

MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY EMOTIONAL SYSTEM

Marriage and the Family Emotional System

Once one has a reasonable, clear idea and working knowledge of the assumptions and principle of family systems theory, the clinician can practice “family therapy” with whomever one is seeing or with whatever is the “problem” focus – whether it be the individual, parents, the marriage, or the children. The thinking drives the therapy.

I have selected seven letters that use the lens of marriage that Dr. Bowen uses to articulate his thinking about family emotional systems. These letters are not about “marriage therapy,” but about variables in emotional systems and how interaction processes play out. These letters cover a period between 1961 to 1975 and address multiple themes and issues such as “emotional divorce,” impasses in relationships and predictability, motivation, impact of new arrivals into the system, short-term versus long-term efforts, how marital disharmony fits into other human phenomena, and how anger and anxiety may be related.

The letters, as a whole, address many of the challenges of making a marriage work. The letters also reflect that there is a way to think about these challenges.

April 28, 1962

Attorney

Dear Mr.

Mrs. has asked that I write you about her psychiatric consultations with me in regard to her marital problems. She was referred by Dr. who had seen her and her husband, Dr. in preliminary interviews. I saw Mrs. alone on , together with her husband on , and then alone again on . These four interviews were the ones that had to do specifically with the marriage. I saw Mrs. with her daughter in August and Mrs. alone in for problems other than the marriage relationship.

At the time of the consultations in February and March it was Mrs. who was seeking help and psychiatric understanding about the marriage problem. Dr. was much less motivated to seek help about the problem.

There is not a simple way to conceptualize or describe a marital problem such as the one between Dr. and Mrs. . My effort has been to understand the marital disharmony as a human phenomenon in which both people have played a part, rather than a situation in which either one is primarily responsible. Of course in periods of marital conflict it is almost inevitable that there be aggressive incidents in which each blames the other and justifies self. Prominent in the marriage has been an extreme degree of "emotional divorce" which has been present for a long time. This emotional distance between spouses is a common phenomenon - so common that it is present in "most marriages some of the time and in some marriages most of the time". Not many marriages continue for long with the degree of emotional distance that has existed in the marriage for a long time. Before going specifically to the problem, I will describe briefly my concept of how an "emotional divorce" comes to be.

In the growing up process children achieve varying degrees of maturity of identity. Some "grow away" from the parents to attain relatively high levels of autonomy or identity. A fairly high percentage of people have some degree of emotional over-attachment to their parents. After adolescence they deal with this by denying the importance of the parents and acting over-independent. In leaving home, they tear themselves away, or "go away" from the parents instead of "growing away". They are vulnerable to future emotional involvements. As young adults they might

function quite well as long as their relationships are brief and they do not become too involved emotionally. In a marriage they become deeply involved emotionally. It is a clinical fact that people marry spouses with identical levels of maturity or identity, though each has handled parental dependence in a different way. They both long for closeness but when they are emotionally close, they automatically merge into an uncomfortable interdependence which is really a "stuck togetherness". Each deals with the discomfort and conflict of the interdependence as they did the earlier dependence on parents. They withdraw to sufficient aloofness and distance for each to function with as much comfort and autonomy as possible. When neither "gives in" on points of difference, open conflict results. Each sees the other as "dominating" and self as "giving in". Conflict is avoided when one "gives in" but the one who habitually "gives in" loses "identity" to the other who becomes more dominant and stronger. Many such marriages eventually find a satisfactory working equilibrium to the various forces. A common solution that works when children are small is one in which the mother becomes over-involved with the children and the father over-involved with his work.

The emotional distance in the marriage has been great. In the early years she devoted much of herself to the children and his emotional investment went more to academic achievement and his work. Outside the family he functioned on a high level. In the home, which was her sphere of activity, she functioned on a high level as the dominant resourceful one. The distance between them has been so great the past few years that there has been little contact or personal communication between them.

In my clinical experience, not many marriages with this degree of emotional separation ever work out of the problem. A few people do solve such problems and we know that it can be done. However, the forces that caused them to keep the distance during the more active years of the marriage, are still operative – even more operative – in any effort to solve the problem. To work at finding a solution means arousing all the old conflicts, anxieties, and turmoil that caused them to seek the distance in the first place. So, for practical, rather than theoretical or technical reasons, the marital problem in this situation can be considered an insoluble one.

Sincerely yours,

Murray Bowen, M.D.

September 8, 1965

Dear Doctor :

Your letter came on Wednesday September 1 and on Monday September 6 I saw the last time. Your check for \$150 covered the bills through May. Enclosed is a bill for the appointments since May, including the final one September 6. The previous bill which listed appointments through August should be adequate for insurance purposes but if you need something else, let me know.

