

BECOMING A FAMILY

When we grow up in our families we learn many things about human relationships and how we fit into the world. We don't always know what these things are but they tell us about how we should behave and relate to other people. For example, we learn about the value of ourselves to the people around us and what we need to do to solve problems and communicate our needs or feelings.

It can be helpful for new parents to think about what experiences they have had growing up in their family (family of origin) and what they know about being a mother or father. What they have learnt in their family of origin will affect how they become a parent and it will be very different for both of them.

For some women the experience of postnatal depression is linked to their childhood and family origin. For example, if a woman has taken on her family's message that her feelings are not important, she may not have developed the skills to communicate them. Consequently when things get challenging after the birth of a baby she may struggle to manage her feelings or ask for help. She may begin to feel anxious or overwhelmed and go on to develop postnatal depression.



ABOUT FAMILIES

Systems Theory

In the late 1960s Systems Theory, taken from the world of science, was applied to the functioning of human groups, the primary group being the family. The effect of systems thinking was to broaden our understanding of how humans function, as a part of a system, governed by sets of rules, values, processes and structures.

The focus became the relationships or interactions between the parts (people) belonging to the system and less on the individual. The nature of these interactions shape how families develop and the behaviours of the members within that family system. It was argued that what affects one part of the family affects the whole family system.

Family Development Theory

The life cycle of families unfolds in different stages of development and certain tasks specific to each stage must be achieved for a family to successfully transition to the next stage of development. For example, the stage family with young children is located between the newly married couple stage and the family with adolescents stage. The tasks specific, although not exclusive, to this stage include, developing children, evaluating relationships with one's own parents and considering the relationship between how they were parented and how they parent.

How the family masters the tasks of each stage will have an impact on how they move into and master the future stages of the life cycle.



Transgenerational Theory

Transgenerational Theory says that the rules by which the family system functions are passed on through the family. All the parts that make up the family system are in part determined by the history within it.

Present day problems, emerging within a new family system, are often related to issues carried from each new parent's family of origin. Problems are carried from one generation to the next in myths and scripts that then shape relationships and patterns of dealing with problems formed in the new family.

Myths and scripts

Myths (beliefs, roles), and scripts (blueprints for action), make up the rules and stories that are passed through families determining the interactions between its members. For example, children learn how to be parents from their own parents. They develop a mental picture about how parents should act with children, what a parent does in the family and the kind of priorities a parent has. This is reinforced in the knowledge and skills learnt throughout childhood and shape how they become parents themselves.

Differentiation

Each member of the family system goes through a lifelong process to define themselves within the family emotional system. This process is referred to as differentiation or the establishment of a sense of self and emotional autonomy within the family of origin.

The more emotionally autonomous or differentiated a person is the greater their capacity to be in close contact with emotionally significant family members without having their thinking, emotions or behaviour affected by those relationships. It means they can be themselves and allow others to be themselves. Differentiation means becoming aware of the myths and scripts held by the family of origin and making choices about them, e.g. to throw them out and write new ones in their new relationships and family.

If a person is not differentiated from their family of origin, their thinking and emotions are influenced by others, often without awareness of the extent of their family's emotional impact on them.

The couple relationship

When two people come together in a long term relationship they bring different experiences of their family of origin, different myths and scripts and different degrees of emotional independence from their family.

Each person has a varied mental picture of what they think a long term relationship looks like. There will be differences in their expectations of roles, skills, beliefs about being parents, autonomy within their family and openness to new information.

It is no wonder that many couples struggle. How successfully a couple merges these differences and communicates, may determine the outcome of their relationship and their growth as individuals.

Becoming parents

Adding a baby to the couple, becoming a family of creation, is a very challenging time. The baby brings changes and losses and a set of tasks to achieve, linked to their new family stage. It is at this time of stress that the new mother and father may draw on what they learnt from their own family of origin. This knowledge and the associated skills may not be helpful in managing the transition, particularly if they experienced distress in their family of origin or these relationships were stressed.

It is ideal that new parents have the opportunity to reflect on their own family of origin and to communicate about their differences as they plan for a baby. It would give them an opportunity to review the myths and scripts that they have absorbed about parenting and families from their family of origin, especially those that they are stuck with. Making time to discuss these together, maybe with a counsellor, can help to build the individual's self awareness and the couple's communication.

Trouble arises when individuals are stuck in the myths and scripts of the family of origin with little awareness of their helpfulness, or if the wider system inhibits their attempt at autonomy (as in some cultural groups).

Understanding the issues linked to family of origin can be vital to a woman's recovery from postnatal depression and provide the possibility of learning new skills to prevent future struggles.



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