The Courage to be Imperfect: Now More Than Ever

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Dreikurs' concept of the courage to be imperfect (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964) appears to have inspired renewed interest by contemporary Adlerians. In fact, evidence of this resurgence of interest abounds. One can see the concept printed across t-shirts (Schecht, 1978) and book covers (Turner & Pew, 1978). Perhaps in this highly self-critical post-Watergate era, we need the courage to be imperfect more than ever. Dreikurs' advice seems timely:

> You need to constantly reinforce your own courage, and, to do so, you need the "courage to be imperfect." Recall to your mind the times that you have succeeded, and try again. Dwelling on your mistakes saps your courage. Remember, one cannot build on weakness—only on strength. Admit humbly that you are bound to make mistakes and acknowledge them without a sense of loss in your personal value! (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964, p. 56)

In my work as a psychotherapist, I believe there is much value in Dreikurs' words of wisdom. I find an increasing number of clients seeking therapy because they don't know how to handle their mistakes. These clients tend to get into difficulty because their teleological movement is characterized by a negative focus.

A negative focus usually manifests itself in one of two ways. First, clients tend to focus only on their mistakes. For example, after a date the client would tend to go home and reflect almost entirely on what he or she did wrong (e.g., spilling a drink). Such negative thinking would undoubtedly lead to emotional upsetness and perhaps depression (Ellis, 1962, 1974).

The second typical way clients involve themselves in a negative focus is by making pessimistic interpretations of their behavior. These clients tend to put themselves down whenever they are unsure of the value of their behavior. For example, a client who has just had his hair cut passes a friend on a sidewalk who remarks, "Oh, you just got a haircut." The client would tend to interpret that statement as meaning "Cutting my hair makes me look bad, etc. . . ." In other words, these clients move through life with the self-defeating

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attitude, "When in doubt, I'm wrong." Again, using such negative thinking will produce emotional upset and perhaps depression (Ellis, 1962, 1974).

Seeing the world through a negative focus produces an unrealistically low self-image. By using a negative focus (e.g., focusing primarily on mistakes), these clients actually become their *own worst critic.* No one else would reflect almost totally on the client's mistakes. Outside observers would undoubtedly reflect on some of the things a client did right, regardless of their feelings for the client.

A case study is presented below to illustrate the various psychotherapeutic strategies used to treat clients involved in the own worst critic syndrome.

A Case Study: Jim

Phase 1: Relationship Building and Insight

Jim, a 25-year-old student, sought counseling at an Australian university counseling center to obtain help in "finding a girl." An analysis of his lifestyle reavealed that he related primarily through a negative focus. For example, all of his early memories concerned themes involving making a mistake (e.g., "When I was 4 years old, I forgot to feed my pet fish and he died").

As we explored the psychology of use of the negative focus, it became clear that, if he was in the wrong, he couldn't be expected to do right . . . . I explained to him that I understood that it was very useful to focus on mistakes, then he would have an excuse to avoid trying to develop a meaningful relationship. He could now enjoy being *safe* from responsibility. I also confronted Jim with the fact that, while he moved toward his goal of safety, he would never achieve his long-term goal of "a girlfriend."

Next, I asked Jim to imagine that he was on his deathbed reflecting over his life. What did he see? Jim responded, "A lonely empty life . . . . I have enjoyed little and left nothing—no contributions."

I encouraged him to experience the reality of his statements fully by having him repeat "lonely," "empty," and "no contributions" over and over. As he silently meditated on these words, Jim seemed to begin to understand how movement toward his short-term goal of safety was preventing him from achieving his long-term goal of developing a meaningful relationship with a girl. More important, Jim began to realize that the cost of maintaining his short-term goal was too high (i.e., he would miss out on life).

The existential tension created within the imagery experience appeared to act as a motivation modification agent. Jim began to eagerly discuss what would be necessary to realistically move toward his long-term goal. I

explained that there were basically three obstacles keeping him from his goal of developing a meaningful relationship with a girl.

1. Learning how to feel safe in a relationship through socially acceptable means (i.e., not hiding behind his negative focus).

