

UNDERSTANDING YOUR FAMILY DRAMA

Do you ever feel as if you're trapped in the web of your own personal family soap opera, unable to make a move without inviting disapproval or "wounding" someone? Have you ever thought you escaped your past, only to find yourself caught in dramas with spouses, children, friends, or coworkers? Expressing your individuality or differentiating while remaining close to your family can break this distressing cycle, but this is not easy. Recognizing how expressions of individuality become stalled can help you avoid problems:¹

- Early in life, you have an outer, false self that keeps you attached and in harmony with those on whom you depend. This false self is capable of acting, pretending, and doing whatever is necessary for the sake of survival.
- Beneath the outer layer is a solid self that strives to be unique and self-governing. When your caretakers are threatened by differences, you may feel unsafe shedding your outer, false self. Your priority becomes maintaining the bonds of survival by fusing or acting as though you are one with others.
- At some point, the desire for independence pushes from within. An emotional cutoff can happen in an impulsive burst. At this stage, you may become rebellious, withdrawn, a relationship nomad, "ruggedly independent," or you may move a great distance from home.
- Surprisingly, attempts to fuse with the first appealing person often follow an emotional cutoff. Initially, the new relationship masquerades as freedom. Eventually, the desire for independence surfaces, causing another emotional cutoff. The more intense the cutoff, the more likely it is that a cycle of fusing and cutting off will repeat itself in other relationships.

DIFFERENTIATION IN MARRIAGE

Courtship is usually the most open period in a relationship, when people express many of their thoughts, feelings, and fantasies. However, after marriage, each spouse becomes sensitive to subjects that upset the other and avoidance of differences begins. When the urge to merge conflicts with the reality of differences, problems develop. Clinging, pleading, helplessness, aloofness, rigidity, arguing, and possessiveness, all indicate anxiety about differences. There are three ways that friction in the struggle for oneness is handled:

1. **Dominance/yielding:** One spouse becomes dominant and appears rigid, and the other adapts and becomes pliant. Neither person is in touch with his or her true needs. One is constantly giving up self-awareness and the other is overextended. In times of stress, the yielding spouse loses the ability to function and becomes physically sick, depressed, or acts out impulsively. If the dysfunctional spouse dies or takes a healthy stance, the rigid spouse can collapse into the dysfunctional position. In a healthy marriage, the dominant and yielding roles are not fixed. Spouses can alternate roles with ease, and both are comfortable assuming the leadership of the family.
2. **Marital conflict:** The outer, false selves of both spouses are rigid and resistant to differences. The couple alternates between periods of intense closeness and periods of distance and conflict. During the latter, divorce can occur. Sometimes, conflict evolves from dominant/yielding patterns. The compliant spouse refuses to continue in the role and becomes rigid. The couple may be able to bypass a divorce crisis if one spouse begins to express individuality without being influenced by the other's distress about changes in long-standing patterns.

¹ Murray Bowen's ideas on differentiation are summarized in *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (Jason Aronson, 1978).

3. Triangulation and projection: Spouses avoid differences and conflict by forming alliances with children or by focusing on “disturbances” in a vulnerable third party. The conflict between the parents is then displaced or projected onto the emotional state of the child, as the following examples show:

- A mother who does not feel sufficient levels of closeness with her husband tries to meet her emotional needs with her child. The child exhibits the mother’s rejection anxiety by being fearful of school.
- If a father is missing intimacy, he may overfocus on his daughter. The mother supports this bond, as it enables her to avoid anxieties that closeness triggers. At puberty, “Daddy’s girl” takes drastic action to break away through an unwanted pregnancy.

Sometimes, all three patterns of domination, conflict, and triangulation can operate to form a very complex system. When tension is great, other people get involved to form interlocking triangles. Social service agencies can even become entangled with a family during crises.

DIFFERENTIATION IN “RECREATED” FAMILIES

Those who cut off from parents and later from spouses often seek intense relationships at work and in social settings. These environments can provide a “safe” means for satisfying emotional needs without the demands of intimacy. Gossiping, alliances, and coalitions in these groups imitate the triangles that occur in families. Expressing opinions by saying “I agree with . . . that . . .” or siding with one of two conflicting parties suggests that triangulation is taking place. You can differentiate in such organizations by having some differing views while remaining involved with the group.

BECOMING YOUR OWN PERSON

Despite an obstacle course of emotional cutoff, conflict, and projection, there are young people who find a way to develop their own views and make independent decisions. In adolescence, some denial of attachment to parents and fusion with peers is necessary, and the more differences a family tolerates, the smoother the journey out of the nest will be. In adulthood, the differentiated individual can have close, intimate relationships while pursuing outside interests. Regardless of the group or relationship you are in, you can avoid alliances and triangles so that you can be tethered to loved ones without being tied.