

## "But I Have to Have a Boyfriend!"

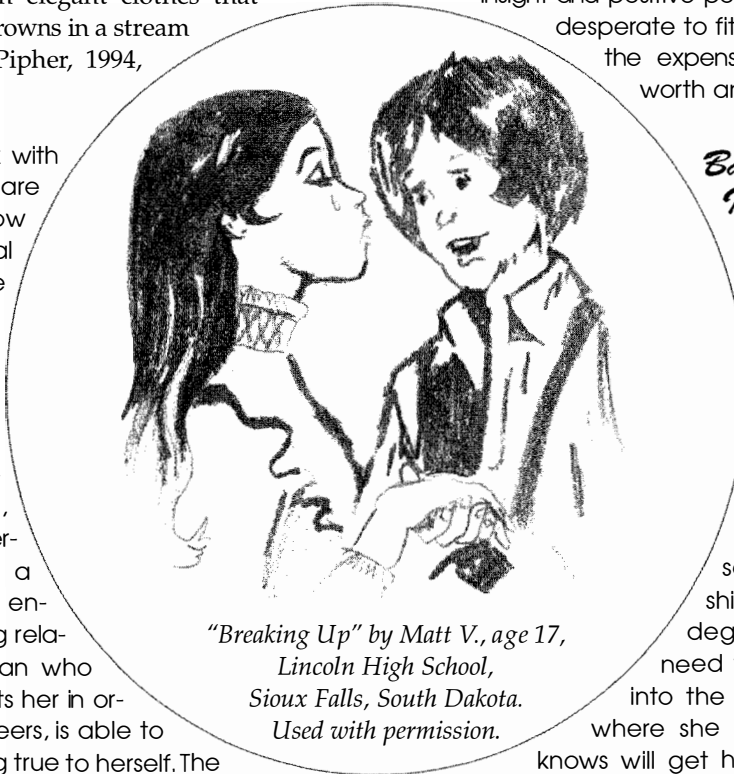
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*This reclaiming intervention targets the problems of a young girl who allows herself to be put down and manipulated by a boyfriend who is meeting his own needs to look good to his peers at her expense.*

The story of Ophelia, from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, shows the destructive forces that affect young women. As a girl, Ophelia is happy and free, but with adolescence she loses herself. When she falls in love with Hamlet, she lives only for his approval. She has no inner direction; rather she struggles to meet the demands of Hamlet and her father. Her value is determined utterly by their approval. Ophelia is torn apart by her efforts to please. When Hamlet spurns her because she is an obedient daughter, she goes mad with grief. Dressed in elegant clothes that weigh her down, she drowns in a stream filled with flowers. (Pipher, 1994, p. 20)

The goal of this intervention was twofold: first, to help the young woman gain new insight into the true meaning of friendship and to contrast this insight with the realities of the exploitation existing in her current relationship with her boyfriend, and, second, to assist her in identifying constructive ways she could regain control of her life and make herself happier by disengaging from insulting and demeaning situations. This (LSCI) intervention was selected as an example of how the efforts of an aware, sensitive classroom teacher can plant the seed for new insight and positive power in a young adolescent desperate to fit in and look good, even at the expense of loss of personal self-worth and identity.

Those of us who work with young adolescents are all too familiar with how the plight of the fictional Ophelia still recurs in the lives of the girls we teach. We become participants in the daily struggle of these young girls to remain true to themselves while balancing the demands of family, school, and, now, boys. This intervention describes how a young adolescent girl, enmeshed in a self-defeating relationship with a young man who puts her down and exploits her in order to look good to his peers, is able to begin the process of being true to herself. The teacher is faced with a number of possibilities for exploration and insight in this intervention. However, she determines that the situation best lends itself to an opportunity to assist the young woman in the process of considering the true meaning of friendship and how the pattern of "having a boyfriend at all costs" is negatively affecting her life. This reclaiming (LSCI) intervention is called the "Manipulation of Body Boundaries" (Long & Gonsowksi, 1994).



