

Philosophical Antidotes for Annie's Anger

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

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Logic-Based Therapy provides a step-by-step procedure for working through one's emotional reasoning with the aim of overcoming problematic emotional and behavioral tendencies. At the Institute of Critical Thinking, I had the wonderful opportunity to complete a practicum as part of the training for a primary certificate in Logic-Based Therapy (LBT). I counselled Annie, a thirty-seven year old mother of five children, ages ten and under, who also helps run a family business and attends classes¹. I will describe the LBT process that I applied to Annie's counseling session, followed by reflective comments about the experience.

In LBT, the first step is to identify the emotional reasoning that the counselee is demonstrating, but there are preliminary steps before this is possible. First, the counselor must actively listen to the counselee. At the beginning of our session, Annie was reluctant to talk about herself, but I listened as she talked about each of her five children, as well as her husband and mother. Listening in an open way provided numerous clues about Annie's life. Sometimes her children were overwhelming, and she often wanted to control their unpredictable yet overall unproblematic behavior. Her husband provides his own set of challenges, as does her mother. Allowing Annie to talk about her family allowed me to understand the context of her life. Finally, I asked her what exactly brought her to therapy and how she was feeling about her life.

Annie said that she often feels angry. I asked about the source of her anger. She said that she wants all of her children, as well as herself, to always behave properly. She wants to always be invited back to social functions and such and never wants to be at the center of any negative attention. She admitted that she feels more compassion for strangers than for her own family, which made her feel guilty. I asked what she thought would happen if she could not control every moment of her children's lives. She responded that there would be chaos, and she does not want chaos. She wants full control, yet she admitted that she is unable to fully control her own responsibilities at present; as a result, her school work sometimes suffers. She recounted a story where she could have asked for an extension on a paper without penalty but chose not to do so because it might cast her in a negative light. The consequence was a less than satisfactory grade,

¹ The counselee's name has been changed in order to protect her identity.

which of course made her feel much worse. As a result of so much stress, pressure, and the desire to maintain perfect control, Annie suffers from migraines.

Learning so much about Annie provided the ingredients for formulating her emotional reasoning. According to LBT, emotional reasoning has the following formula: Emotion = (Object of emotion + Rating of the object). Her primary problematic emotion is anger. One object of her emotion is her children not being perfectly controlled at all times; another object of hers is self-directed: she is not perfect all of the time. Her *rating* is that the lack of perfection is a very negative thing, which coincides with feeling angry, overwhelmed, and chaotic. I then formulated two relevant arguments and showed them to Annie; she agreed that the arguments are accurate renditions of her implicit reasoning. The first one is in the form of *modus ponens*:

Premise 1: If I do not keep myself and my children under perfect control at all times, then there will be anger and chaos.

Premise 2: I do not keep myself and my children under perfect control at all times.

Conclusion: Therefore, there will be (or there is) anger and chaos.

The second argument is a bit simpler and is in the form of *disjunctive syllogism*:

Premise 1: (I must control everything.) OR (There will be chaos, and my family will fall apart.)

Premise 2: It is impossible that I must (or can) control everything.

Conclusion: Therefore, there will be chaos, and my family will fall apart.

With the creation of the arguments above as well as the initial emotional reasoning, the first step of the process is complete. The next step is to identify the fallacy or fallacies at play in Annie's reasoning. LBT entails a list of cardinal fallacies². There are two main cardinal fallacies at play in Annie's reasoning, including *demanding perfection* and *awfulizing*. *Demanding perfection* is self-explanatory: it is the desire for flawlessness. Annie's desire for perfection in herself and her children is very apparent. *Awfulizing* happens when someone engages in catastrophic reasoning, thinking that just because one little thing goes wrong, everything is awful or that many more awful things will soon happen. It is "reasoning from bad to *worst*" (Cohen 2007, p. 6). Annie did this when one of her children would make a noise in public; she assumed that everyone would judge her and that the child would end up screaming to make things even worse. She *awfulized* even further by thinking that her family would fall apart. *Demanding perfection* and *awfulizing* can go hand-in-hand.

The third step in the LBT process is to *refute the fallacy*. Refuting the fallacy includes explaining how the cardinal fallacy is unreasonable in the counselee's situation. Refutation may also involve directly refuting a premise in an argument. First, I will discuss the refutation of premises. My approach with the *modus ponens* argument above was to refute Premise 1 by suggesting that it is *false* that if she does not keep herself and her children under perfect control at all times that there will necessarily be anger and chaos. Indeed, she may choose another response, informed by the guiding virtues that I will discuss in step four. Premise 1 of the

² See Cohen 2007, pgs. 6-7

disjunctive syllogism was refuted by deeming it a *false dichotomy*. It is false that there are only two options: controlling everything or experiencing total family chaos. Annie tended not to see other options.

