

STUCKNESS IN TRIANGLES

Stuckness in Triangles

All clinicians have experiences where the emotional situation stays stuck in spite of intentions of all parties for it to be better. A glimpse of light appears, only to be shot down from another direction at the slightest whiff of anxiety (e.g., a father's attitude to the couple's child). Emotional escalation is a result, with all family members soon out of control, with another lost therapy session, and the family feeling more hopeless.

Dr. Bowen's letter of August 1975 is a response to a person feeling "stuck." He offers a way to think about functions and patterns that play out in these intense triangles within the family emotional system. A key question in his letter concerns not so much what one is doing in the perpetuation, but the resultant anxiety that results in not doing it; there are both advantages and disadvantages to the role in which one is participating and to the other family members. How does one maneuver out of this bind?

August 25, 1975

Dear

Here are some overall guesses about what is going in your family, and hopefully some educated guesses about what you can do with it.

All things being equal, I would expect your mother to be the main generator of anxiety, for her to be responding to her mother and the other way around, and for your younger brother to be soaking up anxiety from mother. His functioning might be a fair barometer of tension in the system and his dysfunction might relieve some of that tension. I would see your father as very dependent on your mother to keep calm, and his dysfunction more related to her than anyone else.

There is lots of evidence to support the notion that your father sees your brother as the generator of problems in mother, which would be part of his power play to enlist the aid of his brother in seeing that your brother was removed from the scene. I would give long odds that your father was trying to calm your mother by removing your brother.

I think your main Achilles heel rests with being the only girl, and the one who sort of absorbs a "fill in" function for your mother, or maybe the mothering function in the whole family. I think you have acquired this by osmosis. I do not remember this from your MCV presentation but your father could well have played his part in this by perceiving you as the best functioner and by making you his ally, or his helper in encouraging you to make allowances for your mother and to forgive and "understand" her.

Your main problem as I would see it, is in finding away to relate to the whole thing as a "globbed unit" without assuming any responsibility for it. The globbed unit would be your mother, your father and your brother. How do you go about relating to your brother without assuming a role as a substitute "understander" and mother? How do you relate to your mother without becoming a functional part of her? How do you relate to your father without assuming responsibility for being his helper? How do you keep on relating to everyone without feeling responsibility for aiding anyone.

I will sort of leave it to you to find your way out. Of if you don't, you have been a pretty good replacement mother for the clan for a long time. You have become versatile, accomplished, and competent in your assigned role, with all the advantages and disadvantages that pertain to it. Good luck. I would like to hear sometime how you try to maneuver out of the bind.

Sincerely,