

SYMPTOMS OF A HEALTHY FAMILY

a workshop by

David Keith, MD

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handout by Anca Tiurean

WHO IS DAVID KEITH:

By being a host of the *Growing up Together* workshops, Anca gets to present herself with each invited tutor and she notices that she is in a different part of herself, depending on who she is working with. This means we are likely to develop increased knowledge about ourselves through our encounters with others. With David Keith, Anca tends to be stalking herself. She sees Dave saying things and taking them back, using ambiguity, humor and often apparently something unrelated to the ongoing topic. Consequently she tends to look for uncommon connections as well as to become aware of new perspectives. In the handout below however I will briefly present a combined version of ideas, which we are hoping you will use to reflect and inspire yourself without turning them into absolute truths. They are not. Every theory is a form of fantasy. We only make them because this is what the mind does all day: it organizes data, it creates coherence, predictability and sense. Participants in the workshop were asked to offer their contributions to the handout. Some of the ideas come from them, but I present them anonymously. The handout is then a bit like the human mind: a collection of voices, which one joins together into a coherent narrative. This narrative is prone to growth and change, it is likely to inspire, to stimulate objections, worries or feelings of relief and it is going to transform in the encounters with the readers minds -- they being creators of narrative themselves.

David Keith started working with families in the 1970s - the families he used to work with were affected by psychosis, psycho-somatic problems and also couples with marital problems. In his view, all psychopathology comes from interpersonal experience¹. Psychotherapy as a practice comes from a tradition of looking at what is wrong with people and their families. In the experiential approach, the perspective has been switched so we mostly look at families and people as healthy and as functioning in the sense of constantly healing, maintaining, and developing themselves. Symptoms as well are viewed as an attempt at health. Where there is caring, all pathology is sharing or repairing.

¹ Gregory Bateson - Interpersonal view of schizophrenia / Double bind theory / Metacommunication

Experiential psychotherapists in general tend to include their own experience of being with the family in working with the family and use their own impressions and subjectivity to make an impact on the system which gives the system a possibility to rearrange and thus evolve. This approach also teaches the family members how to talk about their own subjectivity, by imitating the therapist who knows how to be a patient. In his experience, David observed that families affected by psychosis had a hard time speaking about themselves: they were answering questions briefly, many times with just yes or no or I don't know or maybe. They had an even harder time meta-communicating: that is - they could not say much about how they were communicating and how they experienced living with each other. He characterized these families as "abnormally normal" – they made efforts to look like there is nothing wrong with them and that they were like everyone else out there. And it then occurred to him that healthy families must have been "normally crazy" – that is: different and able to discuss their problems, to contain conflict, to construct solutions together without anyone being an expert at it and to have fun in the meantime. Psychotherapy helps this process, making room for "various versions" instead of looking for one truth. Extra credit is given to crazy ideas for their capacity to stir in the existing order and generate novelty.

CONTRACTING FOR REFLECTION WORK

David Keith will attempt to describe a difficult concept, that of health - such an ambiguous and empty term which can be filled with meaning. In order to make more of what is health available to reflection Dave invites us to allow ourselves to be stimulated not taught by what he says.

"I am sometimes a bit confusing in the way that I talk and part of that comes from the fact that I am interested in obscure ideas, so if you feel confused by what I am saying, don't think it's you. It is not you being stupid, it is me speaking in a way that is too abstract or improperly ordered".

This is a way of taking responsibility for one's own chaos and as well a way to invite the interlocutors to enhance it. In this sense, experiential psychotherapy seems contrary to the tendency of human beings to search for order, predictability and certainty. He is inviting us to learn to swim in chaos and enjoy it, not be threatened by it and certainly not to try and escape from chaos, as we will merely end up back into it. Stimulating thinking into the other is probably the main way in which people contribute to each other's enrichment of mentality, unlike the container metaphor by which one thinks that education is something that the teacher does. It isn't. The teacher merely disturbs. It is the student who educates himself to face the teachers

and everything else that disturbs him. So thank you all who disturb us and this text with their ideas, objections and questions. Feel free to add to this handout!

SYMPTOMS OF A HEALTHY FAMILY

1. Sense of the whole

There is an understanding in the family that everybody belongs. Boundaries do not only separate - they as well represent contact areas, thus areas of stimulation and structure. So when one has a "personal problem" the problem can as well be seen to belong to the family since the family is impacted by the individuals and their problems and the family is structured in such ways as to make those individual problems perpetual or worked through with more or less effort and a great deal of available resources.

