

"Lost? Or Stuck?" An Adlerian Technique for Understanding the Individual's Psychological Movement

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Abstract

"Lost? or Stuck?" is a strategy designed to understand and assess individual psychological movement relative to problem solving. This brief strategy is helpful in recognizing personal problem-solving strategies, modifying the strategies when warranted, and applying personal problem-solving strategies to current challenges. Four case demonstrations of the "Lost? or Stuck?" strategy are presented.

Individual Psychology is a psychology of movement. It is through this movement that the individual expresses his or her unique orientation to self, others, and the world. When clients come to the counselor/therapist, it is usually because some situation or experience has occurred for which they are ill prepared to cope. In terms of their "style of life," they either do not know what to do or, in contrast, have been doing all of the "wrong" things. To be helpful, the counselor/therapist needs to gather information that allows for gaining an understanding of the client's pattern of movement or lifestyle. As this is identified and understood by both the client and the counselor/therapist, the problem situation can be reexamined and alternative solutions developed. The client can then begin to make changes that allow him or her to move in more socially useful ways.

Alfred Adler presented the strategy of *The Question* in the 1929 publication, *Problems of Neurosis*. In his discussion of the neurotic lifestyle, Adler talked about the problems confronting a patient being of two types: They were either organically based physical illnesses or psychologically based mistaken beliefs about life. To ascertain which of these was at issue, Adler would ask The Question: "What would you do if I cured you immediately?" (Adler, 1929/1964, p. 72). Rudolf Dreikurs (as cited in Terner & Pew, 1978) further elaborated on the technique: "What would be different in your life if you were well?" and noted that

the answer to the question is significant. If the symptom is of neurotic origin, the answer indicates against whom or what condition the symptom is directed. (p. 185)

Mosak and Maniacci's (1998) version of The Question takes this form: "If I were to give you a magic pill (or wave a magic wand) and remove all of your symptoms immediately and forever, what would be different in your life?" (p. 15).

In addition to The Question, numerous Adlerians have proposed a variety of diagnostic techniques for assessing the psychological movement of clients. Some discuss fairly extensive strategies for assessing the client's lifestyle (e.g., Powers & Griffith, 1987; Shulman & Mosak, 1988); others have offered brief techniques. For example, Frank Walton's "Most Memorable Observation" (as cited in Evans & Milliren, 1999) provides clues to the dynamics of the family and the decisions that the parent made in adolescence about how family life was *going to be* (or how it was *NOT going to be*) when he or she had the opportunity to raise his or her own family.

Use of this technique can allow the counselor to help a parent see how he or she: 1) overemphasizes the likelihood of occurrence of a situation the parent guards against; 2) overemphasizes the negative influence of such a situation if it should occur; and 3) underestimates his or her ability to deal with the situation in an effective problem-solving way if it should occur. (Walton, 1996, p. 4)

"Lost? Or Stuck?"

More recently, Wes Wingett has suggested an additional brief strategy that is called "Lost? or Stuck?" This strategy is appropriate for use with adolescents and adults and is most useful during the psychological investigation phase of Adlerian counseling and therapy. It is our belief that every individual possesses all the internal resources that are needed for coping with the problems of living. Although these resources may be unknown to the individual or thought to be unavailable, each one of us has a strategy or set of strategies for problem solving. The purpose of "Lost? or Stuck?" is to help a client identify his or her unique and creative problem-solving approach and ultimately move from "lost" to "found" or from "stuck" to "free." Once the individual's problem-solving approach has been identified, the activity of the counselor/therapist and client dialogue is to explore and examine the usefulness of this particular strategy in solving the problems of living. As this dialogue develops, the strategy can be rethought and revised so that it can be applied to the current problematic situation. During this process, the overlying consideration on the part of the counselor/therapist is to assess the extent to which the revised strategy moves the client toward an enhanced level of social interest while at the same time solving the problem.

