

“Ordinary People”

Family Systems Approach to Counseling Conrad Jarret

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The Jarret family, an upper-middle-class family, is grieving the recent loss of their oldest son Buck and struggling to save their other son Conrad who recently attempted suicide. Conrad had gone sailing with Buck the night of the boating accident that took Buck's life. He witnessed Buck being pulled in by the current despite him trying to hold on tight to Buck's hand. Since his brother's death, Conrad has been suffering from depression and guilt. He attempted suicide several months ago, was placed in a psychiatric hospital for four months, and received individual and group counseling. He is now back home and having difficulty adjusting to his former life.

Conrad's relationship with his mother, Beth, is marked by tension and emotional disconnection, which is evident in their communication. His father, Calvin, however, tries to make himself emotionally available for Conrad even though he faces emotional challenges in his marriage. In the intake interview, Conrad stated that his goal is to regain control over his life. To help Conrad regain control of his life, we will explore the dynamics and behavioral patterns of The Jarred family by employing the Family Systems approach.

According to the Family Systems theory, Conrad will best be understood by assessing the interactions and relationships among all the family members and identifying patterns and habits that shape the Jarret Family (Corey, 2015). This will help to determine if Conrad's guilt, depression, and suicidal ideation are the byproduct of a dysfunctional family system or are direct symptoms of Conrad's maladjustment or psychosocial development that is affecting the rest of his family (Corey, 2015). Conrad's depression signifies not only his pain but also the pain of the entire family grieving over losing a loved one.

The Family Systems Approach is a multilayered approach influenced by Adler's phenomenology and the open-forum counseling model. It has been significantly developed by Murray Bowen and Virginia Satir. Bowen believed that the family could be classified as an emotional unit and that change in one member creates shifts in the entire unit. Virginia Satir focused on nurturing "triad," communication, and metacommunication in family interaction (Corey, 2015). These interpersonal patterns of behavior within the family systems transcend generations.

Because the family plays such a unique role in shaping us, the Family Systems theory requires that focus not be placed solely on the individual but on the family system. It examines the members' interpersonal relationships—their actions and reactions to each other. The central principle is that the individual's concerns can only be accurately evaluated by looking at the broader context—the family unit—through which the individual exists. The client is intricately a part of a family system with its own rules that govern its member's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes (Corey, 2015).

According to the Family Systems theory, Conrad's depression and guilt would be considered to have systematic meaning. We will explore multigenerational and transgenerational sequences to see how the inherent dynamics of the family—including values, beliefs, and rules—support and maintain Conrad's depression and suicidal ideation (Corey, 2015). The structure and organization of the family will be examined to assess division in the spousal relationship, parent-child relationship, Conrad's relationship with Buck, and how conflicts within these relationships may be affecting the family's grieving process or have contributed to Conrad's guilt and sense of loss of control. Goals will be collaboratively established to help foster structural readjustment

and necessary cognitive, emotional, and behavioral changes to help the family develop more congruent communication.

As the therapist for the Jarret Family, it is important that I take an objective and neutral stance and be attentive to each member of the family. Great therapeutic success will be achieved when by joining the family, I form relationships and provide support, validation, and encouragement to Conrad and his parents (Corey, 2015). Conrad's mother has already shown resistance to therapy. She has stated that she doesn't need a counselor, doesn't need to change, and that their family should solve their problems themselves instead of running to a counselor (Redford, 1980). It is important that Beth understands the benefits of counseling and that the family system approach is not looking to blame anyone for what Conrad or the family is going through. Each person's subjective experience is important. Therefore, I will listen to the multiple perspectives presented and reframe some of what is being stated to gear the family to new ways of relating (Corey, 2015). The technique of sharing hypothesis will also be used, allowing collaborative dialogue and invoking feedback from family members (Corey, 2015).

In addition, my transparency during this process will encourage openness and consideration from the family to what I may have to share about my observation. Furthermore, every family member present will understand that they are not required to give up their right to reject whatever concept or ideology is not applicable. They can shift the conversation in different directions to establish clearer concepts and perceptions.

The Jarret Family apparently has some challenges expressing their affection and emotionally connecting to each other. During one of the sessions, Conrad describes how his father came into his room right after Buck died, sat on his bed, and put his arms around him. Despite his father's attempt to console him, Conrad could tell his father was uptight. Conrad did not know how to

respond and just sat there, unable to feel anything (Redford, 1980) Conrad also clearly resents his mother, whom he stated never visited him in the hospital after his suicidal attempt (Redford, 1980). His mother's way of coping is to emotionally distance herself. Conrad replied that she would have visited the hospital if it was his brother. She responded that Buck would not have been in the hospital. Conrad blames himself for not being loved by his mother. Her rejection of him is his confirmation that something is wrong with him. While his mother is distant, his father is the mediator and stated that he feels that he is sitting on a fence, basically watching his wife and son on opposing sides.

To facilitate change, each family member must understand that it is better to feel than not to feel. Engaging with each other is more beneficial than retreating into isolation or being governed by fear. Having the family co-construct a genogram will be helpful with this process. The genogram will show the family roots and reveal the pattern of dysfunctional behavior. Through the techniques of hypothesizing, reframing, and genogram construction, we will get a more comprehensive view of what is going on with the Jarret family and how best to foster change in their relationship and communication.

Reference

- Corey, Gerald. (2015) *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy, Enhanced*
10th Edition. Cengage Learning
- Redford, R. (Director). (1980). *Ordinary People*. Wildwood Enterprises Production.