

## **Nadia's Anxiety about Choosing a Dissertation Topic**

Practicum Paper for Partial Satisfaction of Requirements  
for Primary Certification in Logic-Based Therapy (LBT)

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Nadia is an acquaintance of mine whom I met for an aperitif at a local bar.

As soon as we met she started talking about her personal issues explaining that her actual problem is choosing a subject for her final dissertation on Italian literature.

I invited her for dinner at my place the following day to further discuss her problem. I also explained that I am studying LBT.

During our meeting I asked her to focus on her anxiety about her studies. The following is part of that dialog:

Nadia: I must choose a subject for my dissertation and I don't know what to do.

Stefania: Why? Surely you can pick a book or author you like.

Nadia: As soon as I like a book or an author I then suddenly feel anxious about choosing it for my dissertation.

Stefania: You are saying that when you think about your final dissertation you became immediately anxious even while reading something you actually are enjoying?

Nadia: Yes. First I'm reading something that I really like. But If I think about using it for my dissertation, then I'm blocked. I feel as though I'm not capable of doing it.

Stefania: So, thinking about your dissertation takes away the pleasure you have while reading something you are enjoying?

Nadia: Yes, correct.

Stefania: What exactly is worrying you or what are you scared of? Is it simply discussing the dissertation or the fact that you haven't yet made a decision on what to write?

Nadia: Presenting what I wish to bring for discussion. I'm not sure if I'll be able to write something, or something valuable. I think the professor will think it's not enough or is something that has already been discussed. I'm worried that I can't make it and I feel stupid. It's too difficult. I was very bad last spring when I had to prepare for my final exams. I got stressed and I didn't sleep. I also had bouts of anger.

The following are some of the emotions I identified during our conversation.

Emotion: Anxiety

Emotional Object (O) (What Nadia is anxious *about*) = not being able to choose a topic that I will be able to write on that the professor will approve.

Rating (R) (how Nadia is evaluating her emotional Object) = being a stupid/worthless person.

Emotional Reasoning:

(Rule) If O the R

(Report) O

(Conclusion) Therefore R

(Rule) If I don't choose a topic that I will be able to write on that the professor will approve, then I will prove myself to be a stupid/unworthy person.

(Report) I won't be able to choose a topic that I will be able to write on that the professor will approve.

(Conclusion) Therefore, I will prove myself to be a stupid/unworthy person.

The blockage that Nadia is experiencing is due to her low self-confidence or Self-Damnation. She has anxiety about not being able to perform her best and also a fear of being disapproved of by others.

One of main fallacies I identified was Demanding Perfection. Nadia is deducing her low self-confidence from a higher order rule (Rule\*) that demands perfection:

(Rule\*) I must have the approval of my professor.

(Bridging Premise) If I must have the approval of my professor, the if I don't choose a topic that I will be able to write on that he approves, then I will prove myself to be a stupid/unworthy person.

Therefore (Rule) If I don't choose a topic that I will be able to write on that the professor will approve, then I will prove myself to be a stupid/unworthy person.

(Report) I won't be able to choose a topic that I will be able to write on that the professor will approve.

(Conclusion) Therefore I will prove myself to be a stupid/unworthy person.

The obstacle of anxiousness can be very dangerous for our enrichment and growth in life. She is telling herself that she can't manage to make a choice; therefore she is paralyzed with irrational anxiousness about something that will happen—in particular, not getting the professor's approval. Primarily she is scared of disappointment and of being consequently judged badly from significant others. I told her that her self-worth cannot depend on the approval of the professor. It's irrational thinking that our self-worth depends on others.

Refutation of Rule\*: If the teacher doesn't like my proposal it is not something I can control.

(Rule) If I try my best but the teacher does not like it, then I will not demand perfection or try to control what's not in my power to control.

(Report) I will try my best but the teacher may not like it.

(Conclusion) Therefore, I will refuse to demand perfection and accept I'm a human and I'm fallible.

I suggested that she try to enjoy her studies and to substitute "I must write" with "I want to write." I also suggested that she read a novel by Luigi Pirandello, who is a psychological, deep introspective Italian writer, and then start to write down her understanding and feelings about the story. I mentioned a story of his called "The Train has Whistled." It's the story of an ordinary man who one day had a sudden change in his life that allowed him to lead a better life.

Nadia's feelings of self-worthlessness were also reflected in the following excerpts from our dialogue:

- I feel empty during self-reflection
- I don't like myself but I can't change
- I'm weak and I understand (deserve) what others do to me (pitifulness)
- I've been hurt and I'll always be hurt
- I can't change my parents therefore I'll always have anger towards them
- I'll always be insecure because my parents always punished and criticized me

She thinks she is weak and therefore it is impossible for her to reach happiness and serenity. She feels the gravity of her childhood and she believes she will never escape from that feeling. Therefore, she thinks she will always be depressed.

We analyzed how letting go of the past and bad experiences is an important step. We can't change the past but we can change and transform our emotions towards past events which lead to a better understanding of our present. The past was real but it is not real anymore. The only reality is the present. As Sartre said, if you don't try, you'll be a disappointed dream.

Emotional Reasoning:

(Rule) If I can't change my childhood, I'll always be traumatized and I'm justified to be upset.

(Report) I can't change my childhood.

(Conclusion) Therefore, I'll always be traumatized and I'm justified to be upset.

Refutation of above Report: I can't change my past but I deserve a better future.

She said she also experiences emptiness, or a sense that she's been living in a vacuum since childhood. Because of this feeling of emptiness and loneliness, she searches obsessively for emotional stimulation to find meaning in living. Relationships are an escape from her loneliness because they allow her to forget her sadness, anger and insecurity. Relationships also have been a disaster; the last boyfriend left suddenly and she was very hurt by that.

Making the past or others responsible for our unhappiness or insecurity is to not accept responsibility for our own decisions. Instead we should analyze ourselves and make a change.

### **Practicing LBT**

Applying LBT to the existential and philosophical dialog is an important and helpful direction. When we start to acknowledge our fallacies we begin a discovery of ourselves and how we can free ourselves.

The 5 steps of LBT (to identify the main emotion, find the emotional reasoning, refute irrational premises, construct philosophical antidotes, and exercise our willpower to make constructive changes in our lives) are very helpful when emotions get expressed during a dialog.

When the emotion is negative we can discover the emotional reasoning of our feelings and behavior. Refuting the emotional reasoning helps us to find out the holes in our logical argumentation.

Once we can see a fallacy we can explore a number of antidotes and choose which is appropriate to that thought or emotion.

I enjoyed the meeting with Nadia as it gave me an opportunity to understand her irrational premises.

What I would change next time is to work on managing the discussion better so the counselee talks less about past events. I realized how past events are less important in solving the present problems.

Nadia was quite pleased with the counseling I provided. She said that she could trust me and she was feeling better after our discussion. I'm happy I could help her through LBT.