The first phase of the strategy is for the counselor/therapist to listen for key words "lost" or "stuck" as the client describes the current problematic

situation. Many times when individuals describe the situations that brought them into counseling, they will use the words "lost" or "stuck" as a way to conceptualize the problem. For example, "I'm lost. I don't know where to turn." Or, "I am lost in my relationship with my spouse." Or, "I have tried everything and I always end up stuck in the same old rut." Or, "I am stuck in this mess and don't see any way out!"

The second phase of the strategy is eliciting from the individual a time in the past when he or she was lost or stuck. The client is invited to relate a time in the past when he or she was "lost" or "stuck" with an invitation such as, "Tell me about a time in your life when you were lost while traveling or you were lost and could not find your way home. Maybe you were lost trying to find an address or you were lost in a shopping mall." Or, "Tell me about a time in your life when you were stuck in the snow or sand or mud." The client will then begin to share a story from his or her past that will provide an outline of his or her unique problem-solving strategy.

The third phase of the strategy is to define the components of the individual's problem-solving approach that have been successful in the past. When reviewing with the individual how they "found the way out" of the problem or became "unstuck," the counselor/therapist listens for cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of the individual's problem-solving process. For example, when the individual realized that he or she was "lost" or "stuck," how did he or she think and feel and act? When the individual began to take the initial steps toward problem solving, how did he or she think and feel and act? When the individual had solved the problem, how did he or she think or feel or act? What choices did the individual make that may have precipitated the initial problematic situation? What preventative steps can be taken or have been taken since the first incident? Were people involved in the initial problem and, if so, what people?

The last phase, useful during the reeducation/reorientation phase of Adlerian counseling and therapy, is the application of appropriate and effective components of the problem-solving approach to the current problem. What kind of "self-talk" is warranted? How do you want to feel before, during, and after the resolution of the situation? What actions will you take that will be rational, intelligent, sensitive to self and others, and effective and efficient? How will other people be involved in the problem-solving process? What will be done to prevent problems from occurring in the future?

The Snow Storm

The following is an example of the strategy as it was employed in a recent counseling interview.

Counselor: Tell me about a time in your life when you were lost or stuck. You may have been lost trying to find a place or lost in a mall or stuck in the sand or mud or snow.

Client: Well, it was before I was married and I was still living at home. I was driving home from work after a bad snowstorm and I thought I could make it home. Well, I was a few miles from home and I started to slide off the road and I ended up in the ditch and I couldn't move the car.

Counselor: And then what did you do?

Client: Well, I sat there for a while feeling stupid, and then I decided I had better do something before it got dark. I bundled up and started walking toward a farm place that I saw.

Counselor: And then what?

Client: I got to the farm place and saw a light on in the house and walked up to the back door and knocked on it.

Counselor: And what were you thinking?

Client: I thought, "There is a light on, and I'll bet there are people in the house that might help me out of my ditch dilemma."

Counselor: And then what happened?

Client: An older couple came to the door and invited me into the house. I told them my story and warmed up. The husband and I took one of his tractors down to my car and we pulled the car out of the ditch. I offered to pay him, but he wouldn't take anything but a "Thank You." I proceeded home slowly and thankfully.

Counselor: Let me see if I understand the situation. You were unmarried, living at home. You were driving home after a snowstorm, and you slid into a ditch. You sat there for a while and then you bundled up and walked up to a farmhouse and knocked on the door. A couple answered the door, invited you to warm up, listened to your story, and offered to help. You and the helpful husband pulled your car out of the ditch, you offered to pay him, he refused, and you proceeded cautiously and thankfully home.

Client: Yes, that's it. That's how it happened.

Counselor: And that's how you solved the problem. Now, let's examine the problem-solving process that you utilized from beginning to end.

Client: Sounds good to me.

Counselor: First you realized that you had a problem and did some negative self-talk.

Client: Yes, I reminded myself of my stupidity and replayed some lectures about driving too fast in the snow and not having snow tires and taking unnecessary chances.