Directly refuting the cardinal fallacies may be done by showing how they shed light on the problematic reasoning. Regarding *demanding perfection*, it is simply impossible to expect oneself or anyone else to be perfect in an imperfect world, yet that is what Annie was expecting. When expectations were not met, she became angry. As far as *awfulizing* goes, I refuted that fallacy in terms of a slippery slope. She started by worrying about an extra noise from her child, which led to her worry that the child would make more and louder noises, which led to her imagining that they would be at the center of negativity and embarrassment, which further led to imagining total chaos and family turmoil. She admitted that, in reality, it was only a small sound, and it never became awful in any ways that she imagined.

Step four is to identify guiding virtues to help counter the cardinal fallacies. The guiding virtue for *demanding perfection* is *metaphysical security*, and the guiding virtue for *awfulizing* is *courage*. *Metaphysical security* is "the ability to accept imperfections in reality," and it entails being both realistic and hopeful (ibid, p. 17). It is not realistic to demand perfection of oneself or of one's children. Instead, we may accept imperfect behavior, have compassion, and work to maintain internal stability. *Courage* entails overcoming fears in reasonable ways; a courageous person "tends to learn from and derive positive value from his mistakes and is willing to take reasonable risks to live well" (ibid).

Step five is where philosophical antidotes enter the picture, and they relate to the guiding virtues. Regarding feeling secure, Aristotle plays a therapeutic role. He emphasizes being one's own best friend and striving for a habit of excellence³. Annie can be a better friend to herself by being more compassionate towards herself. A habit of excellence involves naturally wavering from the balanced state. We should avoid extremes, such as *awfulizing*, which is extreme in its slippery slope tendency, or *demanding perfection*, which is an extreme and unrealistic ideal. Regarding the false dichotomy in Annie's reasoning, Heidegger is of assistance via Being and Time, in which he emphasizes the recognition of our infinite possibilities. By being open to the profound "possibilities of human existence" as well as recognizing "our ownmost potentiality-of-being," we may feel more assured that we need not be stuck in a limited two choice scenario, such as being either perfect or chaotic (Heidegger 1953, 362 and 266).

Step six is the application of the philosophical antidotes into one's life. Bibliotherapy is a common recommendation; it entails suggestions for reading materials. For Annie, I recommended two books by Thich Nhat Hahn: *Anger* and *Miracle of Mindfulness*. I also recommend works by Aristotle and Heidegger; however, I think it would be best to present summaries of their particular ideas, which I certainly have in tow. I also suggested that, for the sake of both *metaphysical security* and *courage*, she allow herself to *relax* and find enjoyment. She enjoys tennis, so perhaps she could play tennis with her children. Meditation was also suggested. I taught her a simple body scan meditation, which involves relaxing the body from the top of the head to the bottoms of the feet. I taught her a chakra meditation, which includes a list of affirmative phrases that correspond to each of the seven main chakras, or areas of

³ *Nicomachean Ethics*

concentrated energy within the body⁴. The red, root chakra affirmation is key for her: "I am safe and healthy in the root of my being," as well as the yellow chakra, just above the navel: "I deserve to trust." Finally, in *demanding perfection* for herself, she engages in negative self-talk, but she should cultivate compassion for herself and instead mindfully use more positive self-talk. The chakra phrases can help with that, as can insights gleaned from *Healing Emotions: Conversations with the Dalai Lama on Mindfulness, Emotions, and Health*.

I learned a great deal from the counseling experience. I learned the value of patient and open listening. I learned how to formulate more open questions. I learned that counseling is something that I would love to do on a professional basis. I am pleased with how the counseling session went, so I am not sure if I would do anything differently next time. Perhaps I can relax more within, even if the session does not begin as initially planned. Flexibility is important, and sticking to a script is not necessary. I should have tissues available, and it would be a good idea to formulate a list of open-ended questions as a quick resource.

I believe that Annie learned a lot about herself by talking about her emotional tendencies and also by considering what her implicit reasoning is like. She expressed gratitude for having practical resources to help her gain a greater sense of inner security. We connected in a genuine way, and that was good for both of us. I am grateful for the Directors of the Institute of Critical Thinking for organizing such a valuable workshop, and I look forward to starting a Logic Based Therapy practice in the near future.

Works Cited

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⁴ I study and practice a variety of meditation methods. I learned chakra affirmation phrases from various sources. One helpful chakra-related website is this one: <http://www.crystalspringshealing.com/holistic-healing-chakra-healing.htm>