

## THE ANATOMY OF A FAMILY

Reprinted from: Choicemaking, Sharon Wegscheider-Cruse, Health Communications, Deerfield Beach, FL

Whether we, either counselors or clients, have succeeded in becoming whole persons depends a good deal on the families in which we grew up. Whether we can remain whole and continue to develop our potentials will depend on the families (or other intimate living networks) that we have created ourselves.

Some families function in a way that encourages health and wholeness; others, however well-meaning, seem to create stress and pain. An experienced family therapist does not have to be in the room with a family very long to know which kind of family it is. Virginia Satir has given us a vivid and compassionate picture of them both in her book

*Peoplemaking*:

The atmosphere in a troubled family is easy to feel. Whenever I am with such a family, I quickly sense that I am uncomfortable . . . My stomach feels queasy; my back and shoulders soon ache, and so does my head. . . After having this kind of experience over and over again, I began to understand why so many of the members of troubled families were beset with physical ills. Their bodies were simply reacting humanly to a very inhuman atmosphere.

In troubled families the bodies and faces tell of their plight. Bodies are either stiff and tight, or slouchy. Faces look sullen, or sad, or blank like masks. Eyes book down and past people. Ears obviously don't hear. Voices are either harsh and strident, or barely audible.

There is little evidence of friendship among individual family members, little joy in one another. . . When I would see whole families in my office who were trying to live together in such an atmosphere, I used to wonder how they managed to survive. I discovered that in some, people simply avoided one another; they became so involved in work and other outside activities that they rarely had much real contact with the family

It is a sad experience for me to be with these families. I see the hopelessness, the helplessness, the loneliness. I see the bravery of people trying to cover up—a bravery that can eventually kill them. There are those who are still clinging to a little hope, who can still bellow or nag or whine at each other. Others no longer care. These people go on year after year, enduring misery themselves or, in their desperation, inflicting it on others.

These are the families we see every day as therapists, feeling their pain with them as Virginia did. Sometimes we may wonder if there are any happy, healthy families at all. Reassuringly, she goes on to describe the healthy families she has known, offering an ideal toward which every family can begin to grow;

How different it is to be with a nurturing family: Immediately, I can sense the aliveness, the genuineness, honesty, and love. I feel the heart and should present as well as the head

I feel that if I lived in such a family, I would be listened to and would be interested in listening to others; I would be considered and would wish to consider others; I could openly show my affection as well as my pain and disapproval; I wouldn't be afraid to take risks because everyone in my family would realize that some mistakes are bound to come with my risk-taking—that my mistakes are a sign that I am growing. I would feel like a person in my own right—noticed, valued, loved, and clearly asked to notice, value, and love others.

One can actually see and hear the vitality in such a family. The bodies are graceful, the facial expressions relaxed. People look at one another, not through one another or at

the floor; and they speak in rich clear voices. There is a flow and harmony in their relations with one another. . .

Members of a nurturing family feel free to tell each other how they feel. Anything can be talked about—the disappointments, fears, hurts, angers, criticisms as well as the joys and achievements. . .

Nurturing families show evidence of planning, but if something interferes with the plan, they can readily make adjustments. This way they are able to handle more of life's problems without panicking. . .

In a nurturing family it is easy to pick up the message that human life and human feelings are more important than anything else. These parents see themselves as leaders, not bosses, and they see their job as primarily one of teaching their child how to be truly human in all situations.

What makes healthy and unhealthy families look and feel so different, both to their own members and to an outsider? To find an answer, we must first look at just what a family is and what makes it tick

### Family Systems

If we picture the individual person as a wheel, then we can see the family as a whole machine, in which several wheels operate together for some larger purpose that none of them could accomplish alone. Or, we might compare it to a body, made up of several organs each of which is comprised of many cells, functions in its own way, yet affects and is affected by the whole.

Like machines, organizations, oak trees, and bodies, families are systems. Every system is (1) made up of component parts that are (2) linked together in a particular way (3) to accomplish a common purpose.

In a family the components are, of course, the members. While the classic family group includes a mother, a father, and one or more children, not all families fit that pattern. Today more and more families have only one parent as an active component, and fewer families have a grandparent, aunt, or other member of the extended family living in the home. Where they are present, however, they must be considered part of the system. The same is true of stepparents and stepchildren, full-time nurses, or any other persons who are intimately involved in the day-to-day life of the family. Blood ties are not required. Even an absent or deceased person may continue to be a "member" if he still exerts a strong effect on the functioning of the family—for example, as author of the rules, silent critic, or model of what to be or not to be.

