

Impossible Cases

Raymond J. Corsini

“Impossible” cases are family situations in which normal treatment procedures just will not work and where extraordinary measures are needed. Usually, in these cases, the power struggle between the participants has reached such a point that any psychological method is useless. And yet, when faced with one of these situations, something must be done. It is not enough to tell the anxious client that the situation is impossible.

In this article I have outlined several impossible cases with which I have dealt, together with my solution or the resolution, in the hope that other Adlerians may wish to either *suggest alternative solutions* or share other impossible situations. That such cases are relatively rare should make no difference: If Individual Psychology is indeed, as I believe, wide enough to meet with any situation, even these so-called impossible situations can be handled.

Chuck

A couple in their middle fifties told the following story: They had two children, Chuck, now age 30, and Millie, a married daughter, age 28. Chuck was living in the cellar of their home where he had been living for about 8 years. The father did not recognize the son's existence; no mention was ever made of him. The mother would sneak down to the basement to give Chuck food and money to buy gasoline for his car. Chuck had never had a job but from time to time earned money in various ways. He had never been arrested, but he had been picked up several times for unusual behavior and had been taken to psychiatric institutions for short stays.

The father was exceedingly angry with the mother, whom he accused of babying the son and supporting him in his “bum” style of life. The mother simply stated that she just could not throw her son out into the street. Apparently, they had discussed this issue hundreds of times in the past 10 years.

My first suggestion was that they ask their son to come see me, which he did. He was a handsome, well-built, intelligent person with an engaging personality, friendly and apparently self-confident. In our preliminary interview he admitted the situation and expressed the general attitude that he was causing no one any harm. He said his father was a “nervous” person who had

Raymond J. Corsini, PhD, is an adjunct professor at the University of Hawaii, a psychologist in private practice, and senior counselor at the Family Education Centers of Hawaii.

kept his nose to the grindstone throughout his life and expected his son to follow the same kind of life, which Chuck refused to do. He had no intention of getting married, was quite satisfied to be in his basement apartment, and saw no reason to change his way of life. He readily agreed to psychotherapy, went through a 4-hour Dreikursian-type lifestyle analysis, and began to see me in psychotherapy. It soon became evident, however, that he had absolutely no intention of changing his lifestyle. During the therapy sessions he was quite entertaining and seemed to enjoy the process. He shunted aside difficult questions, seemed to think there was something wrong with me when I pressed various sensitive issues, and attempted to train me to think along his lines.

Both his parents called me several times, wanting to know how things were going. Since they were paying for the treatment and since Chuck had agreed that I could talk with them, I informed them only of the fact that no progress was occurring in relation to the parents' desire that Chuck take responsibility or to the father's desire that Chuck move out.

If I brought up the subject of his moving out, Chuck would ask me if I were his parents' stooge or whether I was his therapist—in other words, where was my loyalty?

And so the situation progressed for perhaps 6 months, with everyone digging in. It became increasingly clear to me that this 30-year-old child would never voluntarily leave the home and that he was using me to stave off any disruption of his life. It also became clear that we were not really engaged in psychotherapy, but rather in a social relationship. At one time Chuck brought a recorder and insisted on playing some fairly long musical pieces. He solidly resisted any of my suggestions that he seek a job, go to school, or in any way change his mode of living, even when I offered to find something for him.

I discussed the case with some colleagues, and they were united in the decision that nothing would ever happen. In a last ditch attempt, I managed to get the three parties together—the father and son had not even spoken to each other for years—and tried to explain each person's position and my own, hoping for some resolution; but there was a firm holding on everyone's part. The father still wanted the son out of the house, the mother said she could not agree to this, and the son felt that there was something wrong with the father and that he should get *his* head examined.

This was the last session. What has happened since I have no knowledge.

Betty

When Betty arrived for a first interview, she seemed more than ordinarily nervous. She was a petite person, who was less than 5 feet tall and weighed

less than 100 pounds. She had been divorced for about a year from the father of her three children. Betty described the father as "insane": He was a wife- and child-beater, who would go on wild tantrums as a result of occasional drinking episodes. He had been arrested several times for public fights, in which he had broken bones. Betty stated that she was afraid for her and her children's lives.

The father lived 5,000 miles away but wanted custody of the children. The judge had not even granted him visitation rights in view of the evidence that had been given. Still, the mother was terribly frightened that something might happen that would result in the father's gaining custody.

She had come to see me because she had lost control of her children, who were beating her! She had a 14-year-old daughter and two sons, ages 12 and 10. If she crossed them, they would actually physically attack her, throw her to the ground, and beat her unmercifully. She exhibited some contusions they had recently given her. If she didn't cook what they wanted, if she criticized any of them, or if she even suggested that they go to bed, one started to physically attack her and the others would join in. Soon she would be lying on the ground while they rained blows and kicks on her prostrate body.

The daughter and the older son outweighed her, and in effect it was 100 pounds of mother arraigned against 300 pounds of children. She had tried defending herself by running away, invoking the fourth commandment, threatening to call in neighbors, and screaming, but to no avail.

In discussing what to do, I discovered a really maddening situation: The mother was quite willing to continue getting beaten rather than making the situation public, because that might give her exhusband an opportunity to state that she was an unfit mother, incapable of disciplining the children.

I asked the mother to come in with her daughter for a conference. Later that evening the mother told me that the daughter refused. I asked the mother to get the daughter to talk with me on the telephone. The mother got the child on the phone; but, when I asked the daughter a question, she did not reply, and, when I made a statement, she hung up.

I puzzled over the situation, and finally a solution was achieved. With the mother's permission, I called the police department and explained the situation to an officer in the juvenile division. He assured the mother that he could take corrective action and that the husband would not find out.

