**-The 8 concepts of Bowen Systems Theory**

1. Nuclear Family Emotional System

2. Differentiation of Self

3. Triangles

4. Emotional Cutoff

5. Family Projection Process

6. Multigenerational Transmission Process

7. Sibling Position

8. Emotional Process in Society

**1. Nuclear Family Emotional System**

A) Family is an emotional system. Whatever affects one affects each one in the system as anxiety moves easily from person to person in the group.

B) Family members trade “self” into the family relationship togetherness in a family “fusion” of selves. (“Be like us…think as we think”)

C) Anxiety is important in emotional systems. It is usually not necessary (for the purpose of thinking systems) to describe the coloration of the anxiety—such as depression, anger, etc. At base, most intense emotion is simply, and can be referred to as, anxiety. Emotions are automatic physiologic reactions. When they become conscious, they are feelings. Anxiety is automatic and most of it is out of awareness.

D) Anxiety travels in a group between and among individuals. In other words, it is infectious.

E) When there is anxiety in relationship, there are four typical patterns that appear:

1) Triangling (or focused child) If the family anxiety tends to settle in a child long and often enough, the child will develop a symptom (either physical, mental/emotional, or social). The onset of the symptom will add to the parents’ anxiety. They will begin to worry about the child. The more they worry, the more anxious the child becomes, intensifying the symptom, and so a vicious cycle ensues.

2) Conflict It can become extremely bitter with a great deal of pain. Accusations are hurled at each other. There is projection of blame. The favorite and overused word is “you”. People turn against each other in intense confrontational disagreement, criticism and competition. In its extreme form, conflict can deteriorate into physical violence.

3) Distance Tiring of conflict, people distance from one another. Communications decrease and may stop where people don’t speak to each other for months. (At least the conflict is over, right???) But distanced people think about each other a great deal as they wrestle with the damaged relationship and the conflict that led to the distance between them. They are still emotionally bound and defined by it.

4) Overfunctioning/underfunctioning reciprocity This refers to the borrowing and trading of self in a relationship. The dominant overfunctioning one gains self at the expense of the adaptive one who loses self by underfunctioning to keep the balance. The overfunctioner tends to: gives advice; know all the answers; tell the other what to do, how to think, how to feel; tries to help too much assuming increasing responsibility for the other; has goals for others that they don’t have for themselves; does things for the other than he/she could do for self; sees the other as “the problem”; experiences periodic, sudden “burnouts”. The underfunctioner tends to: rely on the other to know what to do; asks for advice unnecessarily; takes all offered help, needed or not, becoming passive; asks the other to do what he/she can do for self; sees self as “the problem”; eventually becomes symptomatic (physical illness, emotional illness or social illness—drinking, acting out and irresponsible behavior); gives in on everything.

F) In any of these relationship patterns, if one can see the anxiety behind the pattern, one can relate to it more calmly, and the pattern itself will be less an issue.

**2. Differentiation of Self**

A) Self-differentiation is the work one does to differentiate self from one’s emotional systems. It is the lifelong process of striving to keep one’s being in balance through the reciprocal external and internal processes of self-definition and self-regulation.

B) It refers to the capacity to take a stand in an intense emotional system, to saying “I” when others are demanding “we”, to containing one’s reactivity to the reactivity of others, to maintaining a non-anxious presence in the face of anxious others, to cease automatically being one of the system’s emotional dominoes.

C) It refers to being clear about one’s own personal values and goals, to taking maximum responsibility for one’s own emotional being and destiny.

D) Solid self (sometimes called basic self) is the self who is guided by well thought through principles, arrived at through the best thinking, based on logic and fact. It works for individuality (togetherness comes automatically). As Dr. Bowen would say: “The solid self is a definite quality illustrated by such ‘I’ position stances as: ‘These are my beliefs and convictions. This is what I am and who I am and what I will do, or not do’.” An example of this is Martin Luther’s famous statement: “Here I stand!” The solid/basic self does not take part in the borrowing or loss of self in relationships. It stays objective, basing decisions and judgments on fact.

E) Pseudo-self (or functional self) is where we live, most of the time. It is strongly influenced by the relationship system and the togetherness forces. It is the immature, automatic, thoughtless reactivity in us. It lets in the anxiety from the system, functions on borrowed self from another and gives up self in an instant. It goes with the system and all its pressure to be included, liked, or a “team player”. As the system goes, so goes that self. (It is the undifferentiated self.)

F) We all live in the tension between differentiation and undifferentiation, between solid self and pseudo-self.

