



Coming to grips with family systems theory in a collaborative, learning environment.

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Family Gatherings

Family gatherings are an excellent albeit sometimes difficult opportunity to learn about self

In the following table you will find some tips we have found helpful in dealing with family gatherings. We start with taking some steps to help us lessen our reactivity. This allows us to observe how we are reacting.

<p>The first step is to ensure that anxiety / arousal levels are low enough to enable you to be an observer more than a reactor.</p>	<p>Notice signs of arousal and use bio feedback to self regulate. Breath, warm hands, relax muscle tension. Watch alcohol consumption / drink plenty of water.</p>
<p>The goal is to be more of an objective researcher</p>	<p>Observe, listen, gather data on habitual patterns of behaviour and roles. If there is significant pain about events from the past or a long period of emotionally or physically cutting off, the research phase is likely to need to be a longer period.</p>
<p>If anxiety is high for you about re-entering family gatherings, you may be wise to keep the first visits time limited</p>	<p>In order to keep your focus. "Never stay with your family longer than you can manage to be generous." McGoldrick and Carter 2001</p>
<p>Self is central to the research</p>	<p>Observe your own internal reactions to family members and notice your instinctive and habitual responses, especially when pressure and intensity build.</p>
<p>Planning some research tasks is helpful in keeping thinking clear in midst of strong emotion</p>	<p>To investigate what each family member is up against relating to you? To watch the different ways each sibling relates to each parent and hypothesize about how that impacts the different way they experience the family.-the effects of sibling position.</p>
<p>Notice key patterns that are purportedly present in all families (yours may be the exception?)</p>	<p>Who overfunctions, who underfunctions? Who tends to move in and who tends to move out? Who is in the loop of gossip? Who is on the outer? Who gets most of the anxious positive intensity and who gets most of the anxious negative intensity? (Particularly from parents..but if parents are not alive observe where this has been transferred)</p>
<p>The long term goal is to develop a person to person relationship with each family member</p>	<p>The groundwork for this requires you making an equal effort to chat to each person... not just the easy ones.</p>

<p>Have a plan to keep out of triangles</p>	<p>If a family member wants to vent about their unaddressed complaints regarding another- you might plan to use a neutralizing reversal statement such as "Interesting that you mention person X, I was chatting to them a moment ago and really enjoyed hearing their news. I hope you get the chance to also catch up today... By the way what ever happened with that work assignment that was taking up all your time last month?"</p>
<p>Warning signs of losing a systems perspective</p>	<p>Analyzing or diagnosing others deficiencies; blaming thoughts or guilt ruminations. (An over focus on others or on self prevents one from seeing how each person's responses in the family either detract from the functioning of others or add to the functioning of others)</p>
<p>Use strong feelings as signals to think about the system rather than a guide to behaviour.</p>	<p>If you have strong feelings about villains or victims try to think about the circular processes that sustain these roles.</p>
<p>Beware premature re-entry</p>	<p>If you try to express yourself differently in the family without understanding the patterns that have developed to manage anxiety from one generation to the other, you will probably not be prepared for the negative affect response. Systems awareness is perhaps the greatest tool for self regulating as it helps make sense of even the most difficult behaviours and reminds one that they play a role in contributing to this behaviour.</p>
<p>Beware putting more emphasis on I statements than on efforts to engage / connect.</p>	<p>Differentiating is equally about warming up each relationship as it is about expressing autonomous thinking. If there has been distance in the relationship the first effort must be to gain enough contact/connection so that the relationship can absorb the anxiety that will come from expressing difference.</p>
<p>Serious issues are best taken up person to person rather than at large gatherings.</p>	
<p>Don't be too serious</p>	<p>Intensity escalates relationship anxiety and triggers others predictable maneuvers to either move in to align or distance to escape.</p>
<p>Humour</p>	<p>Humour (not sarcasm which is a disguised attack) is a great way to reduce tension and to disorganize established patterns - it can open up surprising new possibilities.</p>
<p>Any strategy must be for self, not to assist another</p>	<p>If your humour is primarily to help calm another down rather than keep self calm and flexible in the system, it is only going to perpetuate old patterns.</p>
<p>Keep your own counsel</p>	<p>Beware sharing your research or strategies with others... this prevents an alliance around differentiating efforts (triangle) or being overtly or covertly pressured to do things the other's way.</p>
<p>A useful mantra "Don't attack, don't defend, don't shut down."</p>	
<p><u>BOOK REVIEW</u></p> <p>Growing Yourself Up by Jenny Brown (Founder & Director of The Family Systems Institute)</p> <p>“This book is an excellent resource for those interested in pursuing greater emotional maturity in their relationships (and those learning to help others do so). In short, a wonderfully clear, thoughtful and engaging read. I recommend it highly” - <i>Elizabeth A. Skowron, Ph.D. Associate Professor of Counseling Psychology, Pennsylvania State University</i></p>	

To purchase visit: <http://growingyourselfup.com>

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