

THE DIRTY PANTS PROBLEM AND A WONDERFULNESS INTERVIEW

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Serena, a disgruntled 11-year-old, accompanied Jenny, her single-parenting mother, into my office. Jenny wasn't in a very good mood either. When Serena turned towards her, Jenny couldn't help herself from scowling at Serena, who made no attempt at putting on a good face for me. Whatever the problem was, it was one of those that had set each of them at odds with the other. Serena looked vengefully back at her mother as if she had been injured by her. When I tried to translate the looks on her face, I came up with something like: "If you tell him what the problem is, you'll be very sorry when we get home afterwards!"

As is my custom, I tried a tack that I suspected caught both of them off guard. "Look, do you mind if we go about this conversation in a way that might be very, very different than what you both might have expected?" They both looked at me askance, but I proceeded without any further ado. "I was wondering, Serena, if I might get to know you through your 'wonderfulnesses'?¹ You know—your talents, abilities, and what your friends think is cool about you. Jenny, I wouldn't be surprised if you want to know why. Well, by the looks on both your faces, this problem has got you pretty upset with one another. So I have to assume that it must be a tricky problem. And we might have to 'team up' if we are going to do anything about this sort of problem. But before we even can think about teaming up, I guess it would be good for me to know what your 'wonderfulnesses' are, Serena, so we can all see what you have going for you. Then we can figure out how to put some or all of those wonderfulnesses against the problem that has got you so upset with one another." Serena and Jenny were certainly taken aback but, if nothing else, they were intrigued and consented for me to proceed. I doubt that at this stage they could have known exactly what lay ahead of them, but at least both were now able to temporarily tear themselves away from the unspoken mutual recriminations.

¹"Wonderfulnesses" was a word I coined from the adjective "wonderful" in order to turn it in to a plural noun and which also allows for the singular "wonderfulness."

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I began by addressing Serena. “Serena, might it make you feel uncomfortable, perhaps big headed, if I were to ask you about your ‘wonderfulnesses’”? She concurred with a head nod but the look in her eye remained quizzical. “In that case, do you mind if I ask your wonderfulness questions to your mum?” She raised her eyebrows as if to say, “What is all this about?” but stumbling over her words, she said, “Yah, go ahead . . . ask her” in a far less disdainful tone of voice than she had been using. Although it was not entirely smooth sailing at the beginning of the half-hour-long discussion, by the end of it, I was not left in any doubt that Serena, according to her mother’s endearing accounts, was a wonderful 11-year-old young woman. Jenny, initially with strained enthusiasm, told me about her daughter’s wonderfulnesses. She related to me that Serena could be “lovely, friendly, and kind to little children.” I refused to leave it there. I sought considerable elaboration of these claims by calling forth from Jenny stories in which Serena’s attributes were embedded. “Jenny, would you be so kind to tell me one story from amongst the many stories you could tell me about how Serena goes about her loveliness, friendliness, and kindnesses to little children. And when I hear the story you decide to tell me, I will deeply understand how she practices such wonderfulnesses.”

Jenny blinked in response to the sententiousness of my expressions but then appeared to pass into a kind of reverie as if she were looking over the past to find an apposite story. Jenny chose Serena’s attention to and care for the young children of their next door neighbors, in addition to her preschool-aged cousins, as the crux of an ensemble of tales in which to portray her daughter. Slowly, the enmity that had pervaded each and every interaction began to fade. When I enquired if such expressions of kindness were extended towards her, Jenny admitted that Serena “at times, could be a good help.” When I asked her to specify how Serena went about her helping, Jenny, turning towards her daughter smiling, told of occasions when “after school, you go out and bring in the washing off the line before I get home from work, which makes it easier for me, and when I work late on Fridays, you take the dog out for a walk so I don’t have to do in late at night.”

By now, Jenny started to appreciably warm up to these questions while Serena looked far less chilly than she had at the beginning of our meeting. Spontaneously, Jenny had cause to commend her daughter for the way she babysits for Olivia, their 6-year-old neighbor. When I asked how significant this was for an 11-year-old to be entrusted with the care of a youngster, Jenny agreed that indeed this was so. She then went on to tell me that although she accompanied her, she observed, “Serena’s nice considerate nature.” She thought when Serena turned 14, she could babysit on her own. “Serena, have you turned this wonderfulness of yours into a form of gainful employment?” This was the first time she smiled coyly and replied with a muffled, “Suppose so.”

