

Understanding Family Systems

Understanding family systems enables leaders to respond more effectively to the dynamics occurring within teams and the overall congregation. Family Systems view the whole unit as greater than the sum of its individual or member parts.

KEY TERMS

- **Differentiation:** Psychological separation of intellect from feeling, and independence of self from others; the opposite of fusion. The differentiated — autonomous — person can be close to others without becoming emotionally reactive to or losing his or her separate identity.
- **Fusion:** The opposite of differentiation, fusion is the blurring of psychological boundaries between self and others, and a tendency for thinking to be overwhelmed by emotions.
- **Disengagement:** Psychological isolation that results from overly rigid boundaries around individuals or subsystems in a family. Disengaged, detached persons can function autonomously but find it difficult to function interdependently, or to give/request support when needed.
- **Enmeshment:** Over-involvement and loss of autonomy from a blurring of psychological boundaries. Enmeshed relationships which foster closeness, affection, and support are fine for a mother and young child but may interfere with autonomy when the child grows older and seeks independence.
- **Emotional cut-off:** Flight from unresolved emotional over-reactivity. The results of emotional cut-off sometimes look like independence, but the difference is that the independent person can tolerate intimacy, while the emotionally cut-off person cannot.
- **Homeostasis:** Systems tend to maintain a balanced steady state of equilibrium. In families, interactions maintain a relative constancy or balance of relationships, often resisting needed change.
- **Second-order change:** Basic change in the structure or functioning of a system.
- **Triangulation:** The process of detouring conflict between two people by involving a third person who stabilizes the relationship between the original pair but freezes conflict in place.
- **De-triangulation:** The process of avoiding the emotional intensity of a fused twosome and the need to fix the dyadic problem. Instead the differentiated self encourages, by word or by deed, a setting in which the dyad can more effectively address their own issues and seek resolution.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- **It is an Emotional System:** More than a combination of each of its members — it has a life of its own. It is an organism. It has a climate of its own - lived out in response to anxiety and through relationships. The goal is an emotional system filled with non-anxious presence.
- **It has Boundaries:** Boundaries exist between members and between the organism and the larger world. Those boundaries can be rigid, permeable, or diffuse.
- **It has Structure & Rules:** It is composed of dyads, triangles, executive (parent) function, dependent (child) function, etc. Rules bring a sense of order and control out of chaos and are most effective when rules create freedom and accountability for its members.
- **It has Communication Patterns:** Healthy communications is open, honest, accurate, flexible, and compassionate, leading to negotiating between members, and a decision-making pattern that is respectful. Unhealthy patterns include placating (giving in), blaming (condemning), computing (facts only), distracting (humor), and double bind (can't win).
- **It has Values and Beliefs:** It creates a worldview that is embodied through statements but also through a lived experience of bonding, atmosphere, lifestyle, roles, traditions, and rules.
- **It has Rituals:** Rituals create order out of chaos and communicate meaning for its members; they include habits, routines, celebrations, and traditions often maintained by gatekeepers and historians.



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