Healing the System:
Enhancing Youth Outcomes Through Family System Approaches

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Learning Objectives

- Identify 3 perceptions of family systems which can become barriers to family engagement
- Identify 3 defining features of family systems which explain why they are critical to providing best practices.
- Learn 3 practices for providing treatment interventions within family systems.

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What's the Family System's Role in Care?

- In the past?
- Currently?
- What should we strive for?
- Parents/caregivers should be an active participant in the treatment program from referral through aftercare.
- Holistic youth care not only addresses the needs of the youth, but also needs of caretaker "Family System"

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Who is the "Family System"

- Birth Parents
- Foster Parents
- Adoptive Parents
- Guardians
- Extended family members that are caretakers
- Siblings
- Step-parent/step-siblings
- Past parental or sibling relationships

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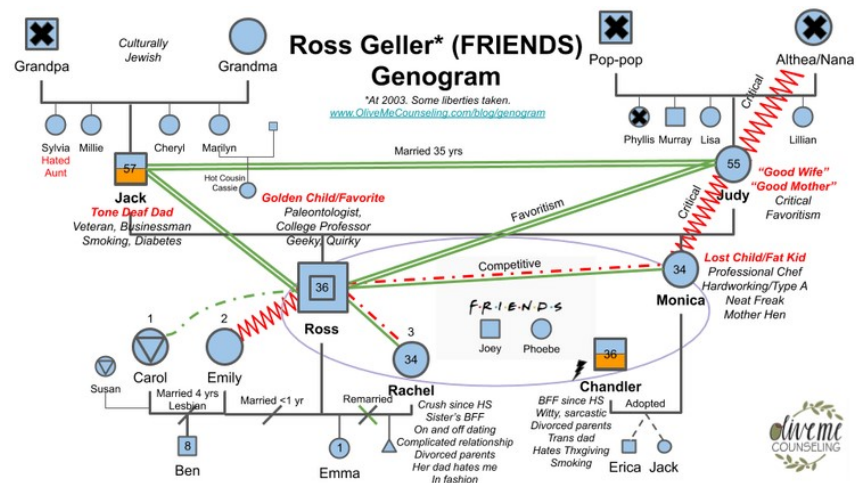Institute of Learning

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Family Systems

- Family systems are made up of individuals, relationships (substystems) and transgenerational systems.
- Family systems exist within the context of larger systems
- The Family is a complex social-emotional unit which is emotionally and socially interconnected
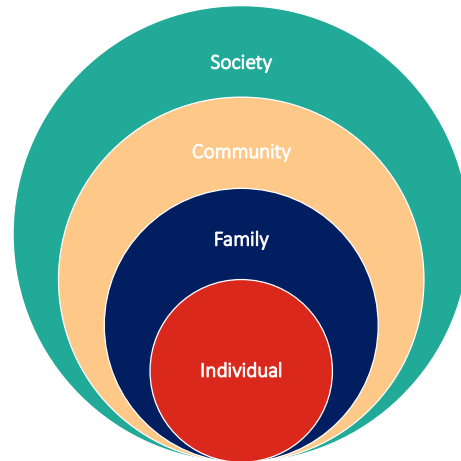
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Family Systems

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Family Systems Theory

Systems are made up of parts which are interdependent

- The whole is greater than the sum of the parts
- Smallest level of evaluation is 2
- Experience and function of 1 part impacts all other parts

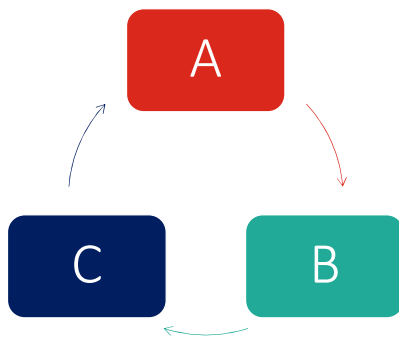**Systems strive for homeostasis**

- Behaviors or responses within the system are goal oriented to return to or maintain homeostasis
- Desire to maintain homeostasis can impact opportunity for growth

Systems are Recursive/reciprocal

- A change to one part of the system creates a change in all parts to the system

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Family Systems & Circular Causality

A

C

B

- Family systems function with circular causality
  - A & B Interact to cause C, Which in turn causes A
- Creates feedback loops which can be positive or negative
  - Systems have a preference toward homeostasis (maintain)
- This is used to describe
  - patterns of interactions
  - Behaviors as functions

