a very high status. They are seen as knowledgeable and wise. Therefore the counselee's mother, being a respected school teacher, thinks that her son should have performed better so as not to disgrace her.

possession; she is always right, and I must listen to her.

Conclusion: I am wrong in my choices and I don't deserve to live anymore.

This chain of syllogisms was revised by the counselee as follows:

Major Premise Rule 2: If I don't have the recognition and support from *people I love* then they must be right.

Bridging Premise: If the people I love are right, then I am wrong in my choices and I don't deserve to live anymore

Major Premise Rule 1: Therefore, If I don't have the recognition and support from people I love then I am wrong in my choices and I don't deserve to live anymore.

Report: I don't have the recognition and support from people I love.

Conclusion: I am wrong in my choices and I don't deserve to live anymore.

My counselee disagreed with the term I originally chose, which was "my mother". He thought it would be more appropriate to replace it with "people I care about" but only to disagree with it later. I proposed "people I love" and he concurred that this term was the most fitting.

Based on the counselee's description, I began to analyze and confirm the personality types of the counselee and his mother. To clearly show him, I demonstrated the personality types in accordance with the three centers: head center, heart center and gut center. The counselee was surprised to see that the thinking pattern, behavior, and words I demonstrated were almost a mirror reflection of his mother. He used to think that his mother did not understand him and was not willing to listen to him, but now with their personality types clarified, he finally understood that their differences in ways of communication and perspective arose from their varying personality features. At the end of this discussion on his irrational premises, I asked him, "If the people you love told you to kill yourself, would you do it?" He repeated my question as if he had never thought about it and he understood the answer to the question clearly conflicted with his premises. However, he was certain about his irrational premise that if he did not gain recognition and support from the people he loved, then he did not deserve to live. I was taken aback by the similarity between the reasoning of his irrational premise

and one of the deductive patterns described in lesson three of the workshop. As I found the counselee's premise particularly irrational to me, I repeatedly inquired if the stated premise corresponded to what he had in mind. His answer was firm. I asked whether he found the premise to be strange in any way or form. He contended that it made perfect sense and there was nothing strange about his premise.

Before the second session commenced, the counselee had expressed his hesitation to appear at some places for fear of the possibility of meeting people he might know.

Counselor: What is it that you are afraid of, greeting from others, pressure brought by their greetings, or something else?

Counselee: I am not sure. My body fights against the thought of it. Maybe a little bit of everything you just said.

The second session ended with the themes about his fear, his conflicting double standards for being himself, and his openness to others remaining yet to be discussed as I became extremely exhausted after three and a half hours of listening and counseling. The philosophical antidote that I offered him this time included the famed concept from Immanuel Kant that denoted the right of all human beings to common dignity and respect. Meanwhile, to strengthen his willpower, I requested that he read chapter two "Confronting Evil, Growing Stronger" in the book *The New Rational Therapy: thinking your way to serenity, success, and profound happiness* to address his habit of disastrous reasoning.

1. What have you learned from this experience?

I have gained a deeper understanding on logic-based therapy(LBT) after attending the LBT Primary Certificate Intensive Workshop in Logic-Based Therapy. At the induction reading session before the commencement of the workshop, I obtained a general idea of what LBT was about and some key concepts in LBT, such as cardinal fallacies, transcendent virtues and syllogism; and during the workshop, the in-depth discussions and practices allowed me to gain a more holistic view of this therapy which features a set of systemic steps aimed at identifying the key emotional reasoning pattern of the

client as well as their cardinal fallacies and transcendent virtues. Syllogistic logic was also used and practiced during the workshop. In fact, identifying major premises is more challenging in the Chinese culture where the common syntax for logic reasoning is "A so B" rather than "If A then B". (Eg. "My parents did this, so I do the same to my children.") In other words, the major premise is deeply and culturally imbedded in our beliefs and values and therefore much harder to excavate. This makes the task of finding the fallacies even more strenuous. This was something that I needed to conquer when first practicing syllogistic deduction and I told myself that this workshop was a perfect opportunity to "upgrade" my old thinking habit.

