You Can Fix Your Family

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About the Author

Charles Fishman, MD has been practicing general, child and adolescent psychiatry for over three decades. He has experience with family systems and therapy techniques and has included his knowledge in numerous books and articles for both academic and general audiences.

He has written five previous books:

- Family Therapy Techniques
- Treating Troubled Adolescents
- Evolving Models of Family Change
- Intensive Structural Therapy
- Enduring Change in Eating Disorders: Lessons from Long Term Follow-ups

Fishman has presented more than 200 lectures on a range of family therapy models and their application to treatment.

He is currently the clinical director at Youthlink Family Trust and NZ Eating Disorder Specialists, Ltd., both located in New Zealand.

More information about this book and ordering information at: http://youcanfixyourfamily.com

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Introduction

"We unravel the mysteries of the galaxies but not our own families"
Charles Handy, 'The Empty Raincoat', (1994)

Candice, 15 years old, rail thin with plaintive pale blue eyes, lies in the hospital bed just hours after a serious suicide attempt. She took all of the pills that she could find—60 in total. Even though I met her decades ago when I was a young psychiatric fellow at the Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic, I can still see her face in my mind.

Candice had been hospitalized the night before at the Children's Hospital in Philadelphia. When we met, she spoke angrily: "It just shouldn't be this way; I shouldn't be so hopeless and my parents shouldn't be such a worry for me." As I sat with her, I thought about the elaborate array of clinical teachings and teaching models that psychiatric trainees like me were confronted with. Each earnest senior clinician believed that his way was the right way. I could spend years discussing her difficulties, her feelings, and her thoughts, but I knew that I needed to address more than Candice's immediate situation. I needed to understand her family and the social system in which she was embedded. It was only common sense.

Candice's parents had separated six months prior to her suicide attempt. They were furious at each other. They had daily telephone battles, each castigating the other and trying to bring Candice to their side of the battle by complaining to her and asking for her opinion and support. She reported, "Hell, I am only 15 years old. What do I know? I feel guilty all the time—I know that I should do more, but I just don't know what."

Candice and the other children and their families that you will meet in the following pages are the reasons that I have focused for decades on family therapy. I have wanted to understand the forces that cause children and their family's great distress.

This is not just one more self-help book that gives you tips on minor growing-up problems within your family; it is a work based on three of the great conceptual theories of the last century: General Systems Theory, Structuralism, and Developmental Theory. Each of these theories has profoundly influenced our understanding of nature, literature, art psychology, and business to name just a few of the affected areas. This book will give you the opportunity to benefit from these theories. It will better enable you to understand, deal with, and even predict family developmental issues.

For instance, General Systems theory tells us everything is connected. Candice's paternal grandfather had died the year before. Even though this is an expected developmental passage, her father went into a profound depression and began asking himself, "Is this all there is to life?" He began to feel that his marriage was not enough for him when he was going to "die so soon," even though he was only 45 years old. He got a girlfriend, thus beginning the downward spiral within his

marriage that had profoundly unstabilizing effects on all the whole family, even though Candice was the one who took the overdose.

I revere families. I have worked for many decades treating families and supervising clinicians. In my capacity as a medical doctor specializing in child, adolescent, and adult psychiatry, I have seen the tremendous effectiveness that families can have in helping their children, adolescents, and their other family members overcome their problems.

More than a perspective for understanding, this book offers you tools that can change your problematic family dynamics. Join me as we explore some powerful, life-enhancing ideas that you and your family can embrace.

Chapter One

Three Important Theories For Understanding Your Family

As a consulting psychiatrist, I often see well-meaning parents struggling to raise their families wisely and despairing because they feel they are failing. In the case of Helen, a fourteen-year-old girl who kept running away from home, I met with her parents who were distraught and at each other's throats. They had tried to find out what was bothering their daughter by talking to her teachers and even to one of her friends but still didn't understand what was wrong. At one point, a community psychiatrist admitted Helen for a short stay in a psychiatric hospital but to no avail. Mom and Dad felt hopeless and angry. They knew that when Helen was younger, the family had been close-knit, eating meals together with warmth and laughter, but now all they saw was that their much-loved daughter was headed for serious trouble.