2. Generation gap

In healthy families there is a clear generation gap between parents and children. The marital subsystem and the sibling subsystem have to stay clearly distinguished. Can you think of some of the many reasons why?

The family is ranked like the military. The officers have some privilege but as well some higher responsibility. Sometimes in single-parent arrangements the oldest kid becomes the mother's emotional partner and parents his siblings. He does learn how to be more responsible, but he as well gets removed from his own generation. Being your parent's symbolic spouse makes both parent and child lonely and symbiotic, breaking off peer relationships. Peer relationships are important because they are unstable enough to maintain the spirit alive and the psychological competencies in an ongoing training and adaptation.

Another example of a missing generation gap is when in the marriage one partner becomes parent to the other. When spouses are peers, they are of "equal rank" -- one does not command the other. But when dad is just another one of mom's kids or when mom is her husband's daughter, then at first the eros is lost and then the one representing the older generation gets exhausted while the one representing the younger generation regresses and loses capacities to self-regulate.

3. Established sibling sub-group vis-a-vis the parents

The children in the family are a group which excludes the parents. In troubled families, often one of the children gets excluded by being treated as "the patient". When you are the patient everyone talks about you and what you do, but you are not allowed to talk about anyone and what they are doing. You are excluded from the interior of the family in this way. So in order to increase the health of such families, we make sure to help children form a team and thereby repair the exclusion of the child identified as problematic. When we see some siblings side with mom and dad against the "problematic brother" we might encourage the siblings to side with him

and help him belong with the sibling subgroup. Parents are tempted to use children unconsciously to relieve the marital distress. So when children form a sub-group they are protected from receiving a function in the maintenance of marital issues. Similarly, when kids experience conflict within the sibling subgroup, the parents may tend to hinder peer relationship and involuntarily send the message "i am a better partner to you than your peers" - this tempts children to reject their peers and to side with the parents, but when parents are not around these kids are vulnerable and alone. So it makes sense that we try to separate the generational subgroups and move the conflict between these subgroups, since social psychology shows that nothing binds a group more effectively than a common enemy.

4. The position of scapegoat revolves among all members

The scapegoat is usually the identified patient. The identified patient is maybe the most alive member of the family and is trying hard to repair something in the family but is constantly defeated and rejected. She or he carries the family's sins and is viewed as being bad or crazy. It is easy to be stuck in this position. In order to restore the health of this family an interesting exercise is to take turns in being the scapegoat: "For two days father is the scapegoat and everything that goes wrong is blamed on him, then for the next two days, the younger daughter is the scapegoat and everything that goes wrong is blamed on her and so on" - each member gets to experience being at fault for everything. It is a fun way to gain insight into who you are within the family and how you contribute to it. The scapegoat role is something probably impossible to be rid of because it is an integral part of family myth. So the best we can hope for is that they take turns at it and no one is stuck in this position, but that everyone gets to experience their power and to reflect on their roles. We can call it the game of flexibility. It is seen as relieving negative behaviours and attitudes.

5. The position of hero revolves among all members

The family hero is the person who is seen as never doing anything wrong. It's never this person's fault. It may sound favorable to be in this position, but in fact most heroes have an acute sense of powerlessness and a strong impostor syndrome. They think their success is accidental but that no one knows it and they feel pressured to keep up the appearance of being perfect and dedicated, never allowed to make mistakes and thus seriously prohibited from learning and developing. The other problem with the heroes is that they can never tell if they are loved for who they are or for what they try hard to seem. When the role of hero moves around in the family -- as an intentional family game perhaps -- the family members experience being of value but as well being not that important, so that they can relax. They get to enhance their capacity to appreciate each other as well as to go easy on themselves when failing. They learn to appreciate failure as much or more than success. They learn that a hero is just a story character - a costume one can wear but that does not define who one is. Heroes do not solve problems -- they usually maintain them and what's often surprising is that they can be appreciated for that.

6. Extended family as a library

The intrapsychic extended family is like a reference library to which we can go to think and help our own decision-making process and to find building blocks of culture and experience to construct our conceptions of what is happening in the present. The Ancient Greeks thought that in order to anticipate the future they had to look at their past and learn from it, trying to understand what happened, define it and then predict “where all this is going”. Whether we know it or not, we have some ideas about how we are supposed to be and how the family is supposed to be and what this world is all about – these are not truths, but legacies from our extended families. The many people in various generations have been working on this common cultural library of knowledge which each of us uses. We can question our family stories or put them together as a bouquet of multiple views, but all we can do is work with what we got. Everything that is new and contrary to our cultural background is experienced as threatening, but can be in fact enriching – depending on what we could learn from our families about being alive.

