Systemic Approaches: Family Therapy Key Terms and Essential Concepts

**Nuclear and extended family:** Nuclear family is the basic group consisting of parents and children. Extended family branches out to include grandparents and other close relatives or friends that have consistent or powerful impact on the basic group.

**Family life cycle:** Family relationships naturally and inevitably change as the nature of the system changes with births, deaths, children growing up, children leaving, job changes, retirements, and so on. Young children who are dependent on parents eventually grow up and establish independence. Marriages change as career efforts dominate for periods of time and gradually recede in priority. Separateness and connectedness may be helpful and harmful depending on the context of the family’s place in the cycle.

**Family of origin:** In an intergenerational view of an extended family, the family of origin is the unit where a particular person is born.

**Homeostasis:** A system, or a family, operates in ways that will move toward an equilibrium of all of the factors that influence the group. Needed adaptations are made in a fluidity that allows for change. A basic stability is retained so the system can continue functioning. Homeostasis is disrupted by family conflict and tension within the system, and the system will create mechanisms to keep the group together.

**Child goals:** Dreikurs, an Adlerian author, proposed four purposes of children’s behavior: getting attention, power, revenge, and withdrawal. Bitter described three more goals: getting, self-elevation, and avoidance of tasks. Children in counseling will show a verbal or nonverbal recognition of these goals as reasons for their behavior or misbehavior. Parents and counselors can teach children more effective means to meet their psychological needs.

**Symptom functionality:** A major tenet of family systems thinking is the concept that the symptoms shown by a family member serve a purpose to maintain the group’s interaction and cohesion. When the family focuses on one member’s difficulties, other anxieties in the system are ignored or reduced.

**Parentification:** A family dynamic that requires a child to take on the role of a parent may mean the child becomes one spouse’s confidant, or one sibling becomes the caretaker for other children, or the child does adult responsibilities such as cooking for the entire family or bill paying. In essence the child is no longer treated as a child and the level of responsibility impairs the child’s experiencing childhood activities. Depending on the degree of parentification, natural psychological development can be impeded and interactions between family members can be affected.
**Problem-determined system:** When family dynamics revolve around an identified problem, solving the problem could disrupt the family's sense of belonging. Discussing the problem is a family activity, rarely including outsiders, so the conversation increases cohesion among members only. A problem-determined system includes everyone who is concerned with the problem, including nonfamily members and sometimes excluding a family member.

**Identified patient:** The family member who demonstrates problems that upset the family is usually named as "the problem" to the counselor. From a family system perspective, the identified patient could be acting in ways that serve a family function. For example, a child's difficulties could be a means to force the parents to cooperate and draw attention away from marital difficulties.

**Scapegoat:** The behavior of a person in the family is blamed for the system's difficulties. Scapegoats can be acting inappropriately according to societal expectations or not. The "misbehavior" could be violations of unreasonable family rules.

**Systemic:** This approach to family therapy is characterized by multigenerational concepts, genograms, and the family projection process. The systemic approach describes how families manage chronic systemwide anxiety and the effects of differentiation and fusion. Interaction patterns are explained, particularly how three members form a triangle of communication to defuse the conflict between two members.

**Differentiation:** The person who has the ability to separate emotions from rational thought is able to distinguish between automatic feelings stemming from current and historical systemic influences. Differentiation as to internal workings within the person allows the person to separate his or her own identity and assessment of situations from the group's.

**Fusion:** When individuals do not distinguish between thoughts and emotions, they react according to emotional patterns of alignments and unconscious acting out of historical experiences. Unhealthy fusion patterns within families create rigid, dysfunctional boundaries closed to outside influences. Passing down low differentiation from one generation to the next can develop into mental health difficulties characterized by fusion, such as schizophrenia, where the person cannot effectively discern reality from inner projections.

**Triangle, triangulation:** A specific type of coalition is a subgroup of three people, where two of the people are in conflict and a third person relieves some of the tension between the two. Such an arrangement can be positive with the relief provided; but at other times and if the pattern is maintained over time, communication becomes triangulated—an unhealthy dynamic. When direct communication between the two people in conflict is thwarted, suspicions or other negative emotions are increased and the system's functioning becomes rigid, and
unable to make necessary adaptations to changes to the family life cycle.

**Pseudoselves:** When a person's identity is designed to conform to group norms whether or not the social expectations have a rational basis, the person is seeking only to belong. Such an identity is labeled as an example of fusion where emotionality overtakes thoughtful considerations.

**Family projection process:** Family members share an emotional common ground and difficulties with one member, or with a subgroup, are felt by all members. Likewise difficulties in the system's structure create problems for individuals. An individual person's concerns may be reflecting problems related to the system as a whole or with any part of the group. Problems are projected onto individuals and onto the system.

**Chronic anxiety:** A general fear that has no specific object, or has so many objects that it reoccurs consistently, affects a person's ability to function. In family systems approaches, anxiety can be a characteristic of the group as a whole. Methods to stabilize the family dynamics control systemwide anxiety, and when the tension is continually repetitive, the controlling mechanisms are built into the patterns of interactions.

