

A Life in Balance: Using LBT to Overcome a Student's Self-Defeating Reasoning

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Abstract: This paper applies the six-step method of LBT in helping a student address an academic problem stemming from the demand for her mother's approval.

INTRODUCTION

According to Logic-Based Therapy (LBT) we deduce self-defeating emotional and behavioral conclusions from irrational premises. As a result we become unhappy, disillusioned and life seems hard.

Logic-based Therapy tries to overcome such self-defeating reasoning by providing a philosophical framework for working through 'bad reasoning' and making constructive changes in our thinking, feeling, and acting. LBT accomplishes this through a six step program.

This paper attempts to show how I've used LBT to help a counselee overcome a problem of living. In doing so I'll describe and discuss my application of the six steps of LBT that I applied to the counseling session, followed by reflective comments about the experience.

A SESSION WITH SIGRID

I. Identifying the emotional reasoning

For the trial session, I chose Sigrid¹ as my counselee. Sigrid is studying biomedicine and sought counsel because she "*felt stupid, alienated and like one big failure*".

The first step of LBT is to identify the emotional reasoning that the counselee is experiencing. To make this possible it's import to build trust, show respect, authenticity and empathy. The counselor must actively listen to the counselee and encourage the counselee to talk about themselves by asking open-ended questions.

The Session

I started the session by asking Sigrid to tell me about herself. Sigrid was shy and it took a while before she started talking about her life, as well as her family and study. I then asked her if there was anything in her present life that was troubling her. She replied that she often felt dumb and useless, and that she had considered dropping out of university.

Sigrid had been studying biomedicine for almost two years. She found it difficult and had a hard time accepting her academic achievements. For the last two years her results had been ‘*just average*’, she said. “*In High School I used to be the best in the Class - now I just feel like a big failure*”.

During the conversation, I ask about her family. Sigrid tells me that both her parents are successful doctors in each of their field of practice. I then ask her what they think about her academic achievements.

Sigrid: “*I dunno....I mean...my mother always says that I can do better. She seems disappointed*”.

Emotional and behavioral reasoning

After learning more about Sigrid, I was now able to formulate her emotional and behavioral reasoning.

Sigrid's reasoning consisted of a series of interconnected syllogisms:

1. I must have the approval of my mother
2. If I must have the approval of my mother, then if I don't get it then I'm worthless
3. So, if I don't (ever) get the approval of my mother then I'm worthless
4. If I can't get high grades then I won't (ever) get the approval of my mother
5. So, if I can't get high grades then I'm worthless.
6. I can't get high grades
7. So, I'm worthless
8. If so, then I might as well give up

According to LBT an emotion (E) can be defined by its rating (R) and its object (O), thus yielding the following formula: $E = (O + R)$.

The intentional object of Sigrid's emotion revolved around getting high grades as a mean to get approval (4). Sigrid then negatively rates the predicted consequences of not getting high grades and approval (5).

This part of her reasoning was purely hypothetical; she negatively rated a predicted outcome and thereby showed signs of anxiety (E).

Following this reasoning, Sigrid deduces the conclusion that if she cannot get high grades (and approval), then she is worthless and might as well give up.

The rating that Sigrid is worthless forms the emotional conditions for (subclinical) depression. Furthermore there's a logical connection between this emotional reasoning and Sigrid's behavioral reasoning:

In (5)—(8) Sigrid forms her behavioral reasoning. The conclusion (7) that she's worthless (a failure) prescribes the action (8)—to give up (and quit school).

I reflected the above back to Sigrid who immediately affirmed the reasoning.

II. Checking for Fallacies

The second step in LBT is to identify any Cardinal Fallacies² in the Counselee's reasoning. In order to do so, Sigrid and I began to take a closer look at her way of thinking.

Running through the aforementioned syllogisms, we identified multiple fallacies:

1. Demanding Approval

The first fallacy is a certain type of the Cardinal fallacy to *demand perfection*. It involves *demanding approval*. Sigrid goes from a preference (to get her Mother's approval) to a demand (I *must* get my Mother's approval).

2. The Demand Not to Fail

The second fallacy is closely connected to the first. It's also a certain type of *the demand for perfection*: this time *the demand not to fail*. Again Sigrid goes from a preference (to get high grades) to an implicit demand (I *must* get high grades).

3. Self-damnation

Sigrid can't achieve what she demands of herself (high grades, approval) and concludes that she's stupid and worthless. This fallacy is called 'self-damnation'.

4. Can'tstipation

Even though she doesn't explicit mention it, Sigrid commits the fallacy of '*can'tstipation*'. She feels that it is impossible to get higher grades, and deduces that

if she can't change that, then maybe she shouldn't even try. Maybe she should just quit university.

