

Creativity in Problem-Solving: The Double Dialogue Technique

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According to Alfred Adler (1956, 1964), life is subjectively experienced in terms of tasks, or challenges, demanding creative responses. A living human being, Adler said, is a problem-solver. The definition of a dead man, it follows, is "a person who is no longer solving problems."

The counselor or psychotherapist is continually confronted by persons who are not *solving* problems, but who, in their own words, *have* problems. Things regularly go badly for them, according to their experience. The "problems" of which they complain are, in the archaic synonym for symptoms, "complaints." In more contemporary usage "complaints" have yielded to "hangups," just as, under the influence of sophistication, symptoms have yielded to "blocks" or "things" (e.g. "I have a *thing* about that") in the fabrication of the neuroses.

In one way or another the task of the counselor or therapist is to help such persons to see their "problems" are, in fact, faulty, mistaken, self-defeating, or ineffective *solutions*. These "solutions" complicate and inhibit movement toward meeting the common, inescapable, and inherent problems, tasks, or challenges of social living.

One of the key factors in effective therapy or counseling, therefore, is to encourage the client to have faith in his/her own ability to work out new solutions to the problems that life implies. The following case example is from a disturbed family of three (father, mother, and a 16-year-old daughter) in which only the mother was willing to come in for therapy or counseling. The mother received individual therapy and counseling which enabled her to extricate herself from many of the power struggles with her husband and daughter. The situation remained a disturbed one, but she was encouraged by the authors to believe in her own creative capacity for problem-solving. As her individual therapy progressed, for example, and she was still seeking from "the experts" the "right answers" to the severe problems that continued to confront her in the home situation, she was told that, "As you understand more clearly what is happening, and are less bound up in and restricted to

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your old ways of responding (the neurotic life style of fighting, feeling hurt, feeling victimized, etc.), your own creative thinking capacities will be released and you will find your own new ways to deal with these problems. You will find yourself exploring and trying out all kinds of creative solutions to see what works best for you.”

A short while later, the mother, who was taking a “temporary leave” from therapy, wrote us about a technique which she invented. We call her invention the Double-Dialogue Technique, and acknowledge her contribution with gratitude, although she must remain anonymous. The Double-Dialogue Technique is a silent, written exchange of feelings between two or more persons, each one setting a theme to begin, then exchanging papers for the other’s responses. We have used this technique effectively in counseling couples, and suggest that it is potentially useful in other situations where verbal communication may be blocked, inhibited, or conflicted. Note the importance of having the Double-Dialogue written *simultaneously*, so that each person gets to set a theme and continue until everything she/he wants to say has been said and worked through. Consider how relatively sterile the following exchange would have been if the mother alone had initiated the exchange, and the daughter had only responded without having the opportunity to express simultaneously what was on her mind, too.

Note also that the Double-Dialogue need not be restricted to two persons, as it is in this example; if father had been willing, or if there were other children, each of them could have participated at the same time, each beginning simultaneously, and making a round robin of the exchanges.

Background for this Double-Dialogue was a typical family scene, synopsisized here:

Mother (Mo) and Daughter (Dau) shopped all day for needed clothes for Daughter; both enjoyed it.

On return, after supper, Mo requested that Dau vacuum house so that Mo could damp-mop it and have it clean for Mo’s birthday the next day.

Dau verbally abusive, took no action;

Mo urged, same reponse from Dau;

Mo scolded, said unfair;

Dau angrily did slapdash, incomplete job of it.

Mo complained of poor job, pointed out day bed not made up, asked Dau to come do that.

Dau verbally negative, took no action.

Mo scolded, expressed her irritation at helping Dau shop all day and getting no reciprocal cooperation at home.

Father (Fa) intervened, came and got Dau out of her room, took her to his room, closed door, lectured loudly and at length.

Mo continued mopping dining room.

Dau increasingly sullen, refused to answer Fa.

Fa increasingly angry, slapped her twice.

Dau ran out of room and screamed at him how unfair it was that he could hit her and she was never allowed to hit or be violent back.

Fa yelled at her to shut up, made her come back into the room, launched into a diatribe against her; she shouted back, he threatened to knock her silly.

Mo interfered, came into the room, shouted over their shouting: "Stop talking both of you. Words are useless at the moment of conflict, let's wait to *talk* about this until Sunday, at 5:00 p.m." thus unilaterally setting a time for a first attempt at a Family Council three days hence.

Dau went back to her room; Fa yelled that nobody cared about him or ever listened to his opinions; Mo went back to her work.

Five minutes later, Mo asked Dau to come and complete the still undone task.

Dau came in, burst into angry tears, yelled, "I'm going to explode, I'm going to break something or somebody. I can't control myself!"

Fa came in and yelled: "You had better shut up this minute or else!"

