

False Alarm: A Massaging Numb Values Crisis Intervention

Mary Beth Hewitt and Nicholas J. Long

The Massaging Numb Values Life Space Crisis Intervention addresses the problems of students who want to do well but cannot manage the effects of their failure or wrong actions. They have a conscience and experience guilt when they err, but instead of using mistakes as opportunities to rectify their behavior or make amends, they are overwhelmed by their inadequacy, which leads to self-defeating patterns of behavior.

"You don't believe it's okay to make a mistake, do you?" the interviewer queried. "No, it's OK to make mistakes, but it's not OK for ME!" the student vehemently replied as he dug at his hands.

Massaging Numb Values Crisis Interventions are designed to help students who can't live comfortably with the fact that they are not perfect. When they make a mistake either through impulsive actions or simply by being human, they cannot cope with the associated feelings of worthlessness, despair, and hopelessness. As a result, they often compound the original error by losing control.

They are what I refer to as the "gutter ball kids." Initially they may try hard to do a good job, but when their efforts fall short of their expectations, they crumble. The analogy of bowling comes to mind when thinking about this type of child. The kid steps up to the lane, with every intention of doing well and getting a strike. He or she throws the ball and it heads toward the pins, but only 9 of the 10 pins go down. The child is devastated that they didn't all fall down, so on the next try, he or she purposely throws the ball in the gutter. It is easier to live with the pain of "screwing up" on purpose than it is to live with what he or she perceives as total failure. Many of these students' self-esteem levels are so low, they decide in advance that they are going to goof up anyway, so why not get it over with.

Working with these students is often very confusing for adults. To us, it often appears as if there is no rhyme or reason to their behavior. Frequent phrases that come to mind are "What's the big deal?" "Why are you acting like this?" "You're just making it worse." In extreme cases, as the child

compounds the original "mistake," the adult starts to get the feeling that "this child wants to be punished." The adult has to fight the urge not to provide that punishment. Five typical cognitive traps these students fall into are

- *magnification* (gross exaggeration of the error);
- *labeling* (I made a mistake, therefore I am a mistake);
- *"should statements"* (I should have known better);
- *mental filter* (dwelling on a negative detail to the exclusion of everything else); and
- *overgeneralization* (a single event is seen as a never-ending pattern of defeat).

Once these students start digging their "emotional holes," it is extremely difficult for them to put their shovels down. Unless an adult is able to successfully intervene, they will continue to dig their holes deeper throughout the day. Frequently, what appears to the outside observer as an insignificant mistake or accident turns into a true disaster. I have seen students turn a single lost point on a management system into an in-school suspension in a few short minutes.

The goal of the Massaging Numb Values Crisis Intervention is to help show these students that they have more self-control than they realize. Because they are incapable of seeing their situation clearly, the adult needs to be able to point out the good decisions they have made. These students have no hope; their irrational belief systems make seeing the positive impossible. The adult's role is to help them see that there is hope, that they do have the ability to make good decisions, and that they can make mistakes and/or poor decisions without feeling they are worthless.

Background Information

Ted is a 10-year-old with above-average intelligence but very poor social interaction skills. He is a frequent target of teasing in his Option III classroom, where he is seen as the “nerd.” He tries to be helpful by what he would call “sharing his knowledge” but what his peers would refer to as “butting in” and “knowing it all.” He currently lives with his father, a recovering alcoholic, who has recently become very active in a fundamentalist-style church. There is an inordinate amount of pressure on Ted to be a “good” boy—pressure that Ted had already put on himself at a very young age, even before his father’s sudden interest in being socially appropriate. Ted came to our program 2 years ago following a psychiatric hospitalization for paranoid behavior and suicidal ideation. He is generally a very good student and follows the rules, almost to the point of being compulsive. He has extreme difficulty accepting any form of constructive criticism and has a temper that explodes when he cannot meet his own high expectations.

The Incident

It was math time, and Ted was working at the table with two other students. One of the students, William, is highly competitive in math. Ted finished first and offered to help William, an offer that was met by a very cruel response. Ted became very angry and screamed that he needed a “voluntary” and stormed out of the room. (Students can request a voluntary “cool-off time” out of the room when they feel like they are going to lose control.)