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Family Systems Approach

Turnbull et al. (2011) described the family systems approach as having an underlying belief that a family is an interrelated social system with unique characteristics and needs.
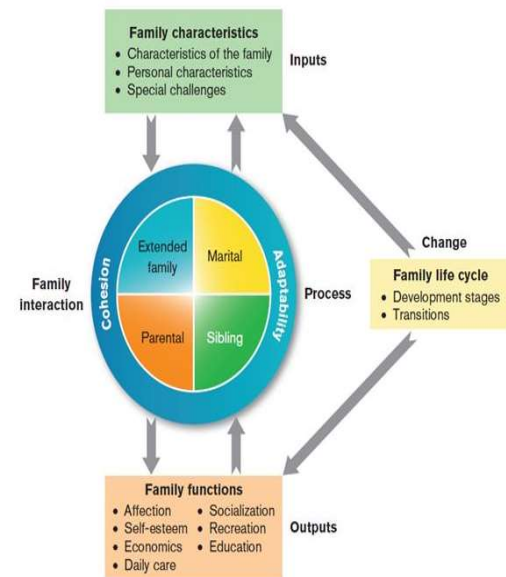
SOURCE: Adapted from A. Turnbull, J. Summers, and M. Brotherson, *Working with Families with Disabled Members: A Family Systems Approach* (Lawrence: Kansas Affiliated Facility, 1984), p. 60.

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Family Systems & Trauma

- Interaction/Impact of trauma is bi-directional
- Trauma Impacts all members of the system
  - The way members are impacted also impacts all other members
- Trauma impacts family's ability to maintain or return to homeostasis
- Member's responses to trauma or stress generate responses from all other members
- Trauma/stress create new feedback loops
- Trauma/stress changes all family processes

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Family Informed Trauma Treatment Model

FITT Model
Adapted from Kiser & Black, 2005

Time*   Acute and longer-term effects
         Individual Development
         Family life cycle

(Family Informed Trauma Treatment Center, 2023. FIIT Tookit)
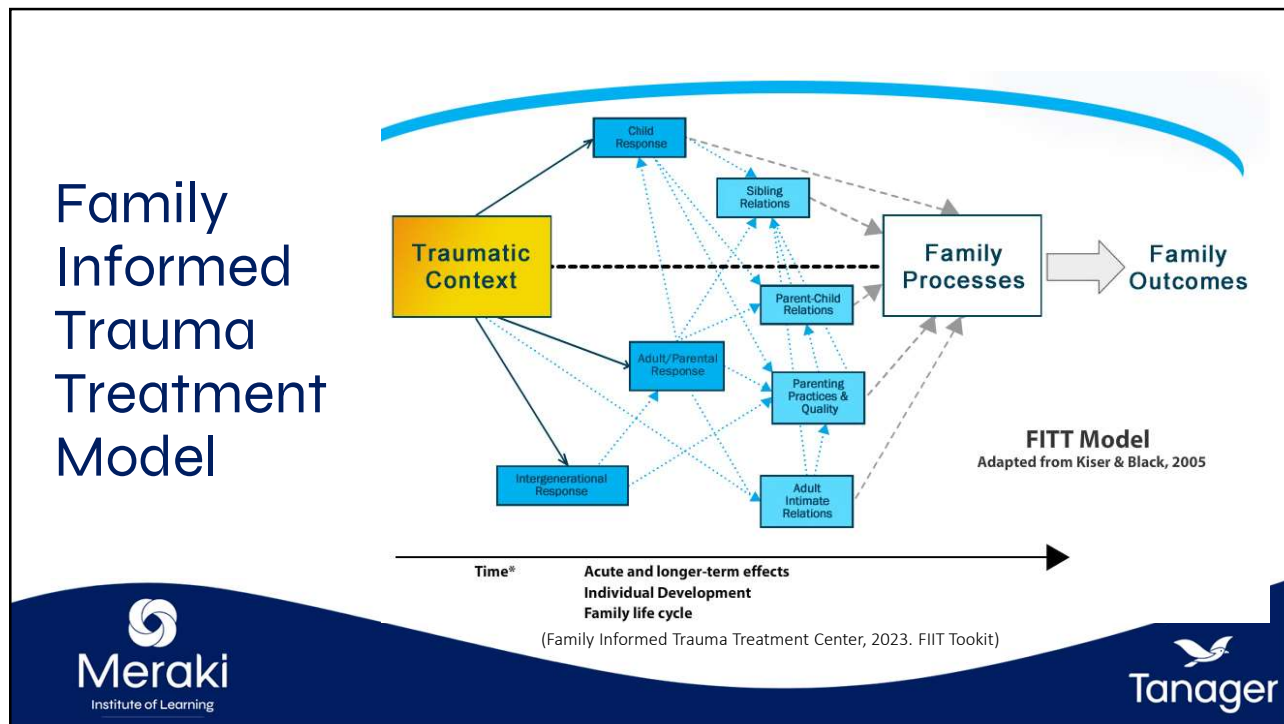
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Why Systemic Healing is Needed

