Catching the Wave

Case Study

Ken Benau
"Jessie" was in her late 60s, a single, never married woman who worked caring for animals. At the time of the session I will describe below, Jessie and I had been meeting in mostly bi-monthly psychotherapy for 2 years, 2 months.

Originally, Jessie came to see me because a colleague who referred her knew I had expertise in what is widely known as Asperger’s Syndrome, now called high-functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Jessie wanted to better understand her lifelong social challenges and related anxiety, and to see if I thought ASD could account for these social difficulties. After a few meetings, she asked me if I thought ASD applied to her. (I never offer this diagnosis unless a person truly wants to know, and only when they tell me they are ready). I answered: Yes, I believed a very mild (i.e., very high-functioning) ASD might explain her long-standing social concerns. To my surprise, when I told her, she teared up and thanked me, deeply moved and grateful to be able to begin to understand something she had struggled with her whole life. Jessie was also grateful to have met me, and I her.

As I got to know Jessie better, the less sure I became about whether the ASD diagnosis fit her. I learned that some of Jessie’s challenges were likely the result of considerable emotional non-attunement growing up, by both of her parents. Jessie’s mother was either remarkably unaware of her daughter’s emotional and relational needs, or very critical and overtly shaming. Her mother’s profound lack of awareness was best exemplified when Jessie was about 8 years old. On that occasion, Jessie was playing with a friend from next door when she jumped off a ledge and, it later turned out, broke a bone in her leg. From a short distance away, Jessie’s mother could see her daughter presumably in pain, lying on the ground, unable to move, and yet she proceeded to drive to her work . . . at the local hospital! Jessie’s father was even more physically and emotionally absent than her mother, and when he interacted with Jessie often behaved in odd and confusing ways. As I got to know Jessie, however, and despite knowing the kind of parenting she had received, the more I admired her social competencies and
courage and the less I noticed her social deficits and anxiety. That is why I concluded that while ASD might fit, it really mattered very little, at least to me.

Fast forward to the session of interest: Jessie and I were continuing to discuss her venturing out socially, from dating to joining others in new activities, as she discovered who she was with other people now. Jessie’s history included feeling so anxious in social situations, particularly in groups with people she did not know well, that she regularly and quite painfully experienced what she called “the shade coming down”. Over time, Jessie and I learned “the shade” reflected her dissociating in the face of overwhelming anxiety and shame when in unfamiliar and confusing social situations. In these instances, Jessie could not readily understand what others were thinking and feeling, including and perhaps most importantly, about her, as well as what she was thinking and feeling about others, and how to engage socially in ways that helped her feel she belonged. It should be observed that people living with ASD typically have difficulty with what is called “mind reading”, that is, more or less accurately understanding what others think, feel, and intend, as well as what motivates their behavior. The concept of “mentalizing”, which is consistent with mind reading, is explored by Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, and Target (2002).

Over the course of the two–plus years of our working together, Jessie made great progress in “reading minds”, lessening her social anxiety and shame, and increasing her self-confidence in new social situations. As a result, the shade came down less and less. Our work was aided by the fact that Jessie was quite courageous, even though she never thought of herself that way. She was willing to meet new people and try a variety of new social activities. Jessie also responded very well to my valuing and, even more, my delighting in her intellect, curiosity, and bravely trying new things, as well as our shared outré humor. Jessie and I laughed a good bit together, all the while exploring serious matters such as dating, ending old relationships and developing new ones, her aging mother, retirement, and more.

My use of the word “delight” when describing being with Jessie is no accident. Consistent with my concept of pro-being pride that I have described elsewhere (see Benau, 2018, and below), I delighted in being myself delighting in Jessie delighting in being herself with me. While I invariably find a way to be this way with all my patients, at least those I am able to help, given Jessie’s relational history throughout her life, my delighting in Jessie was particularly healing. Most importantly, this was no technique—it was genuinely how I felt with Jessie and she with me, and likewise how I feel with other patients whom I truly come to know.

