

How Anxiety Travels in Families

According to family systems thinking, we are more emotionally connected than we realize, and our family is the most powerful and influential emotional unit or system in our lives.

Families need to cooperate and have some emotional cohesiveness to carry out the activities that makes human life possible. When we get anxious and the tension gets too high, however, our built-in connectedness can feel more like a problem than a help. This affects individuals to different degrees and in a variety of ways.

Emotional Triangles are formed when two persons get focused on a third, or a third gets involved on the relationship of two others. This spreads the tension without resolving anything anywhere, and the person “caught in the middle” can end up with the stress of the other two. This happens everywhere, including in families.

Stress or tension, if prolonged and high enough, can be seen in four typical (even, predictable) patterns in families. They are:

1. **Chronic Marital Conflict** (as opposed to what every couple deals with), in each spouse focuses intensely on each other, with special attention to what is wrong with the other and lots of energy dedicated to trying to change the other.

2. **Over-and-Underfunctioning**, a pattern in which one person does less than seems reasonable in the situation. The other, *in a reciprocal manner*, does more. Each person reinforces the other’s behavior. Illness or

dysfunction (physical, social, or emotional) in a spouse may grow out of this as one spouse gives in to pressure from the other to think or be a certain way.

3. **Child Focus** is a triangle in which the energy or worry toward a child becomes and remains too intense, and the child becomes impaired. The focus may appear positive or negative to the family or others, but the question is: what is the voltage?

4. **Emotional Distancing or Cutoff** are ways to try to deal with too much anxiety that (like using alcohol for the same purpose) make one feel calmer at first, but lead to more serious problems, as above.

These patterns are present in all families to some degree. If one (or more) of them is a problem, we can learn to improve our capacity to see what is going on and the anxiety behind it. Our power to change a pattern rests in our then working on changing *our own part* in the interactions while maintaining our connections to others. It is possible to get calmer and use the more thoughtful part of ourselves to take on less of others’ anxiety, and to get better at managing our own reactivity. It helps to see how we participate in anxious patterns that may go back generations and are thus not always evident to us. Often we need a coach to see this clearly and work on improving it. Doing so, however, is a way of giving a priceless gift to our loved ones, and an “emotional trust fund” to our descendents.

by Bart Grooms; based on the theory of Dr. Murray Bowen