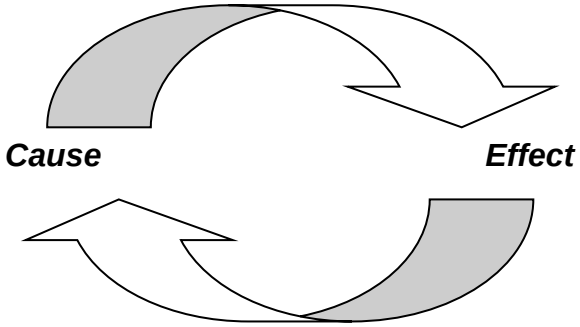
When a family is a well-functioning unit, the kids have an immeasurably better chance of thriving during childhood and even as adults. It is the job of every family to launch healthy, autonomous, happy, and productive children and, thus positively influence future generations. In a perfect world, that's what the family does. But in our less-than-ideal world, some families do not come close. The breakdown of the family is the subject of endless books and newspaper articles. Alienated teens, overscheduled parents, poor communication, problems with drugs and alcohol, and divorce—the heartache among families is rampant.

So how do you cope with difficult family situations, such as the one Helen and her parents faced? When your family is the poignant, ever-beckoning foundation of your personal universe, it is worth knowing more about three very important ideas: *systemic social context, developmental stages*, *and structure*. The ideas are not new, but they are extremely powerful. They date back, in mental health terms, to the creative, yet tumultuous decade of the 1960s when the world was opened up to new concerns and sensibilities. Although these words may seem abstract and difficult to understand, they can be encapsulated into easily understood concepts that you can then apply to better understanding your family and how it functions.

Systemic Social Context

Every individual is embedded in a *systemic social context*, a living and evolving system. The inclusion of an individual's social context in understanding and changing that individual's behavior is, in fact, one of the great contributions to psychology and psychiatry in the last 60 years. By recognizing your social situation and circumstances, you see your *context* which is crucial to understanding and transforming your family.

To put it another way, think of everything as being connected. Cause and effect in families is circuitous—every cause becomes an effect that in turn becomes a cause. This simple yet profound idea, which is part of General Systems Theory in psychology, means that you are always being influenced and influencing others and that no one can fully understand you without understanding the context in which you are embedded. Therefore, *social context* is an immensely positive and potent lens with which to view problems. For example, think about meeting a new person at a dinner party. They are withdrawn and seem somewhat grumpy. Based on this, you could conclude that they are not a very nice or sociable person. However, if you looked at their context, and understood that they had just suffered a death in their family, and had had a recent fight with their spouse, you might understand them better, and reach a different conclusion about them.



Developmental stages

All of us go through developmental stages in life. We move from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. But there are also *family developmental stages* that include the birth of your first child, developing your career, the loss of your parents, retiring, and facing your own mortality. Developmental passages are profoundly influential on families. The stress of entering or leaving any developmental stage can be a tsunami in any individual's and family's life. Yet the impact of developmental stages is greatly underestimated and misunderstood.

One reality of family life is that kids and adults change simultaneously, but not at the same rate. The family needs to evolve to accommodate the inevitable developmental changes within it. The child graduates from high school, the grandmother dies, the husband retires—these developmental shifts may create stress on the family. Therefore, it makes great sense that if you want to understand

people, then, in addition to appreciating their social context, you also need to understand the developmental passages that they and their family are going through.

Structure

Structure is used to describe regular patterns in biology and in cultures and families. When you learn how to view your family as a system, or as a structure, you will indeed be empowered. Identifying and understanding the structures or patterns within your family will give you a powerful tool to help your family become more functional, harmonious, and, indeed, happier.

For example, I recently met the mother and sister of a sixteen-year-old girl who had an eating disorder. Melissa refused to come to therapy, so I worked with these other family members. For the last two years, the mother had slowly been giving up her own life to care for her daughter, ensuring that she was safe and not lonely. I encouraged the mother to take a step back from her daughter and to move on with her own life. While she should ensure her child's safety, she should not be giving up her own life to be by her child's side constantly. This behavior 'rewarded' Melissa's behavior and did not help her to change. One month after seeing me, the mother came back and reported to me that Melissa had started trying harder at school and had achieved some good results. Most surprisingly, when her older sister had asked Melissa if she wanted to go to a school dance, Melissa had agreed and had been the life of the party.

As you will see in the next few pages, the problem in this system was that all of the family members were too close. In particular, the close proximity between Melissa and her mother prevented change. While there was still more work to be done, I see this as a graphic example of eliciting positive change through changing the family structure.

A New Way of Thinking

Being aware of context, developmental stages, and family structure, will allow you to see the solutions to family problems more easily and with greater clarity. You will no longer have to battle to get Jimmy to go to school or fight with your husband over Nancy's report card. Your kids won't "manipulate" you or pit you and your partner against each other. Once you understand how to use "systems thinking" (our umbrella word for *systemic social context, developmental stages*, *and structure*), and you read the examples of families and their problems in this book, you will see how to strengthen your family and *yourself*. There is a caveat, however. This book is not meant to replace professional help, so if you or your family feels that that outside help is necessary, or if you perceive your problems are severe, please seek it.