2. Learning how to change his negative focus through cognitive restructuring.

3. Learning specific behaviors necessary for relationship building (e.g., how to ask girls out, how to tune into others and offer empathy, etc.).

We approached the first obstacle by deciding that the therapeutic relationship could be used to learn how to feel safe in a relationship. It was later agreed that *Creative Arts Therapy* (Nystul, 1978) could be used to learn how to establish a secure relationship.

Phase 2: Reorienting the Negative Focus

Phase 2 involved teaching Jim how to actively dispute his negative focus reactions to various activating events. First, he was instructed in the basic concepts of Rational-Emotive Therapy (Ellis, 1962, 1974) as modified below.

I asked him to set off a red light in his head whenever he felt that he was becoming emotionally upset. The red light could act as a warning, indicating that he was probably involved (possibly unconsciously) in some form of negative focus. He should try to identify the nature of the negative focus (i.e., either focusing primarily on mistakes or making pessimistic interpretations of his input).

As the next step, I asked him to confront the negative focus formally or informally. A formal confrontation would involve making a T-chart, lising negative and positive behavioral inputs (Table 1).

Table 1

Reflecting on My Tennis Match

Negative Focus	Positive Focus
(Preoccupation with mistakes)	
1. My serves were weak.	1. My back hand was strong.
2. I lost the set.	2. I won one game.
3. I lost my temper.	3. I offered to pay for drinks after the match.

If Jim didn't have time to write out a T-chart, I advised him to try to visualize one in his head. I instructed Jim to concentrate more on his positive contributions than on his mistakes, regardless of whether he was attempting to dispute the negative focus formally or informally.

The actual process of trying to get Jim to identify his positive input was fairly difficult and required my assistance for several weeks. Such help is often needed with clients who operate with a negative focus. Frankl's (1959) dereflection technique used in conjunction with the Premack Principle (Suinn & Weigel, 1975) usually provides the extra boost necessary to train clients to look for their positive side. Dereflection simply means to concentrate on areas of strength.

In Jim's case, a list of his strengths included an excellent singing voice, a good physique, and being a good money manager. I then utilized the Premack Principle, which states that a behavior (e.g., thinking positively about yourself) could be increased by being paired with a behavior of higher probability of occurrence (e.g., going to the refrigerator). I instructed Jim to put his list of positive characteristics on several index cards and to place the cards in locations which he frequently visited (e.g., the refrigerator and the telephone).

Phase 3: Learning New Social Behavior

By the end of the seventh session, Jim was able to effectively dispute most negative-focus reactions. He appeared to be well on his way to developing the courage to be imperfect.

Now, freer of his preoccupation with himself, he was able to have the chance to tune into others. I therefore placed him in a human relations group which met for 2 hours a week over a 3-month period. The group experience was a highly structured mixed-sex group that used various communication exercises to tune into other's feelings, attempt to communicate empathy, explore nonverbal communication, and explore assertive and confrontive response modes.

I continued to see Jim in individual psychotherapy sessions while the group met. During this time we worked on more specific social skill building (e.g., how to ask out a girl over the telephone).

After the seventh group experience, Jim began to feel very safe with the group members and mentioned in individual psychotherapy that he felt ready to develop a relationship outside the group. Since he had an interest in drama and singing, I encouraged him to join the university drama club. Through his involvement with the drama club, he met several girls whom he gradually began to date on a regular basis.

At this time formal therapy was terminated since Jim felt he was finally making realistic progress toward his goal (i.e., to "find a girlfriend"). Biweekly follow-up sessions were set for a 6-month period. During this time, Jim reported that he felt more positive about himself in social settings. He also mentioned that he was "going steady" with a wonderful girl.

At the end of the 6-month follow-up period, Jim came into my office beaming with the news that he was to graduate from the university and he had a job offer as an accountant.

I have continued an informal follow-up relationship over the last 2 years in which Jim was encouraged to drop in anytime to say "Hi!" During this period, he reported that he is no longer going steady but has decided to "play the field," which he seems to be enjoying very much.

At work he has had two promotions and has also begun to study toward a law degree at night. As of now, I can confidently say that Jim has developed the courage to be imperfect and is reaping his just rewards.

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