

PERCEPTIONS AND POSSIBILITIES STRATEGIC AND SOLUTION-ORIENTED APPROACHES TO WORKING WITH DEPRESSION

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Case study: Brandon

Brandon sat on the couch in my therapy office with a slightly slumped posture and stared at the floor. He cleared his throat and spoke softly. “I just feel like nothing I do matters. I feel like inside I am a block of ice, you know, frozen. Like I can’t move forward.” I sat quietly and listened as he described the reasons which brought him to me for psychotherapy. “I don’t know why I feel so depressed. It just kind of comes on me. Most of the time I can shake it off, but lately I can’t. It really feels like a weight on me that I can’t escape. I can’t seem to focus at work much, and I even called in sick for two days last week because I just couldn’t find the energy to get out of bed. Lately, I just feel exhausted, and I don’t want to leave the house at all. My girlfriend is worried about me. She is the one that pushed me to call you.”

Brandon had just celebrated his thirty-first birthday and had a life that, from the outside, appeared to be going very well. He had a nice home, had a prestigious job with a lucrative salary, and had a supportive family and girlfriend. Yet, somehow, he found himself caught in the throes of depression. He told me that he had gone to see his primary care doctor who placed him on a low dosage antidepressant medication, but Brandon felt it had not helped him much. He found that, even though he would get hungry, he did not feel motivated to eat as often as he needed. Brandon’s sleep patterns also had been altered by his depression with his usual seven hours of sleep sometimes turning into ten hours.

“I just want to feel normal again,” Brandon said as his eyes slightly glazed. “I want to get up and do the things I need to do, but it all just feels overwhelming to me lately. It is not usually in my nature to not get up and do what I have to do. Lately, it all feels like a big struggle for me. I want to do things, but I feel like it is pointless. It just isn’t like me.” Brandon finally sat up and looked at me. His eyes showed me a depth of sadness that I recognized very well from my years of clinical practice. Brandon felt powerless in figuring out how to beat the invisible enemy he faced that is known as depression.

After he finished telling me how his depression was affecting him, I asked him if over the past weeks there was one time when he did not notice

his depression, even if for only five minutes. He thought for a moment and then had a slight smile as he said, "Washing my car." It seems that Brandon was very proud of his car and wanted to keep it clean. He told me that he had not washed his car in two weeks because he did not feel he had the energy to do so. A plan was then quickly created to get Brandon to wash his car the next day after he got home from work. Brandon agreed to wash his car next day and to report how he felt about doing it at our next session.

When he arrived for his session the next week, Brandon told me that he had washed his car after he came home from work, and he found that he had enjoyed doing it. He also said that he felt a little better the rest of the evening. Hearing this, I asked Brandon if he would be willing to wash his car twice over the next week and perhaps ask any neighbors if they would like their cars washed for free. Brandon told me that his neighbors were an elderly couple who might appreciate his offer of a free car wash.

At our next session, Brandon said that he was feeling much better than he had in several months. He had been washing his car more often and had started helping out his elderly neighbors with several activities including the washing of their car. He told me that he had been picking up medications and getting groceries for them. Brandon also told me that he felt he had a little more energy lately and had been cleaning his house more often. He also reported two nights of good sleep. He was directed to continue washing his car and helping his neighbors for the next week. I also asked if he had ever thought about starting some kind of nonprofit service to assist older people by giving free car washes to them. He said that he had not, but it sounded like something that he would enjoy doing.

When Brandon arrived for his third therapy session, he was smiling and looked more animated than I had seen him in a while. He told me that he felt that he was improving, and his girlfriend had noticed a substantial difference in his mood. Brandon also said that he and his girlfriend had both begun helping his elderly neighbors by cutting their grass and doing some weeding in their flower beds. He chuckled as he told me how his neighbors kept trying to get him to take money for his work, but he refused to take it.

He also told me that he was washing his car regularly as well as going on rides in the country with his girlfriend. Brandon also had talked with the pastor at his church about starting a program to go to the homes of older members of the congregation and to provide free car washing services. He seemed very animated as he told me how receptive his pastor had been to the idea. Brandon's idea was going to be presented to the church committee to see if there would be interest in it.

At the end of our session, Brandon decided that he felt that he did not need to come back for any more therapy. I told him I understood, but

that I would appreciate a follow-up phone call with him in two weeks to let me know how he was doing. He agreed to call. Two weeks later Brandon called me to inform me that he was in a good place and had started feeling like his old self. He was still waiting to hear from the church committee, but had already taken it upon himself to go over to a fellow parishioner's home to wash his car for free.

How could Brandon have so quickly overcome his depression by simply washing his car? How could he start to feel better without an in-depth analysis of why he became depressed, an extensive examination of his cognitions, or lengthy discussions about the expectations that society places on him? The answer to these questions can be found when we explore the underlying concepts and methods of a strategic and solution-oriented approach in the next chapter.

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