**3. Triangles**

A) Dr. Bowen: “The theory states that the triangle, a three-person emotional configuration, is the molecule or the basic building block of any emotional system, whether it is the family or any other group. The triangle is the smallest stable relationship system. A two-person system may be stable as long as it is calm, but when anxiety increases, it immediately involves the most vulnerable other person to become a triangle. When tension in the triangle is too great for the threesome, it involves others to become a series of interlocking triangles.”

B) We live in triangles. They are ubiquitous. They are not good or bad, they just are. They are automatic. We are in them. When anxiety is up, they are easier to see.

C) Living in triangles, managing your self, here is what you work on: maintaining a calm, thinking, self-defining presence, connected to others, finding ways to communicate what you think based on one’s principles, staying emotionally neutral because that calmness has a calming effect upon triangles.

**4. Emotional Cutoff**

A) Emotional cutoff is a process of separation, isolation, withdrawal, running away, or denying the importance of the parental family.

B) Cutoff is the extreme form of the distance posture described earlier. When a relationship becomes emotionally intense, people will often cut off internally or geographically. Communication ceases.

C) Cutoff is one of the ways people attempt to resolve the relationship tension that results from unresolved attachment (fusion or undifferentiation) and the anxiety it engenders. It may be a combination of emotional isolation and physical distance.

D) While it feels so good initially to be rid of that troublesome family, over time, cutoff, like all the other relationship patterns, creates anxiety and that anxiety can lead to symptoms (which may be so far removed from the cutoff that no connection is made between the cutoff and the symptoms).

**5. Family Projection Process**

A) Dr. Bowen: “The process through which parental undifferentiation impairs one of more children operates within the father-mother-child triangle. … It exists in all gradations of intensity, from those in which impairment is minimal to those in which the child is seriously impaired for life. The process is so universal it is present to some degree in all families.”

B) A worried focus, or “projection” of anxiety is how anxiety gets off-loaded to offspring. If one worries excessively about one’s child (or reacts to an overload of anxiety by neglect, or over-focuses in an over-positive manner) one transmits (or projects) that anxiety directly onto the child.

C) This projection process is different for different children. This is not a thought-through process, enacted by a family in order to “do in” one of its children. It is entirely out of awareness. It is automatic. Once it gets started, the over-focus tends to perpetuate itself. Ones that don’t receive so much focus are left a little freer of the family emotional process and tend to do better.

D) We can’t blame the parents for the child’s problems. It is not intentional, it is entirely automatic. Parents have no idea of their part in the problem. Often, however, when they learn about the concept and that they are contributing unwittingly to the problem, they are able to modify their part to some extent with wonderful results.

**6. Multigenerational Transmission Process**

A) The family projection process continues through multiple generations. It explains how differentiation and undifferentiation are passed from one generation to another.

B) A family diagram or genogram can help tell the family’s story. Important facts to consider are: names; longevity of family members; health; their locations, including moves, with dates; their incomes and businesses or professions, including what positions they held; reproductive history—including abortions, still-births and miscarriages; marriages, living-with arrangements, separations, divorces; dates of births, deaths, marriages; highest degree of education, or years in school; religion.

**7. Sibling Position**

A) All things being equal, people show certain characteristics, depending on where they landed in their families’ constellations, according to the mix of rank and genders there. No two children experience the family in the same way.

B) No sibling position is better than the others—they all have their strengths and their weaknesses.

**8. Emotional Process in Society (Societal Regression)**

A) Evidence shows that as triangles in the family intensify, build and interlock, they eventually reach outside the family in networks that include agencies, institutions (schools, churches, the judicial system) and friendship systems. Anxiety increases in society and breakdowns begin.

B) Permissiveness in child rearing where parents allow children to do things they really do not want them to do. When this happens the children are in control of the family rather than the parents. Children are not ready and do not want to be in control of their families. But fear of damaging children’s psyches and the anti-authority bent in the culture makes leadership within the family more difficult. This leads toward regression.

C) The “pleasure principle”—if one’s main goal in life is to seek pleasure and avoid pain, then many other time-honored principles of emotionally mature living such as commitment, integrity, religious teachings, fall by the wayside. It is not always easy or pleasurable, for the moment, to do what is best for the family.

D) The sexual revolution has been so destructive to the family and lives of young people who entered into all kinds of sex prematurely. The agenda these days seems to be to legitimize every sexual orientation and behavior no matter how bizarre and unacceptable to emotionally mature, caring parents.

E) Today there is a tendency to blame parents for the emotional ills of individuals. No wonder parents are on the defensive and confused about their role as leaders of the family.

F) Regression affects organizations, too. It is no surprise that the evidence in our daily news is that all the regressive tendencies so adversely affecting the family are also affecting all organizations and the society at large, including churches.

*(These notes are based on the book The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory by Roberta Gilbert, 2006)*