

System Dynamics of the Alcoholic Family and Dealing with Conflict

Several years ago Mark Bryan wrote a book called *Codes of Love*. In the book Bryan uses the story of his family to talk about family systems. The book is fairly helpful. He has four main ideas, and they all begin with the letter “R.” First, remember the things that went on in your family. We have been calling that honesty. Second, reflect on those things. Pay deeper attention to them. Third, reframe them—that is, look at them differently. Try to see them through a different perspective. Fourth, reconnect with people. This might be a helpful framework for you.

Bryan has an appendix in his book where he includes a checklist for going home for the holidays. He includes things like try to make contact before the holiday, stay in a hotel or with a friend instead of in the house, plan to do something specific with family members, ask questions about the past, have curiosity, bring a camera, have an ally, watch for signs of anxiety, monitor your body signals, do not force them to talk about their feelings, there is no need to buy them anything ostentatious, manage your expectations, and others. Bryan has another appendix called “Codes of Love: Rules of Engagement.” Some of the rules are no kicking, biting, or gouging. Let sleeping dogs lie. (I do not think he means keep secrets.) Do not make promises you cannot keep. And he goes on. Those are just one lay person’s ideas. From the brokenness of his own life he was helped somehow and found some change. He put those ideas together in a book that might be more accessible to some people.

Let me tell you a little bit about Bryan’s background. He was 26 or 27 years old, unemployed, living in Florida with some other people, and did not have much money. He had a relative in West Virginia who would have the family come over around Thanksgiving every year. Mark had not been for years. He had basically been cut off. But he decided, for reasons I do not remember, that he was going to go. Perhaps that relative actually contacted him and invited him. So he went to a thrift store, used his credit card, and bought a full-length men’s fur coat. He went on to buy all these gifts for family members, rented a Lincoln Town Car, and showed up. While he did not have a job and while he was living with a bunch of guys in a beach house in Florida, he could not be honest, so he showed up and tried to portray that he was well off. That gives you an idea of how much he was actually struggling. Life kept falling apart, but he kept working through issues and got his life together. It is a helpful book.

I want to move on and discuss system dynamics of the alcoholic family. When thinking about the alcoholic family, I focus on those rules that we have mentioned already: Do not talk, do not trust, and do not feel. Those rules were derived from people working with alcoholics and from people in alcoholic families.

There are typical roles that people in alcoholic families can fall into. This is helpful, because another way to think about family systems is by looking at the roles that people fall into. We are thinking specifically about alcoholic families, but this can be true of other kinds of situations. Some of the roles are, the person who is dependent (in this case on alcohol), the person who is the enabler, the person who is the hero, the person who is the scapegoat, the lost child, and the mascot. For each one of these roles there are motivating feelings, identifying symptoms, payoffs for the individual, payoffs for the family, and a possible price.

Let us talk about the enabler. The enabler is often the spouse of the one who is dependent. What does enabling look like? Let us say that the alcoholic is hung over and not getting out of bed. The enabler calls in to the alcoholic’s work and says that he is sick and cannot come in today. They are enabling that person to keep functioning with the alcohol. They become a safety net underneath them. The motivating

feeling for doing that is actually anger. It is not verbalized, but there is anger there. The symptoms look like powerlessness. The individual payoff is feeling self-righteous. The family payoff is that they look responsible. The possible price is that they can feel like a martyr. In this case the system is colluding together for this individual to take this role.

Let us talk about the hero. I had an uncle who was an alcoholic. I can see how one boy in the family appeared to have the hero role. It appears that way because he has been very successful in many kinds of ways. He had great grades, went to great schools, had great jobs, and was very successful. I am not sure he stays put in one thing for long, because he moves on to the next thing. That is essentially the way that he has been able to make it work and live his life. He hit a crisis point, however, when he received a phone call saying that his children had not been picked up from school because his wife had been in a car accident. She had been charged with driving while intoxicated. It turns out that she had a real drinking problem. It was a complete shock to him, as I understand it. The family pattern had repeated itself. Being the hero did not mean that he had defeated the impact of alcohol. The motivating feeling for the hero is inadequacy. The identifying symptoms are over-achievement. The individual payoff is that they get positive attention. The family payoff is that the family feels fairly good about themselves. The possible price is a compulsive drive.

Let us look at the lost child. The motivating feeling is that they are lonely. Identifying symptoms are shyness or being solitary. The individual payoff is that they escape. The family payoff is relief; they do not have to do much with that lost child. The possible price is social isolation. I am bringing this up because it relates to genograms.

I am not aware of any screening devices for identifying family roles, but I have not read enough in this area. I wonder if there might be literature along this line coming from Al-Anon. Al-Anon does not stand for Alcoholics Anonymous. It is a group that is designed for people who live with alcoholics or who grew up with alcoholics. They might have some literature along those lines.