Mo protested Fa's interference: "Remember that we are supposed to keep out of each other's fights!" "You didn't keep out of mine a few minutes ago!" "But you interfered with mine to start with, *please* keep out of this one!"

Fa retreated to bedroom, yelling standard diatribe about all psychologists being "blood-sucking leeches," etc., etc.

Mo went to bedroom, got two stacks of paper and two pens, silently gave one to Dau, kept one for self. Both began writing.

When each had finished, they silently exchanged papers and wrote answers to each other.

This written Double-Dialogue continued in complete silence, with Mo and Dau exchanging papers each time, until the completion of the dialogues that follow.

Double-Dialogue

(Initiated by Mother)

Mo. I am very angry because after helping you shop all day, you did not willingly help me get the house clean for my birthday. I thought it was not asking very much that you spend *at most* a half-hour helping me do that. Why do you get so angry when I ask you to help? What could I have done instead that would have avoided the trouble?

Dau. I don't know, you don't define yourself clearly. One time you're one thing and another time something else. I can't get down to understanding the real thing, just shadows. For 16 years you were one way and now you're another, it's hard to know what you want, it's hard to know what I want, I don't think I really know why, who, or what anything is anymore.

Mo. Yes, you are right. I think I am very different now than I was, and I am still trying to change even more. Like you, I am still trying to find myself and be myself, and I know

(Initiated by Daughter)

Dau. I'm going to explode! HELP! Goddam it I can never get a hold on myself. Daddy always talks at me and I can't even think about saying anything but the time of day to him. I'm sick and tired of having to restrain my feelings. I can never show hate or anger, and I don't demonstrate love that much to you or Daddy because I don't feel it! I want to hit back somewhere and the only one that ever gets hit is me! I am my own person, not God's or anybody else's and I feel different each day. How in hell do I relate to two people I hardly even know? I can't touch them; I can't talk to them without being shut out or yelled at I feel as if I have to act like a mechanical toy at home and be like you or Daddy are not like I am.

Mo. Dear Nancy, I love you. I wish we could get to know each other better. (Maybe I'm wrong, but I feel we are slowly getting to know each other better.) I don't know what to do about the hitting, but I agree it is unfair. Perhaps if we talk about it on Sunday when he is not so violent, you can make him understand a little better how it feels.

Dau. No, because he is afraid of getting hurt. I am too, terribly. I want everyone to like me, I like people but I guess I just need to know more about myself. Daddy

how confusing it must be for you. How can I make things clearer between us? Is there any way you could try to tell me when I'm not being clear? If you could think of some way—maybe writing these notes? I would like to enjoy you more and not feel angry so much. I think you're an okay kid, but sometimes I feel that nobody's helping me try to make things better around here. I really do want to keep the house nice now. I am tired of being a messy slob, and I feel proud when the house is attractive and that you can bring people home without having to worry about it being a pigpen. But I don't want to do it all by myself!

won't talk about anything that brings out his fears, he doesn't want to see how other people see him perhaps because he is trying to convince himself that he is a fine person and that people like him. I'm sure some people do, maybe he is afraid that he will lose everything if he loses faith in himself. He is trying to hold me with threats and smacks, but it isn't a way of holding, it's hurting. Even now, I can't touch people, you're preaching keep your hands off everytime I see you you're busy, and I can't talk about me and my personal life with Daddy. He makes me feel like my opinions are dumb, like I don't know anything because he still thinks I'm 12 years old and stupid. I can't act like Daddy and Mommy's little girl, I feel full, I'm not totally grown up, if there is a definition of the word. Sometimes I feel guilty because I don't want to stay here and be "the child." I want to have my friends, my life and you make me feel kind of guilty for wanting to get away. Then when I come home, I feel bad if I've had fun, I feel as if I've somehow let you down.

Dau. I agree it should be clean but I think there should be one certain day that is clean house day per week and not the weekends. I don't feel like I have privacy. If my door is closed people just push it open, not you if you remember to knock but Daddy never does. It seems like I never have time to myself except when I don't want it. You know, I have never thought of Daddy as a father really. Right now he's just an old man who talks to his cat and

Mo. Dear Nancy, you are beautiful and you are just right about Daddy. He is very much afraid, and there isn't much that either of us can do about it. Perhaps someday he will find the courage to let someone help him, I don't know.

I don't understand why you feel guilty for having fun. I love for you to have fun, and I'm a pretty fun-loving and playful person myself, I always thought.

breeds fish. Such a lump who never does anything except sit around the house and live off of it. I do the same, I know but not as much as I used to I think. Also, I don't like to be told what to wear around the house and how to look when I wake up.

