

THE *TECHNIQUE OF PSYCHOTHERAPY*

THE INITIAL INTERVIEW

CASE HISTORY

LEWIS R. WOLBERG M.D.

The Initial Interview:

Case History

Lewis R. Wolberg, M.D.

e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *The Technique of Psychotherapy* Lewis R. Wolberg

Copyright © 1988 by Lewis R. Wolberg

All Rights Reserved

Created in the United States of America

The Initial Interview: Case History

The following transcribed recording illustrates some of the processes of an initial interview.

(The patient telephoned for an appointment stating that he had been referred by a psychiatrist in San Francisco. When he appeared, he presented the appearance of a pleasant, poised young man, somewhat timid in manner.)

Th. Hello, I'm Dr. Wolberg.

Pt. How do you do. *(extends hand)*

Th. Won't you sit down over there, please.

Pt. Yes, mm hmm.

Th. The purpose of this interview is to get a general idea of your problem so that we can decide the best thing to do for it. *[structuring the purpose of the interview]*

Pt. Well, it's a complicated matter, but I feel like I'm not as complete a person as I might be. In my associations with people I mean. *[chief complaint]*

Th. How far back does this go?

Pt. Doctor, now the best way I can preface what I want to say is that I went to see Dr. ____ in San Francisco. I did have a problem, sort of an immediate problem which in turn led to other problems. There was a girl with whom I had been going for the past year, and we had just broken off, and I was very upset about that. And, I had, we had been having an affair, which seemed to complicate the matter considerably, since I wanted to be married and she, in turn, had had a previous engagement which had been broken. She was apprehensive about such things. And my first really severe emotional, what I consider a bust-up, was when she broke off the affair, and I, I lost control of myself pretty well, *[beginning elaboration of the history and development of the complaint]*

Th. How long ago was that?

Pt. This was in early 1948. It just seemed that, as I talked this out with Dr. ____ that(*pause*) that she actually symbolized a type of security which, as we talked over my past and my growing-up process, I never had before.

Th. Mm hmm.

Pt. I can remember very, very well getting little from my stepmother, who raised me with my father since I was 4 or 5. A person who deprecated me and my accomplishments constantly; a person who, of course, took me to the dentist twice a year and performed all of the routine functions of a mother without really letting herself, uh, be a mother, uh ... (*pause*)

Th. And your own mother?

Pt. No, my own mother was divorced from my father and she remarried, and my stepmother took care of me.

Th. I see. What about your real mother, did you see your own mother?

Pt. Oh yes, about once a week. We were living in San Francisco.

Th. Hm hmm.

Pt. Uh, I don't know if I've answered your question.

Th. Yes. (*pause*) Now to get back to the immediate problem.

Pt. That was the first time I had this kind of relationship. I had had various relations with a couple of prostitutes, and also with several girls, but they only lasted for a short time. This girl not only, she was, she was a brilliant girl in addition to being a, a wonderful partner sexually. And, uh, this really was the first experience of that intensity that I ever experienced.

Th. How old a girl was she?

Pt. She was younger than I was. She was 19.

Th. I see.

Pt. But very mature, I might add. As I look back on it now it seems to be almost a shadow. Oh, it comes back every so often. I think that my conduct today would be entirely different. I mean I can't visualize myself actually doing some of the incredibly insane things I did at

the time, (*pause*)

Th. What did you do?

Pt. Well, I mean I, I persisted, I was jealous, I, I, I, uh, didn't know whether to phone her or not. I put her on the spot. I made things rather miserable for her. I made them miserable for myself. I ...

Th. When was this?

Pt. Well, you see, there were actually two stages. About 4 or 5 months after I met her, we went back to college together where I was. We were both doing undergraduate work. And she decided to break off, and that was the first severe reaction I had. I mean, uh, I couldn't see that I was enjoying it too much, and it seemed to represent something very wonderful, and so, I protested loudly at that. I felt I lost everything, and I was very emotional and very, well, it's just, it's just something that I look back on. It seems totally impossible to reoccur. It never had reoccurred. But we still went on after that, and we resumed the affair after a month, and everything was fine. But, when we finally did break up, it was because she had started going out with another fellow. We had not gone steady during this entire period, and I can remember one Thanksgiving evening—this was at the height of the affair—and she went out with other people. Well, this was absurd to me, since God only knows I couldn't see myself wanting to go out with four different girls for the following nights after Wednesday or Thursday night, whichever it was. I don't know if it was Thanksgiving or Thanksgiving eve. So, it was a pretty insecure relationship for me throughout, and finally when it did break off, it was because she had become interested in someone else, a fellow who had had an article published in a national magazine. She was sort of enthralled by this because she had a creative bug, even though she was a political science major.