How can you diagnose an alcoholic? There is a book called *DSM-IV*. That stands for *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*. In that book they describe particular pathologies and give criteria for diagnosis. They typically give a list of things and you read through that list and see how many of them a person has. There is an alcohol and substance abuse category in that volume that would give you some guidelines. A more effective tool is the Michigan Alcohol Screening Test (MAST). That is a screening device that consists of yes and no questions. It is simple. There are questions that deal with legal consequences, driving issues, social issues, impact at your work, and physical symptoms. For instance, if you do not drink, do you begin to experience withdrawal? If they start to see withdrawal, it is fairly clear that they are dependent on alcohol. The MAST will ask some questions of spouses as well. I became aware of MAST from a friend who is a marriage and family therapist and is good with dealing with alcoholism. He will use the test with couples and ask the spouse the questions as well. It is a way to get around the denial. There are levels and extremes of alcoholism.

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* is a tool that is used worldwide, though it is called something different in Europe and Asia. It is produced by a large organization, which is secular and contemporary. The definitions evolve and change. It is something of a political process. If you look at *DSM-IV*, what you are getting is how the profession as a whole defines mental illness and pathology. At a certain point, for instance, homosexuality was not viewed as mental illness but as problematic pathology. It is no longer considered that.

We are not talking about homosexuality in this lesson, but the reality is that, politically speaking, gay rights activists won. Perhaps we have not realized that yet. Anytime you hear someone talk about homosexuality, the assumption behind it is that you are born that way. The political aspect of this has been won. I hear this in Christian youth groups. Kids wonder if they are gay or not. By that they mean, were they born that way or not? Well, that is not the true basis. Research does not show that it works that way. But politically, homosexuality has become defined that way.

Let us move on and talk about conflict. This material is coming from a conference that I went to by a man named Daniel Wile. This is to help us think about how to help couples when they are wrestling with conflict. This may strike you as being too easy, as not considering enough, but I think it does. Wile pays attention to systems theory and lots of thinking about how people work. What Wile says here, by the way, fits very well with what Sue Johnson says in *Hold Me Tight*. This is a very compact presentation of it.

Imagine that a married couple hits a crossroads moment in their relationship. It is a significant moment where something is happening. At that moment there are three approaches that can be taken. The first one is to attack or defend. Wile gives an illustration from his own life. He was driving home one day to see his wife. Something exciting had happened during the day that he wanted to share with her. When he got home, he walked in through the back door of the house into the kitchen. His wife was there talking to one of her friends on the phone. That was all right, he thought. He would wait, because he really wanted to share this with his wife. So he waits and putters around the kitchen a bit. He continues to wait as she remains on the phone. His wife is laughing and talking and having a great time. So he moves into the next room, sits down, and reads the paper. She continues to talk. While this is happening, he starts to feel something. He has hit a crossroads point. What will he say? What will he do when his wife, Alice, gets off the phone?

The first option, as we said, is to attack or defend. Those are the same thing. Listen to this definition of attacking or defending. You express some element of what you are experiencing, not really getting a hold of the whole thing of what is going on in your heart; but it is still there. It is motivating you, and you catch a piece of it. You express that piece but in the form of a complaint that has the effect of coercing, criticizing, or retaliating rather than illuminating.

Sue Johnson says that we want to be connected in our relationships, but we hit moments where we are not sure whether we are. This is a perfect example. Wile wants to talk, to be connected and share with his best friend this great moment, but he is not sure she is interested. That is what he is feeling. In Sue Johnson's language, when that happens we protest. We protest that we have these feelings of doubt about our connection. We protest because we are hoping to get a response that says, "Oh, no. I am interested." We protest because we are not getting a hold of the whole thing that we are feeling. We are only saying a piece of it. We are doing the thing that is least likely to get the response that we are looking for.

Listen to what Wile said to his wife. He said, "How come you always have so much to say to your friend and so little to say to me?" Can you imagine saying something like that in that circumstance? I can, I am afraid. But that turns your partner into an enemy. It triggers an adversarial cycle so that each partner, feeling stung, stings back. It is self-reinforcing. Each partner stings in response to feeling stung. Each feels too unheard to listen, too misunderstood to be understanding.

You might choose not to attack, however. Rather, you might choose to avoid, ignore, or downplay. In that case you keep what you are experiencing to yourself and talk about something else. You might ask,

“Is there anything good on TV tonight?” That turns your partner into a bit of a stranger. It triggers a withdrawal cycle. We ask, “What is good on TV tonight?” and the other spouse may respond, “I do not know.” We stay withdrawn from each other, which is self-reinforcing. Each partner’s carefulness, politeness, or walking on eggshells stimulates the same in the other much as whispering stimulates whispering.