Mo. That sounds like a good idea—what day should we choose? Do you think it will stay clean all week, or should we schedule 10 minutes a day for pick-up, or what? I'm willing to try a new system. Let's talk about it on Sunday at 5:00 with Daddy and maybe he will begin to see that there are better ways of solving problems than hitting. Maybe we could each bring up a problem and try to solve it there—me the housework, you the privacy, and Daddy one of his own. But only one the first time, and *solvable* ones, or we will all feel too discouraged to keep trying. I feel better now—how about you? I feel like hugging you and helping you make up the day bed.

Dau. Maybe if Daddy will listen. I don't think he likes new ways, new ideas, independent people. What about Monday at around I don't know what time for the house. Depending on everyone's plans for night or afternoon. I think we wouldn't have to do much more than keep stuff that doesn't belong where it is in the right place the rest of the week.

Mo. Sounds good—I think you're right.

(The dialogue initiated by mother ended here. Mother moved across

I do understand your sometimes wanting to get away—that's very natural. So do I!

Dau. It's hard for me to get together my feelings so quickly. I can't change my attitude in 5 minutes no matter how hard I try. Perhaps that's why I get so frustrated and yell around here. I try to act perfect in school so I'll make and not lose friends. Then when my anger can't turn at you or Daddy, it turns into myself. I'm a lot freer with you, because I guess we both understand you have to get rid of feelings, but I'm not that way with Daddy. He isn't a free person, he's all locked up and he's thrown the key away. Some of my ropes are loosening though.

Mo. Yes, we need to find ways to get rid of our anger, and not to build up so much of it, or it does turn on ourselves, and that's *no fun!* You're really doing all right, Nancy—you've got much more good sense and understanding of yourself and others that I ever had until years and years later. I love you, and I think you will find yourself very soon and really enjoy life.

Dau. Doesn't it sometimes make you mad when Daddy says the house *MUST* be clean and his own room is a filthy mess? I feel that nobody has a right to tell me how to

the room from where she had been sitting to sit beside her daughter on the couch, rubbed her back and neck, and kissed her. Daughter continued to write, with mother responding, until her dialogue played out.)

keep my own room. I can keep my door closed. Dave has a great situation, he had the whole top of the house to himself and nobody ever goes up but him. If it's a mess it's nobody else's business, after all we have to live in our own rooms.

Mo. Yes, I do feel that way—that he is taking his privilege to be messy, but not allowing it to others. You are really right about your own room, but I must confess that I really get a gut feeling of shame when you invite people in there when it is really awful. I guess I must think they'll think badly of *me* if you have a messy room. I don't quite know what to do about it. I think maybe I kind of feel that you let it get so bad, too, and that is another reason it upsets me. Maybe I could work more on trying to accept that it's your right to have it the way you want.

Dau. Most of my friends' rooms and houses are MUCH WORSE! They just think you're my mother. Nobody gives a God-damn about anybody else's mother; to my friends you're just something to be polite to. I'm the same way. To most teen-agers, mothers are just something you have to listen to with your ears closed.

I don't like being yelled at about who gets the food. I usually get what I want when I want it. I don't like Daddy complaining about he has to cook and all I do is eat it. I never ask anyone for anything (or I try not to that much) at least I don't ask people to cook my food or clean my room.

Once at that stupid place that lady asked me if my parents ever physically abused me. I said no. I couldn't ever figure out why in hell I said such a dumb thing.

Mo. What place—do you mean the counseling center where we went that time? I guess you were ashamed to tell her the truth about your parents. It is sometimes hard to admit bad things that you wish never happened.

Dau. Yeah. That one that Kathy went to.

(Mother joked about the pile of used tissues on the couch [Daughter had been crying and blowing her nose a lot during the writing process], again kissed and hugged Daughter, they made up the day bed together, then sat and talked in a companionable way till bedtime.)

The opening of dialogue between mother and daughter was so satisfying to both that, a short while later, the daughter initiated a further written exchange with mother, bringing up some topics she found hard to discuss aloud. It came about at the end of their second family council meeting, after father had walked out, and mother asked if there were anything else her daughter wanted to bring up. Nancy took a piece of paper and began to write, and the two continued the written exchanges in silence until the end of this (single) dialogue:

Dau. Yeah. I wish I were 18 and could move out sometimes. Daddy doesn't approve of my dating. He must think that just because me and Dave are going steady we screw if we see each other for more than 2 hours.

Mo. I don't think so. I think he just wants to rule over people somehow, some way, and that is the only way he knows how.

Dau. Dave thinks he's a big fat bear. He wonders how you got stuck with a lunk like him. Dave thinks you're pretty if you'd do something with yourself.

Mo. Like what?

Dau. I have no idea—Get rid of Daddy!!

Mo. Not today—though sometimes I feel like it. Daddy has some good qualities, but they are buried very deep and he needs therapy to bring them out. I hope he can risk it some day.

Dau. Yeah. Just my tough luck, my kids will love their grandfather but I have to be stuck with him for one more year. Can I leave the house when I'm 18?

Mo. Let's wait till you're 17½ and talk about it then.