Th. You felt inferior to him?

Pt. In terms of, in terms of suaveness, yes. Not in terms, not because he had published something, though I must admit that I imagined off and on that I would publish something someday.

Th. But it must have been a *terrific* blow to you.

Pt. Well, yes. This guy was a very ... he was very tall, slender, good looking guy. He sort of had a uh, uh, worldliness in general, or so it seemed to me, as I imagined, as I noticed him from afar. And I remember being rude to him one day, which, which again is inconceivable for me, because it not only is out of character, but I certainly don't have that confidence.

Before I go on, I want to tell you something that the doctor in 'Frisco and I found out after a little while. I have a—I see it coming out of me now—I have a knack for glibness, and, sometimes, I talk—I'm able to talk very slick as I do now—as I seem to be able to do, go into a song and dance. And it's sort of tough to probe. He found it tough, because I, I was a little too glib. And I just want to tell you about that ahead of time.

Th. You want to warn me?

Pt. Yeah! I don't think that it's necessary, but ...

Th. You kind of suspect yourself.

Pt. Yeah, I definitely suspect myself of talking glibly and of underestimating, or trying to underestimate in terms of the person to whom I'm talking. I suspect that I try to make friends with the psychiatrist, instead of, instead of—well, (*laughs*) giving an objective account of my problems. [*This may be an awareness of certain interpersonal operations, and defenses, for instance, of a need to impress, to win people over, to befuddle them. The patient may be warning me not to allow him to fool or beguile me.*]

Th. Well, it's only natural for you to relate yourself to me in a way customary to the way you always relate to people. You might utilize, in talking to me, glibness or any other kinds of attitudes that are so often used. But if you want to be glib, there's no reason why you shouldn't be. If your glibness, however, does make problems for you, that may be something you may want to change. That would be something we could tackle right here in the therapeutic relationship. But let's get on to your problem again, if you'd like to resume the thread, [*accepting his glibness, but pointing out that it might be a focus for exploration*]

Pt. Sure. Uh, it seems that when my girl and I finally did break up, of course, I was, I was pretty crushed for several months, for almost a year. I had planned to go to Europe on one of these student ships. Several friends of mine and I got all the way to New York in the summer, three months after we had broken up, and I had what I call anxiety dreams at night, the dream of Joan, which was the name of the girl.

Th. Do you remember the content of the dreams?

Pt. Yes, I've had them off and on ever since, although they are fading out. I just don't have them too often any more. Uh, yes, uh, dreams in which I would see her marching off with some other guy, not at the altar, especially, but perhaps after they were married, and in which I, I seemed to sense that other people were taking her away. I remember one dream in which my stepmother and she were on the same side, and that was a blow.

And, things like that. So I turned in my reservations. I didn't go to Europe, and I turned around and I went back. Meantime, she had split up with this other fellow, who, in turn, had another girl. Circumstances just seemed to create tragedies, at least *(laughs)* temporarily. So, I went back, and we went around that summer.

Th. You went back to the same girl?

Pt. Yes, but we could never pick up the thread. It was just passed. I found it very, I found it just in pieces. You just don't pick those things up again. So, it was one of those things, although she wanted to start all over again. Her parents had thought I was a nice boy, and that was a pressure on her which I think was an unfortunate thing. And when I went back, she became somewhat disillusioned with me. This comes into another issue of—we, together, the two of us, were the officers of a debating society on various issues, including political issues. After listening to the talk back and forth, I had undergone a transformation. I thought I was progressive, but I got disgusted with that philosophy, although I suppose I still am somewhat progressive. I don't know whether to bring it up because I always feel it creates bad feelings.

Th. You don't know whether to bring that up with me?

Pt. Yeah.

Th. You may not know how I might react to your political ideas?

