

Case Study – Lynette (March 2010)

Background

Lynette is a precocious sixteen-year-old, female who is a sophomore at an urban public high school. She is not very interested in school; at her last grading period she got mostly C's. She was referred to a school counselor because a teacher caught her with a small amount of marijuana.

A brief clinical interview indicated that Lynette is a weekend marijuana smoker and that she had experienced a significant life stress of late. Her father passed away about a year ago and, as the only child, the adjustment for her and the relationship with her mother has been difficult. Lynette admits that she started smoking marijuana about two years ago and has increased her use since her father's death.

Lynette requested that her mother not participate in the brief intervention.

Session 1

The therapist was careful to ask open-ended questions, probing whether Lynette saw her marijuana use as a problem. Lynette said she thought the teacher was over-reacting, she didn't use much marijuana, no more than her friends anyway, and she didn't think it was a big deal. She said she'd never tried to cut back since she started. This suggests that Lynette was in the precontemplation stage for changing her behavior. She also exhibited some typical attitudes of an adolescent, declaring in a challenging tone that she had a right to make her own decisions about smoking and was not very interested in counseling.

The therapist reassured her that he agreed she had a right to make her own decisions, and asked her if she would agree to spend some time talking about how

marijuana use affected her life. Lynette was willing to do the pros and cons exercise. She identified the main benefit of her use as helping her to have fun when she was with her boyfriend. The boyfriend was eighteen years old and had a steady supply of the drug. Lynette also indicated that smoking helped her relax.

Lynette did not initially identify any negatives effects of using marijuana. The therapist continued to probe, observing that almost everything people do has both negative and positive effects and asked again if there wasn't anything about using marijuana that caused difficulty for her. She said one negative aspect of using was that it upset her mother. She further indicated that her mother was also concerned with the relationship she was having with the older boyfriend, and that her dad "would have been very mad at me if he knew I were using."

The therapist asked her if there was anything else she could think of. With some probing by the therapist, Lynette admitted that if she continued to use, she may have trouble getting passing grades in school. She was getting Cs, and was growing less and less interested in school. She said that her mother did not seem to care all that much that she was bringing home a report card with mostly Cs.

It was difficult for Lynette to think about changing her drug use behavior. At the end of the pros and cons exercise, she still did not see her use as a problem; she saw the benefits of use outweighing any consequences. The therapist asked her to tell him where she would place herself on the 10-point Readiness to Change Scale. She chose "2" suggesting that she was still in the precontemplation stage.

As they moved into the goal-setting portion of the intervention, the therapist decided to focus on the issue about Lynette's relatively poor grades and growing

disinterest in school, and the issue that poor grades would have upset her father. So the therapist emphasized to Lynette that there can be a strong connection between reducing or stopping her marijuana use and improving her school performance. The therapist was able to draw out of Lynette that she often used marijuana before school and would never let homework get in the way of using in the evening. The therapist steered Lynette into an expanded discussion about how her use of marijuana is directly interfering with her academic progress.

Lynette agreed that she was showing bad judgment in using before school and instead of doing homework. The therapist asked Lynette, “Would you like to do anything about this?” With some reluctance, Lynette responded that it might be a good idea if she were to stop using marijuana before school. (It seemed Lynette had moved into the contemplation stage within the session.) However, she did not seem interested in further discussing the problem of using in the evening instead of doing homework. So the therapist negotiated with Lynette the goal of not using before school for all of the school days from now until the next session, which was in about ten days. (This harm reduction goal is somewhat controversial, given that Lynette is a minor and is using an illegal substance. Still, given that she was in the contemplation stage, the therapist believed that insisting on abstinence right now would create resistance.)

Lynette admitted that the toughest thing about the goal they had negotiated might be the hassle she would receive from her boyfriend, who also typically used before school. The therapist and Lynette discussed some ways to deal with this issue. Suggestions included what to say (“Its okay, you go ahead and use; I don’t want to right

now.”), as well as the strategy of just not telling him all the time whether she has used or not before school.

Lynette agreed to meet with the therapist again in ten days to discuss how things had progressed.

Session 2

This session began by revisiting the goals negotiated during the first session. Lynette admitted that it was not all that difficult to not use before school, and she felt some satisfaction for showing some self-control. And schoolwork seemed easier for her to complete. Perhaps she was experiencing some positive results that are so important in keeping client’s engaged. Lynette now placed herself at a “5” on the Readiness to Change Scale – up from a 2 at the first session.

The therapist took advantage of this modest improvement in the positive direction and encouraged Lynette to think about more meaningful changes in her drug use and perhaps changes in other aspects of her life. Lynette showed only moderate interest in this line of discussion. So the therapist shifted the discussion about how things are going with the boyfriend. Lynette quickly took this opportunity to paint a frustrating picture about the relationship. The therapist drew out of Lynette that she feels that his heavy drug use and aimless approach to things is a problem. The therapist encouraged Lynette to think about what she would like to do with the relationship. It was decided that Lynette would now work on two longer-term goals: 1) to further explore her marijuana use by trying to go for two weeks without using at all (this goal was not volunteered by Lynette but was introduced by the therapist), 2) and to start the process of further exploring her

interest in continuing the relationship with her boyfriend by keeping notes of pros and cons of the relationship.

Lynette and the therapist discussed problem-solving strategies associated with both of these goals, and it was agreed that the two would meet again in three months. The therapist reminded Lynette that her mother may be a good resource and that she should also rely on her friends if she needs support as she makes these changes. It was comforting to the therapist that Lynette not only agreed with this but that she talked at some length about how her mother is a good person to confide in and that she also has a couple girlfriends with whom she is close.

Discussion Questions

1. What did you like about the way the therapist handled the 2 sessions?

2. What you did not like about the way the therapist handled the 2 sessions.

3. If you were conducting a session with the mother, what goals would you strive for?