- Research shows
  - Parents' level of distress/PTSD symptomology impacts parental functioning overall
  - Parental functioning impacts child's level of distress/PTSD symptomology & long-term treatment outcomes
  - When Parent's demonstrate engagement in their own healing, potential outcomes for youth increase
  - When parents engage in personal healing and recovery, family functioning increases mediating distress levels of youth

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Relationships Heal

- Regulatory interactions between child and caregiver is essential for the brain's synaptic connections to develop and for functional brain circuits to be established
- Relationships that offer emotional availability give the child a chance to develop a responsive regulatory system
- How individuals perceive themselves, others and their world shapes how individuals start to navigate and interact with the world around them including the relationships in their life…
- *The relationship is a key pathway for persons to find success.*

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#1 intervention for these children is the relationship with a securely attached caregiver….

So, what stops us from working in the context of the system

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Where are We?

- Reflect on your current and past experiences of working with Family Systems...Have they been
  - Positive?
  - Negative?
  - Successful?
  - Stressful?
- What do you experience?
  - Body sensations
  - Emotions
  - Thoughts/belief?

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What Are the Perceptions?

- Currently?
- Historically?

- Youth is the problem
- Parent is authority
- Parent is the problem
- Youth is the victim
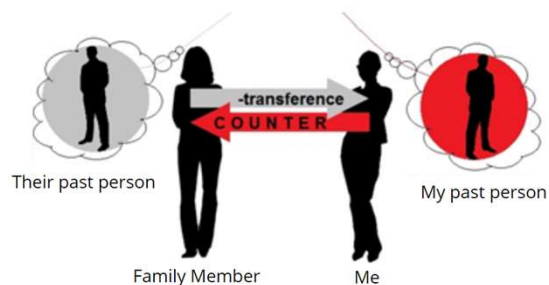- Youth needs protection
- Parent doesn't care
- ?????

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What is the Experience of Families?

- Overwhelmed
- Exhausted
- Defeated
- Frustrated
- Confused
- Afraid
- Protective
- ????

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Understanding Transference & Family Systems

- Transference & Countertransference potentials exist with each member of the family system.
- The more people you interact with the more prone you are to experiencing transference.
- Receiving transference from adults can be more distressing than receiving from youth

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Navigating the System:
Tools for supporting the whole family

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Create the Foundation

- Whether your current beliefs are supporting or preventing connections with parents, caregivers, & families, together we will believe…

- All parents/caregivers want to be the BEST PARENTS they can be. They have lived experiences both positive and negative that impact their understanding of how to be parents and inhibit their current skill level of how to be parents.

- Parents/caregivers are not our enemy; they are the most important ally to our client's success!

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Services to Support Systemic Healing

- Individual treatment (includes trauma processing, assessing & addressing MH needs, SUD needs, etc)
  - Youth in care
  - Parents/caretakers of youth
  - Siblings of youth
- Family Therapy
  - Youth & Caretaker
  - Youth & Siblings
  - Whole System
  - Youth & Other Primary Care Members

Bonus...
Engagement in treatment will likely increase if whole family is receiving care through 1 entity

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Working in the Context of Family

- Identified client is
  - the family system, not any individual person
  - Relationships, interactions, feedback loops, resources, etc
- Your Role
  - Increase *Primary Emotional Communication*-Communicating emotions, beliefs, needs, etc that are at the core of person's behaviors/interactions in the relationship
  - Highlight *Process over Content:* provide *NEW* information to the system
  - When observing interactions...*look for patterns*
    - Think about what private logic or perceptions member may be having
    - Possible function or purpose of behaviors/responses
    - What would happen if you removed ___ part of the interaction chain?

