

“Today Was His Lucky Day”: A Symptom Estrangement Problem

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This reclaiming intervention is for students who justify their aggressive behaviors and are not motivated to change them. These types of young people minimize their problems, blame others, and sincerely believe their behavior is appropriate and that nothing is wrong with them. Their usual perceptions could be characterized as, “I’ll take care of myself” and “It’s not my problem.” When youth are comfortable with their hurtful behaviors, they are not motivated to change them.

Over the past several years, I have found the Symptom Estrangement Intervention to be one of the most challenging of all the Life Space Crisis Interventions (LSCI). During the crisis I am about to describe, I am dealing with a student who justifies negative behavior and is not motivated to change it. In this case—in LSCI terms—the goal of a Symptom Estrangement Intervention is to help such a youth become uncomfortable with his “symptoms” and divorce himself from these self-defeating behaviors.

Youth who hurt others without apparent remorse are very frustrating to teachers and caregivers. Such individuals can physically attack or hurt another student and, when confronted by the teacher, will play the role of victim. For example, such a youth will defend his behavior by stating that he was just protecting himself and that if he had really been mad, the student “would be a bloody mess, but today was his lucky day, because I held back.”

These students have beliefs epitomized by statements such as “I’ll take care of myself, no one will push me around” and “I have a reputation to maintain.” What makes this type of LSCI so difficult for staff members is the fact that they must not become counteraggressive, which is very hard to avoid with a student who is so comfortable with and embraces aggressive behaviors and who shows no visible signs of remorse or guilt. To validate his or her beliefs and negative behavior, an aggressive youth typically uses one or more of the following cognitive distortions:

1. “*He started it.*” The aggressor blames somebody else and magnifies the situation, thus justifying the use of revenge.
 2. “*It was no big deal.*” The aggressor minimizes the seriousness of his or her behavior and accuses staff members of overreacting.
 3. “*No one would have done anything.*” The student assumes the worst and believes that the adults won’t do anything, thus justifying his or her actions.
- According to Long and Fecser (1997), the goal of the Symptom Estrangement Intervention is to drop the pebble of a new idea in the student’s stagnant pool of thought in order to create cognitive dissonance. This is accomplished by benignly creating some ambivalence and anxiety in students about their belief that it is OK to take the law into their own hands. If they convince themselves it is OK, they can be cruel, hurt others, steal, and so forth, without feeling guilty. The adult’s strategy must be to expose this self-deception slowly while still maintaining a caring relationship. For this to occur, the adult must be skilled in benign confrontational strategies, such as the following:
1. Ask questions; don’t make statements. Questions put the responsibility onto the student and are less likely to escalate conflict, whereas judgmental statements usually are seen as a direct challenge to the student.
 2. Establish a time line that is accurate from the student’s point of view.
 3. Acknowledge the legitimacy of the youth’s feelings but not the behavior.
 4. Affirm the youth’s pride and intelligence, when appropriate.
 5. Identify his or her cognitive distortions that are used to justify aggressive behavior.
 6. Ask him or her why he or she is bringing the “law of the street” into the classroom.
 7. Emphasize that the youth is too smart to trick him- or herself into believing that it is OK to assault someone and then say it was the other student’s fault.
 8. Summarize by highlighting the student’s self-defeating

behavior and your plan for helping him or her to think clearly and develop more effective coping strategies.

Examples of these strategies are demonstrated in the following LSCI.

Background Information

Josh is a 14-year-old youth with conduct disorder. He is openly defiant of adult authority, and all directives pose a challenge to him. Josh (not his real name) is a tough, brooding, intelligent boy who has been abandoned by his natural parents and currently lives with his grandparents. He has been enrolled in Mountainbrook Psychoeducational Day Treatment Program for the past school year. Josh has made significant progress in our program but still sees himself as a tough guy who has a reputation to protect, and the maintenance of this reputation is very important to him.