At my urging, Jenny now turned to another arena of her daughter’s wonderfulnesses (“Jenny, do her wonderfulnesses show up anywhere else in her life?”). Before I could propose some other sites such as at school, on school holidays, in her sports, in the things she loves to do either by herself or with her girlfriends, her mother,

with a measure of pride in Serena, reported that she could be “daring, fearless, and brave when it comes to her cheerleading and trampolining.” I quickly turned towards Serena and asked her the following question in a mischievous manner: “Serena, whatever the problem might be, do you think it knows just how brave, fearless, and daring you so obviously are? Do you have any idea what it might think about you if it knew everything your mum knows about you?” She seemed somewhat surprised by this form of enquiry but once again grinned and somewhat hesitantly said she supposed it wouldn’t know this about her. “Do you think this problem is pretty clueless about you?” She found herself unable to answer, and to avoid any embarrassment about being stumped by my query, we just carried on as if she had responded. “What do you think about us teaming up and telling the problem about this?” Once again, somewhat bemused and then starting to giggle out loud, perhaps imagining the prospect of such an encounter, she said, “Oh . . . oh. Okay!” “Well, say we all got together and told the problem, whatever it may be, the truth about the kind of person you are that allows you to get out there and cheerlead and jump up and down when you are trampolining, even though there surely is a risk of falling off and hurting yourself. Do you think this problem would have second thoughts about intruding into your life if it knew full well just how daring, fearless, and brave you truly are?” Once again, she shook her head, smiling through what I took to be bafflement and said, “I dunno!” “Jenny, most problems have a pretty narrow version of a young person because they only know the kid in trouble and not out of trouble and probably aren’t that interested in knowing about their daring, bravery, and fearlessness.” She conceded with an uncertain smile that this was probably so. “Serena, do you think your daring could cause some trouble for the problem?”

Before we could take this up, Jenny sat up in her chair, proudly looked Serena directly in the eye and boldly announced, “You are independent-minded!” I immediately took this opportunity to inquire if it was likely that she had fostered Serena’s independent-mindedness. Jenny had no doubt this was so and spoke of her child-rearing resolution: “I brought her up like that so that she can do things for herself. I don’t like children being mollycoddled!” Turning to Serena, I asked if she had been aware of her mother championing her independent-mindedness before now. Serena, still bemused, peered at her mother with increasing curiosity. Of course, I did not leave it here. “Serena, is it good news or bad news to know your mother was behind your independent-mindedness?” Serena confirmed it was good news after giving my question careful consideration. “Jenny, does your policy to raise an independent-minded daughter go way back to even before she was born?” I glanced at Serena out of the corner of my eye, and she was now unselfconsciously staring at her mother as if her mother was revealing to her something I suspected was previously unknown to her. Jenny disclosed to us both “that it’s a hard world for a woman and you have to be able to look after yourself and not depend on men to look after you.” I thought I could see many questions forming in Serena’s mind. Jenny went on to say that she had always been determined that Serena “grow up to be an adult who can think for herself and be self-reliant.”

I confess I was excited by the prospect of pursuing this inquiry, and I am sure my manner would have indicated that. “Serena, are you of the opinion that your mother is an independent-minded mother, woman, and saleswoman?” She smiled and nodded in confirmation. Further, when I asked her if Jenny had a reputation amongst her family and friends for her independent-mindedness, nodding in unison, they laughed out loud. This left me no doubt. “Serena, do you think there is any of your mother’s independent-mindedness in you?” Serena again confirmed this with a grin and then looked towards Jenny, who was now beaming with a measure of pride.

Once again in a roguish manner, I asked, “Serena, do you have any idea what the problem might think of messing with an independent-minded young person? I am wondering if it might turn out very badly for this problem, whatever it turns out to be?” Yet again, Serena looked at me with equal measures of mystery and bemusement. She replied: “I dunno!” Turning to Jenny, I continued to pursue these novel and perhaps arcane speculations about the problem: “Do you think a problem would prefer to do the thinking for Serena and make up her mind about things for her? Or even have Serena rely on it?” Jenny and Serena concurred after considerable thought and bantered between them that any problem, no matter what it might turn out to be, wouldn’t like an independent young woman. That this could spell trouble for any problem that tried to do an 11-year-old’s thinking for them, especially if they were raised from birth to be independent-minded by an independent-minded mother.

