

Using LBT to Balance a Counselor's Grief About An Adult Son Who Rejects Her

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Mia Massaro

Mia Massaro has been providing comprehensive counseling and case management services to individuals, families, and groups since 2004. She received her master's in clinical counseling in 2012 and has since been practicing philosophy in private and group sessions. Mia established Giati Counseling in 2014 to advance applied philosophy and help individuals address fundamental problems of living through the development of reasoning and critical-thinking skills. She is also the founder and facilitator of Fauquier Philosophy Forum based in northern Virginia. Website: www.giaticounseling.com Email Address: mia@giaticounseling.com

Having read all the materials for this course, I feel I finally have a handle on Logic-Based Therapy. But test-driving its principles in a trial session proved to be trickier than anticipated. My chosen subject for this project was Terry, a 66-year-old female whose identified problem was her strained and imbalanced relationship with her 44-year-old son, Richard. Though an openly compassionate and affectionate person, Terry acknowledged at the onset of our high-starch and low-budget dinner that she did not have an emotional attachment to Richard when he was born, citing a toxic and distracting marriage as the primary cause of her struggle to bond with her son. Yet Terry has since developed an intense maternal drive, fueled largely by unresolved guilt and an overpowering need to compensate for the past. In 2008, Richard estranged himself from Terry and continually rebuffs her attempts to establish a relationship. By her own admission, Terry is "obsessed" with the goal of reconciliation despite (or perhaps because of) chronic rejection and unreciprocated feelings, ardently operating on the premise "If Richard would agree to see me, *then* I would be happy."

Rules and Reports

Terry reports that she feels intense loss, a sense of abandonment, and persistent pangs of emptiness as a result of Richard's detachment, mournfully stating "There is something very important missing from my life." Thus, I would identify Terry's principal emotion as grief, which would be constructed in the following way:

Emotion (E): Grief

Intentional Object (O): The absence of Richard from Terry's life

Rating (R): Terry's perception that her life is empty and meaningless due to Richard's absence

Furthering this construct, Terry's emotional reasoning goes as follows:

Rule: "If I can't establish a relationship with my son, then my life is incomplete."

Report: "I can't establish a relationship with my son."

Conclusion: "My life is incomplete."

Terry has sacrificed a considerable portion of her life to the pursuit of being a model mom, still building a bridge even as her son burns it. With such a poor return on her investment, she seems to waste her energy on a lost cause while neglecting other possible sources of fulfillment. Having known Terry for several years, I cannot imagine her failing to impress and inspire anyone she encounters. Her uncommon warmth and wisdom belie her admissions of interpersonal struggles and unrequited love. In spite of her rickety relationship with Richard, Terry has so much to offer and so many avenues to self-actualization. Hence, her faulty thinking can be refuted on multiple levels.

Refutations and Antidotes

I started the refutation process by providing some perspective. Attempting to reframe the situation, I asked Terry to envision the worst possible scenario, to which she swiftly replied “never having a relationship with Richard.” I then probed those few occasions in which Terry has met with Richard since the rift in 2008, trying to assess the quality of their time together. Not surprisingly, Terry conceded that the visits woefully fall short of expectation, providing a description that stirred up memories of those abysmal get-togethers between my divorced parents, unfailingly rife with spontaneous verbal combustions, overt denunciations of lifestyles, and rabid resentment over offenses committed thirty years earlier. John Bradshaw, call me when you need an anecdote.

Admitting that it is actually more difficult to be with Richard than without him, Terry reconsidered her greatest fear and recognized that a nonexistent relationship with her son is not in fact the worst fate. Subjecting oneself to disdain and disfavor is certainly not conducive to growth or healing, while stretches of solitude allow one the opportunity to reflect, reassess, and redirect attention to more worthwhile pursuits. This was the prescriptive rule for Terry—to reclaim her life and independently complete it.

In reviewing the Cardinal Fallacies that fall under LBT theory, Terry appears especially prone to demanding perfection (insisting on a type of relationship that cannot be), dutiful worrying (obsessively disturbing herself over her son’s estrangement), and oversimplifying reality (believing the inclusion of her son will complete her life). As I exposed these reasoning errors, Terry labored to justify her continued one-way relationship, providing additional rationales for her unrewarded efforts. When asked why she cannot simply halt communication and focus on an independent existence, she replied “I’d feel like I’m giving up.” Eager to pounce on this self-punitive statement, I somewhat brusquely asked “Why would you say *giving up* instead of *moving on*?” After the longest lull in our conversation, she tentatively remarked “I don’t know. I can’t answer that.” At that point we hit either an impasse or a breakthrough, as I was still unsure of Terry’s aims but encouraged by her thoughtful pauses.

