

## She Won't Get Out of Her Room- Reaching Out in Family Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy

Anat Ben Salmon\*

Rotem Center for Practical Professional Training, Tel Aviv, Israel

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**\*Corresponding author:** Anat Ben Salmon, ROTEM Center for Practical Professional Training, Tel Aviv, Israel, Tel: 972-504228189; E-mail: [anatbensalmon@gmail.com](mailto:anatbensalmon@gmail.com)

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### Case Study

A fellow psychiatrist referred Mr and Mrs D. Their case was referred to as a case of a troubled teenager 17 yrs. old who suffered from social phobia with agoraphobia symptoms, and which did not attend school for four months prior to referral. The parents were described by the doctor, as very nice and very anxious. They desperately needed help which can be provided at their home, since the patient refused any professional help, and was not ready to consider medication. Mrs D. called to schedule the first meeting, which was set to be in my clinic.

When the couple came in, no teenager was in the area.

**My first impressions:** I saw a mother with a “terrified” look on her face, and I experienced her as very anxious and worried. Mr. D. looked confused. They had two daughters, Ruti 17, and Coral, 14. Mrs. D. related to her older daughter, as a “poor, weak and in distress girl” while her husband, Mr D, expressed confusion, from all the professional therapists they had tried to get help from, before they came to me. He seemed to cling to his wife’s views because he was so confused, she took the lead.

They did not tell anything about the younger girl, I had to bring her in, (since the first meeting till this day). Coral was described as a normal girl, who was a good student and was engaged in a competitive sport team., and “everything is ok with her.” (my feeling was they were signaling “don't go there”, don't touch). I had to bring her into our space, (since the first meeting till this day).

They looked like a parental couple. The first session did not at all give any clues of the individuality of each one of them, nor their couplehood, beyond parental space. They were talking only about Ruti, and exclusively related to the problematic aspects of her development and behaviour. Her inability to communicate with them, her lack of social life, her lack of motivation for anything, her bedwetting at the age of seventeen, her avoidance of school and everything else, her fights with them and her sister nearly about everything. They presented a troubled teenager; they referred to her as “sick” in some sense.

They also said they tried many professionals since she was four years old, who wanted to help, but nothing seemed to work, and they expressed helplessness and hoped they would find the help in my room. (I did too.)

### **Personal history**

Mrs. D's was in her late forties, grew up in the northern area of Israel, her family of origin consisted of a mother who was described by her as controlling and criticising, with high levels of anxiety around nutrition and health (or sickness) which lives in the north of the country and a sister who is 2 years younger, who lives close to her mother with her family, comprising two children and her husband. Her father died when she was in her 20's.

Mr. D was in his early 50's, also grew up in the northern Israeli area, after he and Mrs D got married they moved to another area. His family of origin was described by him as a "normal" ("don't go there, either") family, he had four brothers, and they grew up only with their mother, after his father died when he was a baby. He described his childhood as a happy one, the brothers were good friends, being "good boys" helping their mother to cope, while "she had to do with everything on her own". His mother still lives in the same area where he grew up and the couple visit both their families every weekend, drive two hours to see them, and also host them at their house on occasions. However, they both did not express any emotional closeness to them. They mentioned that both girls don't join them, saying they are not interested. They have mentioned that the girls are not close to their grandmothers, since they live far away. Mr's. D, expressed feelings of envy towards the fact that her mother is helping her sister more during the years since she is living close and Mrs. D not getting a lot since she is far and the girls did not have grandmas to grow up with, as she wished.

After attempting once more to get both girls to attend the following family session scheduled for next week, and receiving a rejection from Ruti. As agreed between me, the referring psychiatrist and the parents, we have scheduled to meet at their house and reach out to Ruti this way, hoping she would agree to participate if the session took place in her home. At the same time, Coral also agreed to meet with me with the family.

