

Practicing Purposefully

SYSTEMIC PRACTICE

Family Life Cycle

What is it?

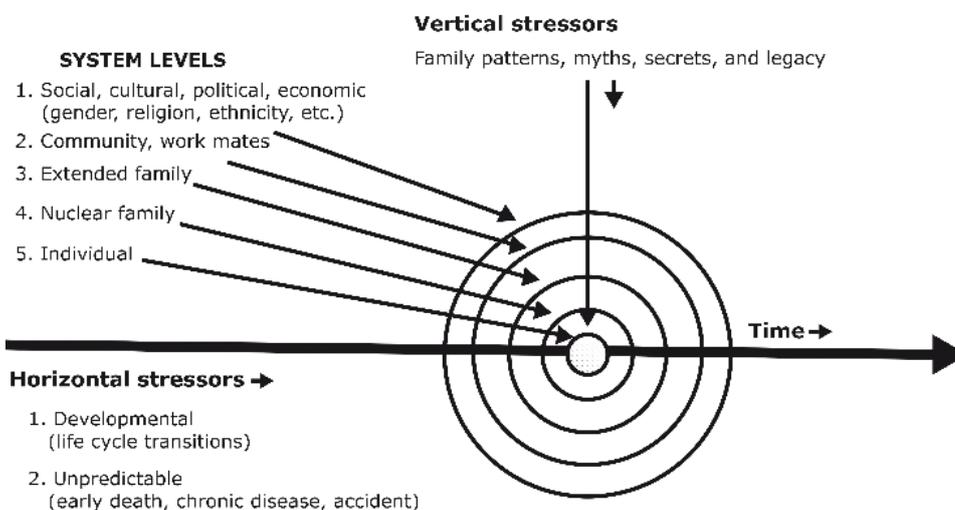
Systemic practice adopts the idea that families go through developmental

changes and common patterns are seen between similar families in the same society. Families do not exist in isolation: All families have to respond to internal and external stressors. They must be viewed within the context of which they operate, in the present, past and future.

Carter, B., & McGoldrick, M. (2005) Overview: The Expanded Family Life Cycle. Individual, Family and Social Perspectives. In B. Carter & M. Goldrick, (Eds). *The Expanded Family Life Cycle. 3rd Ed* (pp1-24) Boston: Pearson

Family Life Cycle Stage	Emotional Process of Transition & Changes required to proceed developmentally
Leaving Home – Single young adults	Accepting emotional & financial responsibility for self – differentiation of self in relation to family of origin
Joining of families through marriage	Commitment to new systems – realignment of relationships with extended families and friends
Families with young children	Accepting new members into the system. Making room in the marital system for children – realignment of relationships within family including negotiation of child rearing, financial and household tasks.
Families with adolescents	Increasing flexibility in family boundaries to include children's independence. Shifting of the parent-child relationship. Refocus on marital and career issues.
Launching children and moving on	Accepting exits and entries into the family system. Development of adult to adult relationships. Negotiate new relationships with in-laws.
Families in later life	Accepting the shift of generational roles. Making room in the system for the experience of the elderly; dealing with loss of spouse or siblings. Life review.

It is usually represented with this diagram:



Vertical Stressors

Past & present issues are represented as 'stressors' on the families functioning.

This includes the person's biological functioning (genetic makeup), i.e. why we do what we do e.g. our temperament. It also

includes family history, patterns of relating. Things passed down generations – attitudes, taboos, expectations, labels, scripts etc.

Horizontal Stressors

These stressors represent the family as they move through time, through their developmental stages, having to cope with changes and transitions which are both predictable and unpredictable. These changes will impact individual members of the family on both an emotional, cognitive, and physical development level.

Why is it useful?

The model adds context and explanations for the functioning of families we engage with. It highlights how as families move through their developmental stages, stress is often greatest at one of the *transition points (horizontal stressors)* if they are not negotiated properly - this is because families have to rebalance, redefine roles and realign relationships whenever there are internal/external stressors forcing it to do so.

If a family does not transition well, there will be 'symptoms' e.g. anxiety, behavioural issues. If there is a lot of stress on the horizontal line the family may appear quite dysfunctional. Symptoms usually serve the function of trying to maintain the normal functioning of the family and/or to prevent change happening. For example, a teenager develops anxiety problems as her older sister leaves for university. Her parent's marriage is not very strong and so the anxiety serves the function of keeping the family together and distracting Mum and Dad from their problems by focusing on the teenager. She is preventing them having to undergo the next developmental stage of "launching children".

How to apply it to practice

- **Figure out what stages in the family life cycle they are going through or have been through.**
How have they negotiated the changes? (Strengths as well as deficits) Are they experiencing difficulty because of one of these transitional stages? Look for short spaces of time in-between transitions – has the time been enough to allow the family to adjust to the changes? E.g. divorce and a remarriage; a death and a birth. Families can be overwhelmed or immobilised by their immediate feelings or become fixed on a moment in the future that they dread or long for (which may never happen/arrive).
- **Help families renegotiate the stages of change**
Certain issues are likely to be linked to certain transitions: The parental relationship may suffer if there is a failure to negotiate the new parental relationship when it has to be shared with new children; eating disorders are commonly seen in transition periods around entry into adolescence and leaving home.
- **Explore some of the family symptoms**
E.g. anorexia: gaining attention of their parents and/or feeling more in control of their life? Aggressive behaviour may be linked to feelings of power in response to previous perceived injustices.
- **Re-address transitions**
Help them organise their thoughts, feelings and memories from the past, present and looking to the future. If you normalise or add context to the life cycle transition then this can help the family reduce fear and feelings of being 'out of control' or 'stuckness'.
- **Preventative work**
You may be able to identify where certain families are predicted to be at risk of future dysfunction linked to transition stages/developmental changes which either are coming up soon or have been a problem in the past. Targeted interventions can then be offered e.g. impending birth of a child – help the parenting relationship adjust.

Criticism

Not all families will pass through the same stages. Some families will skip certain stages or have their own unique ones. It will differ according to culture, race and religion. Some stages may be repeated, as in those where divorce and re-marriage have occurred.