**CATCHING THE WAVE:**
**THE PRESENCE OF PRO-BEING PRIDE—PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE**

Charles Dickens (2007/1843), in his famous novella, *A Christmas Carol*, described three ghosts, or spirits, of Christmas Past, Present, and Yet to Come (Future). The following vignette describes my work with Jessie, and how we played, therapeutically, with her pro-being pride—past, present, and future.
In this session, Jessie began by telling me of her continued participation in InterPlay, a group process that uses movement and gentle physical contact to access the body’s wisdom during individual and small group activities. Jessie then shared that she continued to look into surfing lessons, and would be attending a movie about women surfers with a new friend, “Carrie”, and two other women she had never met.

What I hadn’t known until that moment was that Jessie loved all things surfing, even though she had only surfed once in her life. Jessie loved surfing movies and watching live big-wave surfers in the San Francisco Bay area where Jessie and I both live.

After telling Jessie about a wonderful surfing documentary I had seen recently about teen friends growing up to become professional surfers and being like a family, called *Momentum Generation* (HBO, 2018), I realized for the first time that something about surfing spoke deeply to Jessie. Following my clinical intuition, I invited Jessie first to close your eyes, go inside, and take a few deep breaths . . . to clear some space within and then to dwell in your experience of all things surfing and see what bubbles up to the surface. (I probably did not say anything about “bubbling up to the surface”. It was likely closer to “see what comes up”, but I like the metaphor now so play along.)

After a few moments of quiet, inner reflection, Jessie remarked: joy . . . free . . . expansion.

As soon as I heard those three words, I knew Jessie had contacted her pro-being pride. I also knew I wanted to capitalize therapeutically on
pro-being pride having shown up in our session. I decided to use a method I have created to facilitate memory reconsolidation (Ecker, Ticic, & Hulley, 2012). My approach uses a three-sided model: one side chosen by the patient (say “left”) to represent her old emotional-relational reality, and the other side (say “right”) to represent her new emotional-relational reality, and to experientially juxtapose the two sides until something new emerges, finally returning to the center to consider the updated emotional-relational truth that often results from this process. I have playfully dubbed this method “Benau’s Triptych Method of Facilitating Memory Reconsolidation” or “Triptych MR” for short (with “triptych” referencing the three-panel style of painting).

I instructed Jessie to choose a side representing her past relationship with “joy, freedom, and expansiveness”. She chose “left” as is often the case for reasons I can only guess. Next, I asked Jessie to let “center” reflect her present relationship with “joy, freedom, and expansiveness”, and her “right” side to hold her future relationship with this enlivening, self-other experience. I then instructed Jessie to look first to her left side, then straight ahead, and then to her right side while imagining her past, present, and future experience of joy, freedom, and expansiveness. I modeled for her how to actually turn toward the left (past), the center (present), and the right (future) several times, at her pace—at each panel of her inner triptych imagining her relationship to joy, freedom, and expansiveness. After three rounds of right, center, and left imagining, I instructed Jessie to return to her center, take several deep cleansing breaths, and to come
back into the room with me. Of course, Jessie had physically been in the room the whole time, but in her imagination, I knew she had journeyed elsewhere. I was about to discover “where” Jessie had traveled.

I asked Jessie to tell me whatever she wished about her inner experience, as most clients (though not all) are quite excited to do. Jessie readily shared the following:

**The past.** I was standing on the shore watching the surfers. Reacting. I can’t . . . I will never be able to do that. Others will, but not me.

**The present.** Being a part of it—I’m getting there. [Jessie was letting us both know that she was on her way but not there quite yet.]

**The future.** Surfing! Participating in InterPlay; seeing the surfer movie with Carrie and two women I don’t know who have unusual names. [Interestingly, Jessie was situating the future as now.]

After revealing the two unusual names these women gave themselves, Jessie laughed anxiously, exclaiming, *I’m in over my head!* Those names were indeed quite unusual.

Since we were swimming in the deep, experiential waters of our shared pro-being pride, I knew intuitively how best to respond to Jessie’s anxiety—with my own genuine joy, delight, and complete confidence in Jessie’s joyful and free expansiveness. Speaking from my pro-being pride and deep wisdom, I asserted:

No, you are not in over your head. And when you say that, you’re engaging in self-hypnosis. You will convince yourself that it is true when it is not. So, go inside again and ask yourself what is true about your going to this surfer movie with these three women.

