

A useful tool to help understand ourselves particularly with regards to our families is a genogram. A genogram is essentially a family tree with runs three generations deep. It can reveal a wealth of information about intergenerational transmission patterns which run through one generation to the next. It is more than just a family tree in that it tries to gather specific information which might be physical, psychological or emotional in nature. I often recommend that a person does three version of a genogram, one focussing on the physical, another on the psychological and another on the emotional.

It is possible to combine the three into one genogram, but because of the wealth of information people may find it a tad overwhelming. Some of the specific information we might try and uncover are;

- If applicable, how each person died in the family tree.
- Any serious illness or injuries.
- What type of life crisis did each person have to deal with?
- What was their work history?
- How was their personality described?
- What kind of emotions did they display?
- Were they considered open or closed type of people?
- What were they like socially?
- What sort of roles did they play in life?

The above are just some suggestions to help get a start, but also explore other themes and concepts. The idea is that we view the family history from as many different perspectives as possible. In short, the more information we have the better.

Often people are encouraged to use symbols for various psychological or emotional phenomena. Using symbols is an excellent way to help build a genogram. The old saying that a picture is worth a thousand words seems very apt. There is a link at the end of the article where more information about symbols in genograms can be obtained.

I remember the first time I did this exercise and how surprised I was. I found a history of incest, rape, violence, divorce, addictions, and broken family relationships in my family history. Three family members took their own lives. Several people suffered from depression. Cancer, diabetes, and heart conditions ran rampant through the family tree. This looked more like a scene from the horrors of war than a reflection of how a healthy family was supposed to look.

from generation to generation known as intergenerational transmission. It was startling to see how suicide ran through one generation to the next. Which then initiated more questions revolving around the circumstances of the suicides. As more information was gathered the genogram took on further meaning.

A while back I was discussing the value of a genogram with a friend. In her family history, there is a pattern of people being involved in the health field. She herself is a medical doctor. Her mother was a receptionist for a doctor. Her sister is a veterinarian, her brother a nurse and so on.

As we talked through this pattern, it came to light that one of her grandfathers suffered from post-traumatic stress syndrome in quite a debilitating fashion. In those days, the effects of prolonged exposure to war were not well known. Later in life when he was