You say your functioning has been better since you have been away from . This is predictable and to be expected when there is a significant level of marital disharmony. This often leads to the automatic assumption that the other is hurtful, or toxic, or "sick", or too overwhelming for self. Implicit in the assumption is that self is inadequate and incapable of dealing with the other. The main problem is there are distortions in the assumptions and one can go on and on, terminating the marriage because the other is "impossible".

Speaking strictly from a psychotherapeutic orientation, whether you and eventually go on to a divorce or not, I would say that you both have much to gain if you both stay on the goal of learning to relate to, and to deal with the other. You expressed concern that you will get back into "the same old mess" if you get back with her. It is to be expected that you will get back into some of the same old bind in relating to her, but if you have a productive therapeutic effort in progress, the intensity of the bind will be less and less, and the net gain to both of you will be greater and greater. You have the mirror image of mechanisms, and she has the mirror image of yours. This is a built-in advantage in a therapeutic effort.

If "nature takes its course" the percentage chances of you and going on to divorce are fairly high, but if you and can act on the intellectual process, instead of the automatic emotional process, an apparent deficit can be turned into a net gain. Even if you eventually go on to psychoanalytic training, the experience of working on the problem with will provide big dividends. If you rely on individual psychotherapy to solve such problems, the results can be disappointing.

I hear you when you say your training program wants concentration on individual therapy. And so it goes with most training programs. You asked about reading in "family". My one suggestion would be the journal "Family Process". The papers pretty much cover the field and the bibliographies are good.

Best wishes to you and

August 5, 1961

Baltimore Maryland

Dear Doctor

Thank you for the report on Dr.

I was not specifically aware of Dr. 's feeling or impression that psychotherapy with me meant separation from Mrs. but, in the context of the present situation, it makes sense. In the brief period of therapy a year ago, Mrs. was able to make some rapid changes in herself. She became much clearer about her own identity and she was able to maintain a firmer stand against her old automatic mechanism to give in and to "mother" his neurosis. In my experience with family psychotherapy, there is a definite course of events in these situations. When the "changing spouse" can begin to maintain such a stand, the "other spouse" begins to feel "unloved", "we are growing apart", "our love is dying", etc. The "other spouse" then goes into a period of intensified symptoms which amounts to a plea for the "changing spouse" to give up the change and to resume the old neurotic response-counter-response "togetherness". At such a point, it is easy for the "changing spouse" to give up the change and to "go back into the neurosis", and to plead with the therapist to do something about the demands of the "other spouse". If the "changing spouse" can maintain the change in spite of anxiety and the flowering of symptoms in the "other spouse", both can then move into dramatic new changes. It is almost identical to a mother taking a stand with a temper tantrum child. When she can finally maintain her stand in spite of symptoms and the increasing demand that she give in, the child's symptoms disappear. In these situation between husbands and wives, I have had the best success by directing attention to the one who is changing; helping that one to understand the situation and to maintain the stand in spite of the neurotic pleas of the "other spouse". When the "other spouse" is present in the hours, it is frequently possible for them to emerge from the emotion long enough to encourage the changing spouse to maintain the change, before going back into the emotional demand that the "changing spouse" give in. I tried to help Mrs. maintain her stand but, at that time, she was hoping for a re-marriage and that was not a favorable situation for maintaining a stand. He was making re-marriage contingent on her again giving in.

I was impressed by the descriptive aptness of your statement

that Mrs. is "exceedingly well motivated to have him under treatment". Speaking from a family orientation, I think the crux of the problem is somewhere in this area. In their relationship together, she is in the functioning position of the one for whom ACTIVE CHANGE would be easiest, and whose change would benefit both of them the most. Yet, he is the one who ends up seeking help. From his dependant position, I think it is really impossible for him to ACTIVELY CHANGE himself, as long as he is in a living interdependence with her. Their restitutive effort has gone toward PASSIVE compromise in which he seeks to BE CHANGED. Their mechanisms persist in seeking relief of symptoms without changing the basic patterns beneath the symptoms. This was the bind I was perceiving in 1956 when the psychotherapy relationship began to move toward an interminable one and I moved toward involving Mrs. . It is my guess that Dr. next psychotherapy relationship could well go on to become an interminable supportive one, which could permit him to function on a pretty good level as long as he maintained the relationship. There might be some kind of indication for indefinite support but I am opposed to it philosophically and I do not continue too long with an indefinite status quo situation.

In line with the above thoughts I would like to modify my previous statement that I would again be willing to work with Dr. if he wished it. From what you say, he is opposed to further therapy with me and the issue probably will not come up but, if the question should come up, I would change my stand to say that I would be willing to work with him provided that Mrs. was also involved in the effort. I would not insist that they attend hours together, but I would not work with him alone. I say this because I believe basic change is possible only if it can somehow involve both of them.

