



WORKSHOP PRESENTATIONS

Holding the Family in a Room That Wasn't Built for Them: One therapist's attempts at differentiation in youth alcohol and other drugs services

Presenter: Rochelle Oshlack

A young person's substance use is never just their own. It ripples through — and is shaped by — the emotional system around them: families under chronic stress, parents oscillating between over-responsibility and blame, siblings pulled into triangles that absorb the family's anxiety, and clinicians working inside services that were never designed to hold the family in the room. Yet most drug and alcohol services remain organised around the individual. Funding, outcome measures, and treatment models all converge on one variable — reducing the young person's use — while the emotional process that generates and sustains the symptom goes largely untouched.

This presentation holds the theoretical tension between Bowen's systems thinking and the medical model that dominates AOD treatment, and asks what differentiation of self actually looks like for a Bowen therapist practising inside a system that individualises distress, and prioritises risk in place of relationship. This presentation describes the steps towards a clinical AOD setting that has now made space for genograms and family work. Drawing on clinical work with young people and their families, I consider the challenge of staying connected without fusing — to clients, to colleagues, and to the anxiety of the wider service system. And how this challenge became both the central challenge and the central intervention.

About Rochelle –



Rochelle Oshlack is a PACFA-registered clinical counsellor, supervisor, and Youth and Family Counsellor at St Vincent's Hospital, Sydney, where she works at the intersection of adolescent mental health, substance use, and family systems. She also maintains a private practice supporting individuals, couples, and families navigating issues involving sexuality, gender, relationship, and cultural diversity. Rochelle holds a Master of Youth Mental Health from the University of Melbourne and brings a Bowen Family Systems lens to her clinical work and supervision practice. She presented at the 2025 FSI Annual Conference and is a committed student of the theory in both her professional and personal life.

Mirror, Mirror: Who is the least differentiated of them all? Seeing the intensity of the family emotional process play out in the tension of treating team triangles

Presenter: Michelle Varcoe

Have you ever noticed the way that treating teams can mirror the dynamics of a family they are working with? Has it ever felt like you, or the system in which you work can "catch" anxiety like a common cold? Have you ever walked out of a therapy room or an interaction with someone feeling like you're carrying an emotion/sensation/problem that doesn't belong to you?

This presentation will consider how Bowen Family Systems Theory would understand these contagious forces, particularly in light of the concept of triangles. It will discuss the automatic survival instincts of families under pressure to draw in others to manage tension, and how that works to stabilise their system.

Using an amalgamation of case studies, the presentation will consider predictable responses of therapists, teachers, and other helping professionals in accepting these invitations from families. The workshop will also provide opportunities for participants to reflect on examples from their own lives/workplaces, and consider their own efforts in recognising and managing these invitations.

The presentation will ask the question: What does it take of a therapist/helper to resist the strong (subconscious) invitation of families to join their "dance", especially when the broader system is under its own high levels of pressure and tension?

About Michelle –



Michelle is an Accredited Mental Health Social Worker (AASW) who has worked in the mental health sector for the last decade across private and public health settings. She has a special interest in family systems, and thinking systemically more broadly regarding the wider influences of communities, schools, treating teams and other institutions. Michelle has an Advanced Certificate in Couple and Family Systems Therapy.

Michelle is also interested in the teaching and learning process, which has led to her presenting workshops and delivering training for different contexts and audiences, such as teacher professional development days, church contexts, and mental health teams and clinicians. She has recently co-authored an article published in the 2024 special edition of the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy. Her interest and passion for the continual learning process has led her to the role of Engagement Coordinator at the Family Systems Institute, where she supports people to engage in learning pathways that suit their learning needs and goals

Houston, We Have a Problem!: When All Systems Fail and the Adolescent Is Left to Launch on Her Own

Presenter: Veronica Pym

This workshop explores the emotional process surrounding a highly complex adolescent presentation involving severe trauma, exploitation, family disruption, and extensive involvement across multiple systems, including police, mental health services, school, community agencies, and family networks. Using a carefully de-identified clinical case, the presentation will examine how chronic anxiety spreads through both family and organisational systems, shaping the functioning of individuals and professionals attempting to respond under pressure.

The case involves a young person exposed to coercion, abuse, dissociation, psychotic symptoms, and profound emotional and relational instability during adolescence. Alongside these experiences were intense patterns of fear, secrecy, dependence, conflict and distance, over/underfunctioning reciprocity, and triangles across several systems attempting to manage the situation. The workshop will consider not only the impact of trauma itself, but also the emotional process surrounding the responses of family members, clinicians, institutions, and broader support systems.

Particular attention will be given to questions central to Bowen theory: What helps an individual maintain or develop a more solid sense of self amidst extreme adversity? How do relationships and systems either support or undermine clearer thinking and responsible functioning? What aspects of service involvement reduce chronic anxiety and support growth, and what aspects unintentionally contribute to dependency, reactivity, or fragmentation?

The presentation will also reflect on the young person's gradual movement toward increased functioning and self-differentiation in adult life, including engagement in higher education, leadership roles, employment, and independent living. Participants will be invited to think about differentiation of self not as an abstract concept, but as a process that can emerge unevenly and imperfectly within highly anxious family and organisational systems.

About Veronica –



Veronica Pym is a Clinical Social Worker and Family Therapist working in Private Practice for over 15 years and within NSW Health for 20 years. Currently she has been at Rivendell Child, Adolescent and Family Mental Health Service, including the statewide Rivendell Adolescent Unit for the past 10 years where she supports young people and families experiencing complex mental health, neurodevelopmental and trauma-related difficulties.

