

The Betting Technique in Counseling and Psychotherapy

Raymond J. Corsini

Some twenty-five years ago when I was the chief psychologist at San Quentin I was part of a car pool consisting of a minister, a social worker, and a prison guard, each of us living in Richmond, across the bay from this prison. At that time, the mode of transportation was a ferry, for the Richmond-San Rafael ferry was not yet built.

Most of our conversations were about “psychology”—that is to say people we knew, mostly the criminals, and issues relative to therapy, counseling, and the like. Ordinarily the conversations were a three-way process with the guard listening in.

One day, enroute to Richmond while I was pontificating on some topic, the guard suddenly inserted a remark.

“You can talk psychology all you want, but no one can do anything about my Dennis.”

“What’s the problem?”

“He’s slow. He is the slowest thing on this earth. It takes him forever to dress; he takes a couple of hours to eat. I swear if he were to fall from a five story building I could run down the stairs and catch him before he hit the ground, he’s so slow he would even fall slowly.”

“What’s your explanation about his slowness?” I asked.

“God knows. I suppose that is how he made him. He dawdles all the time. No one can hurry him. No sir, you can talk all the psychology you want, but you can’t make him hurry.”

“Wanna bet?” I said, reverting to my New York position.

“Huh?”

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“You said no one can make Dennis hurry. I want to bet you that I can make him hurry, even though I have never seen him. All you have to do is just what I tell you.”

“No hurting him . . . I wouldn’t go for that.”

“No hurting him.”

“Then how? We’ve tried everything.”

“Psychology, that’s how. But I won’t tell you what to do unless it is a bet.”

“How much?”

“Ten bucks. You give your ten bucks to Mr. A. (the social worker) and Mr. B (the minister) will be the judge. If you do just what I tell you and if it does not make Dennis hurry then you get back your ten dollars and also mine. A deal?”

“It’s a deal.” We both gave Mr. A ten dollars, and Mr. B. agreed to serve as judge. And then, in very clear detail I explained exactly what Mr. C (the prison guard) should do relative to his five-year-old dawdling son. And the “pay” day was set in exactly a week.

The next day the guard informed us that the bet was off. It seemed his wife didn’t like the procedure that I had explained. I gave the guard some more propaganda, such as was he a man or a mouse, and who was in charge of that family anyway? He promised to try again to convince his wife.

The next day, his wife came out when we stopped at their house, and we spent some five minutes reviewing what to do about Dennis’ dawdling at the dinner table. It appeared that while the rest of the family, parents and two other kids who straddled him in age took about fifteen minutes to eat a typical meal, it would take Dennis several hours, eating at the rate of spoonful every twenty minutes or so.

My solution, as every good Adlerian and behavior modifier in the natural environment knows, was simply to take food away from him after fifteen minutes, and not let him have anything else until the next meal.

In one week, Dennis was eating normally, and I was ten dollars richer, and the guard and his family were well satisfied. On top of that the honor of “psychology” was vindicated.

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Some ten years later while working in Dr. Rudolf Dreikurs' private practice, I was amazed to discover that he fairly frequently made bets with his patients and counselees. If a client or patient would disagree with him, he would cock his head, purse his lips, and say, "Would you like to bet two dollars that if you do just what I say that it will work out just as I say?" When I informed him that I had once done the same thing, and had made ten dollars, he commented something to the effect that I too was a genius but that I shouldn't take advantage of suckers, and should limit my bets to exactly two dollars. I have done this ever since, and about two or three times a year I will make bets with patients or clients—and so far I have never lost. Since it appears to me that I have never read anything in print about this procedure, I shall try to explain the technique as I employ it, and give some case examples, as well as to try to justify it.

1. The natural time to consider making a bet is when a counselee rejects your direct advice saying that it won't work.

2. Then (to be fair) you should explain why it will work, how it has worked, how it must work. If your client is stubborn and insists still, then . . .

3. You say, "Wanna bet?"

4. You then conclude the bet, giving him/her your two dollars, saying, "I'll trust you with the money, and to do just that I tell you, and for you to be the judge. However, you must do exactly what I tell you." Then, you set the judgment date.