Your letter filled in information gaps in several areas and I was glad to get it. The 's have had a long struggle with their neurotic bind. I believe they will profit from their evaluation with you, and I hope that in their next psychotherapy effort they can somehow break through the impasse and get the "sickness" defocused, and find better ways to utilize their individual and combined strengths.

Sincerely,

Murray Bowen, M.D.

June 16, 1969

Bethesda, Maryland

Dear Doctor

The following is a report of my family oriented psychotherapy with Dr.

His marital problem came into acute focus a year ago when his wife began legal steps toward separation and divorce. He was not previously aware of the extent of her discontent. She would not participate in family psychotherapy designed to resolve the problem. She proceeded with separation and established a separate residence for herself and children in New York. The husband was opposed to separation, he is deeply attached to the two children, and he was motivated to work at understanding and modifying his part of the marital problem. In my experience, a fair percentage of such marital problems can be resolved as long as one spouse is seriously motivated to work toward resolution, and the thoughts, fantasies, and actions of the other do not proceed toward remarriage. Some husbands, whose wives and children move out as a prelude to divorce, make more progress working on the family problem alone than would ordinarily be possible with husband and wife in family therapy together.

I have seen Dr. about twice a month for a year, while he has attempted to understand and modify his contribution to the family problem, and to demonstrate the change in his visits with children when he also has some contact with his wife. Progress has been slow but positive. It has been sufficient for me to be willing to continue, and for me to have a moderately hopeful opinion about ultimate outcome. One impediment to faster progress has been the young age of the children which precludes the father's most effective communication with the children, and another is the distance to New York and his lack of control over visiting.

The clinical situation indicates there is better than a 50% chance of resolution of this marital problem to the advantage of both parents and the children, if Dr. motivation continues. The wife shows no significant primary interest in another man, the husband has no interest in other women, and both are deeply attached to the children. These are positive forces that hopefully can be utilized in resolution. On the other side, this is one of those very difficult clinical problems in which the wife's anxiety

goes to impulsive action and the husband is sensitively responsive to her anxiety. The internal dynamics of the family has favorable indicators for eventual resolution of the problem but the wife's emotional trigger is "cocked", she still voices adamant demands for divorce when threatened, and the husband is responsive to her threats. It would be easy for husband, therapist, or other outside advisor to precipitate divorce with loss of "cool" or an inept move. If the husband can keep on course, the chances for a favorable outcome are better than 50%. If his motivation subsides, or he begins undue response to the wife's anxiety, or he begins to fight her "pro-divorce" posture, or if he gets into a form of individual therapy in which the therapist implicitly takes sides against the wife, the chances of divorce are almost 100%.

No matter what happens, this problem is not going to respond rapidly to any kind of "therapy". I have been sort of challenged by the technical difficulties involved. It would be easy for any clinician to trigger this into a "point of no return" divorce. If the problem can be resolved, even if it takes several years, the cost of therapy will be minimal in comparison to the monetary cost and human turmoil, if it goes on to divorce. The wife is not likely to remarry. If they get a divorce, I would predict the wife may get superficially involved with other men but keep her primary emotional investment in the two children, which will impair the future adjustment of the children. I think the husband would eventually remarry but he probably would never become emotionally and financially independent of these two children.

In summary, there has been slow and positive progress on the family problem. If this year of family oriented psychotherapy results in restoration of the marriage, it will have been a great year. If the problem goes on to all the expense and complications of divorce, I would consider this year to have made a lasting contribution to the husband. If he leaves the area this year he will have major decisions in regard to future "therapy". If he remains in the area, I will be willing to continue my interest in the problem.

Sincerely yours,

Murray Bowen, M.D.

7-26-70

Dear

Some thoughts since your telephone call this morning. People can get real worked up over the concept of "manipulation" in a relationship, yet people are constantly "manipulating" each other, if one thinks within that framework.

If you considered the recent sequence between you and in a step by step framework, it might go about as follows – distancing himself and making self unavailable to others (maybe distancing more from and clan than from you – he is administratively hooked to that household and he is not to you which should make you a more free and acceptable relationship). When pressed about the distancing, the lack of a telephone is seen as "the reason", a real flimsy reason. He is real unsure about wanting the distance. I'd say he wants it but he also doesn't want it. If he really wanted it, why wouldn't he have said, "I do not want a telephone because I like my cave where I can hole up away from the demands of the female world, especially from troubled ex-wives and certain other women". If he had said this, there would have been "no debate" or another subject for debate. Instead the "telephone" became the subject. You engage him on the unreality of the telephone reason. If he responds on the telephone reason, his next reason will become even more flimsy. He has no where to run. You sense "victory" and move in to nail down your point. The next defense, when one is "about to be nailed down" is anger, and a relationship cut-off.