Fortunately, through continuous practice of the five steps with classmates, I was able to adapt myself to this new thinking habit by learning to identify and refute irrational premises. In terms of the selection of antidotes, as a beginner, I tended to go by the book. I would present to my counselee with a number of options that I had chosen from the textbook and give him the freedom to select from the options the philosopher of his own liking.

Actual counseling was very different from simulated counseling in the classroom setting. First of all, as a first-timer conducting counseling based on the five steps, it was likely that I appeared inexperienced. Furthermore, the help and reminders that we often obtain in a simulated environment from our practice partner were clearly unattainable in a real counseling session. After the first session with my counselee, I was able to identify his emotions, fallacies and the virtues that corresponded to his needs within the situation; however, I stumbled at syllogistic reasoning. I turned to Dr. Bernard Li for help who so kindly and generously offered explanations and examples for me to take home for further deliberation and practice. Thanks to his help and guidance, I was then able to proceed with the logic deduction for my counselee. At the second session with my counselee, I presented my deduction of his irrational premise. I was surprised that my deduction was an accurate description of his thoughts and I was even more surprised that he found nothing wrong with this irrational premise – nothing fallacious about it at all. This was definitely a remarkable progress for me.

Next, I guided the counselee to understand his own cognitive status. I urged him to

develop the virtues required by giving him self esteem and confidence. I was particularly encouraged when I knew that the counselee was able to fall asleep without medication after having these two sessions with me. Due to the deadline of the submission of this paper and the meeting arrangement with the counselee, I am forced to end my documentation of my interactions with the counselee after two sessions. However, as far as I am concerned, this experience has inspired me to pursue further in the area of LBT and has led me to realize the significance of a counselor's life experience based on which the counselor is able to observe and pick up more subtle signals and information to understand the client on a deeper level in terms of their physiological and mental conditions. Moreover, I also came to a strong realization of just how important the strengthening of willpower is, not only for the counselee but also for the counselor.

2. What will you do differently in your next counseling session? How?

I certainly will do things differently in my next counseling session. It seems to me that every session is a new beginning. Identifying irrational premises using syllogistic logic may be more challenging in certain cases. As a beginner in the use of LBT, the five steps are a very helpful tool, which I will continue to utilize for an array of different questions and various types of clients until I am experienced enough to know how to improvise adequately.

When I first tried to deduce an irrational premise for my counselee using syllogism, my questions were neither flexible nor fluent. I was then advised by Professor Bernard Li to adopt such methods as Socratic dialogue, which opened my eyes to the many possible ways that the counselor may use to ease into LBT with the counselee. I decided to work on this particular area. Yet as I set out to seek more ways to be incorporated into the use of LBT, I came to realize that I had a resource shortage in terms of methods and ideas. In addition, I also needed more hands-on experience with more counsees as the number of cases currently available for comparison and reference remains scarce. Generally speaking, I am still at a stage where the principle of "doing it by the book" takes lead and I am not that confident in pinpointing just exactly what I will do differently in the coming sessions. However, as a near-time objective, my expectation

for progress lies in the finding of more diversified and effective options and directions for the prescription of antidotes and training methods of willpower.

3. What has the counselee learned?

My counselee told me that he found LBT to be a very special approach. He even posted on Facebook, saying that he could now fall asleep without the help of medicine. In our counseling sessions, there were many questions that I raised to which he had never given thought. Trained as a mathematician with a fairly high level of logic ability, he found it strange that he had never thought of these questions that I proposed and they led him to ponder that there might be something "off" in his argument but he did not know what it was that was wrong until I showed him his irrational premises using syllogistic reasoning.

Sometime after our first session, he told me that he went home and deliberated on the questions that he did not have answers to on the spot. This enabled him to independently read the book *The New Rational Therapy: thinking your way to serenity, success, and profound happiness* and come back to discuss with me. Also, the counselee was impressed with result of LBT. With his mother's disbelief in his mental illness and his reliance on psychiatric medication, the counselee was able to recognize that he was in fact not mentally disturbed and that he was simply suffering from conflicting logic and cognitive inconsistency after just two counseling sessions following the five reasoning steps. Through the use of LBT and the practice of syllogistic deduction, he is now equipped with the ability to identify subtle things that he used to overlook. He has successfully rid himself of his irrational premise that drove him to believe that everyone else was right and he was wrong.