

Reducing Anxiety in Aging: Taking the Next Steps Confidently (The Case of Terri)

Permission: This audio clip was taken from the full demonstration session with permission of The Milton H. Erickson Foundation. The full session conducted by Dr. Michael Yapko is available for purchase from the Foundation (Erickson-foundation.org) and is called "The Case of Terri."

Terri reported that where she most needed help was in walking; she said she had "a history of falling down." In her 70s and legitimately concerned about aging and the prospect of breaking fragile bones in a fall, Terri had become anxious about walking. Predictably, her anxiety would lead her to fall, intensifying the vicious circle of more fear causing more falls thereby increasing her fears. "Anticipatory anxiety " is the term clinicians commonly use in such instances, and it involves an obvious orientation to a future mishap that generates anxiety in the here-and-now.

In this session Terri was invited to close her eyes and focus on her breathing, and this seemed to calm her relatively quickly. She was encouraged to begin to think of the steps involved in performing an activity, any activity; There's a sequence to follow, a beginning step and a next step and perhaps many next steps before reaching a last step in the sequence. She accepted this obvious truth easily. Next, Terri was invited to think

about the steps involved in walking, from the lifting of a foot to the planting of a foot with each step. She was focused intently on the physical sensations of feeling her weight shift as she stepped, such as the feel of her foot (whether in a shoe or not) contacting the ground, distributing her weight safely and the many other sensations of walking mindfully. She was gently reminded that she could maintain that immediate sensory awareness wherever she went, whether at home or someplace far away.

She was invited to consider the importance of being deeply aware inside at times and the equal importance of being deeply aware of the external surroundings at times. At any given moment, before she takes a step in walking, she can comfortably take a preliminary step of noticing the environment and whether she'll be walking an even or uneven surface, a hard or soft surface. She can comfortably take the next step of focusing on her body, her legs, her feet, and her well-practiced ability to walk with awareness with each footstep she takes.

Beyond the physical act of walking, the sessions focus on 'next steps' allowed Terri to comfortably integrate and generalize taking each next step in her life with awareness and balance as she moved forward through her 70s and onward.