*"Breaking Up" by Matt V., age 17,  
Lincoln High School,  
Sioux Falls, South Dakota.  
Used with permission.*

### Background Information

Corrine, a 12-year-old identified as having a learning disability, has a long-standing history of attention problems and impulsiveness. She has significant difficulty fostering productive peer relationships and friendships. Corrine often involves herself in self-defeating relationships with boys and girls who degrade and tease her. Her need for friends also carries over into the home and neighborhood, where she agrees to escapades she knows will get her into trouble. She often feels bad about breaking the rules, yet she is unaware of how she is being taken advantage of and rationalizes and defends the actions of her "friends."

Corrine is active and noisy when around her peers but can become quiet and childlike around adults. When teased, she has difficulty ignoring negative comments and usually responds with a negative retort, falling victim to a cycle that creates a worse situation. At times she will

bring anxiety stemming from her lack of success with peer interactions into the classroom situation, and she then is unable to follow directions and engage in the class learning experiences.

### *The Incident*

The bell rings and the students enter the classroom for reading. Corrine comes storming in from lunch just seconds before the tardy bell rings. I give the class the usual directions to get their reading books out and turn to page 28 for vocabulary practice. Corrine, who is still agitated, continues to walk around the classroom, yelling put-downs at compliant peers. She finds a seat at a table in the back, mumbling under her breath and refusing to work. I walk toward her and quietly state that she looks as if something is bothering her. Then I gently, but firmly, remind her that it is time for reading. Corrine pounds both hands on the table and yells, "I can't take it anymore! Everybody is on me!" She makes her way to the book corner, where she finds a stuffed bear on the shelf, and she sits on the floor by the wall, holding her knees and cradling the bear.

### *The Drain-Off Stage*

I take a minute to reassure the other students in the class and to clarify the directions for their assigned independent vocabulary lesson. Then I move over to the book corner.

**Ms. M:** "Corrine, as I look at you, it seems like you have a lot on your mind right now."

**Corrine:** (whining) "He does it to me all the time." (Puts head on knees.) "Just leave me alone. I'm not going to talk to you."

At this point, although Corrine's behavior is controlled, the baby talk, whining, and body language indicate she is still emotionally vulnerable. In order to discuss the situation fully, I seek more privacy.

**Ms. M:** "I understand that you want to be left alone, but perhaps it will be helpful if we talk about it."

**C:** (quietly) "I don't want to talk. Nobody likes me. Just leave me alone." (Lifts head off knees.)

I take this as a signal to affirm Corrine's efforts to regain control and as a bridge for opening the next stage of the intervention.

**Ms. M:** "Corrine, I am impressed with how respectful you are being to the rest of the class, even though you are so upset. That shows a lot of maturity. Let's go into the hall where we can have some privacy."

I stand up and move toward the door. Corrine quietly follows, head down. She brings the stuffed bear along and mumbles under her breath. I thank Corrine for coming with me.

### *Timeline Stage*

We move into the hall and sit next to each other in two classroom chairs. I had seen Corrine in class earlier in the day, and all was going smoothly, so I suspect that the triggering event must have happened during lunch. This becomes my starting point. But, before getting to the facts, I need to give Corrine some support in beginning the process of talking about the situation.

**Ms. M:** "When you come into class so upset, and things were going all right this morning, that tells me something went wrong. Let's talk for a few minutes so we can get to the bottom of this."

**C:** "I don't want to talk."

**Ms. M:** "I can understand your not wanting to talk, but you are good at doing difficult tasks."

**C:** (Says nothing but plays with the stuffed bear in her lap.)

**Ms. M:** "I am pleased you found that bear over by the bookshelf. He can be a good friend at times."

**C:** "I don't have any friends. I can't do anything right. Everyone makes everything my fault. He's always insulting me."

**Ms. M:** (concerned) "What I saw earlier was a pretty happy young woman, and now I see you so upset. You feel you have no friends and get a lot of criticism."

At this point, Corrine begins talking. She is talking very fast and gives me abundant information. Apparently something had happened at home over the weekend and her mother had called the school. The guidance counselor had called her in to discuss the problem, so Corrine was late getting to lunch.

**Ms. M:** "Wow! You do have a lot going on. Can you walk me back a step or two? What happened right before reading class?"

**C:** "I didn't want to come to class but I did. I was real mad."

**Ms. M:** "So, even though you were mad, you came to class; I'm impressed! Help me understand what made you so mad."

**C:** "My dad is blaming it all on me, and it isn't true."

**Ms. M:** "What is your dad blaming you for?"

**C:** "I've got too much pressure from my friends and now I'm in so much trouble. I just want to call my mom and go home."

