

Family Therapy

Family therapy is a healing and strengthening process used by two or more people who are part of a family and are experiencing difficulties that interfere with their functioning together as happy and fulfilled family members. In most cases, each member of a family contributes to the problems with which families present. For that reason, it is most often the case that all family members are involved in family therapy sessions.

Sometimes, however, the relational difficulties are limited to certain family members, but do not include all. In that event, sessions are held with certain family members but not all.

It is also the case that resolving issues between certain family members can uncover other issues involving the remaining family members. Consequently, I often meet with family members in various combinations at different points in time and later with the family as a whole to ensure that a healthy family system is in place.

It is my practice to invite all family members to the initial meeting(s). This allows me the opportunity to get to know each person and to observe the interactions between various family members. The goal of the initial meetings is to examine the family system to determine the nature of the problem(s) of the family as a whole and each family member's contribution. Once a "diagnosis" of the problem has been established, a decision is made regarding the involvement of various family members in the treatment process.

Weekly meetings are scheduled to address the problems that have been uncovered during the initial family evaluation and continue until either the problems have been resolved or family members believe that they have reached maximum therapeutic benefit from treatment.

The most common issues discussed in family therapy sessions include 1) a pattern of poor communication, 2) unresolved conflicts between family members, 3) a pattern of inconsistent need-meeting about which one or more family members complain, and 4) behavior on the part of one or more family members that is considered intolerable.

Different family members perceive family problems in different ways. It is important that each family member has an opportunity to inform other members in the family of how he or she views the problems, what needs to change to resolve them, and how to involve family members to reach resolution.

An effort is made in therapy sessions to unite the family and create a therapeutic environment within which the family problem(s) can be addressed and ultimately

resolved. This means looking at what each family member needs psychologically to be fully invested in helping the family as a whole to improve communication between family members, modify unhealthy interactions, and integrate positive changes into the family system as a whole.

Family therapy can also be of benefit to people who are in the process of a divorce or who have completed the divorce except emotionally. In this instance, it is generally the case that a family therapist will meet with family members in various combinations with the goal of maintaining stability for the family as adjustments are made in the direction of a new family equilibrium.

This may involve conjoint meetings with the parents to talk about issues related to the children, meetings with one parent and the children to talk about the children's feelings and needs, and/or meetings with the children without the parents to strengthen the children's relationships with each other and provide them a support system within the family that might not exist otherwise.

Family therapy in the case of a divorce can also help with the development of a healthy and effective co-parenting relationship between the parents during the divorce process and thereafter. This is extremely important for children since all research studies in the area of parental conflict and its impact on them shows that it is those children who have been freed from such exposure who do the best once the divorce has been completed - emotionally, academically, relationally, developmentally, and behaviorally.

Finally, family therapy at the time of a divorce can help with the informal development of a parenting plan for the children and the resolution of parental disputes when problems arise with parenting time and other child-related matters.

Family therapy is not for everyone. This is particularly true when significant domestic violence has pervaded the family system, when one or both parties are addicted to substances, and when one or more members of the family isn't motivated to do the work of change.

Family is not an easy process. It requires a great deal of time and effort to make significant changes in a family system, particularly if the unhealthy patterns in family relationships are long-standing. Nonetheless, the vast majority of people who engage in family therapy state that they have found the process helpful.