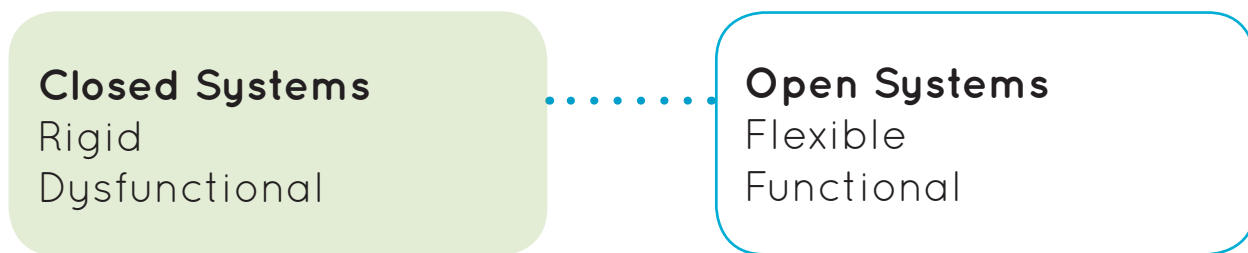# Family Systems I

Families as Systems

There are generally two types of systems: micro systems and macro systems. Micro systems tend to be small, they can also be a miniature representation of (or part of) a bigger system. Macro systems on the other hand tend to large. Both systems can be a part of each other and interrelate with, and to, each other.

Your blood system is a macro system in comparison to the micro system that exists within a blood cell. However, when compared to the Milky Way your blood system is a micro system itself. The Milky Way is a micro system when compared to the universe. Systems are composed of connecting relationships, and when in balance are said to be "homeostatic".

There are two main components to any system

Wholeness

The concept of wholeness is based on the premise that a system exists because of its parts. Those parts working together give the system its completeness or form.

Parts

The concept of parts is based in the premise that the parts are what make the system, rather than the system making the parts.

Another way of looking at systems is to look at them as either open or closed systems.

Closed Systems
Rigid
Dysfunctional

Open Systems
Flexible
Functional

Family Systems are Either Healthy or Unhealthy

Healthy systems are healthy because of the parents' own health in their relationship with themselves and each other. There are also healthy rules that support and encourage open, honest expression of ideas, thoughts and feelings.

Unhealthy systems are unhealthy because of the parents' lack of health in their relationship with themselves and each other. There may also be unhealthy rules that set up less than satisfactory life scripts.

Some ways in which the Emotional and Mental, Ill Health of Parents may be exhibited are:

Addiction

Eating Disorders

Mental Illness

Sickness

Violenece / Rage

Secrets

Unhealthy Family Rules

Don't trust yourself or others.

It's not OK to talk about or express your feelings.

Don't address issues or relationships directly.

Always be strong, good and perfect.

Dont be selfish.

Do as I say not as I do.

It's NOT ok to play.

Don't rock the boat.

Don't talk about sex.

Don't feel.

Characteristics of Healthy / Unhealthy Family Systems

Healthy Family Systems
Appropriately intimate
Appropriate boundaries

Unhealthy Family Systems
No intimacy
No boundaries

Healthy families have a sense of worth, belonging and of mattering. There is love, time for each other and the provision of the basics of food, clothing and shelter. There is also mutual respect. Healthy families have parents who meet their families' needs.

Unhealthy families have unhealthy parents who don't meet their families' needs. The children in these families try to meet their needs themselves. They do this by taking on certain roles.

Dysfunctional Family Systems Roles

Dependant · · · · · · · Addict

Enabler · · · · · · · · · Co-addict (or co-dependant)

Hero · · · · · · · · · · · · · Gives the family a sense of dignity, esteem, worth, respect etc. Positive focus – keeps parents together.

Scapegoat · · · · · · · Gives the family an outlet for anger, pain etc. Negative focus – keeps parents together.

Mascot · · · · · · · · · · Relieves tension, expresses joy, fun and laughter. Positive focus – keeps parents together.

Lost child · · · · · · · Family pet, cute child, outlet for nurturing, love and peace. Positive focus keeps parents together.

A Further Explanation of the Roles

In a dysfunctional family people tend to play rigid roles rather than be themselves and play a variety of roles. There may be a lot of naming and casting people into roles, such as "Katie's the artistic one", and "Peter's the one who always gets into trouble". The more dysfunctional the family, the more fixed the roles tend to be.

When a child is worried about the behaviour of the parents they will often act out to try to take the focus off the worrying behaviour.

The natural fear the child experiences in realising that the people who are supposed to be in charge of their life are incompetent is so great they would do anything to make their parents look better. Rather than experience the pain of admitting that their parents are simply not able to adequately provide for them they take on roles:

- The **hero** will work overtime to give the family self-esteem (overcompensating for inadequate parents).
- The **scapegoat** will get into crisis after crisis, diverting the family's attention away from the real problem by giving them something else to worry about.
- The **lost child** will take care of themselves and suffer silently. They will be the child that no-one has to worry about – quiet and undemanding.
- The **mascot** will relieve the tension in the family through clowning, goofing around and so on and will be counted on to perform this function.
- The **addict** drinks either to kill their own personal pain, because they are an alcoholic personality type and cannot help themselves, or because they feel the basic family disease of co-dependency and do not know how to address their pain openly.
- The **enabler** will make desperate attempts to keep the addict from using (pouring liquor down the sink etc.) and to maintain the appearance of a normal, happy family. They will lie to the outside world about what is going on and deny to family members that any problem exists.

In a dysfunctional family without drug abuse, a co-dependent or two co-dependent parents may replace the addict.

The family rules that hold the system together are; "Don't talk", "Don't trust", "Don't feel".

Each of the above roles and rules are vital in maintaining the equilibrium, however dysfunctional, of the family system. If one family member stops playing their role, it threatens the entire system.

Needless to say, it is wholly against the rules of the family system to recover or get well in any way and if you attempt to break the rules, you will be punished.

Some Points for Discussion

1. Do you understand your family system?

2. What sort of emotional rules do you apply to yourself and others?

3. What role/s do you act out?

4. What do the roles you act out allow you to avoid?

5. How are you going to stop this acting out behaviour?