At this point I decide to get a picture of the weekend's events in order to better understand the emotions and thoughts affecting the current situation. Corrine talks freely about her weekend, explaining that on Sunday, Jeremy (her boyfriend) had come over to visit. They ran out of things to watch on TV and were looking for something

else to do. Jeremy noticed a tie-dye project that Corrine's mother had begun. He wanted to give it a try. Corrine initially resisted, but Jeremy called her "stupid" and "chicken" and threatened to leave because "you don't know how to have any fun." Despite the warnings of her parents to not make a mess, Corrine allowed Jeremy to talk her into tie-dyeing T-shirts in her room. The dye spilled all over the carpet, causing permanent damage. Jeremy left before Corrine's parents returned home, leaving her to face the problem alone. When confronted with the situation, Corrine's father began criticizing Jeremy. Corrine got furious and yelled at her father. Corrine's father then insisted that the incident was mainly Corrine's fault, "because it is your room" and "you know the rules." (This is the Conflict Cycle in action.)

After Corrine tells her story about the weekend disaster, she appears ready to begin focusing on the events in the lunchroom that led up to the explosion in reading class.

- Ms. M:** "Where did today's problem happen?"  
**C:** "At lunch. You know Jeremy usually eats at a table with his friends. You know they joke around and stuff."  
**Ms. M:** "So, what happened at lunch?"  
**C:** "I had to walk in late and everyone was already sitting down and eating."  
**Ms. M:** "How did it feel to be late?"  
**C:** "I was mad . . . and I didn't know if I could sit with Jeremy or not because you know the rule."  
**Ms. M:** "Which rule is that?"  
**C:** "Once you have picked out where to sit, you can't move."  
**Ms. M:** "You really remember those rules, don't you?"  
**C:** "Yeah, well, Jeremy called me over to sit at the table where he was."  
**Ms. M:** "Oh, so what did you think about that?"  
**C:** "I was pretty happy, except he doesn't want anyone to know we are going out."  
**Ms. M:** "Where did you sit?"  
**C:** "There was a chair next to Tony, so I sat there." (She smiles.)  
**Ms. M:** "So things were looking up?"  
**C:** "Yeah, but then Tony started . . . he's such a b-----."  
**Ms. M:** "So, who else was sitting at the table with you?"  
**C:** "You know, Jeremy's friends, Tony and Brad and, you know. I was the only girl, and I was nice enough to switch spots with Jeremy when he asked me to!"  
**Ms. M:** "So you switched spots so Jeremy had a better seat at the table."  
**C:** "Yeah. He decided he wanted to sit next to Tony."  
**Ms. M:** "So, what did Tony start?"  
**C:** "You know, calling me names, making fun of

me going to the counselor's office. He always insults me."

- Ms. M:** "How do you feel when that happens?"  
**C:** "I want to punch him out! Jeremy's friends don't like me, they want him all to themselves!"  
**Ms. M:** "What did Jeremy do after Tony started insulting you?"  
**C:** "He joined in . . . like he always does."  
**Ms. M:** "And how did that feel?"  
**C:** "Bad. But he's my boyfriend, so it's different."  
**Ms. M:** "Wow, so you were getting it from all sides. You must have been feeling angry at this time, so what did you do?"  
**C:** "Well, I couldn't move, you know the rule, so I told them to shut up and leave me alone!"  
**Ms. M:** "Did you say that softly?"  
**C:** "No way! I was steaming mad!"  
**Ms. M:** "Then what happened?"  
**C:** "Mr. Whalen came over and told me to go sit at the silence table until the bell rang. I wasn't even doing anything wrong!"  
**Ms. M:** "What thoughts were going through your head at the silence table?"  
**C:** "I was thinking about Tony and how he always does this to me. Jeremy doesn't want his friends to know we are going out. Now I'm not only in trouble at home, but at school, too."  
**Ms. M:** "Corrine, those are all really important things to think about. So your mind was full of thoughts and you were pretty upset. What happened when the bell rang?"  
**C:** "I left the lunchroom and went to my locker. Then I came to class."

### *Central Issue Stage*

- Ms. M:** "What you have to say is very important. I want to be sure that I understand what you are telling me. Let's see . . ."

