



Clear Thinking Issue 95



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How to solve problems with paradox

Hypnosis Master Series: Problem solving with paradoxical intervention
– by **Mark Tyrrell**

An interesting way to solve problems is by using what's known as 'paradoxical intervention'. Paradoxical interventions can help people overcome problems when it looks like nothing else will work. And fortunately they are not just the preserve of psychotherapists – *anyone* can use them. So whether you are a therapist or just want to beef up your own problem solving skills, this article should be pretty useful to you.

Now firstly, what exactly do I mean by paradoxical intervention? Well, a 'paradoxical' solution to a problem is paradoxical because, on the surface, it tends to look completely counterintuitive, and like the very thing you would *not* want to do to help that problem. But when you dig beneath the surface, it actually makes perfect sense.

How to play the fall

I'll tell you a little story. A young woman came to see me. She worked as cabin crew on a well known airline. She was attractive and presentable but she told me she suffered from terrible self-consciousness. She managed somehow to hide this at work, but found it very hard, and even harder when she was just out and about in town, without even the protection of her work role and uniform to hide behind.

I asked her what she was afraid of. She said she was terrified she might accidentally fall over while walking along the street and – her very words – *make a fool of herself*. In other words – she was scared that strangers would laugh at her. She had no idea why this obsession had taken hold and when she came to see me she had started avoiding going out all together.

I went for the rational approach first, of course. But no matter how hard I tried to convince her that other people wouldn't laugh even if she were to fall over accidentally, or that she was extremely unlikely to fall over anyway so there was nothing to fear, she'd heard all that before and it wasn't going to make any difference now either. So I decided to use a paradoxical approach.

I looked at her and said: "You're telling me you really want to get over this problem; that it's wrecking your life, right?" She agreed. "And that you would do *anything* to get rid of it?" She agreed to this also. "Okay", I said "Now, you are afraid of falling over *accidentally* when out in the town. So this is what I want you to do between now and the next time I see you: Go into the main shopping mall. Choose a public spot where everyone can see you. Then fall down on purpose. Count *exactly* how many other people laugh when you do so. Follow these instructions *to the letter* and you will be instantly cured."

The psychological shock of hearing such a dramatic and unexpected instruction instantly plunged this woman into that very narrow focused state we call 'shock hypnosis', and before she knew it she had agreed to my prescription. I already knew she was a woman of integrity and I was pretty sure that, having agreed, she would not go back on her word.

An unexpected result

She showed up the next week brimming with energy. I asked her what happened. "Well," she said, "on Saturday I went in to town. I still thought you were crazy, asking me to do this, but I was so intrigued by the idea I couldn't help myself. I walked up and down the mall for a whole hour before I gathered up enough courage to fall over. Eventually, I made myself trip and fall onto the floor and lay there. And guess what? Nothing! No one did a thing! People ignored me, just looked away. I couldn't believe it! In fact, I was a bit cross no one had bothered to help. So I did it again half an hour later, in another part of town, and again no one did anything! People just walked by as if nothing had happened. I tried again. On my third fall, an elderly lady came over and asked if I was all right. I was so grateful that someone had finally taken notice!"

Now some people might say: "Ah, but this is just dealing with the *symptom*. What about the underlying *cause* of her anxiety?" But this is to miss the point. As the late great

Milton Erickson used to say: “We can see people as *systems*, and if you change one small part of the system *all* the system has to change. This is systemic theory. If you lift the handle of the pot then the whole pot has to rise.”

I actually bumped into this woman years later and happily she had had no further problems.

So let’s look a bit more closely at the paradox in play here.

How to use paradox

By completing my paradoxical task this woman had replaced her *imaginary* scenario with a *real experience*. And, as I had promised, she was cured. It had taken her *an hour* to try to do what, previously, she was terrified might happen at *any second*. She was in the position of *wanting* to do precisely what she had been scared would happen to her.

