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Figuring Out Family: An Owner's Manual by David Bennett Stube, PhD

How do you work this thing? If you have belonged to a family for years and often wished that you had read the manual, read on. The first thing you probably already know about families is that families are emotional systems and logic need not apply. In our family we love, honor, cherish, disappoint, empathize, pressure, shame, hurt, rage, and feel frustrated. Family members pay more attention to emotional and nonverbal cues than to words and logic. Because of our emotional bonds, we find it difficult to think our way out of family situations.

But the less we stop and think about what we do in families, the more fused we get to family emotions. Fusion with the family can be wonderful when things are not too stressful. Fusion becomes intoxicating fun in the early honeymoon of a new romance. But, often the family fusion thing becomes too much. Our families drive us nuts. Family problems become our problem and family pain becomes our pain, overwhelming our sense of self. At a high level of emotional fusion it can be an intense challenge to maintain an internal sense of equilibrium and not be infected by family anxiety, tension, and trauma. Then fusion hurts. The more we react, the more others react; the more others react, the more we react. When emotions become intense, our family can drive us to two radically different extremes: to die protecting our own individual liberty or to lay down our life for our family.

These two needs are very basic--individuality and togetherness. First of all, we want to have a life, an identity, a self. We want to do something, go

places, meet people. Yet at the same time, we want to love, belong, and have a family. We are rarely happy giving up who we are, only to feel connected to others. The key to family life is found in harmonizing the need to become yourself with the need to belong with others. It is a question of balance not an either-or decision. Faithfulness in marriage is the commitment to seek this balance anew everyday. Our family constantly challenges us to maintain our sense of self in close intimacy with others. A healthy family owner learns how to function more independently and interdependently.

We do not achieve this balance by isolating ourselves or become emotionally cutoff from our family. In fact, emotional cutoff is simply another way we fuse our sense of self to the family. When we physically or emotionally sever ties, we allow our family to define our identity by who we will not relate to. We no longer zig when the family zigs, we zag. To zag or not to zag, that is the question. The solution to fusion is not to avoid emotional connectedness. Rather the solution lies in what is known as differentiation: the capacity to maintain individuality while creating our emotional connection.

To hold onto self and remain in relationship to those we love, we must study how families process their emotions. When families are in crisis or stressed out, they form triangles as a way to handle the anxiety. One common triangle is the mother, father, child triangle. Other common triangles include, the husband-wife-mother-in-law triangle, or the child-exspouse-exspouse triangle.

Triangles, the most basic family unit, allow us to cope with intense emotions and fusion.

Typically, there are three ways that anxiety is transformed in family triangles: (1) the marital couple fight, (2) the parents focus on a "problem child," or (3) one person becomes higher functioning at the expense of another. When couples fight all the time, they triangulate a marriage counselor or a divorce attorney. When a child of divorce is upset, the child's problem may be blamed on the exspouse. We can increase our emotional bond with someone by gossiping about a third person. Or we can become a super pseudo self by promoting inferior functioning in our spouse and children. In essence we can borrow self from others. We become a self-parasite.

Thank God, humans are more than their emotions. We have developed the capacity to empathize and use autonomous judgement--even in emotionally desperate family situations. This is what family psychiatrist Murray Bowen calls detriangulation. To detriangulate, one must react, but develop the capacity to own one's anxiety and to self-soothe. Rather than relying on others to validate our identity and emotions, we learn to affirm our own sense of self within

relationship. We develop a solid self, in place of the pseudo self that is dependent on blaming and validation from others. Others are no longer the cause or cure of our problems. We can stand alone and still be intimate. And when intimacy creates anxiety or fear of engulfment, we deal with it, rather than take it out on others. It gives a whole new emphasis on the word owner, for those reading this owner's manual. Family ownership is a creative act that blends ownership of self with connectedness with other.

So, the key to owning and operating a family lies in doing four things: (1) maintaining our healthy sense of separate self in close proximity to partners and family members, (2) practicing nonreactivity to other's reactivity, (3) regulating our emotions so that judgement can be used, and (4) tolerating pain for growth. Differentiation is a process, not a trait. It is something we work towards in our family, not something we become at the expense of the ones we love.

Don't you wonder who writes such owner manuals, anyway? Psychiatrist Murray Bowen came up with this one following years of studying schizophrenic families. Dr. Bowen determined that the family system theory which explained the emotional disturbance of his research families also applied to "normal" families. In fact, after testing this theory on his own family, he discovered that it made sense for you and me or any other family owner.

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