Corrine paints a picture that involves several underlying concerns. Initially, I thought this was another incident where, although Corrine's intentions were to do the right thing, her social skills failed her. However, after reviewing the timeline with Corrine and reflecting on the events of the weekend, it seems to me that the central issue is her willingness to be insulted and used by Jeremy so that he can have "fun" or look good to his peers. I decide to review the timeline in order to flesh out this self-defeating behavior pattern.

- Ms. M:** "Corrine, let me see if I understand what happened at lunch."  
**C:** "Okay."  
**Ms. M:** "You got to lunch late because the counselor needed to talk to you."

**C:** "Yeah, my mom had called her."  
**Ms. M:** "That's right. So you were feeling upset and worried that you wouldn't have anyone to sit with. When Jeremy called you over to his table, you thought, 'Oh good, I'll still get to sit with my boyfriend' and felt relieved. Is this right so far?"  
**C:** "Yeah."  
**Ms. M:** "When you got to the table, the only seat left was next to Tony, but Jeremy asked if you'd sit in his seat so he could sit there. Help me understand. You told me about the seat swapping rule—so why did you say okay to Jeremy?"  
**C:** "Because I want him to know I like him."  
**Ms. M:** "So it's important to you for Jeremy to like you."  
**C:** "Well, I'll feel dumb if I don't have a boyfriend."  
**Ms. M:** "Sure, I understand that. So you switched seats and Tony began teasing you about going to the counselor's office."  
**C:** "Yeah, and that got me steamed; he's always starting trouble."  
**Ms. M:** "So, tell me again what did Jeremy do?"  
**C:** "He started insulting me too."  
**Ms. M:** "He's your boyfriend, yet he was insulting you in front of his friends."  
**C:** "Yeah."  
**Ms. M:** "And how did you feel?"  
**C:** "Bad."  
**Ms. M:** "So you were already feeling bad and your boyfriend, a person who is supposed to think you're special, adds fuel to the fire."  
**C:** "But he was just teasing."  
**Ms. M:** "Does he do this often?"  
**C:** "Yeah."  
**Ms. M:** "It sounds a lot like what happened this weekend. Do you feel happy when you're with Jeremy?"  
**C:** "I don't know."  
**Ms. M:** "Is it better for you to be with Jeremy?"  
**C:** "Yeah, because I feel dumb if I don't have a boyfriend."  
**Ms. M:** "So, I want to be sure I understand this, Corrine . . ."

### *The Insight Process*

Although Corrine is intent on differentiating Jeremy's teasing and insults from that of his friends, I decide to attempt to help her realize how Jeremy's actions toward her are not compatible with a caring friend and that, in fact, she is being exploited.

**Ms. M:** "Corrine, I hear you say that today you came to

school feeling bad about your weekend with Jeremy. You had a good morning, but then the counselor talked to you and you went to lunch worried and a little mad. Today, like lots of days, Jeremy joined in the teasing, and you felt angry and ended up at the silent table. Then you came to reading and exploded in class. So what happens to Corrine?"  
**C:** "I don't get my work done."  
**Ms. M:** "Right. So does life get better or worse for you?"  
**C:** "Worse."  
**Ms. M:** "Corrine, I have a thought. Do you think that someone who cares about you would want you to get into trouble?"  
**C:** "No, not on purpose."  
**Ms. M:** "Then help me understand this. Jeremy's your boyfriend—right?"  
**C:** "Yeah."  
**Ms. M:** "But he doesn't want you to tell anyone."  
**C:** "Right."  
**Ms. M:** "He doesn't want you to tell anyone, but he comes over to your house, like on Sunday, and even though you told him the rules, he talked you into tie-dying."  
**C:** "Right, he said I was stupid to be worried."  
**Ms. M:** "Right, he called you names and insulted you. And then today at lunch you were feeling bad, Tony was teasing you, and Jeremy joined in."  
**C:** "Yes, he's always insulting me and treating me bad in front of people, and I get in trouble."  
**Ms. M:** "Corrine, say that again."  
**C:** (Repeats her statement.)  
**Ms. M:** "That's right, Corrine. He teases you so he can have fun and look good to his friends. You get mad or get caught and pay the price."  
**C:** "He should help pay for the rug."  
**Ms. M:** "You're absolutely right—a true friend would share that responsibility. So, is it fair to say that Jeremy likes to break the rules and insult you, and even though you know the rules and it makes you feel bad, you go along in order to keep him as your boyfriend?"  
**C:** "Yes, because you have to have a boyfriend."  
**Ms. M:** "So, does your life get better or worse when you go along with Jeremy?"  
**C:** "I don't know."  
**Ms. M:** "Do you feel happy when you're with Jeremy?"  
**C:** "I don't know."  
**Ms. M:** "Is it better for you?"  
**C:** "Yeah."  
**Ms. M:** "Why?"  
**C:** "Because I have a boyfriend."  
**Ms. M:** "And that's important to you?"  
**C:** "Yeah, I feel dumb if I don't have a boyfriend."  
**Ms. M:** "So, in order to not feel dumb, you hang with

