

FACT SHEET: What is Family Therapy

Why Family Therapy

- Humans are relational, and it follows that our problems have a relational dimension. We are profoundly influenced by, and influence the actions and feelings of our significant others. One of the biggest challenges we face as humans is to know how to stay emotionally connected to those around us while still being authentic to ourselves.
- Family therapy is a way of addressing difficulties in relational terms rather than individually. Dealing with problems (particularly in childhood and adolescence) purely at an individual level may have the effect of treating a “symptom” but neglecting to see a “deeply ingrained pattern” or “veiled process” that is standing in the way of a more satisfactory family life.
- If family members are present, it is possible to get a better understanding of a behaviours or patterns in the family that are problem maintaining.
- Family therapists believe that therapists will learn more about a problem by meeting as many key players in the person’s life as possible. The therapist can develop a better relationship with the family if there is face-to-face contact with them.
- Additionally, there is often a wider, more stable empathic understanding by the family of what is happening for each other.

Families as systems

- Think of any system (i.e. a car engine, an air conditioner or plant system), if one part stops working, another part must compensate and take over otherwise the system might eventually cease to exist. If we take the example of the air conditioner, we notice that when a window or door is left open it will start to over-function in order to maintain the desired temperature of the room.
- In the family system this is called maintaining the “status quo”. The change that we see in one area might be affecting something else in the system to keep the system going or stable, this is called circularity.
- Unfortunately “stable” doesn't always mean “healthy”, which is when we start to see problems happening within one family member or within the system as a whole. Sometimes it's easy to see what's happening, and it's a one-step process to a positive fix (i.e. replace an engine part or close a window). At other times, it can be a little more complicated and particularly in families where there is an emotional process occurring.

Goals of family work

- The goals of family therapy often centre on improving communication between people and inviting everyone to take some responsibility for the family issue. A family therapist aims to change unhelpful repeating patterns between people.
- To be successful, the therapist is required to be “multi-positioned”, and to hold different family members in mind in order to include each person's point of view.
- Family therapy can help to identify and adjust predictable roles, patterns and behaviours that are causing problems. There are also “spoken or unspoken rules” that form the fabric of family life and the way family members relate to each other.

Am I to blame?

Absolutely not! It takes courage to tackle family relationship issues in an open way and with a therapist by your side. Family therapists understand how difficult it can be to open up with family members especially if this is new for you. They are also specifically trained to be neutral - meaning “allied to all and no-one at the same time” – we are trained to give you unbiased support.

Common times when families may benefit from family therapy.

- Sometimes our family system works well and everything seems harmonious, problems are handled well, and relationships remain intact. At other times this is not the case and things that worked in the past can become a problem. Common times when things become more difficult may be:
 - Times of heightened stress
 - Family life cycle changes, developmental changes
 - Mental health issues
 - Drug and alcohol issues
 - Financial pressure
 - Death, dying, loss and grief

Recommended Reading:

Harriett, Lerner (2001) The Dance of Connection Harper Collins.

McGoldrick, M (1995) You can Go Home again. Norton Press.

Richardson, R (2012) Family Ties that Bind. Self Counsel Press.

Segal, D (2011) The Whole Brain Child. Bantam. USA.

Segal, Daniel (2003) Parenting from the Inside Out. Scribe Publications.

