

# The paradigm of family

Family



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Most of us would like to believe in the concept of the ideal family. A unit of people that are nurturing of their children and provide a stable environment of love, growth and structure from which children learn, form and are able to become healthy adults both mentally and physically. The concept of this type of family is summarized best by " A family in which equal regard prevails between the members is such an ideal" (Browning et al. 73).

The notion of the ideal family is formed by our own belief systems, traditions and is influenced by mass media. Belief systems and traditions are based in culture and experience, along with what we have learned in our lives. People may have strong cultural influences on what the ideal family is, or have experience of growing up in such a family. In the past families were portrayed in mass media as loving, easy-going, non-argumentative units in which parents and children would solve every problem to the best outcome.

Programs such as " Leave it to Beaver" and " The Brady Bunch" have portrayed this ideal for the current generation of parents. Media evolves with the developing trends and in the current generation children are exposed to more variants of family types through television, however, advertising media still tends toward reinforcing the " ideal family" concept. Reality can be very different from this concept. Few people can attain their ideals, and the way we live out our ideals depends on the actual circumstances of our lives (Browning et al. 73).

One parent's belief system may not be the same as the others and the balance of influence within the family would depend on a number of factors, such as power ratios, time spent with the children and the strength of

influence of extended family on one or both sides. The mental and physical well-being of family members can influence family types and their attainment of the ideal. Children from some families experience harm from their immediate and external family unit and are unable to grow into adulthood without carrying the issues from their childhood.

The harm takes place when parents experience various pressures that affect their ability to provide the ideal family for their children. The causes of such pressures, also known as stressors, could be an issue in their adulthood, such as financial pressures or an issue from their childhood, such as sexual or physical abuse. Such stressors lead to a state that is known as stress. The affect of stress can cause negative psychological and physiological changes in people.

The negative psychological or emotional changes can lead to thoughts of suicide, difficulties in maintaining healthy relationships both inside and outside the family and an unhealthy level of fear and negativity.

Physiological changes are thought to affect the immune system, blood pressure and levels of chemicals in the brain, leading to depression and fatigue. The unintentional transference of parent's stressors can cause long-lasting negative effects for children that they then carry on the cycle of stress as a child, causing illness as a child carrying over to adulthood.

Unless this cycle is stopped, the consequences can create unhealthy human beings from one generation to the next. However, the purpose of making this statement is not to find blame or accuse parents of neglecting their children's psychological and emotional state, it looks at the problem and its

long-term effects. The problem lies mainly in the situation when the parent's emotional state is more powerful than their ability to consider their children's. The book "Family Stressors" relates examples of the theory of cyclical harm from parent to child.

This is the story of a mother (Loretta) whose psychological health directly affects her children's. Loretta had been traumatized in her childhood by sexual abuse by a grandfather and uncle, and in her teenage years by being raped by a fellow student. The rape resulted in a pregnancy, which Loretta later miscarried due to self-intervention. Loretta kept both the rape and miscarried pregnancy from her parents as her father (a police officer) had recently been accused of showing porn movies at his workplace, which resulted in him being fired.

Loretta instead turned to the school counselor for help, but was not given assistance. As the rapist was part of Loretta's school community and she was faced with seeing him everyday. When Loretta turned the legal age of 16, she quit school. Loretta later married a man that was the father of her three children, whom she grew to fear and divorced him. The affects of this childhood and teenage trauma is reflected in how Loretta manages her everyday life and her family of three children. Loretta still lives in the family home and sleeps in the room in which she experienced the childhood sexual abuse.

Her teenage daughter goes to the same school, which was the scene of her rape. She lives in the environment of her sexual abuse and visits the environment of her rape when she has to go to the school for her daughter.

Loretta has been diagnosed with Dissociative Identity Disorder, and lives with at least eight personality types including the raped teenager and sexually abused four year old. Loretta's ability to deal with any kind of stress is diminished to the point of regression into either her teenage or childhood state.

Loretta's reactions can be impulsive and reactive, instead of studied and proactive. She has times when she withdraws from the family or alternatively, discusses inappropriate issues with the children including her fear of their father. Although Loretta strives to provide an ideal family environment for her children, her mental illness and cognitive reactions to stress and the children's father have a negative impact on the children, causing each of them a unique form of psychological and physiological harm. Loretta's daughter (Kathy) is fourteen and is starting to rebel against parental control.