I think that anger is a necessary ingredient in the "manipulation" process. Or one can replace anger with anxiety. I think anxiety is a better concept. In this situation, you'd be aware that you made him angry and you would instinctively avoid the angry panic button in the future. In the past I have said that spouses learn to avoid the touchy areas in the other, which gradually results in the communication cut-off in marriages. From the "manipulation" standpoint, one could say that had "manipulated" you to steer clear of the troublesome issue.

Some ideas – I am fascinated by responsiveness to money issues. One could say that he always had problems with money and his anality should be analyzed. You know what I think about that kind of explanation which fixes the problem in him and ignores the part his mother, and , and you, and others, play in it. I could see his mother having some kind of a "thing" about money so he could always "engage" her on money issues. Then it must have been a deal between and with R having all kinds of reality issues about money and defending, and demanding her rights and defending. As an overall program (you have to decide what you want to try and what is not worth the effort), I would say try to avoid any kind of an issue that has to do with money, unless you are being playful. I can sit here and have a "ball" thinking up reverses and trial balloons on money issues. The old pattern was R bugging him for more money and him holding back. You could wreck some of the old pattern by encouraging frugality and thrift and saving his money for R and the kids. You could spend money on food for him, etc at home and he'd never notice that it cost you a penny but I'd bet he'd choke if you wangled him in going out and rig it so you pay the bill and rig it ahead so he'd have to eat a \$15 meal that you paid for. Bet he'd choke on every bite. I am having too much fun just thinking of ways to turn tables. I'll quit thinking.

Sincerely,

February 17, 1975

Dear Mrs.

Yes, I did see and his parents briefly, about ten years or so ago. As I remember the situation, it was a rather typical example of each having done his or her best, as each saw it, ending up with blaming his parents for his problems, and the parents focusing on his "immaturity" as the cause of the problem. The subsequent course indicates that they chose to deal with the situation by going away from each other.

The disharmony you describe is fairly typical. It has the earmarks of a situation in which the marriage was fairly congenial until the addition of a third person, a child, which upsets the emotional equilibrium in the marriage. The usual human reaction is to seek a short term solution, which goes toward divorce and the creation of a new congenial relationship between mother and child, which lasts until the child reaches adolescence, and then impinges the child in the next generation. And so it goes multiple generations proceed through time.

I am much in favor of long term rather than short term solutions. I am in favor of parents assuming responsibility for their own problems. I am against short term solution that impinge children in the future. You are at a critical time in your life. Society provides plenty of experts who favor the short term solution. Good luck to you in your choices.

Sincerely,

Murray Bowen, M.D.

October 15, 1961

Mrs.

Dear

You describe a pattern that repeats and repeats. How does one go about understanding it? I believe that a high percentage of people live their lives in automatic fixed patterns that amount to "chronic ruts", that most of them never recognize or acknowledge the fixedness of the situation, and that most of the others "get numb" and accept it as inevitable. One wife described it aptly when she said, "Our life never really gets anywhere. On any day it may appear to be progress but that is an illusion. It is more like a tilting pan of water that tilts from side to side. The water is always in motion but it never goes anywhere. It tilts in one direction until that is too much. Then we make a great effort to "change" and we tell ourselves we have solved something, but we only tilt it in the other direction for a time".

I am looking for better concepts to understand this common human problem. Some people do succeed in getting it solved but most people give up and choose to live it out. Inherent in this is some kind of an equalizing, or self stabilizing, or self canceling mechanism that automatically operates between spouses. I think it probably operates between parents and children, only at that stage of life it is easy to convince ones self that marriage will fix it. At least in marriages, each spouse has a mechanism that effectively neutralizes the forward motion of the other. As I see it at this point, change within the family (except to tilt the pan) is theoretically impossible. Yet change does occur for some. For change to occur, one spouse has to find a way to stand against the automatic neutralizing mechanism of the other and that is difficult unless one or more significant figures within the family unit can have a relationship outside the family neutralizing mechanism that does not get involved with the intrafamily counter-balancing.

From your description, it is a fairly predictable characteristic for to run into a period of poor functioning and then to consistently come through, even though at the time it may look as if the ship will surely hit the rocks.

I am currently trying to put together some ideas that several have asked me to write down. I thought I would have it finished last week. I will send you a copy. It may still be in rough draft form but perhaps you can let me have any ideas and comments you have. My writing is several months behind schedule but I am working toward the May 1962 deadline.