5. Write in your appointment book the terms of the bet and the date agreed upon. The time period should be fairly short, anywhere from a week to a month at most.

6. On the appointed day, you review the situation, asking the person exactly what he/she did and if what you are told accords to the instructions, you then ask "Who won?" If you win you collect your money as smugly as you can. You do not say anything more. The person has learned a very important lesson, very cheaply.

Cases

Mrs. Williams, talking about her husband, informed me that he had a thirty plus year habit which he could not break. Mr. Williams was a prankster, and nothing pleased him more than embarrassing his wife. If she bent over the stove, he was likely to slip behind her and insinuate a hand into her bosom to "grab a tit" as he put it. In elevators, he liked to "feel her pussy," putting a hand behind him while standing in front of her. If they appeared at a social function, when the hosts opened the door, he would "goose her behind."

While Mrs. Williams was recounting these violations of her dignity, her husband, a half a head shorter than her, a jolly fat man, chortled in glee. But when she insisted that nothing could break his habit of some thirty years standing, I said, "Wanna bet?" At the next session, with the husband missing, Mrs. Williams and I concluded our bet. Two weeks later she paid off. What I had asked her to do was simple. She was to grab "his family jewels" if he ever put his hands on her without her permission. She got him once at home, one time in an elevator, but what really stopped him for good was once when at a party she grabbed him by the crotch and wouldn't let go for some five agonizing seconds.

She was very happy to pay off and even indicated that she hoped he would try again. The abashed husband, regarded me as a traitor to our mutual sex no doubt, but apparently he learned his lesson—and I got my two dollars.

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A somewhat similar situation, but not as dramatic, had to do with a middle aged lecher, who in a social situation would abandon his wife, and unabashedly pay court to the prettiest woman in the room, flattering the woman, flirting outrageously, and generally making a "pest" and an "ass" of himself (according to the wife's version.) She too said the magic words "There's nothing that can be done about him" relative to his undesired behavior, which in turn elicited from me, "Wanna bet?"

After the bet was made (first we make the bet, then we explain what to do) I told her just what to do. Part of the terms of the technique is to make the bet, give the other the money, set the time, and *then* explain what to do. If the person should refuse to do what you suggest, then you should not say, "Bet's off" but rather "Pay me." The logic is that you made the bet in good faith, and now the other in good faith must do what you suggest to see whether you or the other party wins, and if the other will not do it, then you (the counselor/therapist) should win.

Anyway, the solution to the problem of flirting was simple. She was told to tell him, "If you embarrass me by flirting, I'll simply go home." And she did—twice. Once she took the family car, and he was stranded. The other time she called for a cab. He learned to respect her and she learned the power of logical consequences.

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An amusing situation once took place in a public family counseling demonstration. When I insisted that father and mother stop doing Rollo's homework, checking it, etc., they both insisted that Rollo would never do his homework. After some sparring around, I demanded: "Wanna bet?" The bet

was carefully specified, and I took the husband's two dollars, added my two and selected a man from the audience saying that he had an honest face, and asked him if he would (a) hold the money and (b) at the proper time be the judge to determine who had won the bet. He agreed somewhat reluctantly.

At the next session I asked the parents if they had in fact done exactly what I had told them to (absolutely no discussion whatever about homework) and they quibbled, and admitted that they had once asked him about whether he did have any homework. I cried "foul" and stated they had not followed directions, since I had told them absolutely no discussion at all about homework. The "judge" wanted to know whether I should be paid since they had not followed instructions, but I said "No"—we needed two weeks of absolute following of instructions. The next week each parent declared that they had said nothing—but that Rollo had not done any homework either. I pointed out we had agreed on a two-weeks trial. At the end of the next week, again I asked if they had followed the rules, and they said they had, and when I asked him whether Rollo had done homework they said, "Well, a little . . ." and so on.

I asked the "judge" to make a decision. Who had won the two dollars?" To my surprise he seemed unable to make a decision, and finally he said "You" and offered me the money. "Why the hesitation?" I asked. The reply broke up the audience.

