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## The Family as an Emotional Unit

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A friend visited us awhile back who had spent four years in Japan and speaks Japanese fluently. She said the Japanese word for individual literally means, “the space between two people”! In the West we like to think of people more as self-contained entities. Our legal system is predicated on the rights of the individual. Medicine defines disease as something occurring within an individual, even our religion often centres on the individual. The idea of a relationship system between people governing much of what goes on within each person is foreign to us. Yet, we may be far less self-contained than we think. Family systems theory is predicated on a concept of the family as an emotional unit where patterns of interaction between people govern individual behavior and development.

In psychiatry, the idea of the family as an emotional unit originally took shape in the 1950s when clinical researchers like Murray Bowen studied schizophrenia by bringing entire families to live on a research ward of a hospital for up to three years. A new level of observation became possible when the person with schizophrenia was seen over time living within the context of his/her family. Intense and fixed patterns of relationships in the family seemed to affect the severity of symptoms in the “patient”.

Later, researchers began to notice the same patterns in families with members who had less severe problems. In those families, the patterns were a bit more flexible and less intense, then the same patterns were found in families without diagnosable symptoms, especially under conditions of high anxiety. Again, the difference was in the amount of flexibility in the relationship patterns and in the degree of emotional intensity expressed in the patterns of interaction. It began to appear that the emotional process in families with a severe symptom in one or more of its members was simply an exaggeration of a natural process present in all families.

An evaluation of the family as a unit is a routine part of the intake process at Living Systems Society. Counsellors gather factual information about each family which forms the basis for an initial assessment of the variables influencing the presenting problem. A careful assessment process may take three or four sessions. The more the counselor learns about the family, the more the family learns about itself. As family members begin to recognize the part each plays in relationship patterns that contribute to family problems, each person has something to work on. Family therapy, like family evaluation, rests on the concept of the family as an emotional unit.

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