Following instructions, the mother first informed her children that if they ever struck her again she would call the police. Several days later her daughter "accidentally" elbowed her. The mother called me and I advised her to call the police, which she did. When the police officer arrived, the daughter

locked herself in her room. The officer informed the daughter through the door that if she did not come out he would force the door. The 14-year-old then opened the door, and a conference was held. The police officer informed her that if the mother wished to make a charge he would take the daughter into custody and remand her to a detention home. The daughter stated that she had not hit the mother on purpose. The mother informed the officer of prior beatings. The officer told the daughter that no one can legally beat anyone else, certainly a child cannot strike her mother with impunity. The mother refused to file charges but assured the officer that she would if other such incidents occurred. This was the last such incident.

Henry

A mother came to see me about her 12-year-old son, Henry, who was born when she was in her early forties and her husband was in his late fifties. This son had a chronic disease that, unless treated constantly, might mean that the son would die in his twenties. He and his parents were constantly at odds about the treatment, with which he refused to cooperate.

The immediate problem was that both mother and father worked, and the father was generally out of town. They lived some distance away from the son's school, and every morning there was an argument about getting ready to leave the house. The mother was a teacher in a different school and dropped Henry off; however, she was often late due to his tardiness.

I recommended that she inform him of a time deadline and that starting the next morning she should leave without him if he was not ready. She told me her 12-year-old had once hired two tough youths to beat up the janitor of the school, who had criticized him, and that, after a neighbor picked on him, Henry had set fire to the contents of the neighbor's mailbox. Nevertheless, I told her to follow through with my suggestion: Give him a deadline and, if he is not ready, leave.

The mother called me the next day. She had done just what I had asked her to do. When she got home, her son had not gone to school, and every bit of glass of her husband's automobile—windshield, windows, headlights, etc.—had been shattered. A neighbor had witnessed Henry doing this, but he refused to admit it.

The mother asked me what she should do. I suggested she come in with Henry. He was a powerful, chunky fellow with a barrel chest, a consequence of his diseased condition. He took a simple and straightforward position: If I kept on giving his mother the kind of advice I gave her, he would arrange to have my house burned down. In view of his history, I had absolutely no doubt that he meant what he said.

My immediate solution was to ask the mother to return with her husband (who was in his seventies) when he returned from a business trip. Fortunately, I never heard from them again.

Mike

The last of these impossible cases, that of Mike, was perhaps the one that bothered me most. The mother who came to see me was the widow of a soldier who had been killed during the Vietnam war. As a result she had to move away from the military base with her three sons: Mike, 17; Bill, 15; and Jim, 9.

Mike, a school dropout, was taking marijuana, was constantly getting arrested for speeding, and was not working. He absolutely refused to do anything constructive around the house. His behavior had changed rapidly immediately after his father's death. The father, who had been a stern taskmaster, had not hesitated to use a belt or his fists to obtain compliance with his orders.

Mike was completely out of control; if his mother asked him to do anything he didn't want to do, he would curse her. He was now influencing Bill, who had also refused to do any chores and who was beginning to use vulgar language.

She was in a desperate situation. She was not physically able to prepare for moving and needed cooperation, but neither of the older sons would help in any way. She was in a sad situation, trying to shield her friends and relatives, both in Hawaii and on the mainland, from knowing of the family situation, but completely unable to cope. Her main concern was that Mike would "ruin" her two other children.

I asked her to get Mike to see me, alone or with her; and she called to tell me that he refused to come, saying that there was nothing that I could do for him. I asked her if he would talk to me on the telephone, and he consented. The conversation was really one for the books.

I was told that he was 17 and that his mother was responsible for him and had to support him until he was 18. He informed me that parents have to take care of children, that children legally didn't have to do any chores, and that there was no way anyone could make him. If he didn't want to go to school or didn't want to work, that was his privilege. If his mother didn't want him in the house, he was bigger and stronger than she; and he would be able to push her out. The money that was supporting the mother came from his father's death benefits and he was equally entitled to the funds. He had the right to talk to her or his brothers the way he did. This was a free country, wasn't it? And,

hadn't his father died to preserve our country's freedom, including freedom of speech? If his mother had chores to do, such as packing clothing, and couldn't do it herself, she could hire someone to do it. As for him, he didn't intend to do such work. This was a new world in which he had rights, and no one was going to push him around. No, thank you, he saw no reason to see me, and he knew what was the right thing to do. And with this, politely, he hung up.

With the mother's permission and in her company, the above information was passed on to a juvenile court official, who had the son arrested. He was tried as incorrigible; and, head hanging high, he restated his various principles in court and was convicted and sent to a training school. He showed no anger or animosity toward the mother or anyone else, apparently believing he was doing the right thing and that society was against him.

Summary

I present these unusual, "impossible" cases, garnered over some 30 years of private practice, as examples of situations that are not amenable to ordinary communication. In Chuck's case, he knew what he wanted—a soft life—and ordinary therapy had no effect on him. In Betty's case, through using the police, with her mother's determination not to take it any longer, a satisfactory solution resulted, when, due to the daughter's unwillingness to communicate, discussions with her could not be held. In Henry's case, I was happy that the parents did not follow up, because I believe I would have risked my family's lives and mine if I had continued to counsel this family. And, in this last case of Mike, the unhappy solution was imprisonment of a person who held to his distorted ideals.

Suggestions on how such cases can be handled as well as a recounting of other so-called impossible cases in which the power contest has progressed to the point where usual treatment means are apparently ineffective would be immensely valuable. While there are many examples of impossible marital situations in the literature, there seems to be relatively few dealing with juveniles. From my point of view, very often the sole solution appears to depend on *force majeure*—calling in official agencies. At the present time I have two somewhat similar families with problems, both with uncooperative male adolescents, and I look forward to any general solutions in such cases.