When we fear something, it *seems* to make sense to avoid it and often it is sense. The act of *purposefully* bringing about what you fear is paradoxical. For example, people who blush fear that others will notice. But when a blusher says: “Gosh, look at me! I’m blushing!” he is short circuiting the whole problem. By *asking* others to be aware of his blushing he is paradoxically bringing about the very thing he fears and at this point the blushing usually stops right in its tracks.

Getting someone to consciously ‘do’ their problem turns an unconsciously generated compulsion into a conscious chore. For example, asking a compulsive hand washer to wash their hands a *hundred* times a day instead of fifty, and even get up at six in the morning to do it, instantly reframes the hand washing as a consciously assigned (and potentially burdensome) task. When someone becomes reluctant to carry out what was previously an uncontrolled *compulsion*, we know we are getting somewhere.

The advantages of failing

Paradoxically, people often ‘fail’ the tasks I give them by not washing their hands at all! So they have rebelled against my task giving – but at the same time they have not engaged in their problem pattern. I recall setting one woman the task of waking up at four in the morning to her alarm clock in order to worry about her health for ten minutes. She had already been waking up in the small hours and frightening herself with her worries, but I asked her to do it as a *conscious task* and introduced the alarm clock to fix the time. This was not the only approach I used to help her, but it certainly shifted the pattern and she started sleeping through the alarm.

This brings us to a very important point. *When* should you use paradox? Well, firstly, you can start to think paradoxically when seemingly logical attempts at problem solving

haven't worked. Logical solutions to problems are fine, when they work, but when they fail to produce the expected result we may need to get more lateral in our thinking. You can kick start your creative paradoxical thinking by simply asking yourself: "What would be the craziest way to try to solve this problem?" Then come up with *as many crazy ideas as possible*. Some of the ideas may indeed be 'crazy' – but by allowing yourself to at least *consider* crazy solutions you may come across the perfect 'paradoxical' solution.

Keep it clean

I saw a news report recently about a woman who managed to cut litter in her village by 40%. How did she do that? Well, she runs a small shop, and she noticed that it was mainly young school children who were dropping litter. So she started writing the children's names on the wrappers of the items they were buying from her (in a small place, she knew most of them). You are much less likely to drop litter when it has your name on it. Result!

So get into the habit of thinking up the craziest solutions – even solutions that you are pretty certain really *wouldn't* work – because, well, actually, they just *might!*

The second good starting point for paradoxical intervention is when you come up against resistance – and pretty well any new idea will meet with people's natural resistance to change. The school children I just mentioned were clearly pretty resistant to being told "Don't drop litter!" So the shopkeeper *stopped* doing more of what clearly *wasn't* working and bypassed the children's resistance with her crazy idea. She didn't tell them it was okay to drop litter. She simply put their names on the wrappers. So, if they *did* drop them, everyone would know whose wrappers they were.

The delicious allure of the forbidden

Some people need to resist. The more they know they *should* do something – lose weight, use waste bins, stop smoking, be polite and so forth – the more they do the *opposite*. So the more you try to get them to do these things, even in their own best interests, the *less* compelled they feel to do them. Paradoxically, you can encourage more of the negative behavior in order to reverse this trend. This only *seems* paradoxical. (Think about it!)

I had a particularly telling experience of how this works when one troubled mother brought her adolescent son to see me. This young man had got into a habit of insulting and belittling his mother, and he would do this even in front of me, a stranger. The more he was asked not to, as it was quite inappropriate behavior, the more he would do it. One week (with the prior secret agreement of his mother) I myself started to berate and

insult his mother. At once he leapt to her defense and got quite angry with me. I suggested to his mother that she should be vocally self-critical in front of her son, putting *herself* down. He didn't like that at all! She soon found that he had become much more supportive and appreciative towards her.

Not everyone is contrary or resistant to straightforward advice and attempts at help, but people who are having psychological difficulties are *more likely* to display resistance to problem solving attempts. This is why all psychotherapists and even parents should at least *understand* how paradox can be used to advantage.

