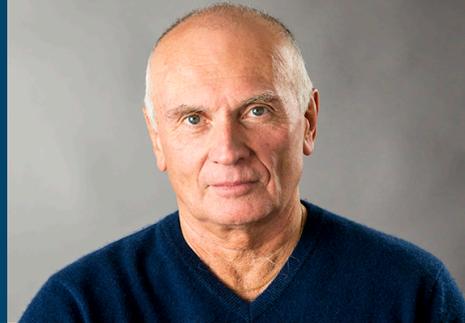




An Enmeshed Family Or Too Much Family

by Dr. Paul Dunion, Transformational Faculty Member



An enmeshed family diminishes the value of individual members while prioritizing the wellbeing of the group. The enmeshed imperative is: Are you giving enough to others? Weak boundaries masquerade as expressions of closeness and togetherness. There is a way to be, and individual family members are encouraged to figure that out and make it happen, in honor of the group. Before taking a closer look at the prevailing characteristics of an enmeshed family and recommended strategies for healing, it may be helpful to stress the importance of understanding the imperfect nature of families.

Parents of an enmeshed family likely recreate the family configuration they were raised in and best know. What they understand is that family is constructed with permeable boundaries – ones that do not effectively separate and honor the unique aspirations, needs, and beliefs of its individual members. Parents tend to not only create what's familiar, but to err on the side of too much support for the group or too much for each separate member.

A more sophisticated boundary is semi-permeable – one established with discernment in assessing whether the autonomy of individuals needs more support or the cohesive connection to the group. The process needs to remain corrective. A group doesn't support the whole *and* support individuals perfectly. It calls for commitment, perseverance, and

enough humility to fumble with the evolving nature of a family.

Characteristics of an Enmeshed Family

Weak Boundaries – Boundaries in an enmeshed family can be extremely permeable. Permeability inhibits how family members distinguish themselves from others in the family. Members get effective at reading what others in the family expect. It becomes only too easy for family members to feel entitled to influence and control others. Hence, enmeshed families typically experience a higher incidence of both emotional and sexual incest.

I was working with Joan, mother of three children and a devoted kindergarten teacher. When introduced to what it means to come from an enmeshed family, she came to the edge of her seat, “Oh my God, I just thought we were just really close!”

“The members of your family may have felt close to each other, and it does sound like the boundaries in the family were considerably permeable,” I suggested, wanting to support Joan's introduction to enmeshment.

“Well, the more I think about it, the closeness mostly happened before we were adolescents. I've recently noticed that several of my siblings get rather critical with a number of my choices, workshops I go to, and people I choose for friends”, she offered, her voice trailing off, with her gaze moving down and away.

“Joan, I wonder if you’re having some feelings about your relationship with your siblings,” I suggested, hoping she might feel invited and comfortable enough to give a voice to her feelings.

“It’s just something my younger sister Sally told me recently about our older brother. It’s hard to believe it happened, and I know that Sally would not make such a thing up,” pausing, with her jaw-dropping and lips quivering, “Sally said that our brother Ted sexually abused her when she was thirteen,” Joan divulged.

“How do you feel about telling me?” I asked, wondering if she might feel like she betrayed Sally.

“I feel nervous and I’m glad it’s coming out. I don’t remember Ted ever touching me inappropriately, but I often got the feeling that he was peering as I left the bathroom after showering. Do you think what happened to Sally has anything to do with the enmeshment of the family?” she wondered, eyes widening, and her tone genuinely curious.

“Well, it’s likely. In an enmeshed family, no one truly owns their own body or for that matter, their own mind,” I pointed out, seeing Joan lean forward with interest.

“I’m not sure I understand what it means not to own your own body,” Joan offered.

“When boundaries are too thin or permeable, the message is that what you call yours is also ours, ours to access and claim in some way. What belongs to one member belongs to everyone. That could be your mind or your body,” I explained, noticing Joan gently nodding as if what she was hearing she already knew.

From there, our work focused on Joan learning about semi-permeable boundaries and committing to employing boundaries in her own family that

supported individual differences while building a trusting and cohesive unit.

Externally referenced – Family members are encouraged to read the needs and dispositions of others in lieu of their own. Love is understood as attending to others and the attention is typically driven by hypervigilance. This exaggerated focus on others happens because it’s a violation of family norms if someone focuses on themselves. Everyone depends upon others to pick up on non-verbal cues regarding needs and upsets. Family members easily succumb to feeling guilty if someone’s discontent was missed. Often these individuals feel low-grade anxiety about the possibility that someone other than themselves was not properly supported.

Diminished support for autonomy and individuation. Being self-focused is frowned upon. Getting clear about one’s own values, needs and desires can be seriously compromised. One consequence is that personal identity can be undermined, leaving family members feeling separated from themselves. They know more about to whom they are related, than they have solid feelings about their own interiority. Their identity is strongly planted in family roles.

The present-day experience of this psychological merger, can leave people feeling haunted by a historical family dynamic. George came from an enmeshed family where he found himself traumatized in a family triangle.

“My two sisters were kind of raised by my mother, while my younger brother and I were raised by my father when he was available,” George’s voice trailed off as he mentioned his father.