Counselor: After you surveyed the situation, you decided to bundle up and walk toward the farmhouse. How did you make that decision?

Client: Well, I thought I could probably stay in the car and wait for someone to find me, or I could walk to the farmhouse that was about a half-mile away. It was not freezing cold and I had some extra clothes in the car and I thought there was probably enough daylight left to easily make it to the farm place.

Counselor: And what were you thinking as you approached the farm place and saw the lights on in the house?

Client: I was thinking that I hoped people were there, and that they would be Midwestern farm folks who would probably help me if they could.

Counselor: And you knocked on the door?

Client: Uh-huh. The husband and wife answered and invited me in to warm up. I told them my story and asked for help.

Counselor: How was it for you to ask for help?

Client: A little scary. However, I thought they would probably help if they could. And they did.

Counselor: And you worked together to pull the car out of the ditch, and you offered to pay him and he refused, and you went on your way. So, the steps that you utilized in solving the problem were: 1) surveying the situation for possible options, 2) identifying sources of help, 3) asking for help from people that you did not know, 4) offering payment and verbal thanks to your helper, and 5) proceeding cautiously toward your destination.

Client: Yes, that is what I did. I never broke it down into steps like that before.

Counselor: What would happen if you applied those same five steps to your current problematic situation?

Client: I don't know for sure, but I am willing to give it a try.

This first example demonstrates the use of the strategy to identify an individual's personal problem-solving style. This particular individual's problem-solving style will be an effective tool for her in solving future problems that she may encounter, provided "farm houses" are available to her. It is clear that she is able to ask for help; it is not so clear what her strategy is if no one is available to hear the request, or if the request for help is denied. Although she is able to use her strategy in the current problem situation, the counselor/therapist may wish to explore with her what she could do when help is not readily available.

The Train Station

In this next example, we have an opportunity to discover some possible faulty thinking on the part of the individual as he has solved problems in the past.

Counselor: Tell me about a time in your life when you were lost or stuck. You may have been lost trying to find a place, or lost in a mall or some building, or stuck in the sand, mud, or snow.

Client: Well, what comes to mind just happened this past summer. I was in Chicago and needed to catch a train to the suburbs. I caught a cab to Union Station, and the driver asked if I minded if he let me out on the backside of the place. As I was getting out of the cab and getting my bags together, I realized that I had no idea where I was—nothing looked familiar—or where I needed to go. I had no sense that I was being scammed or taken advantage of by the cab driver, so I knew I was where I needed to be. I just didn't know what I needed to do next. Having my bags with me, I wasn't too excited about doing a lot of walking to figure out where I was because I sure didn't want to be dragging all that luggage around with me.

Counselor: And then what happened?

Client: I have to think about that because I don't think I really did anything significant. All of a sudden, though, this African American, I assumed homeless, woman showed up. I didn't notice her earlier nor did I see where she came from. It's like she just kind of magically appeared. Anyway, she asked if I needed help or something like that and said she was trying to earn the price of a hotel room so she could take a bath. That really didn't click at first, but I soon realized that her assistance was for sale! I told her I was looking for the main terminal so I could catch my train.

To make a long story short, for a \$20 bill, she walked me down along the tracks to the opposite end of the building where the ticket counters and concessions were located. It was really quite easy but I hadn't a clue! Made me realize, in the bargain, that here was a person we might classify as a failure in life being quite successful using what she knew. Maybe there is a message there—to never underestimate a person's assets and capabilities!

Oh! And, I almost forgot this part—I asked the woman where I might be able to get a bite to eat, and she gave me the rundown on several places in the immediate area where I could eat fairly cheaply. She really knew the area, and that knowledge was her means to an end. I noticed after she left me, she stopped a young couple and gave them some assistance of one sort or another, and they paid her a few dollars. You just can't beat ingenuity!

Counselor: And then what happened after you got to where the ticket counters and concessions stands were located?