Pt. Yeah. That's exactly it. *[The patient seems to be testing me here to find out how tolerant or judgmental I might be.]*

Th. Do you feel that I might perhaps judge you in a certain light, if you were either conservative or radical?

Pt. Yeah, I'm always scared of people who live too near Park Avenue. This is maybe because I come from a very wealthy family, and didn't like it. These people frighten me. I don't mean frighten me in a conventional meaning of the word.

Th. All I can tell you is that whatever your political convictions may be, they may be right for you. You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, just what your political orientation is. It really wouldn't make too much difference to me. *[attempt at reassurance and at creating an atmosphere of tolerance]*

Pt. I believe you. This, uh, probably what I said was to, probably because I was grasping for information from *you*. I, actually, I had undergone a transformation.

Th. Uh huh.

Pt. I heard of a forthcoming convention, and I didn't like it. She asked me to participate, and I told her no, that I was at a former convention and I was a little disgusted at the goings-on, and I wasn't going to work in it. Well, that was the last straw. She had imagined me as the sort of person whose beliefs coincided with hers. And they did, actually, pretty much, except politically I suppose.

Th. What happened then?

Pt. Yeah, we broke up. We never started up from then. That was the last straw. We broke up. And that summer, I went to see Dr. _____ (*pause*)

Th. After the second break, you saw Dr. _____

Pt. It was during that second break, (*pause*)

Th. What was the *reason* you saw Dr. _____?

Pt. Well, because, because of her in two ways. First, she wanted me to. Both my mother, my real mother, and Joan wanted me to see a psychologist. I had been toying with the idea myself, and one of the things that enraged me particularly was the fact that Joan said that the condition for our rapprochement would be seeing a psychologist.

Th. Why did she want you to see a psychologist?

Pt. Because she, because she, well, she felt—and she was probably quite right—that my emotional attitude was so unstable. I, I jumped back and forth so much that she couldn't see herself living in this, this uncertainty.

Th. I see, Did *you* really think you were unstable?

Pt. Oh, definitely.

Th. Well now, what happened since the breakup of your affair with Joan? Perhaps you could bring the situation up to the present. [*Because the patient may cover many minor facets of his relationship with Joan to the sacrifice of other important aspects necessary to cover in the initial interview, I attempt to focus the material.*]

Pt. Yeah, I shall. There has been one other item of major importance and that recently terminated, but I'll give you that very briefly because I think that's quite important. Well,

right after that I transferred to a midwestern school. I missed Joan terribly, and I changed my major. So I changed it without any trouble, since I had another year before I took my Bachelor of Arts degree. So I did that, and I really had a fine time. I lived at the fraternity house, and I was active there, and I did some debating there.

Th. This was '49?

Pt. This was '49, yeah, late '48 and mostly '49. Well, soon I met a girl named Philly, she shall be called, since that was her nickname. So Philly and I started seeing one another, and we started having an affair. She seemed to me, well, she again had interests much similar to mine. So we started going around together and had an affair, but she turned into, in the last analysis, possibly a repetition of what happened with Joan. She turned out not to know what she wanted, and we went around all summer and all spring of '49 last year. I went to school in the East last fall, and when I went home in December, I found out that in spite of the fact that we had been engaged since last May, she had gone out with a boy whom she had previously gone with when she was at college. This is getting complicated. He had transferred to the Midwest college where she was still a student in her senior year. He had transferred there the same month last September that I had transferred East. And she had started going around with him, and she was wearing my ring, and although we had both been going out, I had been, had not been carrying on any promiscuous activities. It turned out that she became worried right after I left. She went to see a doctor, and it turned out that she was not pregnant, but, like a fool, she told him. Then it had got back to me, since we knew him mutually.

Th. Who told you this?

Pt. Well, you see, look, uh, here I go again, I'm skipping. This, this is getting complicated.

Th. We have so much to cover in the interview that it may perhaps be essential to cover highlights and then we'll be able to go into detail later, *[again attempting to focus on material pertinent to the initial interview]*

Pt. This is a highlight I'm going to have to tell you. I'm sorry to interrupt you, but I have to tell you this. She was pregnant last summer. I got her pregnant. And I was pretty shaken by it, and I brought my mother in who is a woman of the world.