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“I’m wondering if you saw your sisters getting more parenting from your mother than you received from your father,” I offered, wondering if he might be carrying feelings of loss.

“Yes, my father wasn’t around much, but the big deal was I had no idea how to break into the triangle with my mother and my sister Louise. I mean, they were tight, and I just could not connect to my mom, but I don’t want to take anything away from them. They had a good mother-daughter thing, you know what I mean?” George added, seeming to mitigate his loss in favor of what his mother created with his sister.

“I hear you don’t want to diminish the relationship between your mother and your sister. *And* it’s okay to feel the loss of your mom,” I encouraged.

“Yeah, I hear you. I’m reminded of what you mentioned about these triangles getting reproduced. You know, the one at work with my boss Peggy and my colleague Maureen – sure feels the same,” he admitted with a note of anger, leaving me feeling a bit confused.

“I get that you’ve been in a triangle with two women again. But, my understanding is that the outcome of this triangle at work was quite different than the one in your childhood,” I suggested. Given the information I had, I was confused about the comparison he was making.

“Well, both triangles felt awful. I can’t tell you how many times I witnessed Peggy and Maureen doing their female thing together. They have been really bonded,” stressed George.

“George, I’ve got to tell you that I have a different take. Didn’t Peggy let go of Maureen and promote you?” I asked, seeking confirmation of his experience.

“Yes, yes she did. But I don’t know, nothing about the whole thing felt right,” he added, casting his gaze downward.

“Okay, so what I recall is that Peggy has been very clear about believing in you and supporting you. Sounds like the kind of boss we all might want to have,” I proposed, curious about how much of the energy attached to the original triangle he might have dragged into the current one.

George was willing to interrupt his protection of

his mother and his sister and access his anger and hurt about feeling marginalized in the family. As he was able to access the loss and grief related to his mother, he began to appreciate how much Peggy remained a professional ally. The heartbreak of the original triangle had temporarily blinded George to the fact that the current triangle at work operated without unfavorable consequences for him.

Love means being self-sacrificing – Efforts to support oneself can be viewed as unloving of others. Consistent self-sacrifice typically yields accusations that others are not doing enough. There’s an attachment to the illusion that others can make you happy. Being self-sacrificial also tends to lead to resentment as a family member awaits a payoff for sacrifices rendered.

Conflict avoidant – Family members are encouraged to remain conflict-avoidant since a conflict may have an unfavorable impact upon others. Consequently, family members do not learn how to reach conflict resolution. The typical approach to conflict is avoidance. However, avoidance tends to lead to case-building and narrative confirmation. When we avoid emotional material, we can continue to build a case against someone’s character without ever questioning ourselves. Narrative confirmation follows and occurs when we decide that someone is insensitive, for example, and we tune into any behavior that might support that narrative.

Learn to become caretakers – Family members learn the belief that they are responsible for the well-being of others and remain self-neglectful to meet the family imperative of caring for others.

A tendency for the children to be Parentified – Parentification of children happens as they are encouraged to parent others. Because of the weak boundaries coupled with the heartening to become caretakers, parentified children in an enmeshed family often experience an early role reversal, parenting one of their parents. In addition, they parent themselves and often their siblings.

Fear of abandonment – Because members have a compromised relationship with themselves, their greatest fear is to be rejected or abandoned by others. This fear often carries an acute sensitivity where there is little resiliency for tolerating the unfavorable responses of others. To mitigate others being upset with them, they exercise a strong need to please and be liked. As Emily learned about her fragility when it came to others being angry at her, she understood how she coped.

“I made up the story that I was a very likable person. In fact, I always said that people just naturally like me,” Emily explained with a sheepish smile.

“I’m interested in your smile. What does it say?” I asked, in the hope that she might pause and consider the smile’s message.

“Well, if I’m really honest, the truth is that I give a lot, I mean a real lot in the hope that my giving will be able to fend off unwanted anger, disappointment and frustration people might have with me. You know, I’m starting to think that it’s not about how much I give, I think that people might feel too guilty to be honest with such a kind person. They might not tell me that they are angry at me, but they also aren’t building anything truly intimate with me,” Emily shared, revealing how much she was willing to get honest with herself.

Emily soon learned how much she neglected herself and how much energy she put into taking people hostage with her exorbitant levels of giving. She also became clearer about the possibility of becoming one of the recipients of her giving.

Encouraged to feel guilt, shame, and anxiety – These feelings are encouraged to avoid a family member straying from the group mandate and keep them focused on supporting the comfort and happiness of others.

Compromised personal agency – Once family members have internalized the family imperative to serve the collective and not themselves, they are prone to becoming excessively passive when it comes to even knowing their desire never mind acting toward its satisfaction. They are more comfortable waiting for others to care for them.

Deluded about genuine emotional intimacy. Members of enmeshed families are usually convinced that enmeshment is synonymous with emotional intimacy. If we define emotional intimacy as the unity of two separate and unique individuals, it becomes clear that enmeshment is masquerading for authentic unity. When the denial of the self is seen as loving, it can be extremely difficult to learn what it means to choose oneself, an essential building block of real intimacy.