7. Flexible role-structure

Flexible role-structure, even across generations, means each member learns how to do what the other members can do, which means that if one temporarily loses capacity, another can replace him or her, functionally. Men can do what tends to be considered women work and vice versa, children can do parents’ work (for example taking care of their younger siblings), parents can engage in play, etc. In troubled families we tend to see rigid role structures (one is only in charge of breadwinning and one only in charge of breadmaking, so to speak, one only does the messing and one only the cleaning – and that is expected of them, their roles are taken for granted). In troubled families we can as well see the role structures being unclear and everyone expects the others to do what needs to be done, so no one does it. Many come to therapy because it is a place outside the family where they can speak openly and listen to each other – which is something they can’t do within the family, due to role rigidity or role confusion.

8. Flexible relationship structure

The relationship structure shows up in how the family members are close to each other, not in how they perform their roles. We can see the mother being close to the son and seems to be more disturbed by her daughter. Or a father being closer to his younger daughter and more distant from his daughter from a previous marriage. Another example is a mother being close to the newborn and rather distant from the first-born. There are deep unconscious reasons for which some family members are more close to each other than others. Sometimes it is simply because they are willing to share intimacy while others have a hard time being close with anyone. However tempting it may be to stay in the comfort of relating with those we feel more compatible with, it is more beneficial for the health of the family and of the individuals to work on those relationships that seem to be more uncomfortable.

9. Freedom for group regression

Group regression usually happens on holidays: Christmas, Dad's Birthday, Mother's Day, the cousin's wedding, the Christening of the new-born niece, etc. There are such various times when the family celebrates as a group and everyone joins in. Even the grumpy and more distant members of the family do not go to their study to do paperwork - they are not too busy to attend, because they just have to be there on the special occasion. In a healthy family they join in with pleasure, the group has fun together and they experience various old and new forms of intimacy.

After having lived apart and developed new ways and new personalities, a family reunion tends to bring everyone back into their old selves and their familiar positions in the system. Have you ever had the impression your parents still treat you like they did in childhood although you are all grown up now and with kids of your own?

The family group get-together drives everyone a little crazy, which is normal. The group holds each of us, individuals. We may tend to experience ourselves as small (even if we are each of a different generation) and to act-out as if the others were our parents: we want them to be understanding, to give space, to give us a hug, to appreciate how we have grown up and to love us no matter what, to refrain from shouting and to offer a warm shoulder or some kind confirmation of who we are. None of this happens exactly in this way and all of us get at least a bit frustrated, which leads us as a group to maintain a family atmosphere similar to a healthy yet not always easy to bear emotional sauna. Each time a blast-from-the-past hits someone right in the middle of their chest, we all may seem to start behaving in surprising or mysterious ways since we now experience things the same as we did a long time ago, but understand them quite differently.

10. An attitude of playfulness

The capacity to be silly with friends and family is a symptom of maturity and health of the family system. Single-mindedness tends to be divisive: one fights the other in an attempt to establish "the truth". But there are more truths and levels of truth and everything we can say is limited and problematic to some extent. It can all be proven wrong. Yet our views can be valid perspectives and our subjective experiences can be validated as contributions to the search for an ever-escaping truth. People who make puns are able to create social cohesion. They are aware that one word means two or more things and can use them to switch between meanings. They often bring smiles to our faces because they get us out of the narrowness and seriousness of an exclusive view we have been perhaps overly preoccupied with. Humor does the opposite of correctness: it does not cross with a red line over what has been expressed, but finds a way to dance with it, which enhances the freedom to express and the chances to belong where a singular view doesn't let one fit it.

11. Intimacy

Intimacy is about being open to interact with the other in ways that are transformative of both. In intimacy we feel safe although we are most vulnerable. To be intimate is to be capable of simultaneously love and hate in dyads and in groups. It is visible as well in the capacity to fight for the fun of it and to give up without the impression of losing anything important, but on the contrary, with a sense of having gained warmth, connection, insight and freedom from something perhaps self-imposed. But warmth is often unexpected and sometimes people cannot tolerate it when they get it. We can say the same about freedom and about authenticity.

12. A contradictory rule system

The family rule system is a mass of contradictions and inconsistencies forming a compost that enriches the children's growing. Healthy families do not have it all figured out - they keep searching. In healthy families members know that they only have the impression that they truly know each other. You may experience from the other members a curiosity to find out who you are and who you have become and an openness to show you all about who they have been recently. Families in which members all submit to a strict consensus about everything are rather rigid structures that leave little room for individuals to be themselves and to mature. It is a sign of health if these families contain some forms of defiance that brings about just enough contradiction and conflict to open up the chances for systemic reorganization.