The third option, and this is the good one, is that we can confide and listen. Bring your partner in on what you are experiencing. That is what we have been calling honesty. Take in what your partner is trying to tell you. In Wile’s case, he would say something like, “I am jealous of how much fun you were having talking to Jane over the phone just now.” That turns your partner into an ally, triggering an empathic or collaborative cycle, which is self-reinforcing. Each partner’s confiding, admitting, reaching out, and considering the other’s viewpoint makes the other automatically do the same. Automatically might be a bit too strong of a word, but it certainly encourages.

Wile lists several possibilities for different sequences of responses. If he chooses the attack option and says to his wife, “Why do you always have so much to say to your friends,” his wife in turn would have all three options open to her as well. She could attack back, she could avoid, or she could confide. Wile, then, has three possible responses to each one of her responses. So there are multiple options. To deal with conflict well, it comes down to the fact that each one of us, at each step of the way, has to have the maturity to pay attention to our stuff and to respond honestly, even when it gets uncomfortable. We have to be honest.

Even if you start by responding well, things can go the wrong direction. If Wile would have confided in Alice by saying, “I am jealous of how much fun you were having talking to Jane over the phone,” Alice might attack him in response. She might say, “You should not listen to my conversations anyway. I am tired of you always getting so jealous.” If that would happen, Wile would have another choice. He could confide again, “I am tired of it, too.” They could stick with what is happening between them. What is happening in this moment? What is going on at a heart level? Do you see what I am saying? Each person has a response. One person can choose to stay mature and keep confiding even if the other one is not. It at least creates more of an opportunity and a better context for the other person to shift gears, slow down, think about what is going on, and start confiding themselves.

This is pretty simple, but I believe it is correct. Essentially everything that you will ever see in front of you, especially in conflict with couples, fits this pattern. Most of the time, you will have couples coming in who regularly keep going over the same things. They have a pattern. One of them has a tendency to attack or avoid. The other one in response has a tendency to attack or avoid. Confiding is hard to do. Confiding is not typical for most of us. In our marriages, all of us will do all three. All of us in our lives and in our other relationships will do all three from time to time. Our goal is to try to help people do a better job of confiding, especially at key moments, and being more honest with each other.

Wile does a very practical thing in his counseling. I do not do things quite like him, but I try to put the same thinking into play. Wile tries to pay attention to what is underneath the attack or avoidance. He tries to pay attention to what could be confided if the person got a hold of it. In other words, he tries to make educated guesses at what the person should be confiding. When a person attacks, part of what they say is typically based on what they are actually feeling. Part of the attack is based on what is actually there, but it gets distorted. As a result, attacking is a little easier for a counselor to deal with than avoiding, because at least part of the truth is being expressed. Avoidance is a little more mysterious.

Wile tries to listen well. He interrupts people. He stops the arguing process. He asks questions like, “What is it you really want right now?” He might ask, “What is the best answer she could give you? What do you want her to know? Stop and think; what is behind this thing that you have said? You have attacked her, but I recognize that the attack is conveying just a part of what you want. It is not the whole thing, but I do think she can see it. Can you help her see it?” They may not be able to do it, but perhaps they can. When they cannot do it, Wile will say, “Can I take a shot at it?” He will roll the chair he is sitting in next to that person, and he will speak the words for them. He gives them the right to agree or disagree with what he is saying. It might sound hard, as though you are trying to read these people’s minds. Actually, you are just trying to think about what the rest of the story is that they have been leaving out. They have been giving you clues. You have the context of the argument and the discussion. It is not as hard as it may seem. Usually people will say, “Yes, that is it.” Wile will even say, “Why do you not say something like that to her?” Then he will ask the other spouse how they are going to respond. He will keep going, moving his chair back and forth as long as he needs to. He is trying to help them slow down, figure out what is going on, and put words to it even though they are not used to it. He will model it for them with the hope that they will do it more themselves. It will not get done in one session. It is hard. It is contrary to what we have been doing all of our lives—usually.

I think it is helpful to drill into you that the attack is taking a piece of what is true, but just a little piece, which gets distorted. It is a clue to the entrance of what is going on, but we have to help them get past that. A couple may think they get it. If you remember Wile’s own attack response to his wife, he was really saying something like, “You like your friends better than me.” Well, what is underneath that? Slow down and think about it. Own it. That is the other piece of it. Own it. Do not focus so much on what she is doing that is wrong. Focus on what you are feeling at the moment and share that. Practically, I think this idea is very good.

I am not as consistent as Wile is. He will stick with this. I have a tendency to not do that. I have a tendency to get too theoretical, actually. It would be better if I would stay more practical.