Family Systems, Addiction, and Recovery

A look at how changes can affect a family.

The human being is a social creature. We have families, we have significant others, we have friends, colleagues, and acquaintances. Once we have initiated and begun to make changes in ourselves it *will* have an effect on the "others" in our lives. These "others" will, in turn, have an effect on us as they respond to the changes we make.

Change will almost invariably create anxiety to some degree. How best to help, how best to minimize conflict and anxiety, how best to keep together the "good" in our relationships without allowing the natural "anxiety of change" to pull it apart?

This is a complex issue. This essay is intended only to bring to light a few of the factors involved and prompt further study and effort.

What follows are edited excerpts from "Chronic Anxiety and Defining A Self — An Introduction to Family Systems Theory", by Michael E. Kerr, published in "The Atlantic Monthly," September 1988.

Dr. Murray Bowen, a professor of Psychiatry at Georgetown University Medical Center, seeing that the family is not a collection of autonomous entities but rather an interlocked emotional unit unto itself, developed the concept and perspective of "Family Systems".

One aspect that led to his conclusion of emotional interdependence and the family as a unit, was the observation that family members frequently function in “reciprocal relationships”. For example, one member will act “strong” in the face of another’s “weakness”. This process was frequently played out with one member becoming anxious about what he or she perceived as a problem or potential problem in another. This anxiety then would tend to exaggerate the demeanor, appearance, and attitude of the anxious family member and further escalate a “Problem-Anxiety-Caretaker” cycle. This then results in a greater “caretaker” role which further enhances the “weakness” of the other. Each person becomes an emotional prisoner of the other, while giving a pseudo sense of togetherness.

Because of this and a number of other reciprocal relationship systems, it is suggested that it is important when making personal changes to also focus attention on the family unit and have strategies in place to address their needs. When one person makes a “change” in the family system it will have an effect on the other members’ roles. Those effects may be subtle or intense and will create “stresses” in the others. If these stresses are not addressed in healthy ways, the family unit may break down or the personal change may not be successful.

Intense feelings when one family member is actively making changes are normal.

To navigate through the emotional challenges experienced by all members of the family when one individual is making a significant change (such as working on recovery from addiction) a well thought-out direction and tolerance of intense feelings is necessary. Otherwise, the individual

making the change may well be inclined to give up the effort and restore the relationship to its previously uncomfortable but familiar state. The intense emotional challenges for the family members are fed by anxiety, the “fear of what might (or might not) be”. The more people’s responses are based on anxiety, the less tolerant they are of one another and the more irritated they are by their differences. They become more controlling or demanding and are less able to permit one another to be who they are. Feelings of overload, overwhelm, helplessness and isolation increase — along with feelings that are accompanied by the wish to have the responsibility removed. For example, the “problem-person” may wish to seek escape by resorting to substance use; the anxious “care-taker” may wish to seek escape by ending the relationship.

With these aversive possibilities people become more intent on getting others to do things their way. Frustration when others resist often leads to disappointment and anger, further increasing the likelihood of giving up or withdrawing.

Efforts to get others to change can result in escalating the “problem-person’s” feelings of being criticized, becoming defensive, and resorting to counterattacks. The flames are fanned when each party blames the other for the conflict. Projection of one’s feelings and attitudes onto another may also be used to relieve anxiety by allowing one to view the other person as the problem.

When people have difficulty dealing with family or other relationships, contacts are frequently kept brief and superficial to reduce the discomfort. However, when people

deal with difficult emotional situations in this way, they are prone to become so emotionally invested in the success of any *new* relationships that they easily lose perspective and recreate problems in the new relationships that they thought they had escaped.

In addition, when people use distance or denial to manage their anxiety, they may lower their own anxiety level, but this may raise the anxiety in the other. So one may become more comfortable with oneself but increase the level of anxiety in the other. Such an outcome is a mixed blessing.

So, how to break this natural cycle?

When a family member can become more aware of his own part in whatever problems exist, become willing to assume responsibility for that part, and become more able to act on that basis, improvements in his functioning will no longer be contingent on someone else's "absorbing" his share of the family's immaturity.

It is a change in functioning that does not lead to the seesaw effect.