

FAMILY CONFLICT AND STRESS AND ITS RESOLUTION BY FAMILY THERAPY ★

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INTRODUCTION

I was asked to give a lecture on Stress in Families, but decided that it would be more stimulating and educational to show a video tape of my work with a family.¹

I would not be surprised if this was the first time that the work of a family therapist or perhaps any psychotherapist has been shown in an open meeting to the general public. I believe that opening to public view the encounter between psychotherapist and clients may in itself remove a lot of the mystery and mystique surrounding this relationship, and thereby reduce the anxiety and tension which may be present in people contemplating such therapy.

Even though the behaviour and problems of this family are unique, they highlight points, issues and characteristics that may be present in most families under stress. The work with this family demonstrates a potentially effective way of dealing with stress in families in general.

BACKGROUND

On a visit to a small town in northern New South Wales, I was asked to see the Forsythe family. The family consisted of Mr. Forsythe — successful businessman; Mrs. Forsythe — housewife; Jackie — their daughter aged 25 and 8 weeks pregnant; and John — their son and Jackie's twin. Both children live at home.

* A lecture delivered by Mr. Moshe Lang as part of the Victorian Association for Mental Health's 1981 series of public lectures on the general theme of "Stress — Early Middle and Late Life". Mr. Lang's talk on "Stress and the Family" was given on Tuesday, June 2nd, 1981.

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A letter had been sent by the referring doctor — a gynaecologist. The letter stated:

"Please see Forsythe Family, Miss Jackie — 25 — is unmarried and 8 weeks pregnant — the family is conflicted about what to do. I found father impossible, dogmatic, moralistic and dictatorial. Good Luck, you'll need it."

Having read the letter I thought to myself — "It was a mistake to come here in the first place." Then, more seriously, I must see if I agree with Dr. Hill's assessment of the family. If so, then the best way to deal with a "dictatorial father" is not to challenge him and the organisation of his family, but rather work with him and seek his consent and approval to any move I wish to make.

SUMMARY OF VIDEO TAPE PRESENTATION [This written summary inevitably lacks the richness and subtlety of the video tape].

1. This video tape is available from the author.

1st Interview

Father states the problem is that their daughter is pregnant and he is shocked and dismayed. It is against everything he has brought her up to believe. He is worried about the reputation of the family and his standing in the business community. He feels lonely as nobody in the family listens to him. Until this experience, everything was just fine and he was very proud of his family. His solution to the problem is for Jackie to have the baby away from town and have it adopted. He expects me to "knock some sense into the family and forget this crazy notion of his wife and son, for Jackie to have an abortion."

Mrs. Forsythe is concerned about the fact that both her children are still living at home, but she is unclear about what is the best way to deal with the problem. For her the most important thing is Jackie's happiness.

Publication Reference:

Lang, M. (1983). Family Conflict and Stress and Its Resolution by Family Therapy. *Mental Health in Australia: The Journal of The Australian National Association for Mental Health*, 1(10), 28-31.

John Jnr. says that it is not Jackie's fault, because she never received a proper sex education. The subject of sex was taboo in the house and she could never bring friends home; no one she ever went out with was good enough for father. He claims that he is staying at home to look after his mother and sister, otherwise, it is implied, father could be too harsh on them. His solution to the problem is for him and Jackie to go to Sydney, have the abortion and come home. He also states that after the interview he will be in a lot of hot water with his father over what he has said. I then asked father if this will be the case, but father strongly denied it.

Jackie does not know what to do. She says that her relationship with the father of the baby was only casual. She is very inarticulate and uncommunicative.

I finished the session by telling the family that they will have to work out when they want to come and see me again. I asked them to discuss who should decide about Jackie's predicament. Also, who should come and see me — should it be Jackie by herself, her parents, or all of them together. I said that they had spoken to me very freely today and they should discuss if they should be so open on their next visit.

It was father and son who asked that they see me as soon as possible. I arranged to see them the following day.

2nd Session

The receptionist came and told me that Mr. & Mrs. Forsythe and Jackie were in the waiting room and Mr. Forsythe asked that I see his wife and daughter without him. He had also explained that his son had left the house and had taken a flat in town.

I asked the receptionist to show all the family into the interview room. In the room father repeated what he had said to the receptionist. He stated that Jackie had made a decision and that he is now very proud of both his children. I said that I was anxious about going along with his suggestion because if I sent him out of the room it may increase the very problem that he was concerned about yesterday, namely, his loneliness. He assured me that it would be alright, and that he was quite happy for me to talk to the two women when he wasn't there.

I queried why I should not see Jackie by herself. Mother stated that Jackie was worried about talking to me alone and what they wanted to talk about was women's business.

I suggested to Jackie that we leave the door open, so if she got too anxious we could call her parents straight away. She agreed to this and I asked her parents to wait for me in the waiting room.

