



David Galloway,
Resident Counsellor and Coach

Highlights 2013

Fall Conference: "The Miracle of Systems Thinking: Systems Therapy in Action", October 18 & 19, 2013, with Dr. Michael Kerr at SFU Harbour Centre. This is a unique opportunity to see Bowen Family Systems theory unfolding in clinical practice! Dr. Kerr will present a series of video tapes of his work that show the theory in action. The Early Bird Special ends on September 27th. Group fees of four or more save \$100 per group! Visit www.livingsystems.ca or contact the registrar at sdsalomons@gmail.com, ph. 604 926 5496. ext. 308.

New Website: Look for our new website this November. Thank you to Dave Galloway, Katherine White, Cheryl Blair and Leila Howard for their time and energy on this project.

Community Education Courses: Michael Nel will be teaching "Using Family Systems Theory in Your Ministry" and a "Practical Theology Course in Bowen Theory" this fall. Contact Rev. Nel at mnel@shaw.ca for details. Sharon Salomons will be teaching "Family Ties that Bind" this fall. Contact Sharon at sdsalomons@gmail.com or visit the website for details: www.livingsystems.ca.

Counselling Program: We are fortunate to have received funding from the Gaming Commission & North Shore Municipalities and a new grant from the City of Langley. We now have 8 offices throughout the lower mainland, including an office in Surrey and New Westminster. New referrals welcomed.

Emotional contact: a Bowen family systems theory perspective

BY DAVID GALLOWAY, RESIDENT COUNSELLOR AND COACH

I have often wondered what the phrase 'good emotional contact' really means. I have heard it used in discussions, but for me the usage didn't convey a consistent meaning. I came to recognize that I didn't clearly understand the term myself. I suspected that what most people thought of as a good emotional contact is not what is meant by the use of the term in Bowen theory. So what does the term emotional contact mean and what is good emotional contact?

In Bowen family systems theory, the term emotional has a specific meaning. It is not synonymous with the term feeling; it is more of a biological term. Emotional, as in "emotional reaction", would be all the physiological and neurological processes, many of which are instinctual and automatic, that occur in order to process various stimuli. What most people think of as feelings are only the conscious part of these processes. For example, when one feels hungry, this feeling is only the conscious part of a much broader emotional process, most of which one doesn't have feelings about. You don't directly feel the change in your blood sugar levels, nor the levels of other chemicals that trigger the feeling of hunger; you only feel hungry. The emotional reactions are operating, but beneath awareness, and only the feeling is noticed. This is how Bowen theory differentiates the terms emotion and feeling.

Humans automatically sense the emotional state and associated feelings of each other. This automatic sensing can happen outside of awareness through body language (e.g., gestures, facial expressions, tones or inflexions of voice, etc), which communicates an individual's emotional state and feelings to others. Because this level of communication is automatic, feelings can move rapidly from one person to another. When one person in a family is tense or upset, often everyone in the family automatically senses this and can also get tense or upset. When a parent gives their child a particular look, the child can immediately tell if the parent is upset or not. The wink of an eye can communicate that something is actually a joke and not serious. It is our nature to automatically sense and respond to the feelings of others.

Through this process of automatic sensing, family members learn what is acceptable to say and do. Individuals can automatically sense what subjects create discomfort and often avoid those subjects. Often they don't want to have to deal with the upset created in themselves as well as the discomfort in others. The phrase, "don't go near that topic", describes a common way individuals avoid uncomfortable feelings in self or in others: avoid the topic, avoid the feelings of discomfort. Usually, one family member is seen to be more symptomatic than the others; for example, the family may think Pat drinks too much. The family has stopped discussing Pat's drinking because it is such an uncomfortable problem for everyone to discuss. By avoiding these discussions, the immediate discomfort is also avoided. But, the price for this comfort can be, over time, fewer and fewer conversations with Pat. Even though everyone has less discomfort in the short term, the cost, to everyone, is greater isolation of Pat. Through this automatic process to reduce discomfort, the family avoids the issue and they avoid Pat.

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This brings us to “contact” and what Bowen theory means by contact. Bowen theory distinguishes between emotional contact and emotional fusion. Contact has the quality of a temporary coming together, or touching, without losing boundaries, and is often used with respect to communication. Have you contacted your mother recently? How long has it been since you contacted your son? They made eye contact. These are common phrases about when someone last exchanged words, stories or information with family members. In contrast, fusion implies a melding together, a loss of boundaries, or two things becoming one. With emotional fusion an individual is automatically reacting to another's emotional state and feelings so intensely that one can't think objectively for oneself. One may feel the same or feel very different from another, but the emotional reaction is automatic. There is a loss of separateness because one's feelings automatically change in response to changes in the other's feelings. In contrast, with emotional contact one is able to hold on to one's thinking, regardless of the intensity of the feelings being expressed by the other. To the degree that one does not get emotionally fused, then one's emotional state and feelings will not override one's ability to stay objective and thoughtful. Emotional contact occurs when one is able to recognize and understand another's feelings, without automatically reacting to the other's feelings, and without losing the ability to think about the situation for oneself.

Let's continue with the example of Pat and the drinking problem. If one or more of the family members could manage their own discomfort that comes up around Pat's drinking, they would be more able to interact with and talk to Pat about any topic. By having more contact with Pat, the isolation across the family would be reduced. Being able to manage their own discomfort, they could be more thoughtful and objective about any issue that Pat might want to discuss. It is as if one is providing Pat with a calmer, more thoughtful and more objective brain, which would be a significant resource to Pat and thus the entire family. The more family members that can have a thoughtful and objective interaction with Pat, the better things will be for the entire family: Pat will be less isolated and the level of anxiety will come down. This is what good emotional contact can do for a family.

Dr Bowen believed that a better differentiated individual is more able to have good emotional contact with others. Better emotional contact in families improves their ability to adapt to challenges of all kinds. The following questions may help you think about emotional contact in your life: Is meaningful information exchanged? Can I stay objective, interested and thoughtful regardless of the topic? Is there a good understanding of what is important and meaningful to the other? Do I share what is meaningful and important to me? Am I able to listen to the other, or share what's going on for me, without expecting them to see it my way? Can I listen to the other describing a problem without feeling that I have to solve it for them? Do I expect others to solve my problems for me? Just how open am I willing to be with others even if they don't agree with me? What would it take for me to have good emotional contact with others?