All the component members are linked together by family rules. These rules determine the functions of each person, the relationship between persons, the goals toward which they are all heading, how they intend to get there, and what will be required and forbidden along the way.

Since no two individuals are alike, no two families can be alike. Their parts are unique, so their rules must be, too. Any family's rules are flavored strongly by the personalities of the parents—the rule-makers—as well as by the life situations the rules were intended to meet.

Rules perform four broad functions for the family system:

1. to establish attitudes, expectations, values, and goals for the family

2. to determine who will hold the power and authority, how they will be used, and how members are expected to respond to them
3. to anticipate how the family will deal with change—in itself as a unit, in its members, and in the outside world
4. to dictate how members may communicate with one another and what they may communicate about

An analogy I like to use when I'm working with a family is that of a mobile (borrowed in part from Virginia Satir). Let us say that you have a mobile with five or six beautiful butterflies, all of different sizes, suspended by strings from three sticks. The butterflies can represent the family members, and the string and sticks the family rules. The whole thing has been very carefully designed to keep its equilibrium. If a puff of wind hits it, it responds immediately by rocking and twisting wildly, but then slowly it brings itself back into quiet balance. This is the beauty of a mobile, ever moving yet ever returning to equilibrium.

Similarly, when the winds of life put pressure on any part of the family, the first response is usually severe distress. Then the whole family system gradually regains its stability, held together by its accustomed rules and patterns of responding.

As we begin to understand how family systems function, it is not so surprising that the problems in an alcoholic family do not end magically when the alcoholic stops drinking. Sobriety, no matter how the spouse and children may have longed for it, is a change. Stress follows. Furthermore, since the rest of the system was designed to maintain its equilibrium with the alcoholic in his old role, his old place on the mobile, it will subtly work to put him back into that role (although no one in the family is likely to be aware of what is happening). This is why I feel so strongly that sobriety for the alcoholic is not enough. If it is to last and if the family as a whole is to find happiness, major changes have to be made in the family system.

The mobile is a source of hope for me, for it suggests that we have many points of leverage at which to initiate change. If one member of a family is resistant, we can work with another; if one aspect of family functioning is heavily defended, we can begin somewhere else.

#### The unwritten rules

When a new member is born into the family or enters it in some other way, he finds that the family rules are there ahead of him. Others have already worked out what things they value, who will make the decisions, how they will treat one another, all the questions that families face. These rules are rarely written. Sometimes they are not even recognized consciously. But they exist all the same and are passed along to the new family member by word and action. If eight-year-old Michael gets slapped every time he talks angrily to Mother, no one has to tell three-year-old Tommy that there is a family rule against angry talk. He learns quickly just from watching and listening.

As Tommy grows up in his family, some of its rules make sense to him. They protect him from being hurt and from hurting others. They help him shape a value system. They save energy and provide shortcuts; he doesn't have to wonder how to act every time a familiar situation arises.

But there are other rules which, no matter how hard he tries, he finds difficult to obey. Even when he succeeds, they leave him feeling tight, uncomfortable, and unhappy. They are “shoulds”—the expectations of others that never really seem to be part of him

Now all these rules, helpful and otherwise, come from people who are very important to Tommy. He cannot risk being rejected by them or punished. So he complies with the rules anyway—at least for a while. When a particular rule makes him unhappy, he doesn’t tell anyone.

Like Tommy’s every family has some rules that are healthy—that is, health-promoting—and some that are not so healthy. But the healthy families that I have known have had mostly healthy rules, while the families where there was alcoholism or other stress have had many unhealthy rules.

How can we tell whether a particular set of rules will increase or decrease the well-being of a family and its members? I have three tests, based on how those rules deal with the four functions mentioned earlier:

	<i>Healthy rules</i>	<i>Unhealthy rules</i>
1. Establish attitudes, expectations, values, and goals	Human	Inhuman
2. Regulate the use of authority	Human	Inhuman
3. Deal with change	Flexible	Rigid
4. Set up communication patterns	Encourage open system	Enforce closed system

#### Human versus Inhuman Rules

The first essential of family rules is that they be human. This may seem too obvious even to mention, but at a practical level I find that some of the most universal rules in our society are inhuman when we examine them:

“Be nice to everyone.”

“Always look at the bright side of things.”

“Control your feelings.”

“Don’t say anything if you can’t say something nice.”

Familiar? Yes, we have all heard those old saws since we were children. There’s an almost endless list of such rules, or notions and assumptions that I have assumed the force of rules for us. On the surface they sound wise and wholesome, but when we try to follow them, they leave us feeling confused and often worthless.

