



## "The myth of the therapeutic lie"

(Part II) by Naomi Feil, M.S.W., A.C.S.W.



The Lie: "The bus doesn't run on Saturday. Your mother is not waiting for you at the bus stop. You'll see her at home in a little while. Let's take a little nap until your mother gets home."

(Told to 92-year-old Jessie Adams who has wandered from her nursing home toward a bus stop—from the Winter 97 *Validation* newsletter, Volume 16, no. 5.)

At 4 a.m. Jessie Adams, age 92, scurries down the street in her nightgown, one block from the nursing home where she lives. She is in PHASE II, TIME CONFUSION. A Certified Nursing Assistant, who is also a Certified Validation Worker, follows Jessie Adams.

*Jessie to Validation Worker:* LET ME GO, YOU WHIPPERSNAPPER! MY MOTHER IS WAITING FOR ME AT THE BUS STOP. IT'S JUST A MILE DOWN THE ROAD!

*Validation worker/CNA:* (re-phrasing, picking

up the resident's urgent voice-tone) YOU HAVE TO MEET YOUR MOTHER ON TIME? DOES YOUR MOTHER WORRY WHEN YOU'RE LATE? (The Validation worker paces her movements according to the movements of the resident. They move down the street in synchrony. The Validation worker does not touch Jessie before building trust.)

*Jessie:* MY MOTHER WORRIES ABOUT ME. SHE ALWAYS TELLS US TO BE ON TIME. WE ALWAYS LISTEN!

*Validation worker:* (Re-phrasing, picking up on the stressed word, "always." This is the key word.) DOES YOUR MOTHER ALWAYS WAIT FOR YOU AT THE BUS STOP?

*Jessie:* ALWAYS. I WORK LATE AT THE RESTAURANT. IT'S DARK AND THE NEIGHBORHOOD ISN'T SAFE.

There is an important reason behind the





## "The myth of the therapeutic lie" (Continued)

resident's anxiety. The Validation worker notes Jessie's body language: rapid breathing, shaky voice, frantic, urgent movements. Rather than lying to the resident (trying to help her by telling her to relax and not worry), the Validation worker knows that this old woman needs to express her fears to someone she can trust. Once the fears are acknowledged, the resident will feel better and will quiet herself. Ninety-two-year-old Jessie Adams may have bottled up fears for years. Now, in her final resolution struggle, she needs to release them. Bottled-up fears hurt.)

*The Validation worker builds trust and helps the resident express fears with non-threatening, exploring words: "who, what,*

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when, where."

**Validation worker: WHAT CAN HAPPEN?**

(The Validation worker and the resident have stopped walking. They face each other. The Validation worker shares the resident's anxiety. Jessie begins to trust the Validation worker because she has not minimized the resident's concern, or tried to change the

subject, or quiet her by lying. Instead, the Validation worker helps the resident express her worry about her mother.)

*Jessie:* (She stops, looks around, and whispers into the worker's ear): WHAT CAN HAPPEN? TERRIBLE THINGS. A MAN ALMOST KIDNAPPED MY OLDER SISTER, BETH. SHE YELLED, AND HE RAN AWAY. SHE NEVER SAW WHAT HE LOOKED LIKE, IT WAS SO DARK.

*Validation worker:* (re-phrasing): YOU'RE WORRIED ABOUT YOUR MOTHER WAITING ALONE IN THE DARK? YOU'RE WORRIED THAT SOMETHING CAN HAPPEN TO HER. YOU LOVE HER VERY MUCH.

*Jessie:* SHE IS THE BEST MOTHER IN THE WORLD. I WOULD DIE IF SOMETHING HAPPENED TO HER.

*Validation worker:* YOU NEED YOUR MOTHER TO BE WITH YOU, ALWAYS, SAFE AND SOUND?

*Jessie:* YES, THAT'S RIGHT. AND SHE'S ALL ALONE IN THE DARK WAITING FOR ME. (Jessie has expressed her fear of being alone without her mother.)

The Validation worker has empathized, feeling the fear. The Validation worker and Jessie exchange an intimate moment. The Validation worker gently touches Jessie's cheek. Jessie looks into the Validation worker's eyes. Jessie's breathing is now normal, her eyes are soft, her muscles relaxed, her voice-tone is low and without tension. Jessie feels safe. The Validation worker has become a trusted MOTHER SUBSTITUTE.