While in the hallway, Ted walked briskly, pounding on the cement block walls and muttering to himself. At the end of the hallway, he hit the wall, accidentally hitting the fire alarm button. (It was a new school and the alarm casing had not yet been installed to protect the button from being accidentally set off.) As the alarm rang, Ted immediately recognized what he had done and tried to fix the alarm so it would stop ringing. When he realized this was futile, he ran into my office and hid under the desk. I called the main office to tell them that it was a false alarm and the fire trucks should be diverted from coming. Unfortunately, the fire station was right next door, and the trucks were already on their way. The alarm was deactivated, and I turned my attention to Ted, who was curled up in the fetal position, crying and hitting his head on the underside of the desk.

The Drain-Off Stage

I got down on the floor next to Ted and stayed quiet. He was mumbling self-deprecating statements (“I’m so stupid.” “I never do anything right.” “I’m bad.”). He kept hit-

ting himself. I said, “Sounds like you’re feeling real bad about what happened and wish you could take it back.” He nodded and said, “Now everyone will know how stupid I am. The other kids will hate me, the firemen will hate me, the whole country will hate me. It’ll be in the paper, and the whole town will hate me. Tom Brokaw will have it on the news tonight, and the whole country will hate me. I deserve to be put in jail or worse and have everyone hate me.” (This type of expansive thinking is very characteristic of Ted’s behavior.) I said, “You feel you did something so terrible that you deserve to be punished, and no punishment is going to be enough.” Ted looked directly at me for the first time and said in a strong tone, “Even God won’t be able to punish me enough for being so bad.” I believed that his change in body language indicated that I had connected with his feelings and we were ready to move into the timeline stage.

The Timeline

I told Ted that I had no knowledge of what had happened, other than that he had hit the fire alarm. Would he help me to understand how that happened?

INTERVIEWER: Ted, all I know right now is that the fire alarm went off, and you feel you had something to do with it. Can you tell me what happened?

TED: I did it. I hit it. It’s all my fault.

INTERVIEWER: It’s great that you’re being honest and accepting responsibility for your actions. (Ted stopped hitting his head.) So you hit the fire alarm. How did that happen?

TED: I just took my stupid hand and hit it.

INTERVIEWER: Where were you?

TED: In the hallway. My father is going to kill me.

INTERVIEWER: You’re worried about what your Dad is going to say. We can talk about that in a minute, but first I need to find out what happened. Can you wait?

TED: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Who was in the hallway with you?

TED: Nobody. Just me.

INTERVIEWER: So you were in the hallway alone. Where were you going?

TED: No place. I was taking a stupid voluntary.

INTERVIEWER: A voluntary? You needed some alone time?

TED: Yeah. I should be alone forever. Locked up so I can’t do any more stupid things.

Even though I didn’t have all the information yet, I decided that Ted was in desperate need of some intense affirmations. He was loaded with excessive guilt and was definitely flogging himself unmercifully.

INTERVIEWER: Taking some alone time when we need it is a good decision.

TED: Not good enough.

It is not unusual for students such as Ted to discount any affirming statements. Rather than continuing to reflect his rebuttals, I chose to ignore them and press on.

INTERVIEWER: What happened to cause you to take a voluntary?

TED: I was so mad I wanted to rip his head off. I shouldn't have been so mad.

INTERVIEWER: Whose head?

TED: William's.

INTERVIEWER: You were angry with William. Tell me about it.

TED: I was just trying to help him, and he called me names and I got mad.

INTERVIEWER: Let's see if I've got this right. William called you names, and you got very angry. So angry you wanted to hurt him. But you didn't. Instead you made a good decision and asked for a voluntary and went into the hallway by yourself to cool down. While you were in the hallway, you hit the fire alarm. Have I got it right so far?

TED: I can never do anything right!

INTERVIEWER: I have a question. Did you hit the fire alarm on purpose or by accident? I mean, did you go out into the hallway and go right for the fire alarm?

TED: No. I was hitting the walls with my fist, and it just happened.

INTERVIEWER: So, it wasn't intentional. Were you surprised when the alarm went off?

TED: Yes. I didn't even know I had hit it. I should've been more careful. I never even looked. I should've known it was there, and I shouldn't have been pounding the walls anyway.