I now considered it was time to address and confront the problem directly, whatever it was. Why? I expected that Jenny, concluding that she as a woman needed to rely on herself and then sponsoring that in her only child by way of the policy she had adopted since Serena’s birth, might have invalidated or at least neutralized how much the problem had divided them, at least for the time being. Still, I had my qualms, and for that reason I steeled myself for Serena’s response to my next inquiry. I did my best to ask in the most casual manner I could muster under these circumstances.

“Serena, by the way, what do you call this problem?” To my surprise and delight, she answered me in a relatively matter-of-fact manner: “Dirty underpants!” “Oh no, dirty underpants!” I exclaimed sympathetically in the following manner: “Tell me, is your dirty underpants problem like so many dirty underpants problems I have met over the years?” By this query, I hoped that I might indicate I had a long acquaintanceship with dirty underpants myself, which was certainly the case. Serena now queried me with considerable insistence. “What do you mean by that?” Serena really wanted me to explain myself. “Well, I don’t know a problem that can play more dirty tricks on a young person than a dirty underpants problem. Can I run through some of its tricks people your age have told me about? I will start with the least dirty trick and then work my way up to the dirtiest of dirty tricks. Is that okay with you?” Without any apparent reservations, Serena indicated that I should go on. Over the years I had worked with with many young people, aged 4 to 12, to undo the problem’s tricks, and we had come up with a list in order of dirtiness,

and although I did not have my copy on hand, I certainly found the tricks easy to recall. I think that after you read the dirty tricks, you will have to admit they indeed were malicious, spiteful, and harmful.

I had decided to summarize the effects of such a problem in what I hoped was a form that would not only intrigue Serena but render relevant to her those wonderfulnesses that we had concluded might have the capacity to make trouble for the problem: first, their shared mother-daughter independent-mindedness and second, her daring, fearlessness, and bravery. I hoped too that soon Jenny would realize that the wonderfulness inquiry was not mere window dressing.

“Well, Serena, here is the No. 1 dirty trick. Does it pretend it’s not a problem and you shouldn’t bother yourself about it?” Serena pondered this for longer than she was given to and then thoughtfully commented, “Sort of.” Jenny was in no doubt about this particular dirty trick: “That’s right! It does do that!” she asserted in no uncertain terms. By now, their attention was rapt in what possibly could be dirtier than that No. 1 dirty trick. “Well, here is the No. 2 dirty trick. Does it try to have you believe that if it is a problem, it’s not yours but it’s your mother’s?” Jenny smiled ruefully. I suspected this was in recognition of so many arguments she and Serena had had over the problem and whose problem it was. Serena appeared somewhat confused by this but did not object to my proceeding. Emboldened, I proceeded. “Well, here is the No. 3 dirty trick. “Does it try its old favorite that if you do nothing about it or even forget about it, it will go away all by itself?” Once again, Serena mused, “Sort of,” but Jenny insisted: “No, that’s right!” Once again, the tenor of the conversation between them had changed entirely. Jenny’s comment was suffused with kind regard and from what I could see, Serena accepted it in that spirit rather than as criticism. They were smiling at one another and shaking their heads—and the temerity of the problem to try to pull a stunt like that and get away with it. At least until now! “Well, here is the No. 4 dirty trick. Now, I need to forewarn you that this is a particularly dirty trick.” This introduction had obviously captured their attention, and they both stared at me expectantly. “Serena, does the problem tell you that it is good for you and will help you grow up?” Both Serena and Jenny laughed out loud at the problem’s effrontery. After a brief consultation, Jenny proclaimed that would be unlikely: “We are too independent-minded for that, aren’t we, Mum?” I expressed my relief and had to admit this had taken in quite a few young people her age and even older. Serena replied: “Really?” in disbelief that such a state of affairs could happen. I had to assure her that it not only could happen but that I had discussed such a dirty trick with some 11- and 12-year-old young people who had fallen for it. However, I hastened to add by way of reassurance that once we named it “dirty trick 4,” they no longer were gullible. What they did realize was that it was their way to get back at their parents when they lost their tempers and punished them harshly and said mean and hurtful things to them. Serena, Jenny, and I all came to the same conclusion: that this was a particularly dirty trick. I hoped this went some way to exonerating both of them for lost tempers and saying mean and hurtful things. “Well, Jenny and Serena, if you think No. 4