Her practice is informed by Bowen Family Systems Theory, focusing on strengthening parental functioning, supporting clinician thinking under pressure and addressing emotional processes within family and service systems. Since 2019 she has developed parent coaching pathways and provides consultation to teams.

She also maintains a private practice of over 30 years and is trained in trauma-focused and other evidence-based approaches. She sees individuals, couples and families for therapy.

The Helping–Helplessness Cycle: When our helping efforts intensify parental helplessness — and how helping less could help more

Presenter: Katie Small

Parents often arrive at clinical services overwhelmed and discouraged, convinced they have exhausted every option to help their struggling child. Motivated by care and responsibility, clinicians can feel equal pressure to offer solutions and reassurance. Yet years of clinician observations and reflections collected by the Parent Hope Project (PHP) shows a consistent pattern: the harder clinicians try to help, the more parents lose clarity and become dependent on professional direction.

Drawing on Bowen Family Systems Theory and her experience as both clinician and parent, Katie will present personal reflections, clinical examples, and PHP training insights to explore:

- **Shifting the clinician's role** — from expert problem-solver to a calm, differentiated presence who creates space for parents to think more clearly.
- **How parental helplessness forms** — and how clinicians may unintentionally reinforce it.
- **Strengthening parental agency** — through shifts in the clinician's stance and management of self.
- **The power of self-discovery** — and how it fosters lasting growth more effectively than instruction.
- **Parallel process** — how the cycle between clinician-parent can mirror the parent-child relationship.

Katie hopes that participants will leave with deeper curiosity of how a systems-oriented approach to working with parents strengthens parental leadership, reduces reactivity, and supports families more effectively—often through the paradoxical process of helping less.

About Katie –



Katie Small is an accredited Mental Health Social Worker in private practice. She holds a Master of Counselling (UNSW), a Bachelor of Social Work (ACU), and a Bachelor of Arts (UNE), with accreditation via the Australian Association of Social Workers.

With over ten years of clinical experience, Katie's work has almost always involved parents, which has developed a particular curiosity for her in the parent-child emotional process. She has been able to observe this across a diverse range of programs including Royal Far West's Paediatric Developmental Program, SDN's Brighter Futures Program, and Child Protection with the Department of Communities & Justice. She is also an accredited facilitator of several parenting programs, including the Parent Hope Project (inc. the Confident Parent Course), Tuning into Kids, Circle of

Security, and Bringing Up Great Kids.

Katie has engaged in Bowen Family Systems Theory thinking for more than a decade, through coaching and attending training with the Family Systems Institute. In 2025, She joined the Parent Hope Project (PHP) training and development team and loves hearing clinician's thinking as they implement the PHP programs in their practice contexts.

Katie lives in the Blue Mountains with her husband, two young daughters, and a spirited cocker spaniel who ensure she never runs out of opportunities to practice the lifelong pursuit of differentiation.

Four Seasons in One Day: Who is in the Room in Family Therapy?

Presenter: Katherine White

How Bowen Family Systems Theory offers a lens to view this work

Katherine White LMFT, RMFT-S, RCC-ACS

Despite evidence that relational problems constitute over half of presenting issues in therapy, individual therapy remains the dominant treatment modality, even when clients are explicitly addressing family or relationship concerns (Doherty & Harris, 2022). This pattern appears in my own BFST practice, where differentiation work and family-of-origin exploration are often conducted individually rather than conjointly. Bowen theory holds that the emotional system is present in the room whether one family member attends or several, yet conjoint work introduces additional clinical considerations, including assessment of both the therapist's capacity to define self to multiple relationships and the family's capacity to engage relationally. I am exploring whether a preference for individual treatment slows change in the family emotional system compared to the in-the-moment work possible in conjoint therapy, or whether some combination is most effective.

This presentation examines these implications through a BFST lens. Drawing on Bowen's original conceptualization of multi-person clinical work, I argue that differentiation work with multiple family members present offers distinct advantages, including real-time observation of multigenerational transmission processes. The presentation will: (1) review Bowen's foundational thinking on individual vs. multi-person sessions; (2) weigh advantages and disadvantages of each format; (3) examine how the triangle manifests differently across them; and (4) present clinical case examples.

About Katie –



Katherine (Katie) White is a Marriage and Family Therapist registered in the US and Canada. She has been working with individuals, couples and families in schools, clinics, and non-profit centers for 20 years in the US, Australia and Canada. Katie is currently the Executive Director of Living Systems, and the co-host of the podcast Elevator Systems.

From Fusion to Infidelity: Understanding the process of relationship affairs and rebuilding trust in self and the relationship

Presenter: Clare Speirs

This workshop was born out of recent clinical experience and reflection on the dilemmas presented to a therapist in individual or couples work following discovery of infidelity. In this workshop, we will explore infidelity from a Bowen Theory lens, consider options for strengthening relationships following an affair, discuss the issue of therapist neutrality, and build awareness of therapist emotional reactivity in this clinical context.

About Clare –



Clare Speirs is a clinical psychologist and family therapist with 20 years of clinical experience in private and public health. She is an accredited supervisor, Associate Faculty member at the FSI, and trainer for the Advanced Certificate program and Family of Origin research groups. Clare currently works in private practice in Albury where she collaborates with a broad range of clients and health professionals from a family systems framework.