

Psychotherapy Guidebook

# CONJOINT FAMILY COUNSELING

Sharon Wegscheider

# **Conjoint Family Counseling**

**Sharon Wegscheider**

e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *The Psychotherapy Guidebook* edited by Richie Herink and Paul R. Herink

All Rights Reserved

Created in the United States of America

Copyright © 2012 by Richie Herink and Paul Richard Herink

## Table of Contents

[DEFINITION](#)

[HISTORY](#)

[TECHNIQUE](#)

[APPLICATIONS](#)

# Conjoint Family Counseling

*Sharon Wegscheider*

## DEFINITION

Conjoint Family Counseling is an experience in which an outsider, the counselor, is invited into a group of individuals related to each other for the sake of stimulating healthy relationships. Often the group or family invites the counselor into the system because of their painful concern about one member they identify as the focus of the problem. The challenge presented to the counselor is to use his eyes, ears, and sensibilities to give new insights or added reaffirmation to the family's view of itself. Even though the family's goal is the solution of their problems, the therapeutic hope of the counselor is that the family will discover a process for growth, namely, the nurturance of the self-worth of the individual members.

## HISTORY

Theoretically, family counseling grew out of clinical experience. Over the last twenty years family counseling done conjointly was first an experiment used when individual therapy became stuck or ineffectual. The conjoint counseling was used when the myriad of problems defied solution

and the clients remained helpless. Now the use of family counseling is becoming accepted. It is based on the premise that we become very similar to those people with whom we surround ourselves.

Virginia Satir, Don Jackson, Jay Hayley, and others from the Palo Alto area of California are among those who have worked with families to help them become people who know they count, who risk saying what they feel, who make their choices with their own growth as a priority.

## TECHNIQUE

Family Counseling (or process counseling) can be looked at clinically and theoretically. The clinical styles of counselors are as different as the makeup of the counselors themselves. Yet, there are enough similarities in clinical experiences to furnish some basic observations. This clinical description will address the family intake form, the seating patterns of clients, and the story of the clients.

**The intake form.** An agency requires statistical information for its planning, evaluation, and research and it is important that some information be gathered about each member of the family system. This sounds very routine. Yet, many times the family member who fills out the intake form forgets to put information about himself down. Also, sometimes all the children are not listed, and there may be some significance to this. The youngest ones may be

left off “because they are too young for all this.” Or the older children who have moved out are no longer listed. The process of their departure could be very enlightening in understanding present fears and pains. The general rule to follow is that those bearing meaningful influence should be noted on the intake form. For example, the family concerned about their pregnant teenager may find it helpful to include the father-to-be.

**The ages of the family members may be important.** Children born close in age may have some implications on both the marriage relationship and the sibling relationship. Spouses who are of greatly divergent ages may have some things to work through that may not occur to contemporaries. Who came after whom in the family may indicate alliances or rivalries. Birth order does not give any conclusions; however, it may give some educated guesses.

**Questions about current stress points are helpful.** Such changes as a new home, a different school, new jobs, people going back to school, transfer from night work to day work, sudden illness, deaths among relatives carry much meaning. Changes are neutral, but the choices they prompt are either constructive or destructive to a family’s balance. Past and present use of alcohol or mood-altering medicines can also furnish valuable pieces to the puzzle. In summary, the intake form contains something about each member of the family system, and for a family who comes to the agency with a specific problem this is the first step.

**Seating.** The surroundings most conducive to family work is an area large enough to move about, light enough to be cheerful, pleasant enough to be comfortable. One asset in seating in a family session is having cushions or chairs as movable as possible. Ideally, when a family is ushered into the room the chairs or cushions could be either stacked in the corners or arranged in a chaotic state. The first invitation of the counselor to family members is to choose where they will sit. Often, the identified patient is readily apparent, since he takes a position far away from any member of the family. The children with high energy often pile the cushions high in the corner. Children who are family favorites often sit close to their protector. The very reasonable ones attempt to sit just outside of the circle, where they can observe the rest of the family in an objective fashion.

