

Walter L. Strandburg

Aversion to the Mean

Recently, an opportunity was presented to counsel intellectually capable students who had been suspended because of poor grades. All had been on probationary status during the semester immediately prior to their suspension. With the assistance provided by academic advisors and a committee of professors, a counselling program was designed for these students. The students were given the opportunity to return to the University provided they participated in a treatment program as prescribed by the Director of Counselling Services. Twelve students were approached and subsequently agreed to the terms of the program. They were scheduled for weekly counselling sessions of approximately one hour. At the end of the semester during which the counselling took place, nine of the twelve students had earned sufficiently high grades to be taken off probationary status. Two showed no improvement in their grades and were not allowed to return to the University. One student disappeared without formally withdrawing from the University. This represents a seventy-five per cent success rate.

The counselling model used with this program was particularly appropriate to the type of students involved and the problems they were having with their school work. Each student had the potential to achieve satisfactory grades in university. Their ambitions and expectations were reasonably specific. Attending school was not a hardship for the students or their families. They were not an aggressive group of college students nor were they lethargic or disinterested. In fact, their interests were quite broad and imaginative. They did, however, have an air of superiority concerning their knowledge

and life styles. These students were contemptuous of the intellectually ordinary and looked with disdain upon those whom they perceived to be less intellectually capable than themselves.

Each of the students also spent considerable time explaining why they had done poorly in their classes. Their explanations depicted professors who were uninspiring and inept and a social establishment which imposed impossible and meaningless values on them. They felt that there was no practical value in education and were 'turned off' by the University. Significantly, personal negligence was omitted from their considerations.

A feeling of intellectual superiority and an externalization of responsibility, then, were common to all students in this project. It was interesting that an improvement from failing to average grades was not acceptable to this group. They felt capable of earning A's and B's and had an aversion to C grades. Study habits left much to be desired. The students studied sporadically and lacked organization as well as perseverance.

The treatment was partially designed to encourage specific study habits. For example, the students were requested to sit at their desks for a specific amount of time whether or not they accomplished any school work. Active counselling, however, was the major treatment focus. This aspect of the program emphasized Albert Ellis' idea that "... several powerful, irrational and illogical ideas stand in the way of our leading anxiety-free, unhostile lives".¹ The irrational ideas which seemed most pervasive with these students were:

It is a dire necessity for an adult to be loved or approved by almost everyone for virtually everything he does.²

One should be thoroughly competent, adequate, and achieving in all possible respects.³

It is terrible, horrible, and catastrophic when things are not going the way one would like them to go.⁴

It is easier to avoid facing many life difficulties and self-responsibilities than to undertake more rewarding forms of self-discipline.⁵

The method used to confront these irrational ideas was that advocated by the rational-emotive psychotherapeutic view. The treatment emphasized that there is no humiliation associated with average work. The counselees believed that their individual worth was dependent upon superior performance in

school. They had all performed at an above average level in high school with a minimum of effort and felt that this was also possible in university. However, their poor study habits and their inability to persevere made this impossible. Average grades were unacceptable as a source of validation and ego enhancement. Rationalizations were developed to account for average grades. Failure followed as the students put less effort into their school work and placed more blame on external sources for their predicament. On this point, counsellor intervention was especially active. Responsibility was returned to the students and they were held accountable for any failures.

summary

Average grades suggest to some students that one's potential is mediocre. This is threatening to students whose feelings of worth and significance are closely related to their academic achievements. The mean spells mediocrity and some students will fail rather than be mediocre.

The counselling sessions with these students indicated that they had exaggerated the value of academic excellence as a measure of personal worth. When these students did not excel, they chose failure rather than the mean. It is likely that other students are experiencing the same self-defeating reactions and could profit by an attack on the irrationality of an aversion to the mean.

references

1. A. E. Ellis and R. A. Harper, *A Guide to Rational Living*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1961, p. 79.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 179.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 144