Applying Theory to Real Life

According to our Systems Theory, we are all connected—we are not only our brothers' and sisters' keepers, but everything they do affects us and vice versa. Therefore, if mom and dad disagree about how to raise their daughter and give her conflicting instructions, the system is disorganized. The daughter is in a no-win situation. However, if the parents are united in the way they relate to the daughter and she knows what is expected of her, the system is organized. Consider the following example of Bonnie.

Bonnie was a 16-year-old girl who had anorexia. Her parents had taken her to a psychiatrist for individual therapy. Her psychiatrist dealt with Bonnie's fear of being fat, her desire not to grow up, and her fear of becoming pregnant. The psychiatrist used an individual therapy model that saw the problem in Bonnie's head. But, even with treatment, Bonnie continued to lose weight, so Mom and Dad took her to a counselor.

The counselor believed that her problems were due to poor communication, so she tried to help Bonnie communicate with her parents better. If Bonnie could say things that she previously wasn't saying, the counselor thought, the anorexia would be cured. However, despite the attempts to help Bonnie better communicate with her parents, she continued to lose weight.

By the time Bonnie's parents consulted with me, they were desperate to help their daughter. I viewed the family as a structure—a unit of relationships—and saw their problems arising from those relationships. I asked if there were any conflicts within the family. As a result, I learned that Bonnie's mother was angry with Bonnie's father for being away from home so much and that Bonnie's father accused his wife of not respecting him. By unveiling these issues between Bonnie's parents, I could see that her battle with anorexia was probably connected to the conflicts in her family system. By addressing these family struggles, I knew the relationship patterns in the family would automatically change.

Because Bonnie's loyalties were caught between her parents, her anorexia diffused their conflict by giving them something else to focus on. Ironically, because their problems were bypassed as a result of their focus on their daughter, Bonnie's parents were also disadvantaged; they couldn't sit down and hash out their issues because they were so focused on their daughter's illness.

Through therapeutic intervention, her parents were better able to resolve their problems, and Bonnie, therefore, was liberated from her conflicted loyalties. The anorexia ceased and a 20-year follow-up interview determined that it had not returned even though she had no other treatment.

Remember Helen from the previous chapter? Helen ran away from home continuously. Each time she came back, her father was so relieved to see her that he immediately took her shopping and bought her a gift. Helen's mother suggested, somewhat sarcastically, "Hey Dumbo, maybe if our daughter gets pregnant you could buy her a Ferrari." Clearly, Helen's parents disagreed sharply on how to

respond to their daughter's behavior, and Helen, for her part, was not getting the feedback she needed that would give her the incentive to stop running away. Mom and Dad needed help to see that their daughter needed a single, consistent message. Once they maintained a consistent response, Helen's behavior changed. Dramatic changes occur when a family system is realigned.

Radical Change

It's important to understand that adopting this new perspective is no small matter. I am talking about a radically new way of looking at yourself and your relationships. Most of us see ourselves as individuals, as the single unit of our own lives. We see that we have problems, but we think of those problems as our own. When someone is mentally ill, we think that the problem is squarely located in his or her psyche. It's a common way of thinking.

If you shift to a "systems-thinking" perspective, where, as I said earlier, everything is connected, suddenly many common experiences take on a new clarity. For example, if you went away to the University, you may have experienced the change that happens when you returned home for vacation. You arrived, feeling adult and responsible and the captain of your ship, yet, within 24 hours of coming home, you felt as though you were 16 again. Not only did your parents treat you that way, but you also found yourself behaving that way! Your voice was softer, and you became less certain of yourself.

This example provides an important lesson about the power of context: who you are with your family is different than who you are at work, which is different than who you are with your friends on a Saturday night. While no one can deny the influence of personal history, biology, and early experience, there is a great plasticity in people—a tremendous capacity to change according to changes in our social context. This is a fundamental understanding for creating change that leads to an optimistic way of seeing people.

Many years ago, I published a paper with Dr. Salvador Minuchin, one of the founders of family therapy, where we emphasized the concept of the multifaceted self. We used the metaphor of a diamond's multiple facets to illustrate the individual's many selves. Just as light shines on different facets of a diamond, social context brings out different facets of each individual. Sometimes the immediate social context calls forth problematic facets of the person's self; however, when the context changes, more functional facets of the self can be expressed. The beauty of this thinking is that problems are not indelibly etched into who you are. Indeed, all of us have great ability to change with even slight modifications in our context. This is well documented, even in the psychiatric disorder schizophrenia. Therefore, when the family is taught how to work with the stressors in the family, the ability to control its schizophrenia is greatly increased.