Selection of LSCI Interview and Insight Stage

Ted's excessive guilt and remorse, evidenced by his body language, self-deprecating statements, and cognitive traps of magnification—labeling, “should” statements, overgeneralization, and mental filter—were characteristic of his chronic nonproductive behavior pattern. I selected the Massaging Numb Values Crisis Intervention strategy with two goals: helping Ted see that he has more self-control than he realizes and helping Ted recognize that he is not the worthless human being that he thinks he is.

To accomplish this, we reviewed the timeline again, and I highlighted all the good decisions that he was incapable of

independently recognizing. I wrote down each good decision on a pad of paper.

INTERVIEWER: You were trying to help William?

TED: Yeah, I finished my math early and he wasn't done. So I tried to help him. I should've just left him alone.

INTERVIEWER: *(Writes down: Trying to help a fellow student)* But William didn't want your help and called you some names.

TED: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: And that made you angry. Did you call him names back?

TED: No. I wanted to, but I didn't.

INTERVIEWER: And you said before, you wanted to hurt him physically, but you didn't. *(Writes down: Wanted to call names back and hurt William but didn't)* Instead, you made a good decision and decided to take a voluntary. *(Writes down: Made a good decision to take a voluntary)*

TED: Yeah, but I still hit the fire alarm!

INTERVIEWER: It's hard for you to hear anything you might have done right when you are feeling so bad, isn't it?

TED: *(softly)* Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Let's go on. While you were in the hallway, you were hitting the walls. I have a question. All the time you were in the hallway, were there any other people there?

TED: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Did you hit them?

TED: *(looking shocked)* No, of course not.

INTERVIEWER: Even though you were angry, you didn't hit a person.

TED: No, I wouldn't hit anybody.

INTERVIEWER: So you just hit things that wouldn't get hurt. *(Writes down: Didn't harm others physically)*

TED: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: And in the hallway there are classroom doors. What did you do when you came to a door?

TED: I skipped over it.

INTERVIEWER: You mean you didn't hit the door?

TED: No, I just pounded the walls.

INTERVIEWER: Why didn't you pound on the doors?

TED: I didn't want to bother the classes.

Interviewer writes down: Considerate of the other classes.

Ted looks over at the list, and his whole body starts to relax.

INTERVIEWER: And when you got to the fire alarm, did you say to yourself, “Whoopee, hitting this will really be great”?

TED: No. I didn't even know it was there!

INTERVIEWER: Could you say that again?

TED: I didn't even know it was there.

INTERVIEWER: If you had known it was there, would you have hit it?

TED: Of course not. You're not supposed to hit fire alarms when there is no fire.

INTERVIEWER: So what you are saying is that hitting the fire alarm was a mistake.

TED: Yes. But I should have been looking.

INTERVIEWER: It is difficult for you to believe it is OK to make a mistake, isn't it?

TED: No, it's OK to make mistakes. But it's not OK for me!

INTERVIEWER: And when you realized you hit the fire alarm by accident, did you go, "Wow, this will really get the joint hopping. I'm so glad I did it"?

TED: No. I tried to fix it. I tried to shut it off, but it wouldn't shut off.

INTERVIEWER: You mean to tell me that you realized you had made a mistake and you tried to make it right?

TED: I guess so. Yes.

Interviewer writes down: Realized he made a mistake and tried to fix it immediately.

TED: (smiling) You know what, that alarm might even be defective. When I was trying to fix it, I noticed it said "Pull for alarm." I didn't pull it; I hit it.

Outcome Goals

I had two main goals for Ted. The first was to "massage" his awareness that he does have more self-control than he realizes. The second was to address his irrational belief that he has to be perfect and that if he makes a mistake, he is a mistake. To accomplish the first goal, I folded the piece of paper on which I had been writing in half. On one side at the top I wrote, "Good Decisions." On the other side I wrote, "Mistakes."

INTERVIEWER: Ted, earlier you said that you never do anything right. I wonder if you would read this list with me.

TED: OK.

INTERVIEWER AND TED:

- Trying to help a fellow student.
- Wanted to call names back and hurt William but didn't.
- Made a good decision to take a voluntary.
- Didn't harm others physically.
- Considerate of the other classes.
- Realized he made a mistake and tried to fix it immediately.
- Honest and accepts responsibility for his actions.

INTERVIEWER: How many things are on this list?

TED: Seven.