Due to the conflict in that control power play, Loretta regresses and withdraws from the family. Kathy has learned to manipulate this reaction in order gain the freedoms that she seeks. She also has an issue with anger management and strikes out at her two younger brothers who both have genetic illnesses. Another issue for Kathy is her relationship with her father, whom she fears with the same intensity as her mother. She experiences suicidal thoughts as well. Kathy is already displaying signs of psychological harm from and towards her family unit.

In an incident where she talked to her mother about these suicidal thoughts over the telephone, Loretta's guidance to her daughter included discussing

for the first time her rape in her teenage years and her diagnosed mental illnesses. At the time of the discussion Loretta was absent from the home and in another state. Her choice to counsel her daughter who was seeking support, by discussing her own issues is another form of transference and a reflection of a lack of balance in her decision-making processes. This approach to Kathy would have undermined the strong feelings that she was experiencing.

In seeking counsel for her problem, Kathy unintentionally exposed herself to harm instead of the comfort and help she required. This experience is similar in theme to Loretta's when reporting her rape to the school. Kathy's ability to trust in both her mother and in seeking help could have been damaged after this experience affecting her future confidence in seeking any help she needs. Following this incident, Kathy experienced psychosomatic illnesses, which are illnesses thought to be caused by emotion rather than physical factors.

These illnesses caused many absences from school and Kathy did not want to go back to school and was facing failing the 8th grade. The problem of a stable parental role model is increased by Kathy's issues with her father. She did not want him to know about her thoughts of suicide and influenced by Loretta's fear of him, also does not want to go on visitations to him. This leads to a conflicting sense of responsibility she has for her brothers' who have visitation with their father. Kathy feels that she has a responsibility to protect them should their father get angry.

This is a huge sense of responsibility for a young teenager who has to balance her feelings of fear with guilt. Loretta's inability to proactively deal with the issue of the children's father has led to an exchange of roles, in which her daughter at the age of 14 has been left with a sense of responsibility in guarding family members from further harm. In terms of cyclical transference, this theme seems similar to Loretta's decision to keep her rape and pregnancy from her parents due to the inappropriate behavior of her father in his workplace.

Loretta's two sons also show signs of psychological and physiological harm. The ten-year-old has an eating disorder and shows signs of depression. He has difficulty forming relationships with peers and his motor movements are very slow. The youngest child who is seven is verbally withdrawn and when he does express his feelings, they relate to anxiety. (Williams 55-75). The children's evidence of cyclical psychological and physiological harm is explained in the journal article "The 5 cycles of Emotional Abuse" where the author talks about the cyclical patterns of abuse in families and relationships. Emotional abuse is a cycle: a pattern that repeats for generations, a form that remains the same, while the content or the specific individual changes over time." (Smullens).

Although Loretta did not mean to expose her children to anything but an ideal family life, she was unable to control the effects of their exposure to her own psychological and physiological damage. Certainly, such an effect is not a deliberate "damage" to one's own child. It relates more to not knowing how to control and balance such powerful emotions and by that to protect

the children from the negative effects of parents' emotional stressors, past or present.

The unintentional transference by Loretta to her children is also referred to in Smullens' journal article as "often those propagating emotional abuse are oblivious to the negativity and severity of their actions; they may be--and probably are--simply replicating their own experience in childhood". ---(The 5 cycles of Emotional Abuse: Investigating a Malignant Victimization). In the book "Children of Neglect", the authors talk about how although neglect (lack of attention and due care) of children's needs by their parents can be unintentional it can still cause severe emotional damage.

The research did not specify how many children are involved in neglect cases each year, but that it occurs with a higher frequency than child physical or sexual abuse. However, the consequences (psychological and physiological) of both child neglect and abuse can both be as severe as each other. (G. Smith et al 6). Parents and children want to live within the concept of the ideal family, which is formed, by their belief system, traditions, and exposure to ideals marketed by mass media.

However, their ability to do so is heavily influenced by the parents' psychological and physiological state. If this state is unhealthy, then the pressures or stressors on the parents will have a negative affect on their children. This damage although unintentional by the parent, has negative consequences for the child with a bearing on their psychological and physiological well-being. The nature of this damage is cyclical, although variations occur in manifestation within an individual.



Unless there is positive intervention with both the parents and children, the child will be at a high risk of repeating this pattern as parents themselves. Generations of a family have the potential to experience psychological and physiological harm from traumatic events that occurred at a certain point of their genealogy. As individuals within a family, our belief systems will adapt to our current reality and our traditions will be evolve through our own life experiences but the paradigm of family will have the most influential impact on the entirety of our lives.