“Father knows best.”

(Then why am I, a father, so often wrong?)

“A mother’s place is in the home.”

(But if I stay home, how can I support my children?)

“Children should be seen and not heard.”

(Don’t grown-ups care what I am thinking?)

“Don’t interrupt.”

(But Aunt Lucy never stops talking!)

“Good mothers bake the cookies themselves.”

(But how can I find the time—give up our bedtime stories?)

Most of us have never stopped to challenge these bits of so-called wisdom, but the truth is they have all earmarks of inhuman rules.

#### Inhuman rules

- are made for someone else's benefit or to uphold some impersonal principle or institution, not for the good of the person who must keep them.
- are often unrealistic and impossible to keep
- encourage one to be dishonest and manipulative with others to avoid punishment or rejection.

Human rules, on the other hand, have not been picked up ready-made from the past. They are tailored to fit a particular family and have an honest, reasonable ring to them

"You may not hit anyone in the family."

"You are expected to leave the bathtub clean for next person who will use it."

"You are expected to be home by midnight, or call."

"You are responsible for developing a value system."

These rules have been made with people's well-being as their purpose; keeping them promotes self-worth in the individual and harmony in the family. How Tommy feels about school is more important than grades. How Dad feels about work is more important than dollars. How Mom feels about making a home is more important than being there full time.

#### Human rules

Are made for the benefit of the whole family, not just the rulemaker

Accept each person for who he is—human, possessed of feelings, well-meaning but sometimes fallible

Validate the worth of everyone involved

#### Flexible versus Rigid Rules

A second requirement of healthy family rules is that they be *flexible*. Part of the inhumanity of some of the rules we've been examining is their rigidity. They are often applied like military justice, without room for individual personalities or extenuating circumstances.

##### *Rigid rules*

- make no allowance for differences in people or circumstances.
- Discourage change, seeing it as a potential threat to the status quo (especially that of the rule-maker).

Flexible rules, on the other hand, make the whole family system adaptable—to new jobs, new neighborhoods, new interests, new definitions of roles as men and women, husbands and wives, and the inevitable changes that living in the world can bring. A few years ago as small a change as longer hair styles caused an unbelievable amount of hurt, anger, and conflict in families whose rules did not permit change.

### *Flexible rules*

- Are applied with appreciation for the inevitable differences in circumstances and in the needs and capabilities of people.
- Accept and even encourage change as a potential source of growth for the individual and the family unit.

### *Open and Closed Systems*

The third dimension of family rules concerns communication. Certain of the rules in every family lay down what may be talked about and what must be ignored or kept secret. In a lot of families there are certain subjects that have to be treated as if they simply did not exist. Sex, illegitimacy, how much money Dad earns or how he earns it, quarreling between the parents, religious doubts, and certainly abuse of alcohol or drugs are all taboo subjects in many families. In others it may be silently forbidden to imply that Dad (or Mom, if she is the authority figure) ever makes a mistake.

Whatever subjects may be off limits, the family in which certain areas of life are closed to communication is likely also to discourage expressing one's feelings. This is particularly true if the feelings are "bad"---anger, frustration, disapproval, sadness, helplessness, fear, any feelings that the rule-maker would rather not hear. If Tommy finds he pays a high price for sharing his unpleasant feelings---the ones he may most need to share---he soon stops sharing the pleasant ones, too. With everyone in a family doing this, they in time become virtual strangers to one another.

A family in which communication is limited by the rules is a closed system. The parts of the system---the family members---are walled off from one another so that they cannot interact. Information and feelings stay bottled up inside each one to be handled alone. And since no one has a full and reliable picture of the situation in the family at any given moment, he must speak, act, and make his decisions out of ignorance.

The closed system usually does not admit much communication from outside either. Thus the family remains effectively sealed off from change, learning, and growth.

By contrast, the family whose rules allow an *open* system appreciates that a free flow of communication is as important as a free flow of breath to everyone in the family. Each person can feel free to negotiate for his personal needs and wants without paying a price. Just as important, he can be sure of being heard.

Everything is out in the open. Everyone knows where everyone else stands and how everyone else feels. There is no need for secrets or dishonesty. The rules may require that certain subjects or feelings be handled with special delicacy out of consideration for others, but the very fact that unwelcome information is shared as it arises can keep small problems and dissatisfactions from being magnified to really painful proportions.

## SELF-WORTH IN THE FAMILY SYSTEM