Th. During this period was there a lot of turmoil in you, or were you more or less placid?

Pt. Placid, placid, surprisingly. You see, as soon as I met Philly, she was really why I seemed to get so secure, Joan faded from the picture, and it was like, it was like something fell off my back. It was like, I was like the man with the hoe. Well, anyhow, so I got her pregnant.

Oh, that was a hell of a summer. So Mother, who had been circulating with the literati for many years, she knew I was carrying on an affair with Philly. Mother had, we, we, mother and I had talked everything out, and I had felt very close to her, so I brought her in on this. And she went down to Philly—it was probably a mistake—and we got her, well we got there, everything was all right. Then we went back together. It was very difficult after that, and I began losing a little interest. Well, when I left in September, right after I left, I phoned her, one night in October, and her landlady said she went to see her aunt.

Th. Mm hmm.

Pt. Well, she has two aunts there, three, so she said. My suspicions grew and when she came back, she told me that she had gone South with this fellow. But it was platonic; he had gone as a friend. I accepted that. When I got home in December, Mother told me that she talked with Philly, and she said she didn't know if I was the one who got her pregnant or if it was the other fellow.

Th. Mm hmm.

Pt. And my opinion of her decreased considerably, since she had sort of done this thing without any responsibility. So, we broke up in December. It was a very terrible scene 'cause my mother got involved in it. My mother got involved, and she became just like every other mother, very possessive and jealous of her son. I had thought that she had a soul above it before this. But she didn't. She said, "She's no better than a whore." I took great offense to that. I got sore as hell.

Th. Did that knock you for a loop, too—the breakup of that situation?

Pt. Yes, yes, it did, for 2 or 3 weeks. Well, it really didn't by comparison with the first. I don't know whether it was because basically, because Joan was an unusual, extraordinary, uh, uh ...

Th. An exceptional person?

Pt. Yeah, or because Philly was just a second. And the second is, didn't bother me so much. So it, so, it's, it's, it's during that time I went to see Dr. ____ Now, why am I here today, I mean why I came to see you?

Th. Yes.

Pt. I know you want to get to that. Well, right now I have actually never felt in a way so

confident except maybe when I was in high school or in the army. But it may be because I think introspectively. I guess introspection isn't too good either.

Th. Well, now, let me ask you this. What problems do you feel you have now that you'd like to modify?

Pt. Weil, there are problems. Mostly they're in terms of pers-, my own personality problems.

Th. Do you want to tell me something about these?

Pt. Yeah, yeah, I will. Well, I find myself feeling at times that I do not, oh, have friends with whom I can possibly associate or, or be at ease with. I feel that I should always be making an impression upon them. Uh ...

Th. Do you have any idea as to what goes on?

Pt. I have an idea why.

Th. Yes.

Pt. Well, I, uh, I think it's probably the fact that I had been deprecated; I had been deprecated by my stepmother throughout life. She had pointed to her own son as *the* one.

Th. What age difference is there between you and her son?

Pt. It was a year and a half. He was younger. Well, he turned out to be a complete dunce. *(laughs)* I say that literally. And it, it turned out that, that my father started looking toward me. And later on Dad was, Dad was always the most stabilizing influence in this whole set-up.

Th. Did you like him?

Pt. Oh, yes, Dad was wonderful.

Th. So, to come back to what we were talking about before, the basic problem you'd like help with is your relations with people.

Pt. Yes, and there are several other things I already mentioned that may be concomitants of this or other problems. *[Since the patient is garrulous, to allow him to explore this idea would divert us from important tasks.]*

Th. Now I'd just like to ask you a few questions rapidly.

Pt. Fire.

Th. Your full name is? *[getting statistical data]*

Pt. *(Patient spells this out.)*

Th. How old are you?

Pt. Twenty-five.

Th. Your address?

Pt. *(Patient gives this.)*

Th. Telephone?

Pt. *(Patient gives this.)*

Th. Is it all right to call you there?

Pt. Oh, yes.

Th. Are you living alone?

Pt. Yes.

Th. Now, you are single and a postgraduate student?

Pt. Right.

Th. What are the sources of your income?

Pt. Well, I was left a small amount of money; well, maybe, it isn't small, but it gives me enough to be comfortable with.

