

Introduction to Family Counselling

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Key concepts, goals, processes, and practical considerations

1. What Is Family Counselling?

Aspect	Description
Definition	A therapeutic approach that works with families (or couples) to improve communication, resolve conflicts, and strengthen relationships.
Scope	Addresses issues that affect the whole system (e.g., parenting disputes, divorce, chronic illness, addiction, grief, cultural transitions).
Systemic View	Treats the family as an interdependent unit rather than focusing solely on individual pathology.
Therapeutic Setting	Typically 1–3 sessions per week, lasting 45–90 minutes, with all relevant members present (or selected subsystems).

2. Core Theoretical Foundations

Theory	Main Ideas	Relevance to Family Counselling
Family Systems Theory	Families are organized patterns of interaction; change in one part affects the whole.	Guides assessment of boundaries, roles, and feedback loops.
Bowenian Theory	Emotional triangles, differentiation of self, multigenerational transmission.	Helps explore legacy patterns and anxiety across generations.
Structural Therapy (Minuchin)	Family organization (subsystems, boundaries) and hierarchy.	Provides tools for restructuring maladaptive patterns.
Strategic/Brief Therapy (Milan, Haley)	Problem-solving through paradoxical interventions and reframing.	Useful for time-limited, goal-oriented work.
Narrative Therapy	Problems are separate from people; stories shape identity.	Encourages families to re-author healthier narratives.

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Theory

Main Ideas

Relevance to Family Counselling

Attachment Theory

Secure vs. insecure attachment styles
affect relational dynamics.

Informs work on trust,
emotional regulation, and
caregiving.

3. Goals of Family Counselling

1. **Improve Communication** – develop active listening, assertiveness, and conflict resolution skills.
 2. **Clarify Roles & Boundaries** – establish healthy hierarchies and subsystem boundaries.
 3. **Resolve Specific Problems** – e.g., parenting disagreements, substance abuse, illness coping.
 4. **Enhance Emotional Support** – increase empathy, validation, and shared affect regulation.
 5. **Promote Adaptive Change** – create new interaction patterns that sustain long-term wellbeing.
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4. The Counselling Process

4.1 Intake & Assessment

- **Gather demographic data** (family composition, ages, cultural background).
- **Identify presenting problem(s)** from each member's perspective.
- **Genogram & Eco-map** – visual tools to map relationships, health history, and external supports.
- **Assess systemic factors** (power dynamics, communication styles, stressors).

4.2 Formulating a Working Hypothesis

- Combine information into a **systemic formulation**:
 - What patterns maintain the problem?
 - Which subsystems are enmeshed or disengaged?
 - What strengths can be leveraged?

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4.3 Goal Setting

- Use **SMART criteria** (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound).
- Agree on **short-term** (e.g., reduce yelling) and **long-term** (e.g., rebuild trust) objectives.

4.4 Intervention Strategies

Technique	Typical Use	Example
Circular questioning	Reveal hidden connections	"What would happen if you stopped doing X?"
Reframing	Change	