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Parallel Processing Matters

- The way the worker engages and works with parent becomes the way parent engages with child.
- Especially during times of distress/conflict

Communicate comfort	• Empathy, genuine, touch, nonverbal, eye level
Validate	• Even when you don't like the behavior, acknowledge and embrace feelings.
Stop talking and listen	• Remain in the right brain; just be present – don't go to lecture, logic or reasoning
Reflect what you hear	• Once you've listened, reflect back what you've heard
Assess for needs	• Use curiosity to assess for unmet needs of parent and metacommunicate about them

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Supporting Restorative Practices

- Most families in Western cultures don't have an effect way to manage conflict or repair harm within relationships
  - Leads to shame being a significant driving force within relationship dynamics & interactions
  - Perpetuates negative feedback loops
- Using restorative practices as a model for effective relationships will contribute to positive outcomes.
  - Provides a pathway to relational repair, and repair for harm caused
  - Provides shared responsibility and accountability within relationships
  - Provides equal opportunities for all to be heard
  - Provides increased awareness and insight of the greater impact of their actions

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Process over Content

Process is deeper than content and explores:

- *What purpose does this serve? Purpose of the interaction/behavior?*
- *What are possible circular causations?*
- Get there by bring curious
  - How the communication happens.
  - How communicators are affected.
  - What covert messages are being communicated along with the overt?
  - What patterns exist?

Tools & Interventions

- Circular questions
- Metacommunication
- Video Talk

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Parents as Narrators

Parents naturally become a child's narrator through life experiences.

This can provide child with positive or negative perceptions of self, others, relationships, the world around them	Heavily based on parent's own perceptions and ability to process through difficult situations

Parents of youth in care have their own internal narrative about themselves, their child, their family, the world, their future.

This is often shadowed by the difficult events and experiences which led youth to care.

Assisting parent in "re-writing" their narrative offers

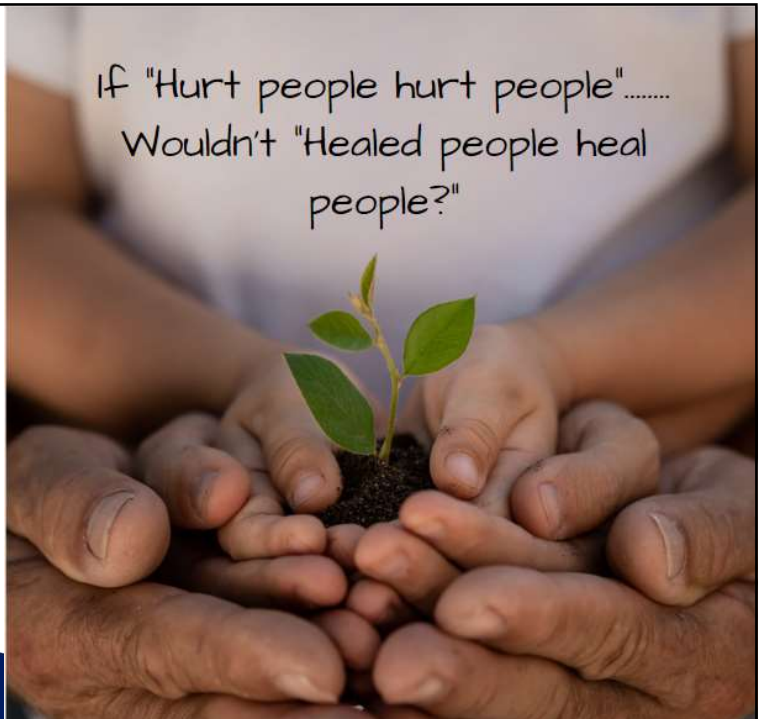| Parents the ability to have different responses, approaches, and presence with youth	Parents the ability to assist youth in experiencing/understanding future situations differently

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Creating a Family Narrative

- Narrative therapy offers family system to create a new preferred family narrative defining
  - Family Characteristics
  - Family Functioning
  - Family Relationships & Interactions
- Preferred Family Narrative becomes the "how-to" guide for navigating & responding to situations in the present and future

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A Thought to Ponder…

If "Hurt people hurt people"……..
Wouldn't "Healed people heal people?"

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Thank You!

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