

# Family Systems Concepts: Application to Counseling Couples

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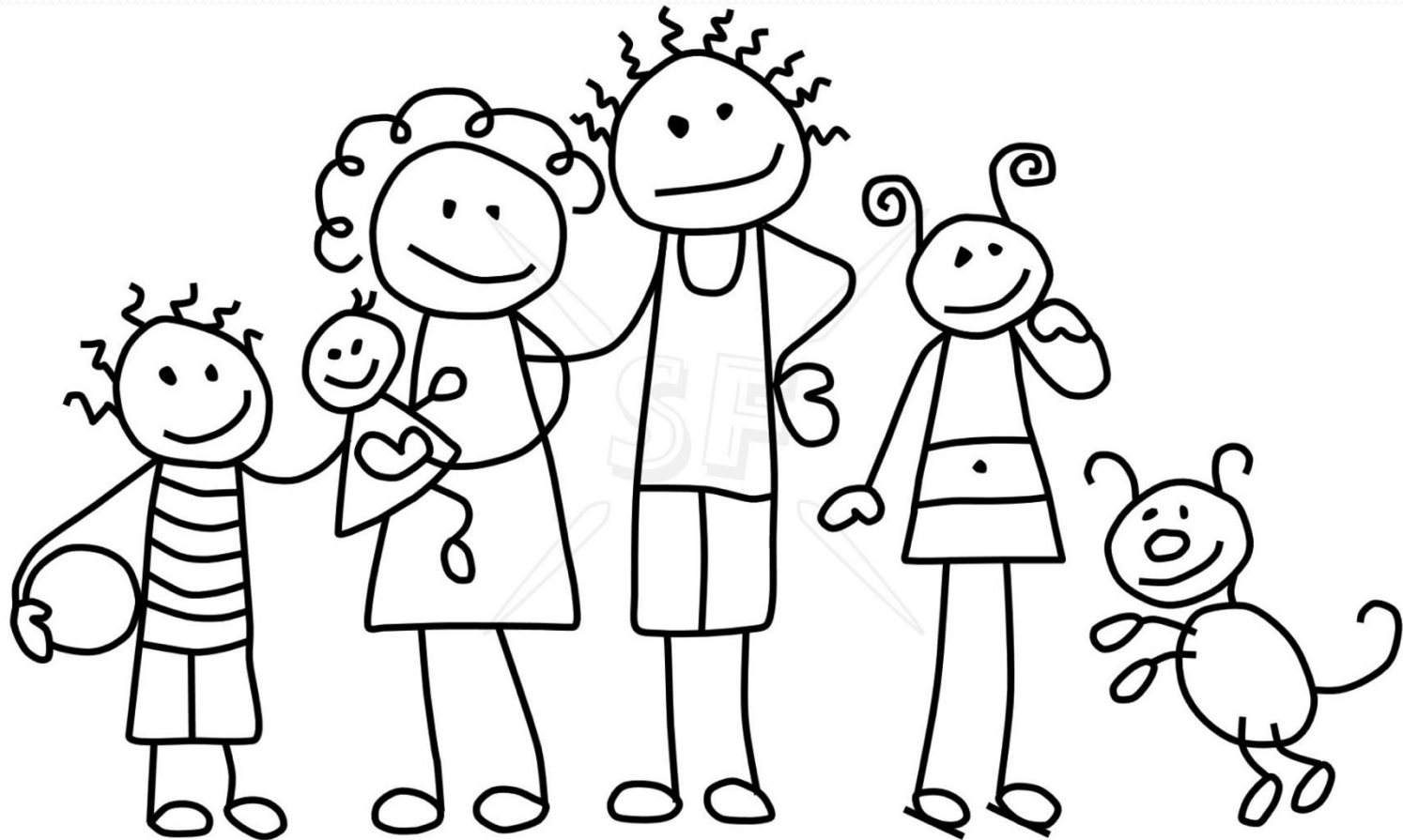
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# Workshop Objectives