Dau. Too long to wait. By that time I'll have run away. Do you think 1:45-2:00 was late this afternoon when I said I'd be home later and called at 10:00?

Mo. Not for me—I told your father that I thought it was considerate of you to call this morning, and that since it was daytime, we should not complain unduly.

Dau. He is so hard to talk to like draining Niagara Falls with an eyedropper.

Mo. Yes, but we did make some progress—like the no hitting rule, and the knock-before-entering. Drop by drop, or as the Espanol say, “gota a gota, se llena la bota.”

Dau. Fill it full enough it'll sink. That's me. He wasn't talking to us tonight. You know, maybe he's Hitler reincarnated.

Mo. You sound very very angry at him.

Dau. Of course, I've got 16 years of it all stored up and he's making more. Make that 17 years.

Mo. *Almost 17 years!* (An old family joke about the pressure that the parents put on Nancy to grow up too fast.)

Dau. Only a month and a half.

Mo. Wow, you're growing up!

Dau. Oh yeah? Not the way things are around here I'm not.

Mo. He doesn't want you to?

Dau. Somehow, I think not. It's evident in that he has to put restrictions on me.

Mo. Yes—would you like to talk to Bob or Jo-Anne sometime about what to do about him? I have terminated for the time being, so I don't see them any more.

Dau. No. Anytime I can get free I want to be out with Dave away from here. Dave goes to a shrink. Sometimes I think he's lucky—No father.

Mo. There are worse things than having no father.

Dau. Who said it was bad? 99% of the time I wish I didn't have one. I can always get my way with you most likely.

Mo. Not always, but usually when you are being reasonable, and you *are* reasonable *most* of the time. But you might be able to help Daddy break out of his chains a little by trying something new with him—like sometime when you are both angry at each other, why don't you hand him a stack of paper and pen and encourage both of you, especially him, to write out your feelings. He might *begin* to understand you just a little bit better and try harder to work out problems *with* you instead of against you.

Dau. No. I hate him too much. I honestly think that if I was ever mad at him and there was a gun in the house I'd kill him.

Mo. I used to get that angry, but not any more. My therapy helped me understand myself more, and Daddy, too, and now I don't get that angry. I still get annoyed and irritated, but not that deep deep hatred and anger. They taught me how to love instead, and it's more fun. You only feel angry if you want to fight.

Dau. Don't be silly. I'm too stubborn to go to a shrink. I hope Dave doesn't give up liking me because of this daddy problem. I would die. He's going to talk to his shrink about us by the way. Oh by the way his mother likes me again.

Mo. I doubt if Dave will give you up on account of Daddy. It's good that he's talking to his shrink about us and that his mother likes you again. I thought she probably would. Bob and Jo-Anne aren't shrinks—they're teachers, helping people understand themselves and life. They helped me understand that Daddy is full of problems and can't really treat us like human beings right now, until he gets some help for himself. But they showed me ways to deal with him so I don't have to fight with him and suffer, and I feel much better now that I don't fight with him.

Dau. The only way I can think of to not fight with him is to stay out of his way as much as possible. What do you think of my going steady with Dave?

Mo. If we *both* give up fighting with Daddy, Daddy might go crazy enough to begin to get well! I like Dave. I don't exactly know what going steady means, but Dave seems like a very nice young man to me.

Dau. Are you worried about our sexual relations? Most parents are.

Mo. Not really. I trust you have sense enough not to rush things up. I think sexual relations at the high school level are full of emotional hangups, not a joyful experience, as they can be later on when both partners are more mature and surer of who they are and what they want in life.

Dau. Oh. In other words. I'm not emotionally ready to screw. Don't worry, all we've done is kiss and scratch each others backs. And hugging.

Mo. Right—go get counseling first if you think you're ever getting to that point. They're not narrow, but can help people understand themselves better.

Dau. Don't be silly, I'll just get birth control. Besides I probably won't need it.

Mo. Why *wouldn't* you need it if you were having intercourse?

Dau. I would if I were but right now I don't, we don't anticipate it so I don't need any means of control.

Mo. Good for you, you are a sweet and sensible kid. Did I every mention that I love you?

Dau. Whoever hear of a sweet and sensible 17 year old? Unless they're prudes!! How awful!!!

(Mother kissed Daughter; both got up and put things away, Daughter went in and began reading *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex and Were Afraid to Ask.*)

Summary

Encouraging the client's faith in his or her own creative problem-solving abilities reduces dependency on "the experts," encourages choice-making, self-reliance, self-confidence, and enhances self-esteem—and may even result in more relevant solutions to the problems at hand. The Double-Dialogue Technique is an example of such creative problem-solving by a client. The technique itself may prove helpful to families, marital partners, and others who experience their verbal exchanges as characteristically blocked, inhibited, or conflicted.

References

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