

Couples Create a Family System

Introduction

The classic medical model of treating psychological, behavioral, and physical problems focuses on the individual presenting the specific problem. The family system model recognizes that the emotional force fields of our families can produce symptoms in a member of the social system. Therefore, thinking about how the extended family functions can give us insights into how to affect healthy change. This will result in the symptomatic problem disappearing.

- A. The identified patient is not seen as the sick one, but as symptomatic. They have surfaced the unhealthy stress of the family.
 - 1. A child may express this in failure at school, drug abuse, obesity, rebellious attitudes, or chronic ailments.
 - 2. A spouse may show symptoms of alcohol abuse, depression, sexual acting out, or physical ailments.
 - 3. An elderly member of a family system may express the family stress with confusion, senility, or a serious illness.
 - 4. Family dis-ease is isolated in one person so that the real family problems can be ignored or denied.
 - 5. Look not to the identified patient, but to the strongest person in the family system to be able to affect the most lasting change.

- B. Homeostasis is the tendency of various participants in a family system to maintain stability and balance when faced with change.
 - 1. This causes resistance to any attempt to change an unhealthy family system.
 - 2. The emphasis must be on one's position in the system, not only on one's personality.
 - 3. Togetherness can produce "stuck togetherness" in which families are too close, anxious, and reactive.
 - 4. The opposite of "stuck togetherness" is extreme independence and it is even more unhealthy.

- C. Differentiation of Self
 - 1. One extreme is disconnectedness where one is disengaged from one's family.

2. The other extreme is enmeshment with the family to the point one loses one's individual identity.
 3. One must learn how to be a non-anxious presence in the family system. One can clearly express opinions without judging or contradicting others.
 4. One must not try to please various people in the family system, instead simply be real.
- D. One is influenced not only by one's nuclear family but by extended family, even generations that are dead.
1. Patterns of behavior tend to continue from generation to generation, both for good and bad.
 2. For example, issues of sex, money, drinking, separation, and health have uncanny ways of reappearing from generation to generation.
 3. Families are always trees of the knowledge of good and evil. They can often be turned into trees of life.
- E. Emotional triangles are formed by any three persons or issues. There are basic laws of how emotional triangles work in families.
1. The relationship of any two members of an emotional triangle are kept in balance by the way the third party relates to them.
 2. The third party in an emotional triangle cannot change the relationship of the other two directly.
 3. Repeated attempts by an individual to change the relationship of the other two will generally be ineffective and result in the opposite effect.
 4. The more a third party tries unsuccessfully to change the relationship of the other two, the more likely the third party will end up with the stress and anxiety of the other two.
 5. Various triangles in an emotional system interlock, so that efforts to change any one of them will be resisted by homeostatic forces by the other triangles in the family system.
 6. One can only change a relationship to which one belongs. The way to change for the better any two others is to maintain a well-defined relationship with each one and avoid responsibility for their relationship with one another.

7. To the extent one has a non-anxious presence in a triangle, one can influence the level of the other's anxiety for good.

Conclusion

Instead of looking at family problems as psychological or medical only, we need to recognize the power of sociological and emotional bonding. Many times healing the individual results in the creation of a more healthy family.