13. Belonging and individuation

The healthy family is one in which the individual has the right to belong and to separate at their own initiative. One might say: "I don't see it that way, but go on". One feels free not to join or agree with the other and not to conform to the others. It remains a choice. Another symptom that the family supports individuation is that they enjoy it when a member enjoys something outside the family and cheers them on. They support the members' new found enthusiasm.

14. Death is acknowledged

Death in all its disguises, is an acknowledged member of the family. Some of the disguises of death include: illness, acute and chronic, feelings of fear or sensations in the body that can be worrisome, bankruptcy and the loss of a job or a business that is shut down by the pandemic. When the family can talk about death and acknowledge it, then the family members do not have to deal with it alone. It is not just between me and my body but between me and someone else and so it becomes easier to bear. Healthy families experience the freedom to talk about what is frightening to its members.

15. Reciprocal guidance

Family members allow reciprocal guidance. You learn by doing and by failing. Failures teach you. Failures disrupt us and make us question ourselves. It is through failing that we learn about our limits and the limits of the others. And since some limits are momentary we may be failing again and again. Healthy families view the many facets of failure: experimentation, exploration, learning, transformation, contact, illumination of the obvious, etc. Success is nice but it doesn't offer much and it often remains a burden: to maintain it, to repeat it, to not disappoint, to not fail, etc.

16. Craziness is not feared - may even be cherished

Everyone is crazy in some way. We are too complex to be fully understood, we are often surprising (that is: we abandoned a usual pattern) or we keep on applying the same formula to all problems (that is: we get stuck in a pattern) or we sometimes function in paradoxical or absurd ways. Confusion is a trip into chaos – we almost always come back from it with a handful of inspiration and change. Therefore craziness is not feared in healthy families. It is something interesting, not something scary. It is something cherished and often a topic for good humor in the family.

There is also craziness that is culturally laden with negative connotation and it tends to scare people. For instance psychosis: it makes us scared that one can lose their capacity to reason and to self-control and thus become violent or alienated from themselves, lost in some daydream or obsessed with doing strange things to prevent unlikely events. One is easy to marginalize for lesser sins like "being a nerd" or "wearing an inexpensive outfit" or "belonging to a disrespected social group". So people are afraid of craziness, probably because they fear being alone and attacked. That perspective creates just enough panic to make us want to blend in and seem normal or hide in a homogenous crowd and pretend to not be any different.

17. Meta-communication

Parents who know how to play provide health for their kids, but there are also families in which parents don't know how to stop the silliness. The silliness that is born from avoiding anxiety or intimacy is hard to stop because if it does, then we are obliged to face our anxieties. And we often rather discharge them through an endless play, sometimes finishing with cries and tears. Healthy families have a clause that play can be stopped at any time. This stopping is not just about play though. We should be able to stop what we are doing in a conflict when it becomes hurtful or unproductive. We should be able to stop sexual intercourse if it is not gratifying. We should be able to stop expressing ourselves in some ways and switching to other modes of expression that seem to be more suitable in a certain situation. When we

can stop and talk about what happened between us, then we are able to meta-communicate.

18. Being a patient

Being available and able to get something valuable from almost all life experiences and relationships, irrespective of what happens in them is an indispensable part of individual and family health. Many are afraid of what they feel and how they are, so they don't want to find out or they don't want it to become known.

How to be depressed: depression is a trip inside. It is dark in there. It is a cavern. There is an end to it, but you will have to endure the pain for a while. Depression is self-limiting, but if you try to treat it, you implicitly turn it into something wrong that needs to be corrected and this is likely to only add to the problem. In this way one may get depressed about being depressed. You are in an existential bowel which contracts and relaxes and it is moving you along towards the exit, little by little. Improving the health of a depression prone family requires that they learn how to care and how to be cared for without demands to get better or to be happy.

How to offer and receive attention: we all crave for attention and we all can do some things in order to get it but it is not always gratifying. The supervision of children with ADHD for instance involves a lot of attention to their behaviours, but too little to their lived experience. They get some form of attention but with insufficient emotional energy in it. When the attention we give comes out of our anxiety it is not the kind of attention that comforts them, but a hopeless struggle of ours to get someone outside of us to comfort our own anxiety. When we are ready to be patients, we start to pay attention to what our attention is directed at and that makes us more capable of seeing the others and their preoccupations in a clearer perspective

19. What would you add?