was a particularly dirty trick, here is No. 5, which in my opinion is the dirtiest trick of them all. Serena, has the problem tried to convince you that your poo smells as sweet as roses and everyone should wear some poo on their body for its perfume?" Once again, they laughed uproariously at my exaggeration for some time before Jenny called it to a sudden halt, saying, "You know, there's something to that." She reflected on how she worked in a paint and home decorating shop in sales and often was told by her friends that she smelled of paint and turpentine, whereas she was oblivious to these odors. She told Serena by way of commiseration rather than criticism: "You know, you get so used to it that you can't smell it yourself?"

Serena looked thoughtful but kept her thoughts to herself for awhile until she suddenly expostulated: "I don't like it!" Somewhat confused, I enquired, "What don't you like, Serena?" "The dirty pants problem!" "Do you think we do?" "I suppose not!" Serena replied. Both Jenny and I tried to offer her some solace by indicating that we wholeheartedly shared her dislike of such a problem and the dirty tricks that made it possible. To this end, I declared, "Serena and Jenny, I am heartsick to learn that this problem has been playing the same tricks on you that it has played on so many young people I have met over the years." I then turned to Serena and spoke directly to her: "Serena, you are now an independent-minded 11-year-old and this comes from your mother both by the example she has provided for you and her fostering of it in you. Do you think the problem's dirty tricks are wearing a bit thin, even if they can fool you every so often?" To my surprise, she replied that the dirty tricks could fool her quite a bit but in spite of that, they were wearing thin. "Serena, if you weren't quite so independent-minded, do you guess you would have been fooled all the time rather than just a bit?" She nodded in agreement, as did Jenny, who did so as if she were paying homage to her daughter for her perspicacity. Serena's response startled us both, as she jumped to the far-reaching conclusion that "it's a bad problem and I can do something about it!"

I then asked a question that I believe would have seemed audacious before Serena's assertion of her distaste for the problem and her belief she could seek some remedy. "In that case, would you be willing to put pressure on yourself to put pressure on the problem?" "What do you mean by that?" Serena wondered aloud. I surveyed the problem's effects on their past and recent present. "Look, the problem has been putting pressure on your mum to put pressure on you. How about turning the tables on the problem by putting pressure on yourself to put pressure on the problem?" "How?" Serena asked with zeal. It now seemed like a viable tack to take to get her own back, a kind of revenge, and out-trick the problem. "Well, you might have to play clean tricks on the problem instead of being taken in by its dirty tricks. Would that be okay with you? Would that be okay with you too, Jenny?" There was no dissent. We went on to confirm this policy without any specific tactics being discussed. If nothing else, we had teamed up against the problem's dirty tricks and had outlined the ways to respond, for example, "putting pressure on yourself to put pressure on the problem" and naming them clean tricks.

"Serena, before we go any further, I need to know how much pressure you are

willing to put on yourself to put on the problem.” Serena, although interested, justifiably wanted to know how she might go about this. I told her of several young women who decided to put pressure on themselves instead of the problem putting pressure on their mother to inspect and wash their underpants. “Serena, an 8-year-old who was pretty mad about being tricked like this said that if the problem had the nerve to dirty her bed, the next night she would put pressure on herself by sleeping in her sleeping bag on the floor to get back at the problem for its dirty tricks. And you know she really taught the problem a lesson because the problem hardly ever messed her pants or her bed after that. There was a 15-year-old girl I met a few years ago who was very humiliated by the problem and got so indignant that she gave her mother one item of her makeup every time the problem messed her up and said her mum shouldn’t give them back to her until she went clean for a month or two. Are you surprised it worked so well that she got all her makeup back within 3 months?” Neither of them seemed surprised by these outcomes. In fact, Serena, without much reflection, displayed her independent-mindedness to the fullest by telling us of another far-reaching conclusion. “Right, Mum, I will give you my cell phone, iPod, and computer if you find my pants messed up!” Jenny looked stunned by Serena’s declaration and tried to talk her out of including her cell phone, as this would be inconvenient for her when she wanted to pick her up after school. But Serena stood her ground and said this would be the requisite pressure to put on herself to put on the problem. And it just had to be this much, and anything short of that wouldn’t do the trick of her going clean. Jenny readily conceded.