"Of all the people in the room, why did you pick me as the judge? He is my boss . . ." and he pointed to the loser of the bet.

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"She'll never say "yes" if I ask her for a date!"

"That boy will stay up till midnight forever if I don't make him go to bed."

"If I don't wake him up, he'll never wake up on his own."

"If I let them alone, I know they'll kill each other."

"I can cut down to a half pack a day—and keep to it."

"I just know I won't pass the exam—so I am going to take an incomplete."

"I absolutely can never learn to dance."

"Unless I feed him he just will not eat."

"I know they won't hire me, so what's the use of going for an interview?"

To these and to a number of other definite statements, my answer was: “Wanna bet?” And in each case, I won—and the loser was glad to lose. It is really a no-lose situation.

Comments

This betting technique must be used properly. What it amounts to is a form of encouragement, in that you (the counselor) say that you believe in that person so much that you are sure that if he/she does just what you suggest then he will succeed. You are saying that if you are wrong in your prediction you are willing to lose money. The fact that the sum is trifling makes little difference: the basic notion is that you are willing to back your prediction by a sum of money.

The whole situation is rather complex, and has some elements that may not appear immediately.

First, there is some sort of problem, to which you listen.

Second, you have to be sure of your grounds that the person’s prediction is wrong, such as, “It won’t work,” “nothing will work,” “there is no use”—and the like.

Third, you must know exactly what to do and must know how to put the proper solution with precision, so that there is no question in your mind or your counselee’s what is to be done and what your expectation is of the outcome.

Fourth, you must give the other person a lot of rope, letting him or her go out on a limb—or you mix your own metaphors!

Fifth, you then say that the person is wrong and that you are sure he/she can succeed if he or she does just what you tell them.

Sixth, on getting a rebuff, such as, “You don’t know what you are talking about,” you then say, “Wanna bet?”

Seventh, you then make the bet, without explaining the “how” but set the amount (always two dollars) and set a definite payoff date. You give your two dollars to the “sucker” to hold and you make him/her the “judge” of (a) whether he/she did just what you said to do and (b) whether or not you win. In some cases, it is good to put everything in writing, with both solemnly signing names, etc.

Eight, you pick up your money and say nothing. The lesson is learned.

Now, the situation has some elements of “cognitive dissonance” and of “paradoxical intention.” Here you are betting on the individual and he/she is betting against himself/herself. One would think that a person in this situation would want to win and prove you wrong. But it doesn’t work out that way: actually, by the bet you encourage the person to outdo himself/herself and do what is necessary for you to win the bet. To lose would be to win money, but it would be to lose something much more important—your esteem of your client. So, your client is motivated to prove you right—and himself/herself wrong. Naturally, the more important aspect is that the person will succeed in the feared action.

In using this technique (and this goes, of course, for all techniques) a certain amount of depth of understanding is called for. It should be used only when the counselor is certain that if what is to be done is done correctly, that it will work out. It should be used only with fearful, pessimistic people who *know* they are right. Only when you know they are wrong and they know they are right, does it make any sense to say, “Wanna bet?” Then—you have them. If they don’t want to bet, they are saying that they really could do it; and if they do bet, then they are honor-bound to do it just the way you say it should be done.

An important part of the whole betting situation is to not say anything “encouraging”—simply take a cold, hard, practical point of view, such as:

Now, let us summarize: You say you can not learn how to swim. Am I right? (Client nods). OK. I say you can swim. And we now have a two dollar bet. Will you agree to take ten lessons from Betty Ben? (Client nods.) OK. Will you come back in five weeks from now to pay me the four dollars—your two dollars and my two dollars. (Client asks how do you know you’ll win.) I know you can do anything you want to do. And you want to learn to swim, so you will learn. It is as simple as that.

Summary

Making bets with clients is a somewhat unusual technique, it can be valuable in situations when you are certain your client will succeed in something if he or she will do just what you say, and when your client is equally certain that it will not work out. If your success rate is less than 100 per cent, you’d better give up this technique—and use something that works better for you. In addition to making a little extra money, it also makes the whole psychotherapy-counseling game a bit more interesting. Try it: it’ll work. Wanna bet?