

+SESSION 4

“LIVING IN SYSTEMS—FAMILIES, WORK, WORLD”

1. Think Systems

A) System—a set of forces and events that interact (solar system, weather system, human body, families, work systems).

B) Systems theory is a way of conceptualizing reality. It is a way of seeing the whole and how the parts mutually influence one another. Instead of seeing individual, isolated, unrelated parts, we look at the whole and consider the interrelatedness of the parts. (This is in contrast to the *INDIVIDUAL* model we live with today.)

C) Systems theory attempts to see the bigger picture as OBJECTIVELY as possible. (Subjectivity enters the scene when people spend time talking about why someone did what they did. This speculation about motive or behavior is usually largely built on the status of the relationship. If the relationship is good, the speculation will usually be positive. If it is bad, the speculation will be negative.)

D) The 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. Anxiety is infectious.

E) You cannot understand an individual (or your self) apart from the system in which he/she lives, works or plays.

2. Work on Self, not others

A) Self-differentiation. Work to define who you are, what you believe, where you stand, what you will or will not do, etc. Be clear about your own personal values and goals. Take maximum responsibility for your own emotional being and destiny by self-definition and self-regulation. Differentiation is charting one's way by means of one's own guidance system rather than deferring to the group or system of which you are a part. Remember—this is a lifelong process because we live in the constant tension between individuality and togetherness, between differentiation and undifferentiation.

B) Family of origin work. Draw a family diagram (genogram). Learn what you can about the family you grew up in, your sibling position, how things went in your family. Learn about your extended family, too. Maintain or initiate contact with as many family members as you can. Learn your family's story. Look for strengths and weaknesses.

C) Work on self. Concentrate on your own life problems more than on anyone else's. (Most people have only a limited awareness of the influence of anxiety, reactivity, and subjectivity on their behavior.) Learn what you can about your self, your beliefs, your preferences, the ways your own emotional reactivity gets triggered, and how you have tended to manage things in your life.

- Work toward emotional calm whenever intensities or anxiety arises.

- “Don't just do something...stand there!”

- Work toward increasing your threshold for another's pain (to tolerate your own internal reactions to another's distress) rather than taking responsibility for them. (The very act of trying to make others responsible preempts their own responsibility.)

- Seek to gain more emotional objectivity. That means one is better able to see the ways in which he/she is part of the system: the ways in which he/she affects the emotional functioning of others and the ways others affect his/her emotional functioning. More objectivity means one is better able to see the part he/she plays in creating the very problems in others that he/she then uses to justify his rejection of others. If one does not see himself as part of the system, his only options are either to try to get others to change or to withdraw.

- When people want to confront others, be more honest, “get it all out on the table”, they are usually focusing on deficiencies they perceive in others, on what is “wrong” with the family, rather than focusing on their own part in the problems.

D) It takes time to learn to act on the courage of one's convictions rather than on the power of one's feelings.

3. Patterns and Repetitions

A) Repetitions are patterned behavior or feeling states formed in early relationship triangles in the family of origin. Our tendency is to repeat old patterns.

B) When anxiety increases, individuals are most likely to resort to blame and diagnose others. (A good rule of thumb is that if you catch yourself diagnosing someone else, there is probably something in you that you are trying to hide.) Diagnosis makes everyone and everything more serious.

C) The seriousness with which families approach their problems can be more the cause of their difficulties than the effect of the problems. Efforts directed at the seriousness itself often will eliminate the problem.

D) In order to manage anxiety, partners begin to posture themselves in recognizable ways. There are familiar relationship patterns that form to “solve” the problem of relationship anxiety. The basic problem, emotional immaturity, does not get addressed.

1. Conflict—The basic pattern is that the relationship cycles through periods of intense closeness, conflict that provides a period of emotional distance, and making up, which starts another cycle of intense closeness. People in conflict show tendencies to: become critical when anxiety is high; become embroiled in blame for perceived problems; project their own problems on other people; focus more on the other than on the self; fight rather than switch, have fun, or do anything useful; behave abusively. Antidote: If one of the parties to the conflict could learn to remain calm and thoughtful in the face of the anxiety of the other, there would be no conflict.

2. Distance/pursuit—Distancing is an automatic attempt to make the relationship tolerable by getting periodic relief from its emotional intensity. If an individual cannot control his reactions to another person, and if the reactions are intense, he must distance from that person to control himself. The other may respond to the distance by pursuing—hence, the distance/pursuit pattern.

3. Cutoff—is a distance posture carried to the extreme, a nonfunctioning relationship. One might ask: What is my part in inducing the intensity of feeling that made the cutoff inevitable? Cutoff can never be changed unless someone takes responsibility for himself in the cutoff and begins to move responsibly in the relationship.

