

The Holistic Benefits of Family Therapy

How individuality is defined by the context of our relationships.

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KEY POINTS

- Systemic Family Therapy (SFT) is a holistic process that espouses to resolve problems through relational healing.
- SFT addresses current societal pressures that support diversity and development.
- The focus of the therapy should be one where the complexity and context of the family is the therapeutic process.

"It takes two to know one."—Gregory Bateson



Freud and Father, Freud and Daughter
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Family Therapy, or “Systemic Therapy” as it is better described, is a holistic process that espouses resolving problems through relational healing. This therapy framework is successful because, if practiced correctly, it is not about the individual or family system. It is hard to imagine how our family of origin, with its ever-evolving interactive contexts, is not the primary learning context and source of our strengths and dysfunctions. *Instead, it is what is interactively occurring in the system from multiple perspectives.*

Solutions to problems are resolved in the present. This creates liminality, those transitional moments or gaps that lead to, as Gregory Bateson would also say, “a difference

that makes a difference." From a systemic perspective, in relationships, we each create different views that, like quantum physics, can all be correct.

It is essential, especially in today's rapidly changing world, that clinicians who say that they do Family Therapy are transparent with prospective patients who are enlightened enough to seek it. This entails *agreeing on what it is to be systemic and how the therapy will proceed.*

What do I mean by this? I have been a practicing Systemic Family Therapy, Approved Supervisor, and Adjunct Professor at the graduate level for the past 40 years. My training is in Family Cultural Studies (Anthropology and Psychology), which has taught me the gift of being a systems thinker, which creates a unique segue to learning about the interactive complexity of our lives. It is essential for both a Family Therapist and those seeking help to mutually explore presenting relationship issues that are simultaneously connected to broader societal contexts. *A kind of zooming in and out process.*

Many astonishing things are affecting families today. This includes varying manifestations of cultural norms, historical views, ethnicity, gender, class, racial recognition, and diversity, not to mention the Covid Pandemic. All this is within a broader socio-economic context. In America, the official poverty rate is approximately 13% based on a "family" of four making \$26,000.¹

However, if the poverty income level for a "family" of four were arbitrarily proclaimed to be just twice that income amount, the poverty rate would be closer to 50%. This startling and near impossible survival challenge exists within one of the wealthiest countries in the world. Even more so regarding the horrific disproportionate everyday existence for people of color, that is interwoven and part of the root causes of today's needed antiracist protest movement.

Systemic Family Therapy is an ecological process where the whole family (and community and so on...) is interdependent and more than the sum of its parts. This is not about just fixing the family system. It is, as Nora Bateson, President of the *International Bateson Institute*, believes, "It is about sense-making. The fixing will happen by happenchance, not direct correctives...but only when interdependencies come into view." It helps resolve insidious pain, allowing hidden resources to emerge to address socio-economic problems.

It certainly can help with the emotional outcomes of post-pandemic, racial unrest, and extreme financial issues, as well as power policy changes. *Within this process, our "individuality" is defined by the context of our relationships.* This further underscores the need for the

involvement, recruitment, and systemic training of multicultural and non-white clinicians in the collective quest of strengthening our interdependency.

Inherent in a systemic framework, like nature, all are interrelated, with no labels, opposites, or dichotomized. Solutions to problems can be attained through different avenues, weathering inevitable paradoxes using improvisation and resolving double binds. It is the unheard patterns that are there but need the context to emerge to resolve problems. The emphasis is on the "how" of the interactions that are occurring. This is supported by research. It works.

Unfortunately, today there are only about 50,000 Family Therapists in the USA. This contrasts with approximately 680,000 social workers, 106,000 clinical psychologists, and 113,000 mental health counselors.² A revealing statistic for those latter disciplines is the enormous gap between the number of traditional one-on-one therapy clients working with more than one person in the therapy room (or currently on the virtual screen).

The American Psychological Association cites that approximately 2% of their members do Family Therapy. For clinical social workers, it is indicated that approximately 12% are employed as working with families, while mental health counselors report 16% involved with families.

The American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists currently states that about half of the treatment provided by its members is one-on-one, with the other half using a combination of treatments.³ *This indicates a need for consumers to ascertain if they are looking for a Family Therapist. The focus of the therapy is one where the complexity of the family or context in question is the therapeutic process.*

Many excellent therapists specialize in individual psychotherapy, and there are many Systemic Family Therapists out there. Why is it important to look at the more comprehensive and interdependent contexts? Is it the predominance of allopathic medicine, where the norms of fragmentation and dependency on medications help address symptoms? Or is it a cultural pattern of discrimination that discourages and fosters unequal distribution of wealth and living standards? Could it be the mindset of therapists themselves? Is it insurance companies who force a structure, diagnosis, and coverage that follows a medical model and outdated cultural /racial assumptions at the expense of working within the whole system that may need a difference?

Systemic Family Therapy can holistically address current societal pressures that support diversity and developmental stages, integrating broader contexts based on relationships and social dynamics. It is an approach that encourages new perspectives, given these trying times.

Additionally, it finds novel forms of interdependency and makes use of all segments of our culture (i.e., education, politics, media, agencies that serve and protect, etc.). And most of all, it strengthens and celebrates multicultural backgrounds.

So, what to do? *I suggest inquiring of prospective Family Therapists if their approach creates a forum for family members to learn about themselves via their relationships.* And importantly, if they meet with family members or other significant people at the same time while respecting different points of view.

References

1. <https://www.povertyusa.org/facts>
2. https://www.aamft.org/About_AAMFT/About_Marriage_and_Family_Therapists.aspx
3. <https://www.apa.org/workforce/publications/15-health-service-providers/>