Client: It was amazing just how relieved I felt. There is something about traveling (by air or train or whatever) that gives me a panicky feeling at times. It's like you have no control and they could care less about you: They leave on their schedule no matter what! Not that they don't care, I don't mean that. It's just that if you don't have it right, you could be left behind. So, it was a relief, and I was there in plenty of time. I hunted

around for a place to have some lunch and then waited around for the train to arrive.

In looking back, the whole thing felt somewhat surreal to me. I don't know how to explain it! Just very confusing and strange. And it's like this woman showed up out of nowhere! Just when I needed her!

Counselor: Let me see if I understand your situation. You caught a cab to Union Station and were let out at the backside of the place. You realized that you were lost, and a woman approached you and asked if you needed help for a price. She helped you find where you needed to go and pointed you in the direction of good places to eat. You were relieved when you had the problem resolved and were on your way again.

Client: Yes, that's what happened.

Counselor: Now, let's explore your problem-solving approach. The steps you utilized include: 1) recognizing the problem; 2) appearing to be needing help and being approached by someone who offers help; 3) acknowledging the assets and strengths of the individual offering help; 4) asking for more help after the initial help is utilized; and 5) feeling relieved when the problem was resolved.

Client: Yes, that's the way I usually go about the business of problem solving.

Counselor: I'm wondering what you think of the way you approach the business of problem solving.

Client: Well, it's usually worked so far. However, I'm not sure I am comfortable with the part where I appear helpless and wait for others to approach me.

Counselor: When you appear helpless and wait for others to approach you, it sounds to me like you are waiting to be discovered rather than discovering what needs to be done.

Client: I don't like that part where I am "waiting to be discovered"! I could take charge more quickly when I know that I need help.

Counselor: You recognize and acknowledge the assets and strengths of others. Maybe you could use that skill to identify and approach people who could be helpful.

In this second example, we discovered the faulty step in the client's problem-solving approach. Of interest is the fact that this individual's problematic situation was occurring simply because he was still "waiting to be discovered." This aspect of the client's problem-solving approach was explored in depth. He was able to recognize how his "last born" status set him up for an expectation of "discovery." With four older siblings, he learned early in life that the world would be there to take care of him. This belief created a worldview that did not include asking others for help because he always expected someone to come to his rescue. Recognition of this

aspect helped him to move forward on his own behalf and ask for the help he needed when he needed it.

Bingo in the Fog

In the next example, we begin to see how the technique helps to identify a lifestyle problem-solving pattern for the client.

Counselor: Tell me about a time in your life when you were lost or stuck. Maybe you were lost while traveling or were lost and could not find your way home or you were lost in a shopping mall. Or, tell me about a time in your life when you were stuck in the snow or sand or mud. Just tell me what comes to mind without censoring.

Client: About 10 years ago, when we had just moved here, my in-laws came down for a visit. My mother-in-law loves to go to Bingo and wanted to go to the bingo hall in Odessa. At the time we lived in Midland, and I had only driven into Odessa just a few times, but I felt confident that I could find the bingo hall with some instructions. We found the bingo hall with no trouble. We stayed for over 4 hours, both sessions, and when we went to leave thick fog had laid its "shadow" over Odessa.

Well, I made it to the interstate, but I thought I was on Highway 191. After driving for a few minutes, in fog so thick I could hardly see, my mother-in-law asked me to pull off the road to wait for the fog to lift. So, at the next exit, I pulled off and we waited. After a good 30 minutes, the fog didn't give up, so I decided to try again. I pulled onto the interstate and began driving, not knowing I was on I-20, instead of 191. Well, with the fog, the new road, and my mother-in-law's panic, I did not know if I was going in the right direction or not.