Th. You say you were in the army?

Pt. I was in the army, uh, 26 months between 1944 and '46. I think the army was intellectually regressive. I don't recall reading more than 3 or 4 books during that time.

Th. Now I'd like to ask you about other symptoms. How about tension, do you feel tense?
[inquiring about other complaints and symptoms]

Pt Well, now, if you are talking about now, I don't. Only when I am in certain situations.

Th How about depressions, do you get depressed?

Pt Once in a while when I think of the messes I've been in.

Th But not habitually.

Pt No.

Th How about anxiety?

Pt Oh, yes, I'm anxious, but I get out of it.

Th What about physical symptoms?

Pt Well, no.

Th Any fatigue or exhaustion?

Pt Yes, often that.

Th How about headaches?

Pt No.

Th Dizziness?

Pt I don't think so.

Th Stomach or bowel trouble?

Pt No.

Th Any sexual problems?

Pt Well, now, it's funny, when I first meet a girl, I can't, I mean I have no confidence, but later it's all right.

Th I see. Any other problems?

Pt I would say not.

Th. Any phobias or fears?

Pt. Just of speaking in public. Stage fright, I guess.

Th. Any other fears?

Pt. No.

Th. Any thoughts that crowd in your mind that frighten you?

Pt. No.

Th. Any compulsions—doing things over and over?

Pt. Well, no.

Th. How about sedatives, do you take them?

Pt. Only rarely when I can't sleep.

Th. How about alcohol, do you drink excessively?

Pt. No, but at parties I may have too much.

Th. You say you sleep well?

Pt. Oh, yes.

Th. Any nightmares?

Pt. No.

Th. You remember your dreams pretty well?

Pt. Generally.

Th. Can you tell me a recent dream?

Pt. I had one last night, but I can't remember the details.

Th. Any repetitive patterns in your dreams?

Pt. I couldn't say.

Th. Now a few items about your family. Your own mother is alive and well, [*obtaining family data*]

Pt. Yes.

Th. You say you feel different ways about her?

Pt. Yes, good and bad. I seem to miss her and get furious, infuriated with her. She is sophisticated as I say, but always gets into my life, interferes.

Th. Your father is in good health?

Pt. Yes, he's a person I always admired.

Th. And your stepmother?

Pt. As I said, we were strained. I don't think she ever liked me. She gave me physical care, but it stopped at that.

Th. Now what about brothers and sisters?

Pt. I have a half-brother, three years older than I am. He is a shy fellow. We got along badly, very badly all our lives. I joined in the cruelty kicking him around. It seems I emerged out of all this better than he did. And then I have a younger half-brother who turned into a sort of nonentity. That was fortunate for me because I felt that I had it all over them.

Th. Now previous to the two bust-ups you had with these two girls, were there any previous attacks of the same kind? [*questions as to previous emotional upsets*]

Pt. No, not that way.

Th. How about when you were little, any problems then?

Pt. I suppose I was a nervous kid, but I, uh, I mean, I never had any real trouble.

Th. You have had previous treatments as you said with Dr. _____. Can you tell me a little more about these, [*questions as to previous treatments*]

Pt. Well, you see, I saw him for a month when I got upset, then, and then I had to go back to

school. So I used to see him vacations, and never more than a couple of weeks at a time.

Th. I see.

Pt. And I saw him when I was in California in December, and, it's, well it's been a very short period.

Th. Did you get any psychologic tests of any kind?

Pt. I took some intelligence tests when I was in high school.

Th. Any Rorschach test at any time?

Pt. No.

Th. I'd like to get one on you. How do you feel about it? [*Securing a psychologic consultation. This is not absolutely essential here but it might give me some data about his ego strength.*]

Pt. Sure, if you think it's important.

Th. All right, then, my secretary will make the appointment and will call you. Now, how would you estimate your present health, physical health?

Pt. I'd say I was all right physically.

Th. Have you had a physical examination during the past year?

Pt. Only three months ago I had an insurance physical. The doctor said I was in good shape then.

Th. So to review, you'd like to get started in therapy for this personality difficulty. How urgent would you say your need for therapy was?

