



## Clear Thinking Issue 137

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### No way out? 3 ways to help therapy clients escape double binds

*How to find the way out of seeming impossibly situations - by **Mark Tyrrell***

Remember Yossarian, the US Army Air Forces B-25 bombardier, the main character in the book and movie *Catch 22*?

In that story you could be grounded for being crazy and so not have to fly dangerous missions. All you had to do was ask. But if you *asked* not to fly dangerous missions, this meant you were sane, and not crazy, so you'd have to fly them!

Being sane enough not to want to fly these missions meant you weren't *insane* enough not to *have* to fly them.

'Catch 22' has become part of our everyday language, a way to laugh about the 'double bind' or 'no win situation' that life sometimes throws us into. Those awful times when you're 'damned if you do and damned if you don't', or when you are 'between the devil and the deep blue sea' where laughing about it is generally better than crying about it.

But while some double binds are perfectly real, a great many are *constructs*. That is, people often think they are caught in a double bind when this is not really the case.

## Double binds and emotional problems

Many psychological problems are fuelled by such apparent double binds.

A man is bored and stagnant in his job but too afraid to make a change. If he stays he suffers; if he leaves he suffers (or believes he will). He feels stuck.

A woman wants to end her guilty affair but fears she'll remain unfulfilled in her marriage if she does.

A person heartily wishes to be slimmer but at the same time craves fattening 'comfort' foods.

A man wants to have sex but fears he will be 'unable to perform' and so avoids all sexual contact.

The double bind is at the heart of so many problems.

Escaping (or helping others to escape) a double bind requires

- flexible thinking
- a capacity to see beyond the obvious and
- a willingness to forgo either/or limitations.

Our clients present with double binds all the time. We need to help them untie the knots of their lives.

Here are a few ideas.

### 1. Look for the pay off

Some people really *do* feel trapped and stuck, of course, but bear in mind that people can *get accustomed* to feeling like this. And this has a paradoxical effect. Even *discomfort*, if it is very *familiar*, can feel strangely comfortable. "Better the devil you know..."

If I am really damned if I do and damned if I don't, then that kind of lets me off the hook a little, doesn't it?

Consider that a client may be *assuming* they are trapped when in fact they are not.

"I'm overweight because of my genes" could perhaps be a rather convenient double bind to get stuck with. Is the person getting an emotional pay off through being 'allowed' to feel as if nothing can be done?

Ask in detail about all the benefits they'd imagine they'd have if the problem disappeared.

If they struggle to think of any but still keep on about how they are trapped, it may be that consciously or unconsciously they want to remain stuck.

This doesn't mean you can't help them, of course, but it does mean at least you'll know where you are starting from.

## 2. Compromise

There are always options.

A man who desperately needed more social contact was too fearful to go out to parties. So he was encouraged to go to an event for only ten minutes and then leave, making the excuse that he had another engagement to attend.

He found that once the pressure was off, he stayed for three hours!

I'm reminded of the [story of the artist](#) who was commanded to paint a flattering portrait of his one-eyed king. He would be executed if he failed to draw a good likeness, but he would meet the same fate if his drawing showed any imperfections in his majesty... But all was well when the royal portrait was finally unveiled. It showed the king taking aim with bow and arrow – with the bad eye firmly closed.

The point is that if we stop seeing the situation in an all-or-nothing way, we will often find at least the beginnings of a solution.

Another typical double bind is being very [anxious to sleep](#) but finding that the desperate desire for sleep drives sleep away. Untying this bind may be achieved through setting the client the [paradoxical task](#) of staying awake until a specified time, or even all night.

If you give them a rationale for such a task, staying *awake* becomes the goal, the pressure to sleep is off, and they will be more inclined to sleep.

There is always a compromise, always a third way (and possibly many more) of looking at a situation.

### 3. Change one part of the pattern

Have you ever played with a Rubik's cube? When you change one part of the pattern, the *whole* pattern shifts.

Imagine if the bombardiers in *Catch 22* could feel totally fearless during their missions. I'm not saying this is necessarily the *best* solution, but it would certainly break the double bind!

If you help your client *feel differently* about an apparent double bind, then that in itself constitutes an escape from the claustrophobic prison of a 'no win' situation.

Alternatively, rather than trying to tackle the whole situation in one go, we can just seek to make a small alteration to start with.

For example, a woman who wanted to quit smoking but feared putting on weight if she did was encouraged to learn about what would be the right type of nutrition to stay slim once she had stopped.

She made these changes to her diet and style of exercise *before* she quit.

In this way one part of the pattern of her life altered so that other patterns (such as the smoking) now had room to shift. Just as shifting one square on our Rubik's cube means that other squares now have to move.

We can't always choose what happens to us but we can choose, or at least alter to some degree, how we respond to the variations in life's rich pattern.

And as the American poet and novelist Jean Toomer wrote: "We learn the rope of life by untying its knots."

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In short, you will learn how to treat phobias or PTSD in as little as one session, and really understand how faulty pattern matching prolongs emotional distress and how to help your clients back to a full and rewarding life.

See you in a fortnight.

Mark Tyrrell

Co-Founder

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