Instigating Conditions

For the past few days, several of the students have been involved in “flicking each other off” (throwing paper wads). When confronted by the teacher, each student will blame the other for starting it and state that he or she was “only responding back.” Chad, who is new to our program, decided that his “honeymoon period” was now over and that it was time to try testing teacher limits and authority. Chad started to flick off Josh and the other students. Of course, Josh decided to flick back. At this time, the teacher got involved and requested that this behavior stop. All the students complied except Chad. As the teacher turned away, Chad flicked off Josh, who immediately got out of his seat to confront Chad. The teacher quickly directed Josh to sit back at his desk. Josh angrily stated that Chad had continued to flick him off even after the teacher asked everyone to stop, and that he had done the same thing yesterday and the day before. Josh wasn’t “going to take it anymore from that little S.O.B.” Because Josh was becoming verbally abusive, the teacher directed him out into the hallway so that they could talk about this problem. As they started toward the door, the teacher’s back was turned toward Chad; she thus did not see Chad giving Josh the “finger” while smiling at him. This was too much for Josh to handle; he pushed by the teacher and charged at Chad. The teacher immediately called for assistance and attempted to pull Josh off of Chad. By the time I arrived to assist, Josh had struck Chad several times in the face. Because I had a generally positive relationship with Josh, when I put my hand on his shoulder, he settled right down and accompanied me to a quiet room, where I began the LSCI process.

Stage 1: The Drain Off

During the time it took to move to the quiet room, Josh regained complete control of his emotions. The drain-off

stage usually is very brief for students with conduct disorder because they feel that their behavior is justified and pride themselves on being in charge of their actions.

INTERVIEWER: Josh, I really appreciate your walking into the quiet room with me. It shows me you are making good choices.

JOSH: Yeah, it was no big deal [*minimizing the situation*].

INTERVIEWER: Well, I think it was. Here you were, mad at Chad, in a fight, and had to be pulled off. I appreciate your settling down so quickly.

At this time, I was attempting to maintain my relationship with Josh, make him somewhat comfortable, and give him positive reinforcement for appropriate choices in willingly coming to engage in a discussion about his behavior.

Stage 2: Establishing the Time Line

INTERVIEWER: Josh, I wasn’t in the class when the fight started. Would you please tell me what happened?

JOSH: Chad started it [*blaming others*]. He’s been bugging me since he started here. He thinks he’s tough but he’s just a p——. He always does things behind the teacher’s back so he doesn’t get caught. Today, he was flicking me off, and I wasn’t going to take anymore of his crap. It was his fault; he shouldn’t have flicked me off.

INTERVIEWER: I agree he shouldn’t have flicked you off and given you the finger. It made you mad. I can understand your feelings, but tell me what you did and how you acted.

JOSH: I hit him a few times, but I didn’t hit him hard. If I had wanted, I really could have hurt him. I took it easy on him; it was his lucky day [*minimizing*].

INTERVIEWER: Well, Josh, I really appreciate your self-control. I can understand how mad you were at Chad, yet you were able to show some restraint.

At this time, Josh was much more relaxed and quite involved in the interview. With Josh being sure of himself now, I felt I could gradually ask questions that I hoped would focus on his comfort level with this behavior and the pleasure that he got out of being aggressive.

Stage 3: Establishing the Central Issue: Symptom Estrangement

INTERVIEWER: Josh, let me ask you a question here. When Chad flicked you off, you got angry, but what I don’t understand is that you chose to hit him.

JOSH: Well, he flicked me off.

INTERVIEWER: I understand that, but you had other choices. You could have walked away, ignored him, or told the teacher.

JOSH: Ms. Jean wouldn't have done anything [*assuming the worst*].

INTERVIEWER: Did you ask for help?

JOSH: No, but I can take care of myself.

INTERVIEWER: Well, you can't read Ms. Jean's mind, so you really don't know if she would have done anything. You chose not to ask, is that correct? You decided you were in charge of the class, and you chose to punish Chad.

JOSH: Well, I guess, but he started it! He flicked me off.

INTERVIEWER: Didn't you just say that you take care of yourself?

JOSH: Well, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Josh, let me ask you another question. You have a reputation at school and on the street for being a fighter, don't you [*acknowledging his strengths and perhaps tapping into his pride*]?

JOSH: I may be small, but I've learned to take care of myself. In fact, there are some kids who [*sic*] I don't even know who come up to me and ask if I am Josh.

INTERVIEWER: So you really can take care of yourself?

JOSH: You got that right!

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that your classmates know your reputation?

JOSH: Yeah, they do.

INTERVIEWER: Then, help me understand [*make him the expert*]. Let me ask you, did you need to attack Chad, since all the students know how tough you are?