### **First family session in the family home**

When I arrived at the house, the parents and Coral were waiting for me in the living room and stated that Ruti had refused to participate in the session. Mrs. D looked anxious and frustrated, and went up to Ruti's room to persuade her to join us. Ruti refused saying that she is fine, that she does not need therapy and has no idea why anyone would think that there was a problem that required intervention. Mrs. D said that she had also asked Ruti if she was willing to meet me alone, in her room and she did not refuse. I understood that Mrs. D expected me to go upstairs and try to reach out to Ruti and persuade her to come out from her room and join us downstairs.

When I knocked on Ruti's door, she said "go away" and did not open. At this stage, I heard her stubbornness, but not the anxiety presented by her mother when she described her as a gentle and weak girl. I tried once again and asked her only to open the door and tell me her perspective while promising to consider her wish not to participate in the family session, if still refused afterwards. She opened the door, and I met a teenage girl who looked straight into my eyes and stated that she "had no reason to meet the therapist, since she was ok". I met a very controlling powerful adolescent girl. She was indeed troubled, but in no sense of weakness. I said that I am here since her parents felt there was a difficulty that kept her in her room and out of the school system for months. She said that everything is ok (don't even try) and if her parents felt there was a problem they can go ahead and get some help.

However, she does not think that the family had any problem at all, and that her parents are exaggerating as they always do. I asked if she is willing to get down to us, and tell everybody how she feels about it and maybe hear what they have to say, she said no, and it was clear that there is no way now, to achieve more from her, as frustrating as it was, for the family and myself, I did not push beyond that and respected her refusal. I said to her, that I hope she will be ready at some point to join us and that she is welcomed at any time. The rejection her parents felt from her was transferred to me, and in my countertransference, I felt rejected and very helpless myself. This was the first time in my professional career that I failed to persuade a teenager to cooperate with talking to me.

When I came down, the family looked disappointed to see me alone. I addressed their disappointment in me, as well as in Ruti, and asked Coral how she felt at this point. She said that Ruti's behaviour, as well as her parent's reaction to Ruti's behavior, was tough for her. She mentioned that Ruti argued with her about everything, stole her belongings from her room, invaded her privacy, and when Coral had tried to confront her, nothing positive evolved. Moreover, Coral told me that she felt that her parents were asking her to understand and tolerate Ruti's actions, while ignoring her own distress.

I asked her what she means, and both parents said that many occasions they had requested that Coral be aware of Ruti's emotional difficulties and that she should be considerate. Coral felt that they punished her for Ruti's behaviour since they were helpless with Ruti. Nevertheless, Coral was always pleasing in her behavior and carried all of the troubles on her shoulders. We agreed that I would meet with the parents at my clinic the next week, and start the therapy process, while every week they would invite both girls to join them, and we would work with whoever attended the weekly session.

**The following is a session which occurred a month after the session in their house.**

The two parents arrived on time. Both were quiet, and looked at each other anxiously. We said hello but after that were very quiet, and I decided to ask about that.

Me: You're looking quietly at each other, and almost look startled, and concerned about who is going to say what? Can you tell me how you feel about this?

Mrs. D.: Yes, something like that, I don't know. I cooked for Ruti this week, and as usual she said again: "you don't cook the vegan things I eat especially for me, not", and I did not cook soya and stuff, but I did make things she can eat, meaning without meat or dairy in it. During the week the food was standing there ready for her to eat because we weren't at home, and Coral is not in the country. During the week she said she would eat it, and she even tasted a bit, and when I asked "well did you eat what I cooked?" and she said "do you think I am going to eat your food all week? those leftovers?"

Me: You asked her whether she ate because....?

Dani: Because she's always complaining there is no special food for her and that we do not consider her special needs, so Miki cooked for her, and then she wanted to see whether she ate it or not

Miki: I waited a couple of days, and stopped myself from asking, and then I saw all the boxes of food standing there ...

Dani: How did it start this time? Did she come to you?