Well, I admitted to my mother-in-law I felt a little lost. Anyway, I kept going, and after 30 minutes of driving, I knew something was wrong. I knew it didn't take 30 minutes to go from Odessa to Midland. By now it is 2:00 or so in the morning, and there are no other cars on the road. I could not find any signs, and the two of us started to panic. My mother-in-law told me we must have gotten mixed up and we were headed to El Paso and to turn around and go back the same way we came. So, I turned around and started heading back the way we had just come. About 25 minutes go by and I saw a sign for Odessa exits, so I pulled back off and went back into Odessa. We pulled up to a convenience store and I went inside to ask where I was.

The nice lady explained that I was on the interstate not Highway 191. She told me how to get on 191 and off we went again. The fog had not lifted and my mother-in-law was in a total panic. Finally, after two and a half hours, we arrived back in Midland. Well, of course, my husband and

father-in-law had already called the police because it is now 4:00 something in the morning and they thought we had had an accident. . . . Well, I have never been able to live that one down.

Counselor: Tell me a little about how you felt during all this. You mentioned the confidence and your mother-in-law's panic; what else was going on for you? Do you recall what you were thinking to yourself?

Client: Well, at first I felt nervous. I had only been married a short time and, being as young as I was, I did not want to look like a fool in front of my mother-in-law. Then the nervousness spread through me and I felt hot all over and embarrassed to admit that I she might be right—that I might be so stupid as to have gotten completely turned around and headed towards El Paso. When the 20-minute drive turned into 35 minutes, I got scared because I had only lived in Midland for about 2 months, knew no one, and really didn't know my way around. I kept telling my mother-in-law it was okay and we were going in the right direction. But after 35 minutes, I had to admit I really didn't know if I was going in the right direction or not.

Turning around and driving across the median to go the other way on a heavily fogged road made my heart pound. After turning around, my emotions turned into anger, for I didn't want to go to Odessa in the first place to play bingo. After talking to the lady, I was totally embarrassed . . . and hoped I would never see her again . . . for what idiot gets lost between Midland and Odessa? When we finally reached home, I took out all my emotions on my husband and then felt relieved. Through this whole thing I kept telling myself that I knew I was heading in the right direction, that if I just held on a little longer I would find my way, but the "sheep" part in me led me to thinking I really didn't know what I was doing.

Counselor: How does this compare with your typical approach to solving life's problems? It strikes me as a very determined and "I can do it" attitude. Do you kind of "charge on" hoping things will take care of themselves as you go?

Client: Yes, I never thought of it that way, but, yes, I do keep charging on hoping that everything will turn out okay in the end. I keep pushing through the "fog" with a positive attitude that life is good and people are good and in the end things will be what they should have been anyway . . . Well, that was a light bulb experience! I never thought of it that way before.

Counselor: The next question might be to evaluate how well that works for you. When is it the best approach? When might some other choice be better? Are you aware of times when this "positive, charge ahead, pushing through the fog" has gotten you in deeper whereas another strategy would have worked better?

Client: When is the best approach? Well, I think that I do the charging on when I first think I can do it or I can accomplish it. When might some

other choice be better? Well, when the charging on collapses and I could use another type of strategy like stepping back and just watching. The pushing through the fog has gotten me into hot water many times, and others that have observed these situations have commented that I look like a know-it-all when this style does not work.

Counselor: And what might happen if you recognized that when you saw the fog it might be worth your while to step back and allow the fog to lift?

Client: I might stay out of hot water.

Counselor: And what would happen if you "stayed out of hot water"?

Client: I wouldn't appear to be a "know-it-all" and many of my relationships could be better.

Counselor: And how would that be useful to you?

Client: The thought that pops into my mind is one time when my strategy did not work with one of my bosses. The charging on through proved to be a bad choice . . . And, in hindsight, stepping back and looking and observing instead of jumping in and taking charge would have been a better choice. I wound up destroying that relationship when I might have improved upon it!