- Jeremy, but you said Jeremy makes you feel bad."
- C: "Only sometimes. I thought he might be abusing me as a friend."
- Ms. M: "Say that again."
- C: (She repeats her statement.)
- Ms. M: "If you're feeling bad, and he makes you feel worse, is that being a good boyfriend?"
- C: "No."
- Ms. M: "Have you ever thought that perhaps Jeremy is not the right boyfriend for you?"
- C: "I think about it, but it will be hard because he'll insult me more if I break up with him."

At this point I praise Corrine and support her in the realization that she needs to somehow find a way to remove herself from Jeremy's negative influence. However, I also realize that she is not ready to push the insight further. Whenever I brought up breaking up with Jeremy, Corrine resorted to one-word responses and quick justifications for keeping the relationship, saying "If I dump Jeremy, no other boys will like me. I have to have a boyfriend to get a better one."

### *New Skills Generation: Planning for Success*

This is my cue to turn my focus back to the lunchroom incident and to empower Corrine with skills to break this pattern of exploitation and abuse. Together, we look at how to handle Jeremy and his friends in the future. I begin with the comment, "It sounds like we need a plan to handle this insulting-at-lunch problem."

The teasing does not happen every day, and Corrine is not ready to totally sever the relationship with Jeremy. However, she is eager to develop strategies to disengage her from trouble if it happens again. She comes up with several options, such as:

- Don't sit with him if he's with his friends
- Ignore him when he teases
- Talk to Mr. Whelan
- Move to another table if the teasing starts

We discuss several options and decide to enlist the assistance of Mr. Whelan, the lunchroom administrator, in the development of a signal that Corrine can use to indicate that she would like to talk to him. We continue sorting through the steps to make the plan happen and decide to begin by setting up an appointment with Mr. Whelan. We discuss how Mr. Whelan might feel about talking today, because Corrine had been in trouble in the lunchroom, and how Corrine could control her tone of voice and body language if faced with a gruff attitude from Mr. Whelan. After talking about our plan, we role play making an appointment, and Corrine is smiling and confident when we finish.

### *Transfer of Training: Getting Back to Class*

Corrine, generally a good worker, is ready to go back to class. I review the vocabulary assignment for the day and remind her that she can complete it after we finish the class project that is about to begin. We enter class together, and I transition the group from independent seatwork to the group lesson for the day.

### *A Woman's Perspective*

Life Space Crisis Intervention offers women helpgivers a way to structure the emotional dynamics of the human experience because it acknowledges the importance of relationship and has understanding of the interaction between thoughts and feelings as its core. The emphasis of this particular reclaiming intervention—carried out between women and from a women's perspective—was perhaps unique. At first, the central issue could have been viewed from the perspective of a young woman who merely lacked the necessary social skills to make and keep friendships. However, to Corrine and the interviewer, the issue seemed to strike much deeper than that. Corrine's identity and self-worth were enmeshed with the need for being viewed as part of a "couple"; she seemed stuck in the perception that life could only be "good" if she had a boyfriend, and she was willing to be insulted and demeaned to maintain the "friendship." Developmentally, she could become a classic case of an abused wife who felt she deserved to be mistreated. The teacher skillfully and courageously navigated through the reclaiming intervention, aware of the dynamic that often happens between girls and their female helpgivers: that women who work with girls often find themselves reliving their own emotions and memories of past relationships. They use their own life experience in order to assist girls in finding the words to express and clarify their struggle, as well as the behaviors to create more fulfilling lives.

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