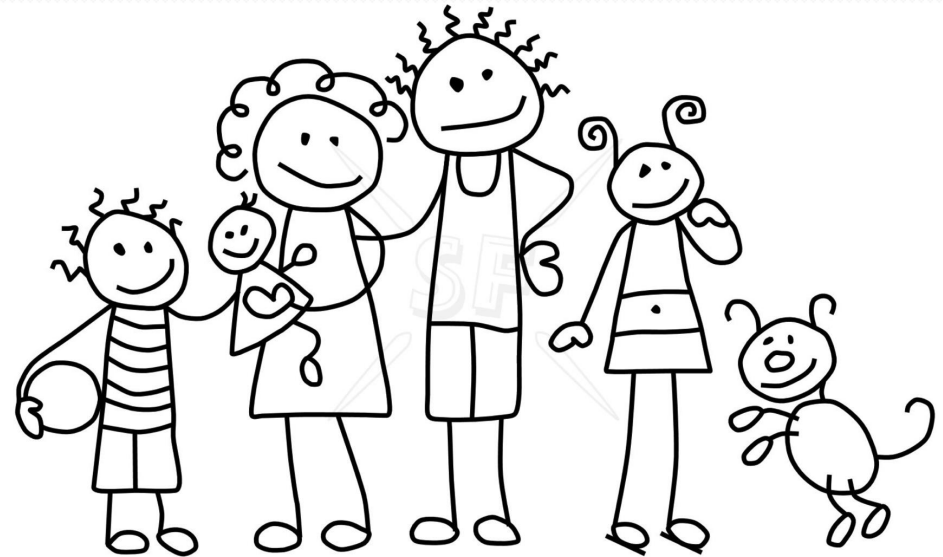
- Upon completion of this workshop, students will be able to:
  - Describe five key family systems concepts useful in working with couples.
  - Use the concept of differentiation in a positive therapeutic manner with couples.
  - Integrate Biblical concepts into family systems work with couples.

# Family System Theory-Bowen



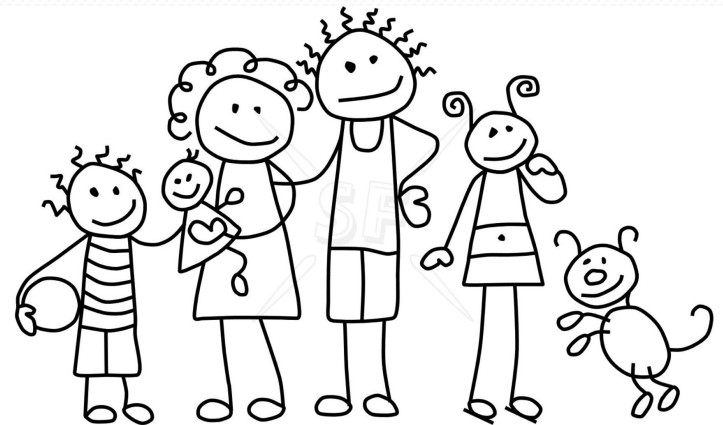
# Key Concept #1 Family Systems Theory- Murray Bowen

- According to Bowen:
  - A family is a system in which each member has a role to play and rules to respect



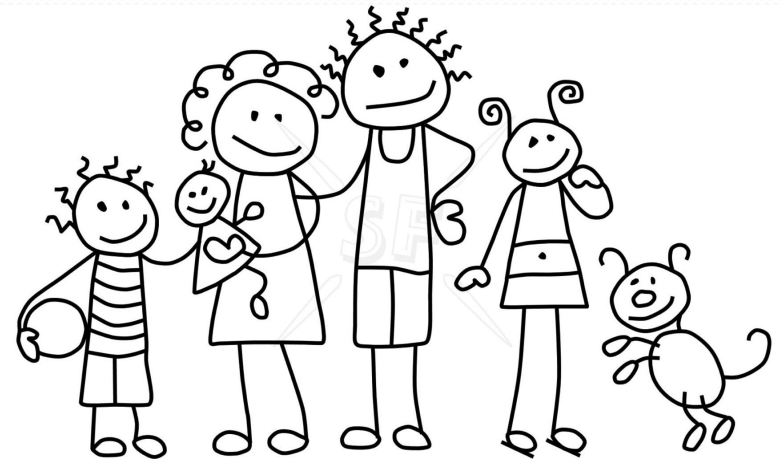
# Family Systems Theory- Murray Bowen

- According to Bowen:
  - Members of the system are expected to respond to each other in a certain way according to their role, which is determined by relationship agreements.