Pt. I'd say it wasn't an emergency, that is, I've lived with it for a time, and I suppose I could survive. But I want to be the sort of individual who can walk around in this complicated world without feeling that I somehow am, well, not apart from it. Now in my studies in school, I, I work in spurts. I find myself unable to study for a week. And, all of a sudden, I'll spurt. I do an enormous amount of work then.

Th. In other words, your efforts aren't consistent. Now, let's look upon the practical issues that are involved. You're up in the country, and you have a commuting problem. If you were to come here to see me, we would have to work out some sort of program for you. First,

how would you feel about working with me? *[making practical arrangements for therapy]*

Pt. Fine, I find it easy to talk to you.

Th. Good. I believe I can make time for you on my schedule.

Pt. Well, now I have a car. It wouldn't be too bad. I have no classes Wednesdays and only one class on Friday from which I can come to and then come in. Those are really my best days.

Th. What I would really like to do is spend several sessions with you attempting to formulate a goal in treatment, and then outline a plan. I am not sure yet how deeply we want to go into your personality problem, or how extensive the process would be in terms of time. You know personality problems go so far back in one's life that it might take time to remove them. Sometimes it takes as long as 2 or 3 years. *[Since this is a personality problem, it is likely that therapy will take a long time.]*

Pt. Well, I know it must take time, and I suppose I am too anxious about it. But on the financial end, if I don't have to come too often, I think I can handle it.

Th. As far as frequency is concerned, we could try twice a week and see how things go. You may be able to do well on that. If any unusual resistances occur, you might have to come in more often, at least for a while. But we can't really tell without a trial. As a matter of fact, once we decide to go ahead, it might be a good idea to set up a trial period of say three months to see how we get along in therapy as a team. *[Setting the frequency at twice a week is conditioned partly by the fact that he can come in no more frequently, if he is to continue with all of his classes at school. On the other hand, because of his dependency problem, we may want to cut down on visits to once a week.]*

Pt. I think that's a good idea.

Th. Now my secretary told you my fee. I'd like to tell you about our appointments. They start right on time, and the sessions last three-quarters of an hour. I'll send you a bill at the end of each month. Once we set our regular sessions, you should keep the appointments consistently unless a real emergency comes up. If you have to cancel an appointment, please do so at least 24 hours in advance; otherwise I may have to charge you for the session since I set it aside for you. *[making final arrangements]*

Pt. All right.

Th. All right, then, how would 3:40 p.m. next Wednesday suit you for your next appointment

and 2:50 P.M. the Friday after that?

Pt. That would be good for me.

Th. All right, my secretary will call you about the appointment with the psychologist for testing. So I'll see you Wednesday.

Pt. Goodbye, Doctor.

Th. Goodbye.

Tentative diagnosis: Passive-aggressive personality disorder.

Tentative dynamics: The patient seems to suffer from tendencies to relate in an immature way to women who take over a maternal role with him. Hostility is probably a concomitant of this relationship. Inevitably the patient is rejected, perhaps through his own participation. A rupture of the relationship produces great anxiety, with inability to function. The patient may try to avoid deep involvement by a detached relationship with women for whom he may have little respect. The origins of his problem are perhaps rooted in childhood insecurities in relation to an alternately rejecting and overprotective mother and a rejecting stepmother. Latent homosexual tendencies may exist associated with the dependency pattern.

Tentative prognosis: There are many positive things about this man, and he seems to have been able to adjust to many vicissitudes. For instance, his early childhood was not too tumultuous; he adjusted well to army life; he has progressed satisfactorily at school. With adequate therapy the prognosis is probably good.

Reciprocal response of patient and interviewer: The patient was cooperative and seemed to respond well to the interviewer. The latter, in turn, felt positive toward the patient.

Physical appearance: Meticulous, perhaps a little foppish.

Patient's estimate of his present physical health: Good.

Communicativeness: Somewhat garrulous.

Insight and motivation:

1. The patient is aware of the fact that he has a problem.
2. He desires to correct the problem.
3. He is aware that his problem is emotional in nature.
4. He is willing to accept psychotherapy.
5. He is willing to accept help from the interviewer.
6. He seems to be willing to accept the conditions of psychotherapy.
7. He is able to afford the fee.

Choice of treatment method: Psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapy.

Frequency of visits: Twice weekly at the start.