JOSH: Well, he did start it.

Josh was getting a little anxious here. In the following exchange, I keep communication going by putting Josh in the role as the expert on himself. I also begin posing more questions to challenge his thinking.

INTERVIEWER: I understand that, and you have a right to be upset with Chad [*acknowledging legitimacy of his feelings but not his actions*]. But what I don't understand is how you can bring that aggressive behavior into the school. Josh, this is just a thought, but by protecting your "rep," does that allow you to hurt someone without feeling responsible? What do you think?

JOSH: Well, I didn't hit him that hard.

Josh is beginning to see his response was not justified, so he is experiencing some discomfort and cognitive dissonance. This

thinking error of minimizing is probably used to protect himself from feeling any guilt or from looking bad in the eyes of others.

INTERVIEWER: I know that, Josh. But you are too smart to trick yourself into believing that it is OK to attack someone and then say it was the other student's fault, especially here at school. You know this behavior is not allowed here.

Josh was really looking very uncomfortable, which showed me he was really listening to what was being discussed.

JOSH: I know, but Chad did start it [*said with great tentativeness*].

INTERVIEWER: I agree that he started it [*validating Josh*]. Still, you need to really think about what we just discussed here. You have to think about your being physically aggressive and saying it is OK. Josh, let me ask you: Did this behavior help you or hurt you in this program? Is it worth all this trouble?

This is the crux of motivation to change, namely, helping Josh recognize that his established patterns of aggressive coping strategies—which might have given him some status and protection on the streets—are self-defeating in the long run.

JOSH: No, it didn't help, but I didn't start it. [*Josh is quite anxious at this time.*]

INTERVIEWER: That's true, you didn't start it. However, it was your choice to hit Chad, and you know there will be consequences for your action.

JOSH: What are you going to do?

INTERVIEWER: Of course, we have to follow the school policies about consequences for fighting. But even more important, I want you to think very carefully about what you will do next time if a similar situation should occur again.

JOSH: I won't get into a fight next time.

INTERVIEWER: I appreciate that, Josh, but if you do, I will consider it an aggressive pattern of behavior that needs to be confronted.

JOSH: Well, I guess I could ask for time-for-self. [*This is a self-management technique that allows a student to take an appropriate time-out without consequences.*]

INTERVIEWER: That is one solution. How would you feel if I involved you in some anger management techniques?

JOSH: OK.

INTERVIEWER: Will you try it?

JOSH: Sure.

INTERVIEWER: Great! [*Josh shook my hand, and we walked back to class.*]

Reentry

On the way back to class, I discussed with Josh what the class was currently doing. I asked him if he could walk into class, go to his desk, and begin his work. He stated that he could. I also informed Josh that Chad was still in the classroom. How would he respond if Chad teased him? Josh stated he was just going to ignore Chad and do his work. If there was a problem, he would tell the teacher or take time-for-self. Josh reentered the room and had a successful day.

Instructional Comments

The Symptom Estrangement interview is difficult to conduct. We are confronted with an aggressive student who is very comfortable with his behavior and has no desire to change. In this situation, teachers can easily become counteraggressive and get caught in a power struggle. Because of the level of verbal or physical aggression these students can display, the teacher wants to quickly solve the problem and "cure" the child. Unfortunately, with youth who have conduct disorder, this is a slow, arduous process. In the metaphor often used by Long, we are only dropping a pebble of a new idea into their pool of thought.

Several times during the interview, I asked Josh to question his behavioral choices and evaluate them. The pur-

pose was twofold: to create some anxiety and feelings of responsibility in Josh about his aggressive behavior and to help him develop positive alternatives to physical aggression. Josh's patterns of thinking and acting are deeply entrenched, so this new way of thinking and behaving will have to be reinforced in the naturally occurring context of future conflicts, and perhaps in subsequent interviews. As we have seen, Josh took pride in his aggressive acts; therefore, it was necessary to make him uncomfortable with hurting others. In LSCI terms, the goal of a Symptom Estrangement Intervention is to help such a youth *divorce* him- or herself from self-defeating behaviors.

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REFERENCE

Long, N. J., & Fecser, F. A. (1997). *Life Space Crisis Intervention trainer's manual*. Hagerstown, MD: Life Space Crisis Intervention Institute.



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