

One way to understand how our family influences us is to view the family as a system. There is a whole school of psychology devoted to understanding the family as a system. A way to understand how it functions is to think of the family system as continually attempting to achieve balance and wholeness as a system. The individuals within the system function as a collective unit where each unit plays a designated role in the service of the system.

Consequently, a system which is in need of healing may find that several family members gravitate towards the health professions. For instance, one family member may become a nurse and another a doctor. The family may have some psychological issue to work through. The nurse and doctor in the family system symbolically and unconsciously represent the family systems need to heal.

Similarly, a mother and father who functionally are workaholics may find that one of their children continually lazes the day away. The child becomes the 'lazy one' in the family system. That person symbolizes a need to rest for the family system. They are over-compensating for their parents. Or consider some very strict religious parents who find that their child is sexually promiscuous. The child may be symbolic for the family's need for letting go of control.

The system attempts to unconsciously compensate in areas that are needed. The difficulty that may be experienced is that often the compensation is so extreme that it causes problems for the members involved. For example, a child who is 'lazy' is essentially relaxing for their workaholic parents. However, this is often distressing for all the individual members involved.

It is wise to note that frequently it is the rigidity of the roles played within the family system which make it problematic. A little laziness here or there is not the issue, it's only when it becomes ingrained and detrimental to the individual that it may become problematic. It becomes more about acting out in extremes rather than living a life which is mainly in balance.

The ownership of a compensatory role is often the family's shadow - an aspect of the family's behaviour that is largely unconscious. The parents who are workaholics are unconscious to the need to relax and wind down. They for all intents and purposes function continually in a driven state. A child then plays the antithesis of the function by largely being unmotivated and unwilling to act. A further difficulty is that the system becomes stuck. The child gets stuck in their way of relating to the world, but also the way the parents are responding becomes rigid and stuck in their own right.

Often people can play more than one role or serve more than one function within the family system. The above examples belie the complexity which is often involved in family interactions and behaviours. Nevertheless, it is sometimes useful to understand certain aspects of our behaviours as serving the function of compensating for other family members.

Sometimes it can work to our benefit as well. For instance, growing up in alcoholic environment may influence us to never become an alcoholic. We may compensate by playing the role of the good person, working diligently etc. Often in psychotherapy, I come across highly introspective people. When their family of origin is explored, frequently the hallmark is the lack of awareness by other family members. In a fashion the highly introspective person is picking up the slack of the family system.

This is not always the case of course. There can be a myriad of other reasons why one person in the family is introspective and the others not. But that it occurs on such a frequent basis should give us cause to reflect and ponder the influence of our families on our being. Even if nothing 'major' comes of it, it typically is a good exercise to think about some of our behaviours as having their genesis in some form of compensation for others.

It is a good exercise to think about the possibility that in some way we might be unconsciously compensating for some family shortcoming. A good clue is to look and see if there are extremes operating in the family system. Then attempt to decipher the effect of those extremes and how you possibly might be contributing to the family system as a whole.

Note: No family is perfect, some are highly functional. This article is not an attempt to categorize all families as dysfunctional, just that understanding our behaviours in terms of psychological compensation can sometimes be very useful for people.

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