

Family Therapy and Systemic Practice

INTRODUCTION

This text is a brief overview of basic facts about a therapeutic approach called family therapy and systemic practice. It is meant for anybody who is interested in this approach as a professional or a client/patient and also for policy makers, decision makers in health care delivery and representatives of public and private health insurance schemes looking to find out what this approach can offer.

WHAT IS FAMILY THERAPY AND SYSTEMIC PRACTICE?

Family therapy addresses the problems people present with in the context of their relationships with significant people in their lives and their social networks. It is a well-recognized psychotherapy approach primarily aimed at the family system as a social unit in contrast to other psychotherapy approaches such as psychodynamic or cognitive-behavioral therapy which focus on the individual. Family therapy and systemic practice is a heterogeneous field; there are different schools and models that share several principles and guiding assumptions. Some of the goals of family therapy might be for instance: improvement of family functioning on different levels, enhancement of mutual understanding and emotional support among family members, development of coping skills and problem-solving strategies in various life dilemmas and situations and so forth.

Traditionally family therapy has had a primary focus on interactions among family members, quality of family relationships, various aspects of family development and functioning and so forth. However, family therapy rests on so called systemic assumptions or contextual perspective which emphasise the role of wider systems, such as community, society and the culture to which the family belongs. In recent years family therapists have started to call themselves 'systemic therapists' as they pay more attention to the impact of wider systems and social contexts on people's lives.

The systemic perspective – which underpins the practice of most family therapists - views the problems of an individual in relation to the different contexts in which people live: i.e as a partner in a couple relationship, as a family member, a person with particular cultural and/or religious allegiances, while also taking into account socio-economic circumstances and political processes. Systemic practice regards 'context' as being of paramount significance for an individual's psychological development and emotional well-being.

A family therapy session usually lasts between 60-90 minutes; the intervals between sessions are from one to several weeks depending on the presented problems, needs of the family members, the stage of the treatment and other variables. Decisions over these matters are negotiated collaboratively with clients and any other involved professionals. Although it is hard to estimate and it differs widely, the average length of family therapy treatment ranges between 6 – 20 sessions.

Family therapists most often work with more than one family member in the room but individual sessions or meetings with parents separate from children for example are also offered when appropriate. Some models of family therapy include collaboration with a co-

therapist or a team. There are also times when systemic practitioners will intervene in the professional and/or social networks around families rather than focus specifically on the nuclear family unit. Both the length and the setting of family therapy result from a collaboration and a mutual agreement between a therapist and a family.

WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM FAMILY THERAPY AND/OR SYSTEMIC PRACTICE?

Family can be both a great source of support for people but also a source of distress, misunderstanding and pain. Therefore family therapy and systemic practice is important whenever the aim is to enhance the ability of family members to support each other. Enabling family members to use their resources more efficiently in a supportive way can be vital in helping members manage transitional stages of family development or stressful life events such as a serious illness or a death of a family member.

Generally speaking, any situation or a problem that affects relationships between family members and family functioning and its supportive role, can benefit from systemic family therapy. Similarly any problem of an individual that affects his/her life in relation to his/her relationships to family and wider contexts will benefit from a systemic approach. Involving others in an individual's family or social network in the treatment can help to avoid the pathologizing of that individual and also address the problem more effectively.

Family therapy can be useful in times of crisis and also with regard to long-standing problems. It also serves to prevent problems such as a behavioural difficulty, for example, deteriorating into delinquency or mental health breakdown. Some of the issues or situations at which a family could benefit from family therapy are listed below.

- Health problems, particularly chronic physical illnesses
- Psychosomatic problems
- Child and adolescent mental health
- Adult mental health
- Psychosexual difficulties
- Alcohol and other substance abuse
- Marital problems including separation and divorce issues
- Foster care, adoption and related issues
- Family life cycle and transitional stages of life issues
- Promoting parenting skills and family functioning
- School-related problems
- Work-related problems
- Traumatic experiences, loss and bereavement
- Disruption of family life due to social, political and religious conflicts

It should be noted that socially and economically disadvantaged families may in particular benefit from family therapy and systemic practice. In a number of European countries, such as Finland and United Kingdom for example, these approaches are available and well established within public services.

CURRENT EVIDENCE BASE

Family therapy (also known as systemic therapy) enables family members to express and explore difficult thoughts and emotions safely, to understand each other's experiences and views, appreciate each other's needs, build on family strengths and make useful changes in their relationships and their lives. However, are these statements supported with any evidence according to current mainstream scientific standards?

Since the 1990's there has been a steady increase in studies providing strong evidence base for family therapy in different indications. At present, research of different design and methodology provides substantial evidence for both the efficacy and the effectiveness of diverse family interventions. Several reviews also suggest that family therapy is not more costly, and sometimes even significantly less expensive than other treatments that do not usually include the family. It is the proven cost-effectiveness of family in some conditions that will be of interest to people responsible for public services organization or treatment programmes development in health care institutions. Some of the research findings show that including a family therapy in treatment significantly reduces costs of provided health care and cost of pharmacological treatment. There are a great deal of studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of family therapy, systemic intervention or family work in treatment of eating disorders, conduct problems, depression, addictions, schizophrenia and other problems in childhood or adolescence.

Although the level of efficacy and effectiveness of family therapy and family-based interventions differ according to research design and studied conditions, family therapy is currently established as an evidence-based psychotherapy approach. Some recent papers with this supportive evidence are listed at the end of this text among the references. Given the current state of the art in family therapy field, it is no surprise that in some European countries is family therapy recognised as an evidence-based approach by scientific bodies, for instance in the United Kingdom, Germany, Finland etc.

SUMMARY

Family therapy based on systemic perspective is a distinctive psychotherapy approach with a primary focus on family and other relationships of an individual. It is a well-researched approach with strong evidence of efficacy and effectiveness in a wide range of specific conditions. Provision of family therapy should be offered for the following reasons:

- Family-focused work is an important as means of preventing various problems that may become a serious burden for society in general.
- Family therapy is considered a highly effective approach in the prevention and treatment of various emotional and behavioral problems in childhood and adolescence.
- Family therapy can help family members to both use their own resources in providing support each other in various stressful situations including mental and physical illness.
- Properly trained family therapists and systemic consultants may use their skills in diverse contexts such as organizations and institutions, where they can foster team work and problem-solving. They can also participate in conflict resolutions and negotiation processes in social and political crises.
- A systemic perspective in its broadest sense can contribute to strengthening solidarity, tolerance, trust and collaboration, the cornerstones of a healthy society.

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