**Multigenerational transmission process:** Some patterns of past generations are carried into the next generation's families through conscious and unconscious processes. Each adult who carries responsibility for the functioning of a family has experienced the effects of previous modeling by older family members. Many attitudes such as time orientation, spending patterns, parental disciplining and teaching of children, values, and behavioral standards are transmitted from one generation to the next. Cultural influences are embedded within the expectations that have been developed throughout family history.

**Genogram:** A diagram using boxes (for men) and circles (for women) and other symbols depicts family members across generations. Ages and sex are noted. Themes, values, disorders like alcoholism, or occupations may be noted to show influences across time.

**Structural:** This approach to family therapy describes the system's set of rules—explicit and implicit. The boundaries between the family and outside influences, as well as subsystems and coalitions, create the basic group structure. Also, the interactions between members are described on a continuum from too close to too distant.

**Rules:** Systems, like families, develop expectations for members to follow to maintain the functioning and homeostasis of the group. Communication patterns, appropriateness of activities, the power to make decisions in different areas, and so
forth are understood and maintained by individual members to create a stable atmosphere.

**Subsystems:** Within the larger group, smaller groups support the interests of their members. Inter-actions between subgroups form patterns that are a part of the complexity of the system as a whole.

**Coalition:** Alignments of some portion of a family create coalitions or subsystems. The children are often a coalition divided from the parents who are another subgroup. Within the subsystems there may be further coalitions as in sibling groupings. Sometimes an ad hoc coalition forms for a specific short-term goal.

**Boundaries:** The psychological division between people, or between a system and outside influ-ences, creates the degree of separation needed for individual identities or distinct systems.

**Closed systems:** A family or another group that is impervious, or resistant to, outside information or influences is labeled as closed. An open system allows interactions and influences from the outside and with other systems. Closed systems are less adaptable and open systems more able to change. Families with secrets such as home violence and alcoholism are likely to be closed systems.

**Permeable and Impermeable:** Boundaries can be permeable, allowing for connections between people and opening up to outside stimulation. Boundaries can also be impermeable, forbid-ding human contact and staying closed to outside pressures.

**Disengagement:** On a genogram too much distance between family members is indicated by two parallel lines with a slash across the lines. The symbol indicates that the people are not engaged emotionally and may communicate infrequently.

**Emotional cutoff:** As a simile for disengagement, people are emotionally cut off from each other when they are separated without emotional exchanges. With no feeling connection to other family members, emotional cutoff allows the person to figuratively run away.

**Enmeshment:** When family members, or people in relationships, are so close emotionally that it is difficult for them to separate their individual thoughts and feelings, distinct identities are not fully maintained. The blending of feelings and identities is labeled *enmeshment.* Family system approaches define enmeshment as too much closeness and indicate the unhealthy pattern by three parallel lines on a genogram.

**Strategic:** An approach to family therapy where therapists are known for tactical interventions that disarm clients into changing their perceptions. Clever techniques include circular causality, paradoxical intention, the miracle question, and
reframing. Therapist directives are designed to target particular attitudes and behaviors without necessarily explaining the purpose to clients.

**Circular causality:** A change in any part of a system affects all other parts of the system. In families, one individual’s changing will affect all the others and all the interacting subsystems.

**Circular questioning:** The counselor asks the same question to each and every member of the family, bringing out the circular causality in the system and helping people realize the interrelatedness of their emotional lives.

**Miracle question:** Clients are asked how their lives would be different if a miracle occurred and their problems were solved. Such a technique induces a new mind-set in that clients’ answers create a vision of living without the difficulties that often dominate their views.

**Cognitive restructuring:** The counselor reinterprets the client’s thinking patterns or supports a more positive view of a situation. With a new structure, the family or individual client may be able to gain a new way of perceiving even though the basic facts of an event are not changed. However, the implications of the situation are changed.

**Reframing:** The counselor attaches a new frame on the meaning given to particular situations or interactions. Similar to cognitive restructuring but usually used for more specific verbal restructing, a word or phrase is changed.

**Intellectualization:** Although intellectual functioning is held to be a major coping skill to manage emotions and stress, intellectualizations are verbal defenses to hide feelings or to justify bad behavior.

**Paradoxical intervention:** As with individual clients, the counselor may ask the family to exaggerate a symptom with the hidden agenda to demonstrate that doing the system deliberately gives the client control. Also exaggerating the symptom brings new perspectives for clients who may discover the symptom does not bring the results expected.

**Experiential:** Another family system approach is noted for its use of techniques that are designed to create evocative emotional experiences, rather than simply talking about issues. Experi-ential family counselors join in family experiences, becoming participants in the family interactions. This approach emphasizes the need for families to be aware of current here-and-now emotions and the unhealthy effects of alienation and emotional deadness. Therapy is designed to create congruent communication and growth experiences.