Miki: No, I came to ask her, to start the conversation

Me: I hear that you are actually trying to get closer to her, and last week you entered her room looking for any clue to her inner life in some way, maybe you're just trying to get to know her

Miki: Well, she needs some human communication.

Me: And maybe you do too. Perhaps you feel that there is not enough closeness with me as well?

Miki: Yes, I do, but so does she, she never communicates with anyone. She is my daughter and I experience her silence every day, and that she is never with us.

Me: Of course, you want her closeness. You need something so natural, but maybe the way you try to approach her is not working, and maybe when you ask her whether she ate your food, doesn't get you where you want to be.

Miki: Well, I get the fact that with the food we're not progressing anywhere, nothing changes there

Dani: what do you mean progressing?

Miki: I want her to eat, but she doesn't eat for days

Dani: she does eat

Me: well, how does she get along with nurturing?

Dani: She is cooking food for herself somehow

Me: So, she is managing on her own, independently. She rejects the food you cook, but provides for herself

Miki: But this is driving her crazy

Me: what do you mean?

Miki: she only eats those special foods, not enough of a variety

Me: she chooses what she wants to eat, and what not to eat

Dani: Yes, why do you pressurize her?

Me: Maybe it is not this kind of nurturing that you want to give her?

Miki: I think she wants to see me doing something especially and only for her. She sometimes says, "this is food not specifically for me, everybody can enjoy it. I want something you made for me... especially for me."

Me: Maybe she's asking you to see her uniqueness

Miki: Yes, she always says "you do not see me."

Dani: She wants her special attention in this way. She wants special treatment.

Miki: I tell her all the time to come with us to the grocery shop and choose the kind of ingredients she wants and I will cook for her. She says "no, you get it for me... but I think vegans can also eat regular food not only special food

Me: I think she's asking for something else

Miki: she wants something special

Dani: She wants attention, maybe she feels that the attention we gave her is changing now, we were over-attentive to her, and now we are less attentive

Miki: first she has to prove to me... she is saying I don't know if I will like what you buy... you buy and I will try... really... this way, I bought and threw away so much food.

Dani: she wants us back in the old way of behaving...

Me: she wants you to guess what her needs...

Miki: We can't, we ask her to do it together with us, I bought cookery books, my mom bought cookery books, we could have found something

Me: Did you invite her to do it with you? To talk to you about what she wants you to cook or even cook with you?

Miki: she doesn't even make her salad anymore, she asks me to make it for her, and she knows how to... but she won't, she would eat her vegetables raw, but she would not make her own salad, so I gave up on it.

Miki: I asked her whether she wants me to cook for her, and she said yes, so I cooked her. But she tasted some and did not eat any more. She's laughing at me, and she doesn't know quantities she can eat. She loves olives, puts a lot on her plate and then eats some of them and throws the rest away. I tell her to take a few, eat them and then take more if she wants, but it doesn't work. She doesn't care if there are no olives left, and Coral likes them too."

Me (reflections to myself): They go around in circles and not progressing. They would not eat my "cooking" either, I felt frustrated and could feel the sense of helplessness they transferred.

In light of what the parents reported at the meeting in my clinic, we scheduled the second session in their house and prior to the meeting Ruti agreed to attend. Our hopes were high, but Ruti rejected us again. When I arrived, Coral was sitting in the living room, and her anxiety, this time expressed by unstoppable eye ticks, was obvious to me. However, both parents seemed not to "see" them.

This time when Miki tried again to ask Ruti to join us, she yelled "No!". Miki and Dani told her sternly that they wanted her downstairs with the rest of the family. When she refused, Miki tried to drag her physically out of her room and Ruti hit back at her. This led to the situation where I went upstairs and told the parents to come back down to our session and not to force her. Dani was actively not active, as a bystander (as "usual for him" as Miki told more than once in our joint sessions), and they both came down tired, exhausted and frustrated from the scene. I could feel the embarrassment they usually described, when speaking about their desperate attempts to persuade her to do as they asked, failing, again and again. I felt their embarrassment regarding the fact I had to intervene in order to actively stop their attempt to drag their daughter out of her room, which was not appropriate for both sides. I simultaneously felt both sad and helpless and also wondering how those feelings might inform me concerning the family.