Encourage the resistance

Getting people to consciously 'do more' of their problem helps them by taking away the pressure to *stop* doing it. It also incites curiosity, turning an unconscious pattern into a consciously intentional pattern. Even if this doesn't create a context in which they can immediately abandon the pattern, it can certainly start to loosen the rigidity of it. And if we can make a problem pattern both conscious *and* burdensome then it becomes much easier for the individual to discard it completely.

An overweight woman who went to see Milton Erickson. She had tried to lose weight for years. Paradoxically, Erickson told her that she didn't weigh enough yet, and instructed this woman to put on *more* weight. To eat a little *more* and exercise a little *less*. Bear in mind this was in the fifties, when 'the doctor' was a much more unquestionable authority than is the case nowadays. So the woman complied.

And what happened? Within a few weeks she was back, *begging* Erickson to allow her to eat less, to start walking and to lose weight! Erickson, through using paradox, had turned healthy living from something this woman felt she *couldn't* do to something she now felt *compelled* to do.

I've used this approach at home too. When my older son was small he became anxious about not sleeping. I asked him if he would like ten pounds – a great deal of money to a boy of his age. This got his attention and turned his attention from 'not sleeping' to 'money'. I said that if he could stay awake until two in the morning I would give him ten pounds. If he managed to stay awake the whole night, he would get *twenty* pounds. So, using one of the key features of paradoxical problem solving, I was asking him to do *more* of the problem – and stay awake.

Staying awake was now reframed as something desirable and profitable. And now he was *trying* to do what before he was trying *not* to do – just like the woman who purposefully fell over. Of course, there was a risk my ruse wouldn't work, but nothing in life is without risk as they say. And half an hour later, I'm happy to say, he was sound asleep.

Can you use paradox for yourself? Of course. The principles are no different to applying paradox to other people's problems.

Applying it for yourself

There are three basic considerations:

- *Don't* do more of what isn't working.
Doing more of *trying* to sleep or *trying* not to draw attention to yourself or *trying* to make yourself exercise when you don't feel like it won't work now if these approaches haven't worked before. Tell yourself that *on no account* will you do *any exercise* over the coming three weeks. Now you are disciplining yourself *not* to exercise, and this discipline not to exercise will create tension, and it's that tension that will make you feel like you actually do want to start moving your body again.
- *Do* what seems to be counterintuitive.
It seems counterintuitive to do more of the problem. But give it a go – as long as it is safe to do so. I used to blush sometimes, but when I started to deliberately draw attention to it myself – I diffused it. Other people just aren't as interested in something that they haven't noticed for themselves, or that is open public knowledge.
- *Change* something about the problem pattern to loosen it up a bit.
For example, a friend of mine was intrigued by paradox. He wanted to stop eating so much chocolate, which he would buy from a service station when he went to re-fuel his car. He decided not to deny himself the chocolate but only to have it when he *walked* to the service station – some half a mile from his home – and to buy only one at a time. Needless to say, sometimes he'd walk there and by the time he arrived he no longer wanted it. Or he'd feel too lazy to walk the half mile and end up not going for the chocolate.

Use paradox when there is resistance in yourself or others to change positively.

I want to emphasize that the examples I've used in this article are not set in stone to be slavishly copied. They are just ideas based on the *principles* of paradox. They wouldn't automatically work with everyone because any problem solving strategy needs to take into account the unique perspectives and character traits of a person. The article on [dealing with resistance](#) and also the article on [shock hypnosis](#) have overlaps with what I've written here.

How to stop anyone smoking

Smoking is full of paradoxes, the most amazing of which is that smokers are convinced that they really enjoy doing something that is slowly killing them. Or even sometimes quickly killing them. That makes smoking, or rather, quitting smoking, absolutely ripe for paradoxical intervention.

Our cutting edge [online smoking cessation training](#) will provide you with many invaluable tools to help people stop smoking, and your toolbox will be enhanced by understanding how to make powerful and effective use of paradoxical interventions when the situation calls for it.

The next course starts on Wednesday 3 November and the Early Bird Discount is open until 13 October. But if procrastination is your besetting problem, you'd be better advised to postpone booking your place until all 25 have gone...

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