# Family Systems Theory- Murray Bowen

- According to Bowen:
  - Within the boundaries of the system, patterns develop as certain family member's behavior is caused by and causes other family member's behaviors in predictable ways.



# Family Systems Theory- Murray Bowen

- According to Bowen:
  - Maintaining the same pattern of behaviors within a system may lead to balance in the family system, but also to dysfunction.



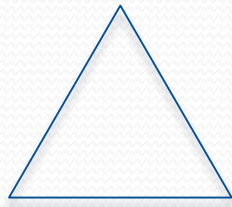
Key #2 Three Concepts of Bowen's  
Family Systems' Theory  
Related to Couples



## Key #2 Three Concepts Related to Couples

- Differentiation of Self

- Triangles



- Relationship Patterns

## Key #2 Three Concepts Related to Couples: Differentiation of Self Foundational Concept

- Basic Self
  - Differentiated or separated from the emotional system of one's family very early in life.
  - Has definite and impermeable boundaries around it.
  - It is sure unshakable and non-negotiable.

## Key #2 Three Concepts Related to Couples: Differentiation of Self cont.

- Human beings will attempt to complete the self in relationships to the degree that it is incomplete by itself.
- At the same time, the others in their systems will also be aiming for self-completion. The effort to make a complete self out of two undifferentiated selves results in a fusion of selves. It is based on the need for attachment, or togetherness, that was not completed or resolved in the original family.

# Key #2 Three Concepts Related to Couples: Triangle

- Triangle
  - 3 person relationship
  - More stable than a 2 person relationship dyad
  - Tolerates more tension than dyad

## Key #2 Three Concepts Related to Couples: Relationship Patterns-

- The role of emotions must be examined to understand Relationship Patterns.

# Key Concept #3 Emotions in Relationships

## Key Concept #3 Emotions in Relationships

- Anxiety is part and parcel of the human experience. It can be a powerful teacher. “Be anxious for nothing.”

## Key Concept #3 Emotions in Relationships

- It can be acute and short-lived or chronic and long-term.



## Key Concept #3 Emotions in Relationships

- In difficult relationships, there is an emotional reactivity that gets passed between individuals. Often, when one person gets excited, the other gets relieved and nothing gets solved. The problem that triggered the emotion never gets addressed.

## Key Concept #3 Emotions in Relationships

- The tendency of emotions to pass in patterned ways from one individual to another is referred to as the emotional process.

## Key Concept #3 Emotions in Relationships

- The lower the overall level of differentiation in the relationship system, the more this passing of emotions occurs.

## Key Concept #3 Emotions in Relationships

- In time, however, borrowing and lending of selves becomes a source of stress itself because trying to make a self out of a relationship can never work.

## Key Concept #3 Emotions in Relationships

- In order to manage that anxiety, partners begin to posture themselves in recognizable ways, and certain well-known relationship patterns form, four of which we will briefly examine more closely.
  - Conflict
  - Distance
  - Cutoff
  - Over/underfunctioning reciprocity

## Key Concept #3 Emotions in Relationships

- These relationship patterns may intensify over time because when things are not going well, humans tend to redouble the same efforts rather than change the quality of the process.

## Key Concept #3 Emotions in Relationships

- If both partners work on their own levels of differentiation, their relationship will improve. One partner changing is likely to do the same over time.

# Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns



## Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns

- Emotional distance
- Emotional cutoff
- Conflict
- Over/underfunctioning reciprocity

## Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Distance

- In relationship where spouses have fusion symptoms (lack of differentiation), they often deal with them by emotional distance from each other. It is present in all marriages to some degree, and in a high percentage of marriages to a major degree” (Bowen, 1976).

## Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Distance

- Distancing is different from giving each other “space” or relieving togetherness tension. In fused relationships, people can opt for distance and call it individuality, but it is not.

## Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Distance

- Healthy distance plays a modulating role even in good relationships, but that is different from this unhealthy pattern.
- The meaningless aloofness seen in the distanced relationship is in sharp contrast to the intense involvement seen in the conflictual one.

# Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Distance

- Forms of distancing pattern:
  - One partner may distance in response to the other's pursuit, which can increase the pursuit and create further distancing.
  - Both partners may distance covertly.

## Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Distance

- Both parties have a part to play. Sometimes, it is the pursuer's anxiety that leads to excessive pursuit. Relieving that anxiety might help minimize the distancing of the other.
- Jealousy is often connected with distancing. Questions may arise about infidelity, work or other compulsions.

## Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Distance

- Distancing partners often take refuge in overwork, substance abuse, or jobs requiring travel. Ultimate forms of distance are cutoff, divorce, or suicide.

# Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Distance

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  - Excessive periods of noncommunication when one is emotionally reactive



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  - Excessive time spent on hobbies
  - A tendency to be quiet when anxiety arises
  - Talk that includes nothing of personal importance
  - An inability to relate to some of the people in one's immediate or original family

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- Often distancing is an attempt to avoid conflict.
- Most commonly, distancing seems to be an automatic attempt to make the relationship tolerable by getting periodic relief from its emotional intensity.
- These attempts rarely bring permanent calm and can intensify feelings.



## Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Distance

How does one begin to think about a distancing relationship?

# Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Distance

- Take a step back and look at the relationship over time.
- How does the pattern emerge out of anxiety?
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- When patterns have been identified, the person can practice different behaviors that do not intensify anxiety in self or the other.
- Gaining objectivity about one's relationship stances certainly involves systems thinking and gaining as much understanding of those systems as possible.



# Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Distance

- Many hard questions need to be asked:
  - How do I distance from my extended family?
  - How do people in my family distance from each other?
  - How many distance relationships can I find in my family of origin?
  - How do I distance from my colleagues at work?
  - How do I distance from my friends?
  - How do I get them to distance from me?
  - What is the origin of the intensity that leads to the distance, or makes it necessary?
- As these reaction patterns are better understood, the need for distance becomes less pronounced.

# Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns:

## Distance

- If distancing is seen as an attempt to work out individuality or togetherness issues, a couple can begin trying to make contact on a regular basis even if it is for brief periods of time. When this is done, working on individual life issues gets easier.
- It is important to get in touch with the emotional intensity that underlies the distance stance.
- Self needs to be differentiated from the togetherness that generates the emotional intensity.
- When people can get calm, and a thoughtful definition of self results, they are on their way out of this pattern.

# Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns:

## Distance

- Simple, calm, person-to-person contact is elusive for many people. Learning how to make meaningful personal contact is not easy.
- It can be helpful to make contact a few minutes each day. This is as much as some can tolerate.
- Over time they will find that their emotional reactivity decreases as they become more comfortable with openness.
- The range of possibilities for making contact is large (long conversations to brief body language).
- Small attempts at making contact can produce large results.

# Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Cutoff

- Cutoff is a distancing posture carried to the extreme of a nonfunctioning relationship. Cutoff is so common in America that it can be hard to recognize. When one leaves home, meaningful relationships with one's family of origin are often severed. Visits are limited to those of “duty” or the “ritual” of holidays.



# Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Cutoff

- The cutoff process:
  - Poor differentiation leads to fusion of selfs, which produces anxiety which gets triggered around a particular issue. The intensity of feelings results in the emotionally-based cutoff reaction.

# Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Cutoff

- Cutoff leads to chronically poor relationships. Because the emotional systems of cut off people tend to be smaller, the relationships they do have are more intense.



# Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Cutoff

- What can be done to change a cutoff pattern?
  - Recognize that it exists and shows itself in many forms.
  - Working on the anxiety that underlies the pattern may be more fruitful than trying to change the cutoff pattern directly.
  - Work to bridge cutoffs in family of origin.