The parents expressed frustration, shame and guilt at the same time. Coral appeared shocked, but when I asked her how she felt about what was happening, she said that it wasn't the first time she had experienced such occurrences. Coral thought it was sad and said that she did not understand why Ruti refused to be part of the family. I asked her if she had some idea as to what was happening with her sister, and she answered that she feels that she has some kind of problem with understanding social behaviour. She thought that her sister was probably suffering, but she would never admit that she needed help. The session dealt almost entirely around the parents and Coral's feelings of frustration.

They said that Ruti quit her job and that she started to invade their rooms again and steal some stuff, so they have decided to go back to locking the doors.

20 min before the end of the session, Ruti came down and joined us, stating she had nothing to say, but didn't stop talking till the end of the hour. She said that her parents only care about the mess and the dishes, and are always unhappy with her, that's all she ever heard from them. Coral immediately took on the role of protecting her parents by explaining why they behave the way they do, and that Ruti has no understanding about the way she is acting with the three of them. Miki and Dani let Coral "defend" them, and did not interrupt. Coral then said that an hour after an argument, Ruti could not expect Coral to forget that she had hurt her, and couldn't be friends with her. Coral was not ready to forget the pain she had suffered, so she cannot move

forward as Ruti might expect. This causes more arguments again and again, a never-ending cycle. From her side Ruti said that Coral needed to move on and forget the past.

Coral said: "the past is still a present" so it cannot be left in the past.

Me (reflecting): Coral ticks slowly stopped as she told this meaningful content.

I asked if Ruti will agree to join the next session with the family.

Ruti said: I don't think so since nothing here was helpful at all.

The next session, they were inside the clinic when I came in, from my break two minutes earlier than the set time. They were sitting in "their" usual places in the clinic, "invading" my room before the time set for their session.

Miki: So, what did you want to report to us?

Me: it's interesting you ask what I have to report to you... what are you asking me?

Miki: well, you probably have a lot to say after the last session, we do not know what you felt

Me: and you probably anxious and hope that I have some key to figure it all out

Miki: well, someone has to

Me: I think the disappointment is almost unavoidable, it seems to me, like in this way or another we deal with disappointment and despair in all spaces here

Miki: we just don't know what to do anymore. Nothing is getting better.

Me: I am sorry to disappoint you as well. I would like to ask you about something I was worried about, and you never mentioned before, regarding Coral's eye ticks, did you notice it before?

Dani: well yeah... Looking at his wife as if he was exposing o something, they both agreed to hide from the three of us.

Miki: maybe she is stressed

Me: any thoughts about her tension? You almost never speak about Coral, and maybe she is presenting her distress this way

Dani: well, she probably has her usual teenage worries, maybe school, maybe competitions, probably nothing too dramatic.

Miki: she did suffer from Ruti's behaviour for years as well, she has a lot inside her she still cannot release and forgive

Dani: this is not good for her to hold on to anger though, while Ruti is trying to reach out to her now, she is rejecting her.

Me: it seems that some are always rejecting somebody else in the group, it's either being rejected or rejecting the other, no escape from it.

Me (reflecting to myself): They both do not relate to what I suggested in any way, and I was rejected as well. I feel that we are going around in never-ending circles, no breaking through, we are stuck. We just cannot get ourselves out of this overbearing dynamic. I try to think what this stuckness and rejection means for their couplehood. I cannot find any way out of this; I am too overwhelmed. I feel desperate, not good enough nurturer for any of them, whatever I try to provide, it just cannot be taken in.

October 2017, Dr Scharff suggested bringing a new couple for our supervision sessions. "I think they are not going to progress much more, for now, keep doing what you are doing, I just do not believe I can teach you anything above what I did by looking at their process".