Such a simple thing as asking them to sit down can speak volumes of how a family sees itself. When there is nervousness or conflict, the stress of the artificial situation exaggerates the family's defenses. Once the family has sat down, the counselor has a spontaneous sociogram. He has at least one picture of the relationships within the family. If the children are noisy, moving around a lot, bored, or daydreaming, the counselor may see who disciplines the children. Different meanings can be studied if the disciplinarian is the mother, the father, or the older child. If no one gives direction, this says much about the family, too. The counselor looks at the choices the family makes to take care of itself.

**The story.** Most clients find it hard to share their private family business with an outsider. They are not only asking for help, but also admitting failure. Admitting failure takes self-worth. If their self-worth is low, as many times it is, their admission of failure involves a great deal of pain. In family counseling the family gets a chance to tell its story. Usually the person who made the appointment speaks first — most often one of the parents. He or she is nervous and has mentally rehearsed what to say. The parent has a story to tell that is both a description of the problem and a justification for coming.

When someone is talking in the family the others naturally react. For example, when a mother shares her background, her hopes, and her worries, it is important that the therapist is aware of all the other people in the room. Sometimes it takes two counselors to do this. The identified patient reacts to his mother talking about him. He is quiet, holding his breath and hoping that this experience will pass. The spouse may react strongly if he suspects that he is being blamed or torn down. The other kids in the background sometimes feel that their mother exaggerates everything.

Some kids very enthusiastically share data as proof that this identified person is really the troublemaker everyone says that he is. Then the identified person will withdraw totally within himself or become angry. He might try to use anger to start a debate, picking up on words here and there in order to show that what they are saying is not true. Or he may discount what

everybody is saying with “How do you know?” or “You weren’t there.”

The work of a family counselor is similar to the work of an orchestra conductor. He needs to maintain a certain amount of order so that he can hear the music. He notices certain instruments yearning to play and gives them permission to be heard. Clinically, the counselor needs to hear stories, especially in the first session. Yet the stories are important only to get at the process. When a family uses the story as a sales pitch to justify their coming, the counselor helps them change the use of the story to getting in touch with new ways of processing, new ways of communicating, and new ways of validating self-worth. That jump is a monumental step toward growth.

Some of the theoretical concepts central to Satir’s work are self-worth, rules, and systems. Self-worth is a person’s self-affirmation that he is important, has limitations, has talent, and has a right to be here. A person with a high self-worth can afford to say what he means. He can allow open communication, can follow and give flexible rules, can even tolerate error. When a person owns himself, he takes responsibility for self. He is capable of building and maintaining relationships.

The power that rules have over us is illustrated in the names that people have given them. They are called programs, life-styles, tapes, scripts. All rules come to us from outside of ourselves. As we become more and more aware of

our own energy, they help us be ourselves. We choose to make them our own. The rules that are valuable to us become our value system. The rules with which we comply out of fear of being rejected or hurt always remain separate from ourselves. They are the things we do to get something else. We follow some rules to get approval from someone. They are the “shoulds,” the expectations of others. Outward compliance and inner resentment at being manipulated cause stress, conflict, and anger. How we cope with the stress depends on how much we really believe in our own worth. How we cope will affect others in our system.

The idea of systems working efficiently and effectively is dependent on two factors. One is the developing into what we call a whole person. The second factor is how whole persons or the opposite — fragmented persons — affect the functioning systems.

## APPLICATIONS

The idea behind system therapy is that persons develop communication patterns that tend to protect their personal self-worth. The person finds whichever communication pattern best protects him in his system, and that is the personality he begins to develop. It seems that people tend to learn their survival patterns from the family they grew up in and take it with them in choosing mates; they then continue their dysfunction into their own families.

To summarize, Family Counseling can be a time of clear communication and maintaining relationships. Family Counseling can be a time when the family members begin to learn from each other. The occasion of Family Counseling can be the beginning of an appreciation of their differences and their similarities.