Guidance for Healing

It is critical that people who come from an enmeshed family, understand that there are no perfect families. Enmeshment was simply the system’s way of attempting to coalesce and cope with the tension of generating unity with unique individuals. It is helpful to introduce the notion that the only option is to come from an imperfect family. It doesn’t mean that someone having been reared in such imperfection is

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damaged goods. It only means that life is a great deal about understanding where you come from, as well as the healing and learning your past is asking for. Let's look at some of the restorative interventions an enmeshed beginning in life might ask for:

Permission to grieve – As you explore the losses that naturally accompany being raised in an imperfect and enmeshed family, it is healing to access the sadness and anger associated with these losses. Losses may be as practical as no door to your bedroom or no lock on the bathroom door, depriving privacy. You may have felt shame because you were called to an ideological path not compatible with that of the family.

Betrayal of the family mandate – Simply exploring how your enmeshed family did not reach some idyllic status can feel like a violation of loyalty. The key is to not make your parents bad because they were instrumental in creating an imperfect family. They too came from an imperfect family. Betrayal might simply mean that you are entitled to grow out of an attachment to dysfunctional patterns, an entitlement that can serve all the people in your life including your children and their children.

Permission to be internally referenced – This simply means that a healthy relationship can begin because we are acquainted with the person we bring to the relationship. We can know our preferences, our beliefs, and feelings. Our interior world is what we can know and have some measure of control over. We can be internally referenced while being empathic, understanding, and negotiable.

Boundary education – Members of enmeshed families live with excessively permeable boundaries. It is important to broaden your understanding of both non-permeable and semi-permeable boundaries. The former is needed when there is an actual imminent threat to safety. However, it is semi-permeable boundaries that support a higher level of relational functioning. These boundaries have a dual purpose.

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They support our safety or uniqueness while allowing us to be accessible to others.

Redefining love and intimacy – Members of enmeshed families need help to let go of understanding love and emotional intimacy as characterized by persistent self-sacrifice and caretaking of others. An important lesson is learning to redefine love, such that both giving and receiving get top billing. They need to add the act of receiving to their understanding of love, as well as making requests of others, and be introduced to their responsibility to support self-love. They also need to understand that when self-love is compromised, they run the risk of passively waiting for others to love them in lieu of loving themselves. Gaining clarity about necessary vs. unnecessary self-sacrifice becomes an essential relational competency. Giving new meaning to love calls for therapeutic support and guidance, and the willingness to stumble with such an immense and honorable undertaking.

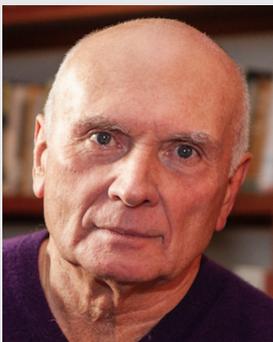
Managing conflict – Because avoidance was the pattern for dealing with conflict, they will need to learn to interrupt catastrophizing the presence of conflict. They can acquire conflict resolution skills and come to accept conflict as a natural phenomenon in healthy relationships.

Permission to live from desire – They will need to be encouraged to be curious about their desire, feel it,

and pursue it as an essential way to engage in life. They will need to be reminded that living from their desire is not unloving. It is simply the most natural way to welcome oneself into life. It can be helpful to remember that as you live your desire, you can be curious about the desire of others.

It is important to accept enmeshment as one way to cope with the tension of remaining connected to the

group while connected to ourselves. Those connections are not static, but rather organic and ever-shifting. Members of the family change, calling for reparative ways to support connections to self and others. Enmeshment is a strong way to attempt to secure connections to others. Of course, if a family member does not experience his or her uniqueness welcomed by the group, connection to the group will be weakened. Hence, enmeshment is a bad imitation of real intimacy. ■



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He has been in private practice for the past thirty-seven years. As a holistic psychological healer, employing an existential modality as well as a somatic approach to treating trauma, Paul is trained in EMDR and is a graduate of the Somatic Experiencing Institute.

From its early beginnings, Paul represented the State of Connecticut at the national gatherings of the mytho-poetic men's movement, sponsored by Wingspan. As the founder of Boys to Men, he created a mentoring community for teenage boys. He is the co-founder of COMEGA (Connecticut Gathering of Men), having served over 6,000 men since 1992, which continues to offer biannual retreats. In 2013, Paul established the Croton Mystery School and designed its curriculum with a focus on teaching students how to make peace with life's mystery and unpredictability. He has offered over 200 workshops on topics related to Human Potential. Currently, Paul offers supervision for younger psychotherapists.

Paul has published six books: *Seekers – Finding Our Way Home* (2016); *Dare to Grow-Up – Become Who You Are Meant to Be* (2016); *Path of the Novice Mystic – Maintaining a Beginner's Heart and Mind* (2013); *Shadow Marriage – A Descent into Intimacy* (2006); *Temptation in the House of the Lord* (2004); and his latest offering *Wisdom – Apprenticing to the Unknown and Befriending Fate* (2021).



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