

Introduction to Family Therapy

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Key Concepts, Theoretical Foundations, Techniques, and Practical Considerations

1. What Is Family Therapy?

Aspect	Description
Definition	A systematic, collaborative approach that treats the family as a unit rather than focusing solely on an individual.
Goal	Improve relational patterns, communication, and problem-solving within the family system to promote psychological health for all members.
Typical Settings	Outpatient clinics, hospitals, community mental health centers, schools, private practice, teletherapy platforms.
Clients	Nuclear families, extended families, blended families, same-sex couples with children, intergenerational groups, and sometimes “chosen families.”

2. Core Assumptions (Systems Theory)

Assumption	Implication for Practice
The family is a system	Changes in one part affect the whole; therapy targets patterns, not isolated symptoms.
Circular causality	Problems are maintained by reciprocal interactions, not linear cause-effect.
Homeostasis	Families tend to maintain existing patterns, even maladaptive ones; therapy disrupts this to allow new ways of relating.
Boundaries	Clear, flexible boundaries promote healthy functioning; rigid or diffuse boundaries can create conflict or enmeshment.
Roles & Rules	Implicit expectations (e.g., “the caretaker,” “the scapegoat”) shape behavior; therapy makes them explicit and negotiable.

3. Major Theoretical Models

Model	Founder(s)	Key Concepts	Typical Techniques

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Structural Family Therapy (SFT)	Salvador Minuchin	Family organization, subsystems, boundaries, hierarchy.	Joining, family map, enactments, boundary making.
Strategic / Interactional Therapy	Jay Haley, Cloe Madanes	Problem? solving through paradoxical interventions, hierarchy of control.	Prescriptions, reframing, directives.
Bowenian (Differentiation) Therapy	Murray Bowen	Differentiation of self, multigenerational transmission, emotional triangles.	Genograms, detriangulation, coach? like stance.
Narrative Therapy	Michael White, David Epston	Stories shape identity; externalizing problems.	Externalization, deconstruction, re? authoring.
Solution? Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT)	Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg	Emphasis on resources and future goals rather than problem analysis.	Miracle question, scaling, exception? finding.
Emotionally Focused Family Therapy (EFFT)	Sue Johnson (adapted from EFT for couples)	Attachment bonds, affect regulation, restructuring interaction cycles.	Attachment? based interventions, re? experiencing emotions, bond? repair.
Multicultural / Contextual Therapy	Harold G. (Harry) G. (e.g., Harkness)	Power, privilege, cultural context, social justice.	Cultural genograms, contextual fairness, advocacy.

4. The Therapeutic Process

Phase	Objectives	Typical Activities
1. Engagement & Alliance Building	Establish safety, clarify goals, identify family members' motivations.	Intake interview, joining (mirroring language, posture), contract setting.
2. Assessment & Conceptualization	Map relational patterns, identify	