Families are systems at work. I am advocating enhanced opportunities to decrease stress by seeing individuals within the context of their systems, rather than in isolation. My approach is not about blaming families, but about understanding problems within their context, which usually includes the family.

William

William was 19 when he was referred to a colleague of mine. He'd known him growing up, as their boys were on the same baseball team. William was a golden boy; he was handsome and good at school, and he was an outstanding athlete, especially as a golfer. With his father as his coach, he excelled at youth golf competitions throughout the state. The father told the therapist, "William has gotten into drugs," but there was another shock to come: this prosperous family supported their comfortable lifestyle by selling marijuana. William had gotten into petty crime to support his drug habit. He forged checks from the neighbor family that had given him respite when things got too tense at home. A drug test evidenced that he was taking Speed. The therapist urged William's father to call the police and learn of the consequences for William's actions. Confronted, William shouted, "Dad, if you call the cops, I'll tell them what you do for a living!" Consequently, the intergenerational amorality came home to roost.

In this family, the launch into adulthood was fraught. This family, with their illegality, had provided a model for their son that was poorly suited for a life in the real world. We've all known contemporaries who chose the drug world, which is not what any parent would want for their child. The offspring is only as healthy as the family unit, and the parental unit must be well–functioning. Fortunately, William's parents did hold firm; they confronted their son and held him (and themselves) to the consequences.

Brad

Brad was a young man from a wealthy family who, at every opportunity whenever Brad drove while intoxicated or cheated on a university exam, was always there to rescue him. As an adult, Brad and his girlfriend lived in his parents' house. His father had given him a phony "make-work" job in his office, saying he was afraid that if he didn't do so, his son might turn to selling drugs.

Brad's father and his mother had an embattled relationship. Having separated many times over the decades, they were living together again. They were certainly split on how to handle Brad. His dad said, "We must do everything we can for him, or he may commit suicide like my mother did." However, Brad's mother contended, "You've got to let this boy fend for himself; otherwise, he'll never grow up!"

Of course, for Brad, this level of over-protectiveness from his family was a lost opportunity. He wasn't obliged to acknowledge any personal responsibility that would

have forced him to reach down into himself to become a more competent being. He was tethered to his family and vice versa. This situation left Brad full of self-doubt in his everyday life. He accepted his father's view of him, and his lack of life experience did not prove otherwise. Brad did not believe that he could do more or that he could succeed in life.

Brad had been disadvantaged and was a "vulnerable child". His parents felt guilty because of their tumultuous marriage and the angst it had placed upon their son. As a result, they bent over backwards for him. Brad was vulnerable in the sense that he was treated as special; he was protected from the reasonable consequences for his misbehaviors. Vulnerable children are those kids who may have been very sick at one time or are from families who have experienced tragic events, such as suicide. When parents feel sorry for their child, they can over-accommodate and overprotect.

Finding Solutions

I often observe, especially when working with very troubled young people, that the level of their functionality is directly correlates to the level of the family's functionality. The better the family does in terms of their relationships and handling conflict, the better young people do. For example, when adolescents have natural developmental needs, such as going out with their friends and having their own privacy, and the family is rigid and does not respond flexibly in appropriately modifying their rules to meet these new developmental stages, problems often emerge. While it may be difficult to see the social systems, developmental changes, and structures/patterns affecting you and your family, as you read the following chapters, you will begin to see how your family is similar to the families profiled in this book and how you can learn from the solutions of these families and apply them to your own.

Looking to the Future

Each generation sets the stage for the next. Certainly, innumerable events arise in your own lifetime, but the more effective you are in setting the stage for the next generation, the greater the odds that your children's families will be better functioning. Customs and technology may transform unrecognizably in the future, but the dynamics between people, which are hard wired over millions of years of evolution, still revolve around the need to be loved. Similarly, the pain of being excluded won't change. There will always be the need to have functional structures so children get appropriate direction and so that couples trust each other. There will always be the challenge of passing through inevitable developmental stages for individuals and families, cradled by their influential context. All will endure as they

have forever. Let these ideas help you and help your family and the families of your families for generations to come.

Key Points:

- As John Lock wrote: “No man is an island”—we are profoundly influenced by our social context.
- Remember, “To everything there is a season”. We and our families are always developing.
- Living systems require organization. Structure is a valuable perspective to understand a family system.
- We are all multifaceted. Changes in context can transform anyone.
- Be aware of the vulnerable child syndrome – being treated specially due to sickness or other ‘special’ quality. This doesn’t help the child. Ensure that there are appropriate consequences for behavior.

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