

## CASE STUDY 3.2.1

### THE USEFULNESS OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING IN HELPING THE CLIENT DEVELOP HEALTHY ATTITUDES

Lukas, *Meaningful Living* (pp. 48-51)

But cognitive feedback reactions cannot be ignored, and they often manifest themselves in physical symptoms. These connections were apparent in the case of 21-year-old Inge who was sent to me by an abortion clinic for a routine psychological authorization. Inge came to me with drooping shoulders, lowered eyes, feet dragging. She hardly dared to take off her coat, finally sat down on the edge of a chair, and began to stammer, her perspiring hands in constant motion. She wanted the abortion because bringing up a child was beyond her; she felt insecure and afraid of the future.

I listened patiently. I wanted her to relax and learn to trust me. I turned on the soft light of a floor lamp and took notes to avoid irritating her. Gradually she lifted her head, made eye contact occasionally, and spoke more fluently. After half an hour she made a statement to which I have become highly allergic because it betrays an unhealthy, deterministic attitude. "My parents never let me take care of my own affairs. They always made the decisions for me, and now that I am grown-up I don't know what to do. They still see me as a little girl, and I have always followed their advice. And now I cannot make up my mind because no one tells me what to do. It's all my parents' fault."

This is widely held unhealthy attitude. Of course, it was possible that her parents dominated and protected her too much. But if she now, as a grown woman, could not free herself from this dependency, if she considered herself hopelessly incapable of making her own decisions, if she saw no chance to liberate herself from her childlike attitude, then she had no chance. She was stuck and would not be much more mature at the age of 50 because her fixed attitude had choked off her maturing. And the physical symptoms were the telltale signs; the lowered eyes, the perspiring hands, the erratic movements; this entire hyperneurotic reaction pattern was the result of her unhealthy attitude.

This, then, was the critical point when I could no longer listen passively, when I felt challenged to open her eyes in a Socratic Dialogue along the following lines: "You claim your upbringing made you dependent and helpless. Do you want to use our time together to support this dependency and helplessness, so they influence your life more and more? We can talk about your dependency and you will become increasingly aware of your helplessness the more clearly you see the causes. You may decide to have the abortion which will confirm your conviction that you are not able to master the tasks of your life, that you are indeed a failure. I wonder what your life will be like if you keep avoiding the difficult tasks because you feel you can't handle them?"

Inge sat a long time, thinking. "I don't want to be a failure forever," she finally said. "What shall I do?"

We talked for two more hours, without perspiring hands and without lowered eyes. "Why did your parents overprotect you?" I asked her, and she had to admit that it was because they loved her. "If you were raised by parents who loved you," I said,

“then you have a good basis for your own behavior. You, too, can love, and love is the first thing your baby will need if you decide to have it. The next thing you need is the strength to take responsibility-for yourself and for those in your care. You cannot blame your unwillingness to take on responsibility on your childhood or your parents, without a feeling of discomfort and failure. Every time you do make a responsible decision, your capacity is strengthened to carry it out. If you make an ‘easy’ decision because it seems most comfortable at the moment, it will weigh on you later on.” In this vein I tried to mobilize Inge’s resources of the human spirit and fortify her self-confidence. In the end I handed her the certificate authorizing the abortion and placed the decision in her hands.

A few days later she returned and said she had thought everything over and decided to have the baby. For the next three months I gave her some assertiveness training, and this was followed by a discussion of her future plans. When we concluded the counseling, her attitude toward life had changed; she was serene, confident, and looking forward to having her child.

The “bad-parents complex” often lies behind unhealthy attitudes. For years psychologists have been looking for mistakes made by parents. Parents have been blamed for being too authoritarian, too indifferent, too critical, too success-oriented, not democratic enough, too unsure, too inconsistent-until many parents indeed became unsure of themselves and for that reason alone made mistakes. Contributing factors were the crumbling of traditions and the bulk of contradictory pedagogic literature. Parents have become the favorite target for their children’s failures, and it is no wonder that young people themselves all too readily point the finger at their parents to explain their own weaknesses.

Undoubtedly parents do make mistakes in bringing up their children. Also, the increasing numbers of working mothers cause an additional strain on the family. But a large percentage of parents lovingly care for their children, endure sacrifices, and do their best to prepare them for the future. Their affectionate concern cannot be simply swept aside while paying attention only to those moments when they lose their nerve or fail to find the right word at the right moment.

True, it has been proven that clients are helped when they see connections between their development and their upbringing. But it has been proven as well that such a looking back may set in motion a feedback process that reduces their sense of responsibility for their actions. They are prone to say: “I cannot act differently; this is the way I have been shaped,” and this attitude blocks the path to further growth and maturity. Ego strengthening is not enough. What is needed is a vital process of self-discovery, not only in terms of who they are, but also in terms of who they can still become. And this process requires recognition of their own responsibility.

Admittedly, each person is equipped from the start with different gifts, some amply, others poorly. But whatever the base, the young must build on it. A part of their success is up to them alone; they can fail in spite of rich natural gifts, and they can succeed in spite of poor ones. Young people have to be made aware that their course is not set once and for all, that they can give their lives a direction toward the positive as well as the negative.

Sometimes the therapist has no parental base on which to build. The young patients have nothing but negative childhood influences; they have many “excuses” for failure, but even they have the defiant power not to fail, in spite of everything.