4. Overfunctioning/underfunctioning—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: gives advice; has goals for others that they don't have for themselves; experiences periodic sudden "burnouts".

5. Triangling—bringing into focus a third party, rather than solving the relationship problem of the original twosome.

E) Most individuals and relationships tend to be governed by automatic emotional reactivity. In contrast, the capacity for emotional self-control permits people to be in an anxious and highly reactive environment without being impaired by it and without impairing the functioning of others.

4. Secrets and Systems

A) Secrets within systems or families are serious stuff. Secrets act as the plaque in the arteries of communication. "Don't tell Dad (or Mom, etc.)"

B) Far more significant than the content of any secret is the ramification of its existence for the emotional processes of the entire system.

C) The effects of secrets are specific and predicable.

1. Secrets function to divide a system or a family. Those "in" on the secret will become far better able to communicate with one another than with those in the outsider group, about any issue, not just about the secret.

2. Secrets create unnecessary estrangements as well as false companionship.

3. Secrets distort perceptions. Family members will become confused or misled by information they obtain because they really are seeing only part of the picture.

4. Secrets exacerbate other pathological processes unrelated to the content of the particular secret, because secrets generally function to keep anxiety at higher energy levels.

D) Family members will say that they kept a secret "to spare" someone's feelings; the truth is more likely to be that they did so to spare their own feelings.

E) The ultimate proof of the function and the power of secrets within a family is that when they are revealed, more change usually takes place throughout the entire system than could have been attributed solely to the content of that secret.

5. Systems thinking and everyday life

A) Systems theory is a new way of thinking about life. Usually, most people think individuality and cause-and-effect without realizing that we are a part of a system be it our family, our work, our friends, and even our play.

B) Over our lives we have read, heard and seen any number of things which have sought to teach us about life. We are eclectic—borrowing from all kinds of sources as we try to make sense of life. Thinking systems takes time and much effort to see life in a different way. It is difficult to think systems without other thinking coming into play as if to say we can pick-and-choose from them.

C) The benefits of systems theory and systems thinking are many. There is a whole spectrum of possible responses in life.

1. Most individuals and relationships tend to be governed by automatic emotional reactivity. When anxiety increases, people tend to opt for short-term relief, a quick fix, immediate symptom relief without considering the long-term effects of the situation. It need not be that way.

2. We seek to manage our emotional self as best we can. Systems thinking helps us develop more awareness of and control over our own emotional self, our emotional reactivity. We have learned what triggers our intense emotional reactivity so that we can manage it in a healthier manner. We begin to recognize “our own steps in the dance of life”.

3. We work toward emotional calm whenever we encounter anxiety and stress as we remember that if one person in the system can remain relatively calm it helps the entire system to function better.

4. We remember the triangles, the basic building blocks in relationships, and we recall how they work and how we can function in the midst of them.

5. Systems thinking gives us flexibility in our response.

a. We can choose between thinking and feeling. We need not be overwhelmed by our strong feelings, but we can think about them and seek to make decisions based on thinking rather than feeling. Or if we decide based on our feelings, it is not an automatic choice but a thought-out one.

b. In relationships we remember that we can have different distances at different times. There are times for closeness and times for more distance. (Remember, you don't need to work on the closeness/togetherness side of things; that comes naturally. It's the individual/distant side that takes work.)

c. We can watch for old patterns and repetitions at work automatically in our relationships and respond accordingly, not like we always have in the past.

d. We are watchful for our ever-present tendency for working on others rather than ourselves. We refrain from doing for others what they can do for themselves. We monitor ourselves for over-involvement where we're taking on other people's problems and responsibilities and over-functioning in their space. We are aware of our seriousness indicator—if we're too serious, something is amiss.

e. When the situation is all serioused-up, we can be playful. Instead of getting caught with all the anxiety, we can delegate it to others. We can be paradoxical in our responses. (These responses are not to change the others, but to act like a relief valve in us to release some of the anxiety and stress in us so that we might better handle ourselves in the midst of a stressful situation.) These are ways of managing our emotional self.

D) "Think PROCESS not content". Most folks focus on the content of an issue, a problem, a relationship and the details of it. Systems theory teaches us it's the process, not the content that counts. A child's symptom may seem like the problem, but it's really the process that is driving the symptom. If we direct all our efforts at the content, we miss the emotional process which is at work.

Resources used:

Murray Bowen, Family Therapy in Clinical Practice

Michael Kerr, Family Evaluation

Edwin Friedman, Generation to Generation

Roberta Gilbert, Extraordinary Relationships

The 8 Concepts of Bowen Theory