## Key Concept #3 Relationship Patterns: Conflict

- “The basic pattern in conflictual marriages is one in which neither gives in to the other or in which neither is capable of an adaptive role. . . . The relationship cycles through periods of intense closeness, conflict that provides a period of emotional distance, and making up, which starts another cycle of intense closeness.” Bowen (1976) This pattern is like emotional Ping Pong. during a time of crisis with neither of them able to take ownership for any of the problem they are experiencing.



## Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Conflict

- Their mutual accusation leads to conflict escalation and withdrawal from others to avoid embarrassment. Between conflicts, they may enjoy gratifying closeness.

## Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Conflict

- However, during intense conflict, there may be episodes of physical abuse or intimate partner violence. They don't enjoy the chronic pain of their relationship, and often seek help.

## Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Conflict

- Sometimes, the individuals may have grown up with conflict and use it as they saw it modeled. Other times, conflict can occur in response to current stressors.

## Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Conflict

- Like the other patterns of relating, conflict is merely a way of handling relationship anxiety. Sometimes, anxiety does not stem from the relationship, but from outside sources. Conflict becomes more intense at times of increased anxiety.

## Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Conflict

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  - Fight rather than switch, have fun, or do anything useful
  - Behave abusively

# Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Conflict

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- How is it possible to change a pattern of conflict?
  - Rules of fair fighting can help, but often partners are too emotionally embroiled to be rational enough to follow these rules.

# Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Conflict

- How is it possible to change a pattern of conflict?
  - Having each partner stop focusing on the other and focus on themselves would be a first step in solving the problem, but often they cannot. If one of the two conflicted parties could learn to remain calm and thoughtful in the face of the anxiety of the other, there would be no conflict, but how does one do that when the other person wants to fight?

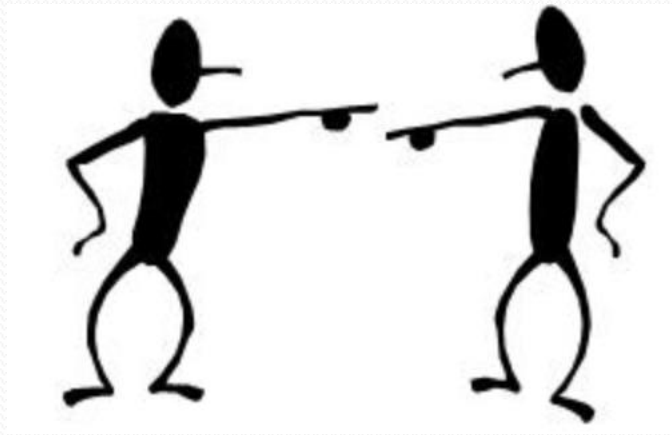
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- When emotions threaten to take over, the following principles can show the way out.



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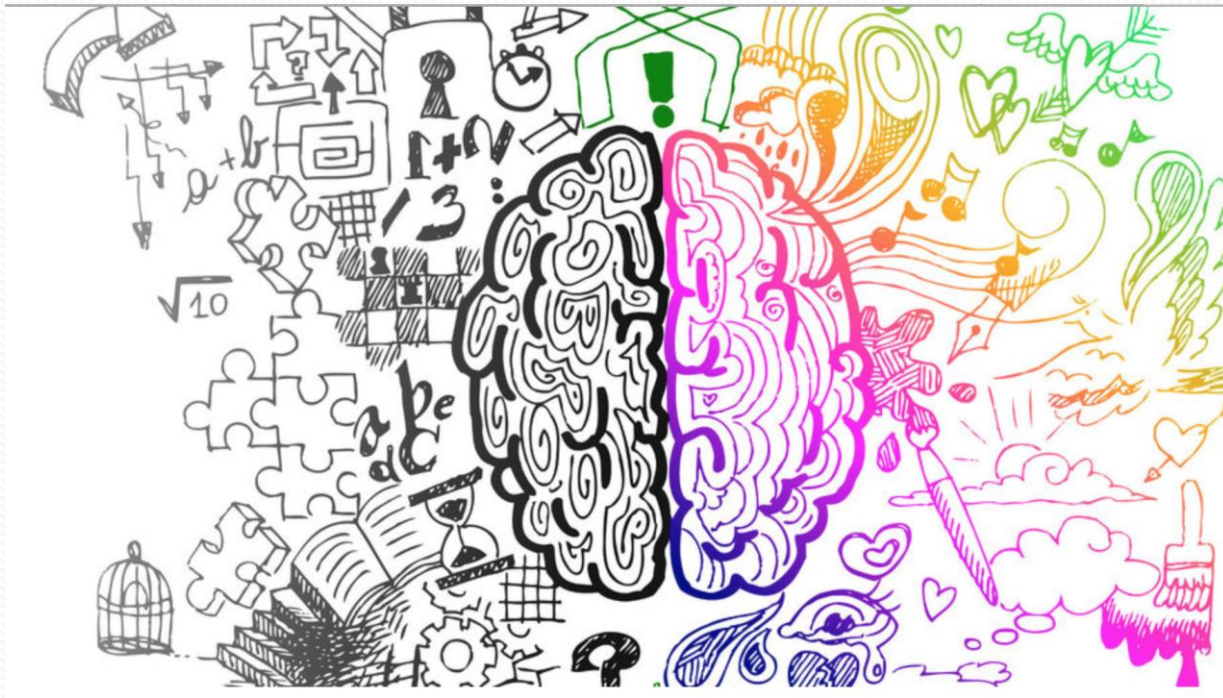


## Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Conflict

- Externalize the conflict: step out and watch it quietly enables one to begin observing one's part in the conflict.

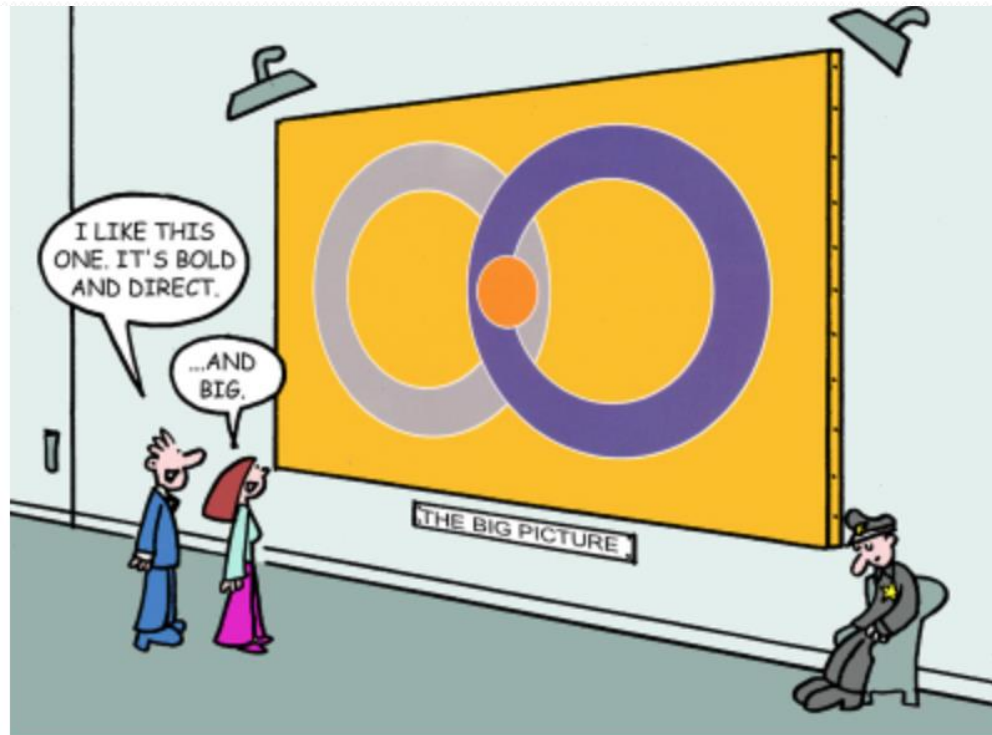
# Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Conflict

- “Thinking systems” may allow one to see this pattern as a repeat of a pattern from parents, and allow them to make different choices.



# Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Conflict

- Looking at the bigger picture to adopt a broader outlook on the immediate situation helps to remove one from relationship anxiety.



## Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Conflict

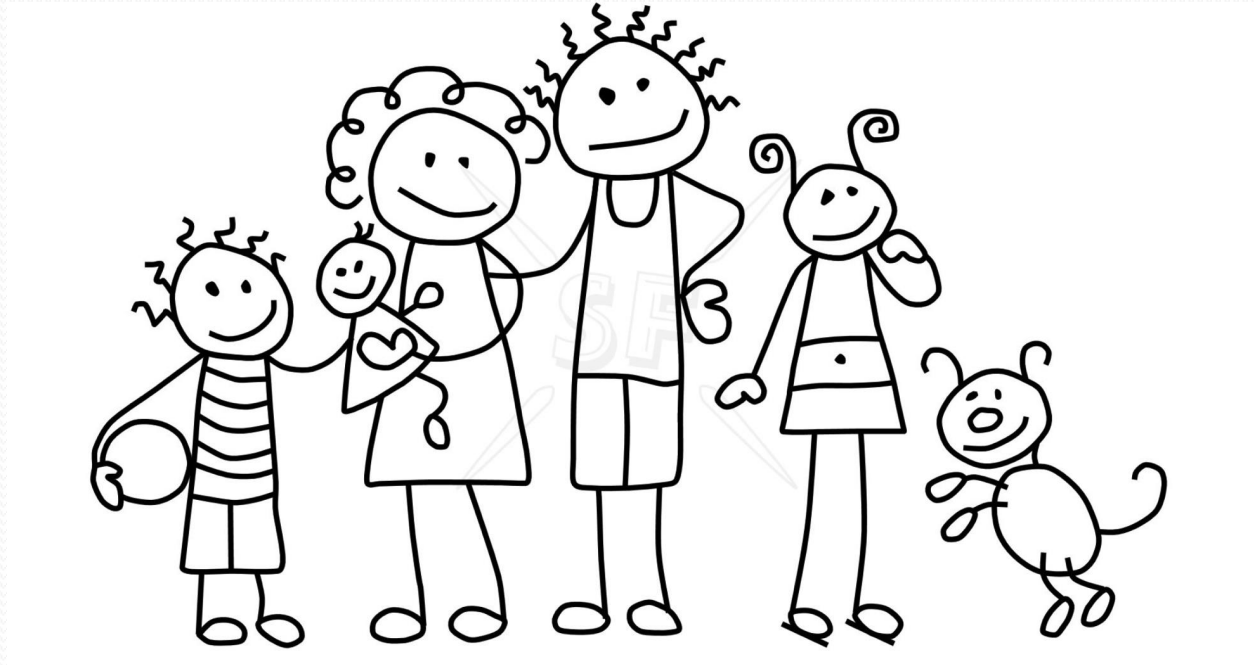
- Understanding the range of adaptability that exists in people can help one understand that he has a choice between feeling and thinking. He might see that he is more emotionally reactive than he would like, and to examine what a less reactive response might be.

## Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Conflict

- Working toward differentiation means finding new ways of thinking about oneself and of calming one's own anxiety. Differentiation of self has everything to do with improving one's own emotional functioning. It has nothing to do with changing the other.

# Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Conflict

- Bowen: Return home to family of origin.





## Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Conflict

- When a fight is brewing, what can be done about it? Just watching the process itself can be calming. Calm, thoughtful, careful watching can often teach one what is needed to make significant changes in one's own part of the process.

## Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Conflict

- Decreasing one's reactivity can be perceived as distancing oneself from the other person. Distance itself is an emotionally patterned response. Therefore, if one leaves the scene or stops talking, that creates emotional intensity.

# Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Conflict

- The goal is not to react as emotionally intensely but to stay in calm communication with the other person. Not always easy.



## Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Overfunctioning/Underfunctioning Reciprocity

- One person does quite well in life in contrast with the despair and dysfunction of the other
- Both agree that the “problem” rests solely in the dysfunctional one.

# Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Overfunctioning/Underfunctioning Reciprocity

- If overfunctioning is present, one might see
  - Advice-giving
  - Doing things for others that they could do for themselves
  - Worrying about other people
  - Feeling responsible for others, knowing what is best for them
  - Talking more than listening
  - Having goals for others that they don't have for themselves
  - Experiencing periodic, sudden "burn-outs"

# Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Overfunctioning/Underfunctioning Reciprocity

- In an underfunctioning state, one might see:
  - Asking for advice when what is needed is to think things out independently
  - Getting others to help when help really is not needed
  - Acting irresponsibly
  - Listening more than talking
  - Floating without goals much of the time
  - Setting goals but not following through with them
  - Becoming mentally or physically ill often
  - Tending to become addicted to substances

# Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Overfunctioning/Underfunctioning Reciprocity

- The overfunctioner barter in the relationship to make a self out of both of them. He/she takes on the functional self of the other, who loses self in the relationship.
- When the overfunctioner stops taking responsibility for the other's self, the underfunctioner will stop underfunctioning.
- Initially there might be protest because the system is being changed, but this usually settles out soon, and the partners can regroup at a higher level of functioning.
- Teaching oneself to feel equal in relationships can be a major task.

## Key Concept #4 Relationship Patterns: Overfunctioning/Underfunctioning Reciprocity

- To begin the work of changing an over/underfunctioning relationship, don't ask: "How can I change this troublesome partner or mine?" Instead ask: "What is my contribution to this relationship pattern?" One is responsible for oneself only.



# Key Concept #5 Portrait of An Extraordinary Relationship

# The Ideal – Separate, Equal, and Open

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- An ideal relationship would be described much the same as an ideal self because, in reality, an ideal relationship is an equal, open relationship of two ideal selves.
- In an ideal relationship, there would be a greater degree of individuality and less togetherness.

# The Ideal – Separate, Equal, and Open

- Although relationships may seem to fulfill the togetherness force, there is less need for fusion or togetherness at high levels because there is less undifferentiation. Therefore, individuality is more important to the success of the relationship.

# The Ideal – Separate, Equal, and Open

- Characteristics of highly differentiated selves:
  - The individuals are “in contact.” They are present with one another enough time and develop an understanding of personal meanings of each to the other. Neither speaks for the other but only for the self.

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  - Each takes responsibility for defining, interpreting, and communicating his or her own thoughts and positions to the other, but does not do so for the other.
  - Awareness also marks the ideal relationship, arising from increased differentiation. We grow in awareness of our own and subsequently the emotions of others. Awareness grows with time and experience. The emotional system becomes predictable.

# The Ideal – Separate, Equal, and Open

- Characteristics of highly differentiated selves:
  - Of all of the characteristics of an ideal relationship, perhaps the three most important are:
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  - Separateness, emotionally, of the partners,
  - Equality in their postures,
  - Openness in communication.

# The Ideal – Separate

- Partners in an ideal relationship
  - Lose no self into the relationship
  - Each person has a choice
  - Freely choose between thinking and feeling
  - Boundaries are present in relationship

# The Ideal – Equal

- Equality
  - Two persons at the same level of differentiation or emotional maturity are comfortable spending time with each other even in the overfunctioning – underfunctioning relationship because there is a borrowing and lending of functional self

# The Ideal – Equal

- An ideal relationship is built on the equality of the partners. In high-level relationships, equality does not have to be worked at, it is just there. Each accepts the other as not more or no less talented, responsible, or free than him or her self. Respect for the other is based on the equal posture. Each can and does freely do things for the other, divides labor or tasks of the relationship.

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- Difficulties with people perceiving themselves as equals occur independently of gender. While it is easy to blame another for the inequality, each partner is actually playing an indispensable part in keeping the pattern alive.

# The Ideal – Equal

- An ideal relationship is built on the equality of the partners.
- Difficulties with people perceiving themselves as equals occur independently of gender
- A relationship will not be satisfying if experienced as unequal.

# The Ideal – Open

In optimal communication, people are open to talk, and they must *talk about relevant matters*.



# The Ideal – Open

- Further characteristics of high level communication:
  - Thinking-based conversation
  - Creativity
  - Self definition
  - Meaningfulness

# Summary

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