Continuing to refute Terry’s irrational premise, I also focused on her gifts and strengths, irrespective of the maternal role. Perhaps a habit of counseling or an attempt to switch gears before Terry un-friends me on Facebook, I thought this was an important step in balancing the emotional books. It was also an opportunity to provide counter-examples to Terry’s belief that she must, as she aptly put it, “keep spinning the wheels in the mud” until she wins over her son. Terry is not incomplete without Richard, or anyone else for that matter. She is not a half-done human being whose intrinsic worth hinges on parental skills and social successes; rather, she is a force in her own right and already accomplished in many respects. Her extraordinary humanity, intelligence, and capacity for introspection elevate her to an

intimidating status. And her passions—her yens for living creatively, roaming the country, and spreading life-affirming messages—speak to her potential, ambition, and sense of adventure. Terry has an enviable life with or without her son.

I then proceeded to expose a double-standard in Terry's rule, reinforcing the adage that relationships are a two-way street. Over-focused on her responsibilities, Terry excuses Richard's behaviors while questioning her own, tormenting herself with thoughts that she "did something wrong." It appears that Terry does not expect others to abide by the moral codes she has so dutifully upheld. Furthermore, her assumption that she has failed at parenthood lacks sufficient evidence, as she reports to have a supportive and satisfying relationship with her younger son, Steven.

Proposed solutions were met with cynicism, as Terry was adamant in her belief that "there is no antidote to the problem." She simply refused to accept the possibility that Richard will never want a relationship with her, despite the fact that he has aggressively avoided her for years. I therefore implemented some standard Cognitive Behavior Therapy, suggesting to Terry that she consider the benefits of simply pulling back. This was an easier exercise for her, as the answer seemed more obvious: "I would have so much more time and energy to focus on myself." Eureka. Seemingly aware that shifting her attention to her own life would not be an act of selfishness but an act of self-salvation, Terry let out a liberating sigh that signified an acceptance of the situation and a rekindled interest in all those shelved goals and deferred dreams. It was then that the ideas flowed: "Return to the present" whenever she catches herself thinking about the past. Writing down her feelings once a week and putting them away, abstaining from any thoughts about Richard until the next scheduled journaling time. Creating a specific plan for realizing her aspirations of traveling, relocating, and starting afresh. "I've always wanted to work at Yosemite," she says with a sanguine smile and a half-eaten Dove Bar. Maybe it was the chocolate rush, but Terry seemed raring to exercise her willpower and don a ranger hat.

Reflections

My evening with Terry and trial attempt at LBT yielded some useful insights into the ways in which the mind functions—and malfunctions. I realized to what extent people will punish and torture themselves over pointlessly elaborated problems for which there seem to be plain and practical solutions. Granted, I cannot say I understand what Terry is going through. Having no children and no time to dwell on all the possible ways to appease them, I'm in no position to deem Terry's behavior dysfunctional, or even irrational. To her, motherhood is monumental. And her reasoning, however faulty, aligns with this *raison d'être*. Terry has respectable priorities, but her tenacity could use some tempering. Allowing herself to be fallible, flexible, and free of guilt would help to lessen the weight of her unattainable standards and self-imposed ultimatums.

Regrettably, I lack the memory cells to recall which thinker said what, so I did not get around to refuting Terry's rule with a few philosophical zingers. To boot, my GI tract was whimpering from a combination of black beans and ice cream, curtailing the session. Thus, I would come more prepared next time with some serviceable quotes and a bottle of Mylanta. In retrospect, I would offer Terry the following insights:

"He is a wise man who does not grieve for the things which he has not, but rejoices for those which he has."

–Epictetus

“Only people who are capable of loving strongly can also suffer great sorrow, but this same necessity of loving serves to counteract their grief and heals them.”

–Tolstoy

“Happiness is beneficial for the body, but it is grief that develops the powers of the mind.”

–Proust

Of course, Terry will need ongoing encouragement in relinquishing the restrictive rule that has governed her life for so long, but I feel our session at least got her thinking about the merits of accepting her loss and filling the void in other ways. Terry’s situation is not unique; it demonstrates the command of emotions and the internal battles that alter life trajectories. Who cannot relate to the struggle of containing passions for the purpose of minimizing pain? Perhaps logic is not the antithesis of emotion but a symbiotic force that gives rise to more powerful and competitive feelings, revealing an inseparable and cyclical give-and-take relationship between duties and desires that must be conscientiously observed and carefully negotiated. This is what I gleaned from my session with Terry—and why I continue to believe that balance is elemental to sanity. Black beans and ice cream being a notable exception.