

Systemic Thinking Tips: Self Reflection Activity

Systems Focus:

Who is in the system?

- Who is in the family system?
- Who is in the broader system e.g., other services? School/work? Hobbies/extracurriculars?
- What are the wider levels of context for this system e.g., Community, SES, culture, spirituality, gender, community, era in time.

Which relationships are you or could you explore?

Which relationships do you need to hold in mind?

Circular Causality:

What circular patterns or cycles do you notice?

How might patterns perpetuate problems? Or maintain challenges?

How does something in one part of the system impact another part? Or have a ripple impact throughout the family/system?

Identified Patient (IP):

Who is the person identified as having the symptoms? Or problems? Or being problematic?

Who is the person referred for counselling/therapy?

What are the problems, and what might the IP as the "barometer" of the family be representing or expressing with these problems in the family system?

Process and Content Distinction:

What is the content that is brought to sessions?

What is the process of how content is discussed and how the family has tried to solve the issue? E.g., the process of communication and other interpersonal processes, and past attempted solutions.

Is the client/family caught in any circular patterns with their processes? Are these helpful or not?



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Homeostasis:

What is the client/family's "steady state/status quo"?

What is their familiar state of being, communicating, interacting, and relating?

What keeps this homeostasis in place? E.g., any behavioural patterns/cycles or the meaning attributed?

Has anything happened that might perturb the steady state?

What could happen that might perturb the steady state?

Symptom Functionality (NB Unconscious Process - Not Intentional):

What might the function of the symptom be? I.e., how has it evolved to help maintain the system homeostasis (steady state).

How might the symptom/problem help the family?

What might the symptom/problem distract the family from?

What challenges might the symptom/problem protect the family from?

How might the symptom/problem bring the family together?

Double Description:

What are the different view points, explanations and ideas about the problem?

How are different people in the family and broader system viewing the presenting problem?

How can you create space for all perspectives?

How might sharing different perspectives help the family/system?

Family Strengths:

What strengths are there in family members, the family as a whole, their support network and community?

What is working well in the family?

What are other aspects of life that stand outside the problem?

How are the family coping with challenges?



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Family Structure:

What is the type of family structure? E.g., nuclear family, blended-family, foster family, residential care, three generational household, polyamorous?

What do you notice about the hierarchy, parental consistency, family rules (implicit and explicit), alliances and coalitions, subsystems, boundaries (enmeshed, healthy, disengaged) and family roles (implicit and explicit)?

Family Life Cycle:

(Leaving home as a single young adult; partnering up; families with young children; families with adolescents; families launching adolescents; families in later life).

What are the current life cycle stages of family members?

What are the current transitions between life cycle stages?

How is the family managing their current stage and transitions? Are there any points of 'stuckness' as they adjust and restructure with the transition?

Are there multiple stages/transitions happening at the one time?

Are there any unscheduled transitions or challenges? Or alternative life pathways?

Triangulation:

What triangles are you noticing in the family or broader system?

Who/what is brought in to diffuse the tension in the system or buffer the relationship between two people or two services? E.g., family, friend, extra-marital affair, drugs, alcohol, gambling, gaming, therapist or other professional?

Who has been drawn in to conflict/tension between another two people?



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Anxiety in the System:

What is the emotional tone and feeling of the family or system?

What level of reactivity is present in the family or system?

Is the anxiety inviting polarization? Black and white thinking? Rigidity? Giving up? Over or under-functioning? Cut off or fusion?

Do different family members or services have different levels of reactivity?

Could anyone benefit from support to reduce reactivity and engage in thoughtful, emotionally mature responses from a position of a solid self?

Family Narratives:

How does the family make sense of their situation?

What are the family stories/narratives? How might they influence the problem/symptom? And how might they influence solution building?

How did these narratives develop?

Are there other alternative narratives that might offer hope or steps to solutions?

Multigenerational Patterns (Can be elicited with a genogram):

What stories, rules, roles, parenting recipes, and relationship templates have been handed down over the generations?

What patterns (strengths/challenges) have been handed down over the generations?



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Communication:

How does the family communicate to connect? To share emotions? To negotiate and problem solve?

Is communication authentic and congruent?

What types of things can the family or system communicate about? And what are taboo topics?

What does behaviour communicate in the family or system? Who is the behaviour communicating to and who notices the communication?

What does emotion communicate in the family or system? Who is the emotion communicating to and who notices the communication?

Culture:

What is the “family culture”? Are there different “family cultures” for each parent? If so, how are they managing this?

If this is a blended family, are there different “family cultures” that might need to be acknowledged and incorporated into a new family culture for this family?

What is the culture the family comes from and how does this shape family structure, family narratives and meaning making, and family interactional patterns. Are there different cultural backgrounds for each parent? If so, how are they managing this?

What are other cultural considerations e.g., Deaf culture

Final Reflections:

What has stood out for you? Insights? Helpful ideas? Options for maneuverability?

What ideas do you have for how you could support the family? What are you doing that you can keep doing? What can you amplify or do differently?