Me (reflecting to myself): I feel sad, trying to figure out what kind of sadness it is, and what it means for them and for me. A memory comes to my mind, last year my son was identified as a challenging case by his teacher in the afterschool, she called me and said: "he is too hard for me, please take him out of my class, I cannot deal with him". I felt she gave up on him since he was too "hard" and she could not see the profit in investing her time to try to reach out to him and provide him with what he needed then, to feel safe and to calm down his hyperactivity. She rejected him. I felt so sad for him and for myself then. "By the

way, my son is doing fine". That feeling was close to that of disappointment from my teacher, who seemed to be giving up on my couple since there was nothing to learn from them anymore. I felt he rejected them because they were "too stuck". I felt it has something to do with the fact Ruti was rejected because she could not be the girl her mother wished her to be, Ruti rejected her mother because she was not attuned to her needs, Dani was helpless and actively not active, Coral was dismissed because she was "too ordinary" and everybody rejected me for all the same reasons.

The only difference was that I could associate and speak my feelings, and I had my teacher to listen and did not reject both them, and myself. I could feel sad and frustrated and disappointed, without being rejected, as I was with my son in that episode. After being provided with affirmation and recognition of my feelings, in a safe space of the supervisory relationship, I could continue the work with the couple them, and in the following session, I felt something had finally started to evolve in the process.

**Turning point:** After two weeks of sessions in which they almost did not mention any issues concerning the girls, they approached the point in which I could see them, starting their introspection into their relationship. They come in on time while Miki looks down and a bit sad even, they both quiet and sit in grave silence.

Me: is it challenging to begin today?

Miki: yes, I guess so

Dani was silent but looked preoccupied

Me: I feel you are trying to find words and fail, maybe it is something that is hard for you to express?

Miki: well with Ruti everything is ok, she is working and tells us how kids adore her and follow her everywhere at work, and I told her that their teachers probably jealous that they love you so much

Dani: They probably feel that it helps them that they are after her rather than jealous

Me: it is interesting the way you perceive what she tells you, and how it's for you Dani sounds contradictory as if it cannot be both helpful but also, they can feel jealous for the affection she is getting from the kids

Miki: well, she is working and was happy to get her own credit card now,

Dani: yes, she mentioned that now she could get for herself whatever she wants

Miki: was there anything she needed that we did not get her? Did we refuse her wishes?

Dani: I asked her that, and she said that she did not even ask since she thought we would say it is too expensive

Miki looked upset: it's sad, she never wants anything from us.

Me: it is hard to feel that she did not want the things from you, and needed those be provided by herself

Miki: well yeah... why would she not want anything...

Dani: maybe she just wants to be independent

Miki: yeah... (sad)

Me: it is not easy to feel that she does not need you, or anything coming from you

Miki: yeah, but maybe it's because I know that she will never ask even if she did

Me and you try to guess her wishes, and get things for her before she asked

Miki: maybe

Me: Are you familiar with that feeling? Of wanting something and not being able to ask?

Miki: I don't think about myself much, as Dani does, I give up without trying

Dani: because you feel I won't be able to provide you with what you need?

Miki: Well yeah, I would like to take more care of my health and do sports, as you are doing for years, but I never do it.



Dani: Did anyone ever stop you from doing things for yourself?

Miki: it is obvious what is expected from me, I have to be home and take care for dinner and cleaning, and girls, but it's obvious that you go to your sports every weekend for ten years now, never missed anyDani: if you ever want to go to do your hobbies, I would be supportive, you never ask

Miki: I know how you would feel about it, so I gave up

Me: maybe like Ruti does, she is confident you would not be willing to give her, so she never asks

Dani: We were thinking about it for the last few weeks, and we must say that we begin to see that maybe what Ruti noted when you first saw her, that it is us who have the problems and not her... perhaps she was right.

Me: and maybe now as sad as it could feel for all of us, we could touch the pain underneath and maybe have a bit of hope, for making it more possible to feel.

Maybe we all can... a bit.

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