INTERVIEWER: (turning the paper over) Now how many things are on this list?

- Hit the fire alarm by mistake.

TED: One.

INTERVIEWER: Which is bigger: seven or one?

TED: Seven.

INTERVIEWER: Let's go back to your statement that you never do anything right. Does this evidence back that up?

TED: (smiling) Well, maybe I exaggerated a little.

INTERVIEWER: Is it possible that when you make a mistake, you forget all the good decisions you have made and feel like just giving up?

TED: Yeah.

Now that Ted had acknowledged that he did have the capacity for self-control and that he had made good decisions, we turned to his belief system regarding mistakes. I have found that sports analogies are particularly effective in helping students see that even the best players in a game are not even close to being perfect. Fortunately, Ted was a true baseball fan. I asked him to think of the greatest baseball player he knew. Then I asked him what that player's batting average was. It was around .300.

INTERVIEWER: Let's see, a .300. That means that out of every 10 times at bat, he hits the ball about 3 times, right?

TED: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: That means that he missed seven times?

TED: I guess so.

INTERVIEWER: Let me ask you a question. Do you think that he missed those balls on purpose?

TED: No, of course not.

INTERVIEWER: So, missing those balls was a mistake?

TED: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think he felt bad?

TED: Probably.

INTERVIEWER: Did he give up?

TED: No.

INTERVIEWER: Why didn't he just give up? I mean, he misses the ball more times than he hits it, after all.

TED: Because he's good.

INTERVIEWER: Even when he makes mistakes?

TED: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: And today you made a mistake, sort of like missing the ball. And when we count up all the good decisions you made, we got seven hits and one miss. You know what kind of batting average that would give you?

TED: What?

INTERVIEWER: About an .850.

TED: Wow!

INTERVIEWER: Ted, even the best ballplayers make mistakes and even the best kids make mistakes. The best ballplayers don't quit, they just keep on trying. Do you think you can keep on trying?

TED: (smiling shyly) I guess so.

Preparation for Return to Class

I felt that Ted's ability to put the mistake into its proper perspective and "forgive" himself for being human was tenuous at best. I also knew that other students in the room, particularly William, were prone to teasing Ted when he returned from being in trouble. I felt it was imperative to prepare Ted for how his classmates might react when he returned to the classroom. He anticipated that William might give him a hard time. I took the role of William, and we practiced a possible scenario. Ted was able to say, "I made a mistake, accepted responsibility for it, and am making reparations." (The word *reparations* was Ted's idea; he said it would probably confuse William, a thought that gave him much pleasure.)

Before I sent him back to class, Ted spoke with the chief of the fire department, who had been waiting to see him. The chief was direct, yet understanding, and believed that Ted had set the alarm off by accident. He admonished him to be more careful in the future and they shook hands. I then asked Ted if he still was worried about his father's reaction. He asked if when I called him, I could share with him the good decisions as well as the mistake. I assured him that I would. He then went back to class and successfully completed the day.

Instructional Comments —Nicholas Long

When a student is in his or her own "pit of despair," it is very difficult for the adult to not get bogged down in intense feelings of counterdepression. These students are so expert at discounting any positive statements that the interviewer often just wants to give up, which is exactly what the student wants to do. When students reject positive statements like Ted did, I've found that decoding their emotional message by saying something such as, "It's hard for you to hear nice things about yourself when you are feeling so bad" works.

I have also found that the physical act of writing down good decisions helps to keep those things uppermost in the interviewer's mind while he or she is being "assaulted" by the student's rebuttals. In essence, these rebuttals have no substance, and the positive written statements are concrete. Not only does writing help keep the interviewer focused, it also serves as concrete evidence for the student. Written feedback is far more powerful than verbalizations because it can be seen, read and reread, and kept.

Mary Beth Hewitt is the CHOICES coordinator for the Wayne-Finger Lakes BOCES and is a senior LSCI trainer. She can be reached at: 131 Drumlin Court, Newark, NY 14513; 315/332-7268; e-mail: mbhewitt@worldnet.att.net. Nicholas J. Long, PhD, is president of the Life Space Crisis Intervention Institute and co-editor of this journal. He can be reached at: Life Space Crisis Intervention Institute, 226 Landis Road, Hagerstown, MD 21740; phone/fax: 301/733-2751.