We then creatively put our heads together and collectively came up with the following agreement. Admittedly, I led the way in the details of the planning, but every step of the way both Serena and Jenny discussed each term of the agreement and confirmed it as their mother-daughter policy. Below is an abstract from the letter I forwarded to them immediately after this meeting.

Dear Serena and Jenny,

Serena, you decided to put pressure on yourself to put pressure on the problem instead of the problem putting pressure on your mother. Here is what everyone agreed to do:

1. Serena will hand over one pair of her underpants to Jenny at approximately 8:30 p.m. before she goes to bed.
2. Serena will state loudly and clearly to her mum: “I am giving you these underpants so you know that I am putting pressure on myself to put pressure on the problem. It is no use putting pressure on you because all that does is hurt our daughter-mother relationship. And no matter how much pressure you put on me, that isn’t going to make my body clean and unsoiled. Because only I can do that!”
3. Jenny will state loudly and clearly to Serena: “I think it is very independent-minded and brave of you to put pressure on yourself to put pressure on this very dirty and tricky problem. Thank you for not putting pressure on me because no matter how hard I tried in the past, it has not made your body clean and has hurt our mother-daughter relationship!”

4. A decision should be quickly reached as to the state of that day's underpants—clean or dirty? If there is any dispute, the underpants will be set to one side in a special place until Aunty Judy can be contacted and come over to decide the matter once and for all. You both told me that you trust her to be fair because she is a social worker and knows all about the problem. You both agreed that what Aunty Judy decides, for example, dirty or clean, goes.
5. If the problem has soiled Serena's underpants, Serena will put pressure on herself to put pressure on the problem by washing them and surrendering her cell phone, iPod, and computer for one week to her mum. After the week is over, Jenny will happily return everything to Serena.
6. After 2 months of Serena putting pressure on herself to put pressure on the problem and going clean, Jenny and Aunty Judy will declare her a "clean" 11-year-old young woman.
7. Of course, after that there may be the odd slip-up if Serena gets overconfident and lowers her guard. Then, we will return to David to discuss ways of "getting back on a horse after you have fallen off."

Serena, I know I only met you for an hour or more today; but I have known this problem for many years, almost 20 when I think it about it, and consider it to be one of the dirtiest tricksters going. I respect the fact that you have risked your iPod/cell phone/computer to go clean. And I suspect a lot of this has to do with how your mother trained you to grow up to be independent-minded.

I believe you can do this!

Yours sincerely,

David

We were never to meet again although we reviewed matters on a regular basis over the phone and by email. There was a period of dramatic success over a 2-month period, leading to Jenny and Aunty Judy declaring Serena to be an 11-year-old independent-minded young woman who had got her own back on the problem's dirty tricks by playing clean tricks on it and outsmarting it. This sounded to me to be a ritual redefinition of her as no longer a young woman with a problem but one who had overcome a problem. They forwarded me a card to proclaim this. As predicted Serena did become overconfident and perhaps complacent, leading to two predictable slip-ups. However, according to Jenny, Serena, without any fuss, merely renewed putting pressure on herself to put pressure on the problem by willingly surrendering her devices to her mother, and it wasn't long before she "got herself back up on a horse" again.

It is always interesting to consider why one selects a particular case or even individual interview to turn into an exemplary tale. When I reconsider having written the above, I recall I was in the midst of trying out wonderfulness inquiries as part and parcel of restructuring the interview itself. What do I mean by that? Historically, the interview followed a certain order: "what is the problem?" was conventionally followed by "what will we do about it?" I suspect this remains the structure of medical and psychological assessment interviews. The classical narrative therapy interview reordered that and asked instead: (a) What is this problem