Based on the previous comment, it seems likely that this client offends as many people as she may help when she employs her "jumping in" strategy as a first choice in problem solving. It would be useful for the counselor/therapist and client to explore the ifs and whens of this problem-solving approach to life's challenges. The focus for the process might be: "Is it possible that you need to develop a strategy for using your strategy? How will you decide which approach is better? Jumping in or holding back?" This way, the client can be helped to discover the most effective approach without having to experience the loss of relationships.

Anger in the Field

This final example demonstrates a positive use of anger as the individual thinks through her unique and creative way of becoming "unstuck."

Counselor: Tell me about a time in your life when you were lost or stuck. Maybe you were lost while traveling or were lost and could not find your way home or you were lost in a shopping mall. Or, tell me about a time in your life when you were stuck in the snow or sand or mud. Just tell me what comes to mind without censoring.

Client: Well, I was about 14 or 15 years old, and it was in the spring of the year and fieldwork had started. My dad told me to take the big tractor and disk, and disk the field south of town. He reminded me that this field had some parts that were wet and I might get stuck if I didn't avoid the wet spots.

Well, I set off for the field. I was pleased to be driving the big tractor with the disk. I pulled into the field and looked around at some of the wet spots and began disking. All went well for quite a while, and then I got too close to the edge of one of the wet spots with the disk, and the disk became mired in the mud; I knew that I couldn't get out, so I stopped the tractor.

Counselor: And what did you think about yourself or others or the situation when you knew that you were stuck?

Client: I think I got myself into this situation and I am going to get myself out of it! Plus, I couldn't admit that I made a mistake and didn't pay attention to what my father told me!

Counselor: And when you were mired in the mud and you stopped the tractor and you were thinking about that you had gotten yourself into this situation and you were going to get yourself out, how did you feel? Sad or mad or glad or scared or a combination?

Client: I felt mad. I was really mad at myself for being so dumb!

Counselor: And the "mad" that you felt, was it a low grade of "mad," a medium grade of "mad," or a high grade of "mad"?

Client: It was a high grade of "mad." I was mad at myself for not paying enough attention to what was going on around me and I paid the price of getting stuck in the mud!

Counselor: And how did you use this high grade of "mad"?

Client: Well, I decided I needed to do something. So, I unhooked from the disk, backed the tractor up to the disk at a different angle, and I slowly pulled the disk out of the mud. I cleaned as much of the mud off the disk as I could and went about completing the fieldwork.

Counselor: So your problem solving process may go something like this: When you stop paying attention to what you know should be done, you become "stuck." And then you think about the dilemma and use your anger to disengage from the situation; and then you find a new direction in life.

Client: That sounds like what I did when I chose to divorce the father of my children and it sounds like what I am doing in my current job situation. However, in the job situation, I am currently in the new direction phase.

Counselor: Tell me more about the new direction phase.

Client: Well, I have resigned my current position effective at the end of the month, and I have sent out resumes to three potential employers.

Counselor: And before you take a new position I believe that you will pay careful attention to what others tell you about the working situation and you will focus on the task at hand.

Client: Yes, that is what I want to do, the direction I want to move.

Here we may want to encourage the client to evaluate her need for anger in the problem-solving process. She uses the anger as the "fuel" for getting the process going; it is her stimulus for movement. Instead of

becoming angry, however, she may just wish to initiate the strategy: She can "unhook" and change direction based on her own good judgment. She might be shown that she has made any number of good decisions in the past with the anger as her justification for doing so. She may now be able to see that the same decisions could be achieved without resorting to anger and relying solely on her own courage.

Summary

Information gathering is a major element in the process of Adlerian counseling/psychotherapy. As such, it is important that the counselor/therapist use specific basic strategies that help to stimulate insight (for both the counselor/therapist and the client) regarding the client's psychological movement in the world. It has been attributed to Adler that the basic strategies of the family constellation, early recollections, and dream interpretation serve as "windows to the mental life." Since the early days of Individual Psychology, numerous Adlerians have identified additional "windows." "Lost? or Stuck?" is a simple strategy for identifying a client's problem-solving approach; it offers just another of those windows to the mental life.

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