

An LBT Session with a Client Going Through a Breakup

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Abstract: In this practicum, Imi Lo helps her client who is confronting a recent breakup to key into her emotional reasoning, and to pinpoint a suppressed higher-order premise that has, for most of her adult life, stifled her potential for authentic happiness.

For this practicum, I worked with Ann using the LBT model. Ann is a 35-year-old female based in Los Angeles. She has been going through an emotional crisis triggered by a recent breakup. Feeling depressed and unmotivated, Ann has not been able to perform at work or maintain her day to day activities. She would go for hours without eating or sleeping, cry for long hours, and neglect self-care.

From her personal history, cultural influence, as well as pressure from her family, Ann has learned to base her self-worth on the status of her romantic partners as well as her own physical appearance. Being a partner of a renown law firm, Ann is successful in her own right. However, she does not feel pride or a sense of fulfillment through her achievements. Instead, she fixates on men's approval of her. She was convinced that her partner left her because she was 'not beautiful enough', and was considering liposuction or facial surgery.

Ann's issues with romantic relationships predate the recent breakdown. From the time she was a teenager, she has struggled with ups and downs in her relationships. She seeks constant reassurance

from her partners and tends to act in a demanding and unreasonable manner. The irony is her need for her partner's ongoing reassurance results in controlling behavior that sabotages her relationships.

At first glance, Ann's situation might involve more than a few potential fallacy syndromes. To become clear about the nature of her struggle, I was keen to explore a few potentially applicable Emotional Reasoning Templates (ERT) with her.¹ I pointed out that as her philosophical counselor, I am not the 'expert' of her psychology but a 'co-pilot' on a journey of exploration. Therefore, I would need her input in helping me get to the root of her challenges. I explained to her what ERTs are, their role in logic-based therapy, and how they may benefit our work. Being a lawyer, Ann very quickly understood the nature of ERT and was keen to start. We verbally constructed the ERTs through a series of back-and-forth questioning and probing. As we met online, we both wrote the ERTs down so they could be visually presented in front of us. With regard to the potential fallacies in her thinking, we came up with the following ERTs:

Perfectionism

- 1) I must never fail at my relationship.
- 2) If my boyfriend broke up with me, it means I am not perfect/ beautiful enough, and I am a failure.
- 3) My boyfriend broke up with me.
- 4) Therefore, I am not perfect/ beautiful enough, and I am a failure.

The need for approval

- 1) I must always have the approval of a successful partner.
- 2) Therefore, if they do not choose to be with me, then I'd be worthless.
- 3) My ex-boyfriend did not choose to be with me.
- 3.) Therefore, I'm worthless.

Demand for a perfect world

- 1) Bad things must never happen in my relationship.
- 2) Therefore, when relationships break down, life would not be worth living.

3) My relationship has broken down.

4) Therefore, life is not worth living.

Demand for control

1) I must always maintain control over my relationships.

2) Therefore, if I lost control over my relationship, then I must not be good enough as a person.

3) My relationship has broken down.

4) Therefore, I'm not good enough as a person.

Low Frustration Tolerance

1) My relationship must always be the way I want them to be.

2) Therefore, if it is not the way I want it to be, then I can't stand it and cannot live my life as usual.

3) My relationship is not what I want it to be.

4) I can't stand it, and I cannot live my life as usual.

After we have listed all the ERTs, Ann agreed that all of them seemed relevant. However, I was keen to identify a fallacy that is central to her life. Ann said the need for approval resonated with her the most. From when she was a little girl, her upbringing has conditioned her to live according to external metrics— performance, achievements, wealth and beauty. While on some level she was aware that this tendency created suffering, she was convinced that the approval of 'certain people' is essential to life. My guess is that this is related to her having highly critical parents and that she felt she was never able to please them, though such analysis would be outside of the scope of this session.

We tried to apply the 'Need for Approval" ERT to other situations such as work and home. It turned out when we fill in the blanks with her boss, or her father, she could still agree with the statements:

The need for approval

1) I must always have the approval of _____ (my friend, my boss, my father, society).

2) Therefore, if they do not approve of me, then I'd be worthless.

3) ____ does not approve of me

4.) Therefore, I'm worthless.

Once we had chosen to work on this fallacy, we tried to identifying some guiding virtues to replace it. Authenticity and self-respect seemed to be the most relevant in this context. In terms of authenticity, I encouraged Ann to start identifying a set of values that she respected, and see how by taking actions to honour those values she could internalize a sense of being a fundamentally good person, without needing excessive external recognitions.

I spoke with Ann about Kant's philosophy of respect. Central to Kant's ethical theory is the idea that people are fundamentally worthy. To be a person is to have worth that is unlike that of any other kind of being. Furthermore, Kant has commented on the meaninglessness of an 'objective' beauty standard. In his work, *Critique of Judgment*, Kant argues that trying to come up with a universal criterion of the beautiful, in order to prove that someone or something is beautiful, is fruitless. "Beauty," he says, "is not a concept of the object"² Instead, it is in one's mind.

Ann is not familiar with Kant's philosophy, but she has a love for nature. I suggested that every tree and flower in the world, while looking different, is fundamentally worthy and beautiful on its own. Just because one tree is taller than the other doesn't make the shorter tree worthless, and a rose is not inherently more worthy than a dandelion. Ann felt this analogy resonated with her.

Finally, we worked on a plan to apply the new philosophy to her life. It was difficult for Ann to overturn a longstanding pattern completely, but she was able to visualize a scenario where she curbed the urges to message her ex-boyfriend. Instead of seeking his validation of her worthiness, she would remind herself that she is just like a flower in her garden, with her inherent self-worth. Ann agreed that she would create a visual cue—the picture of a flower—at her desktop as a reminder.

I am glad I was able to put all that I have learned in the last few weeks in LBT into action. I have enjoyed the structured, step-by-step approach offered by the framework, and its power to make conscious what might previously be suppressed.

The exercise of laying out all the potential ERTs was helpful, but also time-consuming. With experience and intuition, I suspect the core premises could be drawn out in the earlier part of the process. As for Ann, she has benefitted from being able to make explicit what she has always deep down known. Living solely for her appearance and the recognition of others was how she had operated for a long time, but having it laid down on paper told a different story. For the first time, she was able to acknowledge the absurdity of her premise, and that it was neither functional nor sustainable. While change may not happen overnight, she was beginning to question her old way of being and open doors to new possibilities.

¹ In LBT, an Emotional Reasoning Template is a formal structure utilizing variables that serve as place holders, from which a client's emotional reasoning can be generated by filling in the variables with details about the client's intentional objects and their ratings.

² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 2nd ed. (revised), trans. J. H. Bernard, D.D., D.C.L. (London: Macmillan & Co., 2014). Retrieved from <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/48433/48433-h/48433-h.htm>