and what should we call it? (b) What does it do to your identity, your relationships, and your life in general? and (c) What do you do to it in return? What Marsten, Epston, and Markham outline in “Narrative Therapy in Wonderland: Connecting With Children’s Imaginative Know-How” (2016) is a variant on this. Here, the order of the interview is as follows: (a) Before we discuss the problem that is concerning you, can your moral character and the skills and knowledges that give that expression be revealed to us all? and (b) with that, we will then consider how your moral character might engage the problem that I would hope you will now explain to me. At the time of this interview, I was trying this out with almost every conceivable client at the same time as taking pains to explain to them that this was far more than socializing. I reassured all concerned that what at first might seem beside the point or just a kind of pollyanna-ish doting more typical of grandparents than seriously concerned parents attending a professional consultation would soon become very obviously pertinent to the matter at hand. Although this wasn’t without precedent, Jenny and Serena were very much at odds, and at any moment, this interview could have erupted into their screaming at one another or dissolving into tears of frustration and humiliation. As a single mother raising an 11-year-old daughter who was soiling her underpants was very likely as much a disgrace for Jenny as it was for Serena herself. Given that neither of them was expecting or even willing to extoll the moral virtues of the other, I decided to persist with this.

What I found so remarkable was the alacrity and commitment with which Serena engaged with a problem she had previously refused to even discuss with her mother. This took place in a matter of a half-hour-long wonderfulness interview. As a consequence, I reviewed my extensive notes and the letter I had written immediately after this interview, time and time again, especially as over the next few months I was informed of such a positive outcome. I had to conclude that genealogically linking mother and daughter and having Serena acknowledge her mother for her policy of rearing an independent minded young woman had considerable bearing on their newfound solidarity. Now, the problem no longer divided mother and daughter, pitting them against one another as adversaries. Instead, the problem was found to be their antagonist—and now mother and daughter could set out to relate to the problem afresh. I have come up with many complementary terms for this: What have you and your family got: (a) to put against the (generic and as yet unknown) problem, (b) to engage the problem with, (c) to apply to the problem, (d) to meet (greet) the problem with, and (e) to contest (play against) the problem with?

I was also able to review the wonderfulness interview as a series of transitions: first, from adjectival descriptions or characteristics (e.g., kindness); second, to translate say “she’s kind” to a practice of everyday life and to have that rendered in a story with the young person as its protagonist and the parent as narrator; for example, “Can you tell me a story, one among many stories you might be able to tell me of how Serena goes about doing her kindness in her everyday life? And when you do, I expect I will deeply understand what you mean when you say Serena is kind.” And from hereon, the interview will tentatively pursue such a

putative engagement with the generic problem. Here, I realized I was turning a by-now-established historical fact (e.g., how Serena showed kindness in the past) to a prospective engagement with the generic problem.

There also was an attempt that I was to develop further here to cut the problem down to the young person's size, age, and knowledge. From this interview on, I continually would smuggle the problem into the conversation by way of very playful, cheeky, or even impudent inquiries and anticipated responses. Here are some examples of such mischief made at the expense of the problem, whatever it turns out to be. "Do you think the fact that you aren't a quitter might upset the problem if it knew the truth about you?" "If the problem found out it was dealing with a non-quitter, do you wonder, as I do, if it might leave you alone and bother someone else your age who might more likely give up?" "What if someone told the problem that you were a 10-year-old who made up his own mind about things; do you guess the problem would give up trying to make up your mind for you?" "What do you think might happen if the problem found out your dad thinks you tackle just like an All Black [the national rugby team of New Zealand and world champions in 2011 and 2015]?" Queries such as these can change the mood of what began as a deadly serious meeting into one of insolence which can readily infect all the concerned parties. In addition, I was to find that many problems, such as those that Serena experienced, had compromised the family's dignity and honor and these impudent queries went some way towards restoring what had been discredited.

Such a conversation indicates the distinction between knowledge-nearness and knowledge-farness. These conversations take place within those knowledges and moral virtues in their local social world. They have been more than explicated; they are now on hand. But most importantly, playfulness is the preferred domain of young people, as opposed to deadly seriousness. Here, in one or more of the many contestatory relationships possible, mischief can be made in the form of trouble for the problem. Here, the young person and certainly Serena become mischievous, impertinent, and disrespectful to the authority of the problem. Perhaps we might refer to this as serious play. And solidarity in relationship to the problem replaces inquiries as to who did it or who is to blame. Now, all concerned turn and face the problem by way of the young person's moral virtues and the way those are genealogically linked to the family, community, or culture they come from. All concerned are "remoralized" (Frank, 2004), rather than "demoralized" (Kleinman, 1998).

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