If my intuition was wrong, I knew Jessie would correct me as needed. Yet, trusting Jessie could find a truth not riddled with archaic anxieties, she indeed responded quickly:

No, it’s not true. I’m not in over my head.

Then, referring to something I had said earlier that session about there being an edge, between anxiety and excitement, Jessie continued:

I’m really excited, seeing [surfer] women in the movie . . . so brave, and their victory. With Carrie, I feel safe with her. I’ve told her if I become quiet it doesn’t mean I’m not enjoying myself.

I praised Jessie for telling Carrie that, observing:

That’s so wise, Jessie. Letting Carrie know that means she won’t have to wonder how you are doing, and maybe get worried about you. So that
really helps her. And it also really helps you, because if she’s not worried about you she’ll let you be, and then you won’t feel you have to do anything different or be any different than you are.

The reader will note that when people like Jessie have difficulties with mind reading, I intentionally make explicit the implicit for them. I think of this as providing “sub-titles” to their own and others’ minds.

To be oneself, and even celebrate oneself, is the essence of pro-being pride, that is FOR BEING—one’s own and that of others.

Jessie took in my appreciation with a shy smile, continuing:

*Doing something new makes me a little bit anxious, and I’m also excited.*

Right, I affirmed:

So, if the image of in over my head [a water metaphor we both now got] no longer fits with your experience of going out with these three women to see the movie about surfer women, what metaphor or image best captures your experience, now? Go inside and see what comes up to the surface. [This time I use those words, as I liked the image of unconscious process residing in the depths of the ocean but, as with all creative ideas, *could come up to the surface* where—I realize only as I write this—surfers lie waiting to catch the next big wave.]

Jessie closed her eyes, and then after a short while observed:

*The water is rough. I’m paddling kind of hard*
[i.e., with effort and strength]. I’m okay because I want to get to where I’m going, and I’m strong and I know I can get there.

Since Jessie and I were coming to the end of our session, I wanted to be sure she “re–membred” (deeply embodied and retained) this new truth about herself in relation to others, including one known woman, and two new women. The following instructions are largely informed by the comprehensive resource model’s (Schwarz, Corrigan, Hull, & Raju, 2017) way of working with the body, and grounding and strengthening experience with associated eye positions:

Go inside and find the place in your body where you feel the strongest connection with your new truth: the waters are rough, but I’m strong and determined, and I know I can get there. Then, find the eye position, with your eyes closed, where your eyes go when you feel the strongest connection with rough waters . . . determined, strong, confident I’ll get there.

Jessie did so, and found her corresponding eye position.

What do you notice in your body? I enquired.

My legs. Grounding [i.e., solid], sturdy, and supportive.

I shared with Jessie that, going forward, her eye position would help her access this sense of herself as grounded, sturdy, and supported,
particularly when seated with both feet on the ground or when standing up. I reminded Jessie that using her eye position would also help her access and strengthen her new truth: *I'm strong and determined, and I know I can get there.* As our session ended, I knew without saying anything that both Jessie and I registered the significance of her growing confidence and ability to stand on her own two feet.

**Closing Reflections and Follow-Up**

When pro-being pride shows up in your office, if you are a psychotherapist, or in your everyday life, take notice! Bring your full attention to the experience, embody it, see it, feel it, taste it, smell it, image it, know it, and let it speak to you and teach you. The energy and qualities of pro-being pride are uniquely individual, and will serve you and your work, including psychotherapy, well. I have complete faith in pro-being pride—my own when it shows up and others’. There, nestled in one’s pro-being, not only does pride reside (notice Jessie’s growing self-confidence and pride at the end of our session) but also deep, intrapersonal and interpersonal wisdom.

Jessie left me a voicemail the day after this session, sharing with obvious pleasure that she had enjoyed the surfing movie and the evening with these women, adding: The imagery you suggested helped. From my perspective, I hadn’t given Jessie any imagery at all. I believed her unconscious held a beautiful triptych of her past, present, and future relationship with pro-being pride. I knew we could discuss this further, as needed, catching our next big wave when the timing was right.

**References**


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