Jackie Alone

Jackie told me that she had decided to have the baby, keep it and stay in town. She had also decided to leave home. She couldn't decide when and how to tell her parents about her decision to leave home and when or how to tell the father of the baby about her pregnancy. Jackie also told me that her relationship with the father was serious and had been going on for a long time. The reason for not saying anything was that she knew her parents would not approve of the man. I explored with Jackie whether there was anybody in her life she could talk with about these issues; she said there was no one.

I then indicated that I would be more than happy to talk to her about the outstanding issues. I also suggested that she had moved fast, in fact too fast and that maybe she should think again about what she had decided — because literally these decisions had been made overnight.

Mr. and Mrs. Forsythe and Jackie together

I expressed to the family my amazement that they had changed overnight and I personally apologised to Mr. Forsythe for greatly misjudging him, having thought of him as rigid and unable to change.

He explained to me that he had gone to his solicitor about the legal aspects of the problem, and then to an adoption agency regarding the procedure of having the baby adopted. He then realised he had to choose between sending his daughter away, or having her at home with them. He chose the latter. He stated that he was still very much against some aspects of the situation, namely "an abortion".

I asked Mr. Forsythe about his concern regarding the reactions of his business colleagues to the news of Jackie's pregnancy. He stated that he was the boss and if they didn't like it, they could get out.

Mrs. Forsythe reminded me that on the previous day she had said, "his bark is worse than his bite" and that she knew he would change his attitude towards the baby. I expressed the feeling that she might have been confident of him changing his mind, but that he certainly had his children fooled. They were sure that father was some sort of ogre who was to be feared and from whom John thought he needed to protect his mother and sister.

I asked Mr. & Mrs. Forsythe if they felt they could cope without the children at home. They assured me they would manage very well. Mrs. Forsythe expressed her sadness at John leaving home and wanted to visit him. Father disagreed and said they should leave John alone for a week or two to let him settle in. I agreed with Mr. Forsythe's suggestion and she reluctantly agreed to abide by this decision.

I asked the parents if I could see Jackie again and discuss a few outstanding matters. They both thought this would be a good idea and an appointment was made. Mr. Forsythe said that Jackie's pregnancy may have been the best thing that ever happened to them. I agreed and said that it was the beginning of many positive changes in the family's life. Mr. Forsythe then added that he felt it had been a good experience and that now John was standing on his own feet and could get on with living his own life.

I asked Mr. & Mrs. Forsythe and Jackie if they would like to come back as a family in about a month's time, and discuss further how the family was coping with their new lives. They all agreed and an appointment was made.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

James Joyce says "In the particular lies the universal". I believe in this family some universal truths are demonstrated. I would like to stress some of them and to do that I decided to emulate Mr. Forsythe and be forceful and repetitive.

Stress is an interpersonal phenomenon — it can be best understood by studying what happens between people, rather than inside them. The most common arena of interpersonal stress — though by no means the only one — is the family.

This family, like most others, was in stress

for the following interrelated reasons:

- (a) It was in conflict.
- (b) It avoided talking about its conflicts.
- (c) It lacked experience and skill in resolving conflicts.
- (d) There was confusion about who should make the decision.
- (e) There was lack of clarity about how to decide who should make the decision.
- (f) Their previous decision-making process was inappropriate for the current problem, i.e., Until now father presumably made all the decisions. This clearly was inappropriate in deciding about Jackie's baby.
- (g) There was lack of personal boundaries, individuality and separateness, as shown by the confusion about whose problem? whose baby? whose responsibility?
- (h) There was a tendency to be over protective.
- (i) There was rigidity in the family organisation.
- (j) The family wasn't ready to face its next life task — i.e. the growing up, the separation and the leaving home of the children.
- (k) Perhaps there were also cross generational coalitions, viz., between mother and the children which isolated father.
- (l) The family tried to maintain the myth that it was "perfect", i.e., a happy family with no problems.

How was the resolution of the family's conflict and stress achieved through family therapy?

1. Perhaps most important is the way stress is viewed. To think of stress as an interpersonal problem may be the most efficient and humane way.
2. I invited all the relevant people.
3. I asked each one to express as fully as possible his own view of the problem and its solution.
4. I was respectful of their own unique family organisation, thus not challenging father's role as head of the family.
5. Father was redefined from being harsh and dictatorial to being caring and concerned. Similarly, there was a general emphasis on positive qualities in the

family, and I communicated my trust in their strength and ability to resolve the problem.

6. I clarified some of the confusion around their patterns of communication and decision making.

The family had many strengths. Therapy utilised these, and was able to resolve successfully this crisis in their life. This led to a reduction in stress in all its members. They were able to enjoy their life more fully [both as individuals and as a group and as sub-groups] and they were better able to appreciate the love and care they had for each other.

Finally, I would like to quote Father, who

said "Perhaps Jackie getting pregnant has been a good experience for all of us."

This demonstrates the absurdity and the beauty of our lives, i.e., it highlights the paradox that possibly "the worst thing that ever happened to them turned out to be 'the best'."

Perhaps no photograph can capture the drama and beauty of a brilliant sunset like a Van Gogh painting; similarly no real family can demonstrate the human drama so clearly as this role play family.

Footnote: [This is a simulated family and all names are fictions].