



Family Systems

We don't make personal Changes in a Vacuum. The Human being is a Social creature. We Have Families, we have Significant Others, we have Friends, Colleagues, Acquaintances. Once we have initiated and begun to make changes in ourselves it will have effect on the "others" in our lives. These "others" do, and will in turn, have effect on us.

Change will almost invariably create anxiety to some degree. How best to Help, how best to minimize conflict and anxiety, how best to keep together the "Good" in our relationships without allow the natural "Anxiety of Change" from pulling it apart?

This is a Complex Issue. This essay is intended only to "bring to light" a Few of the factors involved and prompt further study and effort.

To That End.....

What Follows contains edited excerpts from "**Chronic Anxiety and Defining A Self**" – **An Introduction to Family System theory, by Michael E. Kerr**, published in "The Atlantic Monthly" September 1988.

Dr. Murray Bowen , a professor of Psychiatry at Georgetown University Medical Center, seeing that the Family is Not a collection of autonomous entities but rather an Interlocked Emotional Unit unto itself developed the Concept and Perspective of a "**Family Systems**".

One aspect that led to this Conclusion of emotional interdependence and the Family as a Unit, was the observation that family members frequently function in "**reciprocal relationships**". One example is where one member will act "strong" in the face of another's "weakness". This process was frequently played out with one member become Anxious about what he or she perceived as a problem or potential problem in another. This anxiety then would tend to exaggerate the demeanor, appearance and attitude of the anxious one and further escalate "Problem - Anxiety- Caretaker" Cycle. This then results in a greater "caretaker" role which further enhances the 'weakness' of the other. Each person becomes an emotional prisoner of the other while giving a psuedo sense of togetherness

Because of this and a number of other reciprical relationship systems, it is suggested that it is important when making personal changes to Also focus attention and have strategies in place to address the Family Unit as well. **When one person makes a "Change" in this system it will have effects on the other persons role.** Those effects may be subtle or intense. This resulting change will create "stresses" in the other. If these stresses are not addressed in healthy ways the Family Unit may break down or the personal change may not be successful.

The Goal derived from the Family Systems Theory is to gain *Differentiation* or individuality while maintaining Togetherness. Differentiation is the evolutionary desire in each person to be an individual – to grow to be an emotionally separate person with the ability to think, feel, and act for himself. Togetherness is Also an Equally strong "force" to keep families emotionally connected and operating in "concert" with one another for the evolutionary advantage that provides.

It is the Balance of these two major drives and the Traps that are inherent that will be further addressed here... **The Capability to be an Individual in a Group**

At one end of the spectrum, are peopling that live in a feeling world. Some however may be so sensitized that they become numb. In general, people at this level are so responsive to others opinions and what others want from them that their functioning is almost totally governed by their emotional reactions to the environment.

At the Other End, a person is directed by goals and principals. While sure of his beliefs and convictions, he is not dogmatic or fixed in his thinking. Capable of hearing and evaluating the viewpoints of others, he can discard old beliefs in favor of new ones, he can listen without reacting and communicate without antagonizing others. He is secure and his functioning is not affected by praise or criticism. He can respect the identity of another without becoming critical or emotionally involved in trying to modify that person's life course. Able to assume total responsibility for himself and sure of his responsibility to others, he does not become Overly responsible for others. He is Realistically aware of his Dependence on Others and is free to enjoy relationships. He does not have a "Need" for others that impairs functioning and others do not feel used by him. Tolerant and respectful of differences, he is not prone to engage in polarized debates. He is realistic in his assessment of himself and others and is not preoccupied with his place in the hierarchy. His expectations are also realistic. He tolerates Intense feelings well and does not automatically act to alleviate them.

Most people wish to be individuals but are not willing to give up togetherness to achieve more individuality. People frequently are willing only to be individuals only to the extent that the relationship system permits and approves. ***There is a Misunderstanding that Giving up togetherness does not mean giving up Emotional Closeness*** . It does mean however that one becomes less dependent on the support and acceptance of others.

Some degree of rejection predictably occurs when a person embarks on a path of "change". The rejection, in whatever form it takes, is designed to restore the Balance. To navigate through this emotional quagmire requires a well thought out direction and tolerance of Intense feelings that might incline one to give up.

These intense feelings are fed by the "fear of what might be". Here arises the Trap. When people become more anxious, the pressure for togetherness increases. During High Anxiety periods human beings strive for oneness through efforts to think and act alike. It is ironic that this pressure increases the likelihood that there will be fragmentation and further anxiety created by the desire to be an individual. So, a greater need for togetherness is experienced with a simultaneous need for greater distance and emotional insulation. The less tolerant they are and more irritated by the differences. They are less able to permit one another to be what they are. Feelings of overloaded, overwhelmed, and isolated increase...along with feelings that are accompanied by the wish to have the responsibility removed. (I.e., addictive behavior or separation)

With these aversive possibilities people become more intent on getting others to do their way. Frustration when others resist often lead to disappointment and anger, further increasing the likelihood of giving up or withdrawing.

Efforts to get others to Change can escalate problems of feeling criticized, defensiveness, and counterattacks. The Flames are Fanned when each blames the other. Projection of one's feelings AND attitudes onto another may also be used to relieve anxiety by allowing one to view another as the problem. Contact is often kept brief and superficial to reduce discomfort. Dealing in this way however creates an emotional investment in the success of the new relationship that they easily lose perspective and recreate problems they thought they had escaped. In addition by denying the anxiety in an attempt to manage, it may raise the anxiety in the other. So one may become more comfortable with oneself but increase the level of anxiety in the other. Such an outcome is a mixed blessing. Efforts at Stress Management may also include outside or group activities. These efforts are useful Adjuncts, but the problem with using a group in this way is that improvements in functioning may depend on maintaining the group relationship. Also Efforts to pursue symptom relief may overlook the cause. **This process is automatic and often begins when a person feels rejected or ignored (real or imagined).**

So, how to break this natural Cycle?

When a family member can become more aware of his Own part in whatever problems exist, becoming willing to assume responsibility for that part, and become more able to act on that basis, improvements in his functioning will not be contingent on someone else's "absorbing" his share of the family's immaturity. To diligently remove one's personal "demandingness" even when the "problem" is not yours. To recognize the Desire for Emotional Closeness and Plan and Perform acts toward that goal, yet maintaining separate and individual responsibilities. To Accept others for who and where they are yet support and encourage change. Recognize this process may contain events of Intense Emotion and Reactivity. This allows for a calm, accepting, responsible individual to have a gradual calming effect on the other. People are keenly aware or sensitive to the emotional states of others and make automatic adjustments in response.

It is a change in functioning that does not lead to the seesaw effect.