After the identification of fallacies, I asked Sigrid to choose which fallacy to address (we had limited time). Which one upset her the most?

Sigrid answered that she really had a hard time not having the approval of her mother.

III. Refuting the fallacies

The fallacies were now identified and I wanted to show Sigrid why these fallacies were irrational.

Two types of demands seemed to play a big part in Sigrid's thinking – the demand for high grades and the demand for approval - so we concentrated on refuting the fallacy of demanding perfection³:

- I asked Sigrid to give me some examples of people she looked up to; *did they live a perfect life? Had they experienced failure and disapproval?*
 - Sigrid provided several cases ranging from Einstein to John Mayer and agreed that most of them had failed at some point in their life and that their lives were nowhere near perfect.
- I then asked Sigrid to imagine a perfect world. What could we strive for? What could we improve? Wouldn't it be a boring place to live without any challenges, new discoveries etc.?
- Lastly I asked Sigrid to consider the difference between the two concepts: a preference and a 'must'.

This questioning seemed to work and Sigrid told me that she could now see 'the logic holes,' as she put it.

IV. Guiding virtue(s)

According to LBT every fallacy has a guiding virtue that counteracts it. In the case with Sigrid there were several fallacies and therefore more than one corresponding virtue.

As mentioned earlier, Sigrid and I chose to focus on the fallacy of demanding perfection. The guiding virtue for demanding perfection (and the subcategory of demanding approval), is metaphysical security.

Metaphysical security refers to the ability to accept imperfections in reality. For Sigrid that would entail the acceptance of her own fallibility and limitations as well as those of others (her mother for instance).

V. *Adopting a philosophy*

In LBT philosophical ideas are used to support and promote the guiding virtues. In the case with Sigrid we looked for ideas that could help her accept imperfections in reality and was consistent with other beliefs in her belief system.

First we consulted St. Augustine and his notion of the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Earth. This didn't quite resonate with Sigrid, so we looked elsewhere.

After some searching, we turned to Spinoza and talked about how ideas of perfection sometimes turn a preference to a demand for what must be.

In the present case the demand for high grades and approval was based on Sigrid's own idea of perfection. It was not reality but consisted of her own subjective preference. So in order to be more realistic Sigrid should try to avoid making demands in terms of 'musts' and stick to preferences.

Epictetus was mentioned as well during the conversation and we spend some time ruminating about the sentence "*Some things are under our control, while others are not under our control.*"

VI. *Applying the Philosophy*

To make cognitive and behavioral changes the philosophical ideas must be applied in real life. The last step of LBT is to 'walk the talk' and make a plan for action.

I asked Sigrid to imagine some of the challenging situations she found herself in—for instance a situation with a failed exam and a disapproving mother. I then asked Sigrid to think and feel as one would if one were actually in that situation—and then change her thinking by applying the aforementioned antidotal line of reasoning.

As a homework assignment I wanted Sigrid to practice visualizing disappointment and imperfections daily for a week. To this I added a bibliography of selected passages from Spinoza⁴ and Epictetus⁵.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The trial session with Sigrid was very rewarding and a great learning experience.

It takes practice to master LBT and I learned that the more comfortable I felt with the different aspects of LBT, the easier it was to make a natural transition from one step to another – to make the counseling 'flow' so to speak.

At first I found it hard to 'tune in' to the right use of language in relation to my counselee. I used a lot of academic notions (about logic, syllogisms and philosophy in general) that didn't seem to resonate with Sigrid. I therefore switch it up and took a different approach using everyday language. This seemed to do the trick.

Time went by fast and I would have wished that we had spent more time investigating the antidotal reasoning as well as the application of different philosophies. This is such an important part of LBT and ought to play a central role in a counseling session. The next time I will try to manage my time better.

During the session I noticed how Sigrid slowly opened up and relaxed. I believe she gained some valuable insights into her self-destructive reasoning as well as her emotions and assumptions. It was an eye-opener for her and suddenly her body posture seemed to change. She relaxed and became a detective on her own reasoning. We developed a mutual understanding and when Sigrid left, she seemed confident in what to do next and how to apply the philosophical antidotes.

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ENDNOTES

1. The name has been changed for privacy reasons
2. 'Cardinal Fallacies' refers to eleven thinking errors recognized by LBT, which often have a tendency to suppress happiness.
3. If we had more time, we would have dealt with the fallacy of self-damnation and tried to focus on self-respect as a guiding virtue.
4. *De store tænkere: "Spinoza"* (2000). Rosianate Forlag (2000), page 178–193.
5. *Epiktets håndbog* (1999). Oversat af J.A. Bundgaard. Filosofibiblioteket. Hans Reitzels Forlag, page 1–24.