**Congruent communication:** When a person’s verbal content matches the nonverbal presentation of the message, the communication is said to be *congruent.*
In contrast, when a person’s words say one thing, but the emotional tone or body language relays a different message, the communication does not match, or is incongruent. In families, incongruent communication confuses interactions and/or lets a member conform just enough to not be too disruptive.

**Emotional deadness:** When a family rarely, if ever, expresses emotion and lacks spontaneity, the lack of animation is striking, without a sense of aliveness. Some families may be typically emotionally responsive but demonstrate emotional deadness around one issue or topic.

**Reprocessing:** Experiential family therapists encourage family members to become aware of deep underlying feelings and for all family members to recognize the powerfully felt emotions faced by others in the group. By empathically noting the full emotions of each family member, people gain a sense of the full experience of themselves and others. Reprocessing assumes that experience has been processed in an incomplete or flawed way the first time or habitually.

**Primary and secondary emotions:** Surface emotions easily shown to others are considered secondary feelings with primary emotions defined as deeper, underlying feelings. Experiential therapies are designed to uncover deeper feelings and to encourage family members to understand one another’s primary emotion.

**Parts party:** An experiential technique also used in Gestalt therapy where one family member directs the others to enact parts of the director’s self. Everyone is able to experience the focus person’s issues.

**Narrative:** The stories that families tell about common experiences of the members or about previous generations communicate meanings that characterize the group. Client narratives attach meaning and values to plots and characterizations. Therapists from this approach encourage storytelling to externalize the influences on clients, making the meanings explicit. Therapeutic letters may be assigned. Or, clients may be asked to note occasions when problems seem to disappear. Reflecting teams may observe family sessions and share their thoughts with clients. Counselors may also suggest new meanings for client problems, encouraging new perceptions.

**Externalization:** A well-known technique of narrative therapy where problems are labeled and given personal characteristics. So the "crappy attitude" invading a family suggests that the people have other attributes that are not encompassed by a labeled problem. The external term can be handled with new enthusiasm even if change was resisted in the past.

**Social constructionist:** The concept that people define meanings based on family patterns or stories suggests that motivating values are socially learned. The social constructions are held internally by individuals and may be unconscious. Individuals may try to force situations to conform to internal views. The underlying
connotations of narratives or the applicability of stories to new situations can be reanalyzed by individuals or families in therapy to create change.

**Reflecting team:** For some systems counseling, the counselor and clients are observed by other therapists behind a screen. At some point in the counseling session, the reflecting team discusses what has occurred in the session and the clients gain multiple perspectives.

**Unique outcome:** Clients are asked to describe the times when they were able to react differently than the typical times when problematic reactions occur. Such a description offers hope that difficulties are not unsolvable and that the client does have the capacity to behave differently.

**Neutrality:** Some schools of thought expect the counselor to remain neutral in relating to members of the family, suggesting that alignments with any one member or subgroup harm objectivity. The counselor’s stance is one of curiosity, maintaining communication and understanding, but not becoming a family participant. Interventions may induce change in the system by introducing something new.

**Joining:** When the counselor enters the family system by participating in the family interactions and conforming to the family rules, the therapist is said to be joining. Such participation allows the counselor to assess the dynamics and determine what changes and interventions are needed.

**First-order and second-order change:** When families make a change that reduces conflict, or anxiety, it is called a first-order change. When change entails a deeper transformation that alters the actual structure of the system permanently, it is called a second-order change.

**Accommodation:** The counselor adapts her use of specific language, phrases, and emotional tone to the style of the client or the family. Accommodation is the means for the counselor to insert herself into the family system. This is called joining.

**Curiosity:** Bowen’s style of family therapy includes a neutral stance where the counselor observes the family as a curious onlooker who wonders how the different interactional patterns work to keep the system operating. Curious inquiries may influence the system to reflect on itself and open the door to new patterns.

**Family drawing technique:** A visual technique to show how the client views the family. A kinetic drawing specifically shows family members doing something together.

**Family mapping:** Using boxes and circles as in a genogram, each family member is named and given three descriptive adjectives. Then a descriptor is given to depict the nature of the relationship between each pair of individuals within the family.
The result is a picture of how the client views each person and the interrelationships. Family members can exchange maps and discuss similarities and differences in their views.

**Family sculpting:** An experiential technique has all family members creating a pantomime to show a meaningful scene from their lives together. One member directs the others to place themselves in specific ways and to do specific things; then everyone discusses the meaning of the act.

**Letters:** Clients are asked to express what they would want to say to someone in letter form. In writing a letter, the client does not have to face the person directly but still has the opportunity to collect his thoughts and communicate them. The letter may very well never be sent, but the experience of communicating in this form can offer relief.

**Goals:** Dreikurs, an Adlerian therapist and author, proposed children reveal four major purposes for misbehavior: attention getting, power struggle, revenge, and withdrawal. Other goals include: getting, self-elevation, and avoidance. Children will typically acknowledge why they behaved as they did by openly agreeing to a counselor suggesting such goals or by displaying a "recognition reflex" in their facial expression. Since children are not fully conscious of the reason behind their behavior, acknowledging the motivation and discussing other behaviors to gain goals is helpful.