

# **Working with the Impulsive Person**

# Working with the Impulsive Person

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## Preface

The development of the material in this volume began with a realization by the staff at The Cambridge-Somerville Mental Health and Retardation Center (in the Massachusetts cities of Cambridge and Somerville) that an increasing number of people were entering the mental health system with problems related to the very nature of their personalities. A significant number of these people presented issues that had not been identified previously within the spectrum of psychiatric treatment. Such issues as marital discord involving impulsive and violent behavior toward spouses or children, drug abuse, alcoholism, brawling, and so forth were increasingly being viewed as symptomatic of disruptions in an individual's emotional makeup. These people usually did not seek treatment; their problems were most often managed by courts and social welfare agencies. In fact, we were not clear as to what constituted the best treatment.

The conference on which this book is based was conceived of as an attempt to bring together people of varying backgrounds to discuss in a general, nontechnical fashion the approaches they have tried in working with such people. We attempted to bridge the gap between the many sophisticated theorists who work in this area and the front-line personnel who daily confront these problems. Because of the general scope of the conference, the papers covered a wide range of issues and experiences.

Our definition of impulsive persons was, simply: those people whose behavior is habitually characterized by poorly planned actions, hastily conceived, and carried out in such a manner that the results are frequently more distressful for the individual than his initial situation. Such people live in chronic chaos unless stability is imposed by others. The breadth of this definition was used purposely to allow the conference to touch on many areas. The premature classification of impulsive people into subgroups based on their most troubling or recent symptom has a basic problem. It helps

us to categorize such people but it shortcircuits our thinking. Wilhelm Reich took this up in 1925 in his monograph on the impulsive character: "The basic flaw in such attempts [classification by single symptoms] is that a single outstanding trait becomes the yardstick for classification in the group; what is overlooked is the fact, for example, that every impulsive (in Bleuler's sense) is as unstable as he is perverted; that every pervert is antisocial and also, therefore, a troublemaker."

The series of papers presented here delineates the clinical and research experience of their authors focused on people with impulse-ridden personalities. Our aim is to call attention to the origins, dynamics, and attitudes encountered in attempting to work with these people--a population often overlooked and considered beyond help.

Howard A. Wishnie, M.D.  
Cambridge, Massachusetts  
1978

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