

Dr. Sparrow's Dos and Don'ts of Family Therapy
EPSY 6393 Marriage and Family Counseling

- Praise has a place in family therapy, but it must be tied to clear, observable behavior that either has obvious positive benefits, or has been reframed in order to “create” a positive connotation around the behavior. Never praise a person just to make him/her feel good. That is a manipulation that the family will not respect, and will often be seen as “taking sides.”
- Make contact, or "join" with everyone in the family. You don't have to say a lot.
- Ask every person about the problem that brings the family into counseling. Don't mention any specific thing in your question. Let them tell you. If you mention something specific, you begin to narrow the focus. Let them define the focus. You may be surprised. (SFT, Allowing the family to describe issues outside of the presenting problem)
- You should ask the parents to go first in describing the problem. Let them decide who should go first. By allowing them to decide, you get a chance to evaluate who has control, who delegates power, etc. (Assessing power and hierarchy)
- When people start to interact spontaneously, give them a little time. Don't jump in too quickly, even if it's messy. It gives you a chance to see how people relate, who has power, who doesn't etc. (SFT, Spontaneous sequence of behavior)
- Never do anything for a family member that he or she needs to do for him/herself. Get the family member to do it. This demonstration of competency will carry over to the home setting. If you do it, it will not carry over.
- Never let one person use “we” or “us” in addressing someone else. Intervene immediately, and say something like, “It's important for each of you to speak for yourselves.”
- Never let one person use “you” (meaning a group) or “them.” Ask the person to address an individual. If the person says, “They think alike,” then ask him/her to address the one who is most that way.
- If two people are too close or too reactive to each other, limit their interaction. (strengthen boundaries between enmeshed members)
- If two people are out of touch or distant from each other, open up communication.
- Whenever you are supporting communication between two persons and someone interrupts, proceed accordingly:
 - First observe how the two people handle the interruption.
 - If they resist the interruption successfully, support their competency by praising their accomplishment.
 - If the interruption arrests the dialogue, you need to:
 - intervene, noting how the interruption has stopped an important process.
 - reframe the interrupter's behavior if possible, giving it a positive connotation.
 - ask the two people what they need to do to continue their dialogue; that is, what they (usually the enmeshed parent) needs to say to the interrupting person. Make sure they do it, praise them, and then have them continue.
- The single most significant problem in marriage and family relations is the lack of honest communication. Usually people will withhold, and then confide in a substitute (triangulate). Your job is to encourage honest communication! There are two ways to encourage honest communication; either by having partners talk to you while the other

listens (Bowenian therapeutic triangle) especially when the couple cannot talk without blaming, or direct conversation. I prefer the latter once the couple is able to respect each other enough to make the exchange productive.

- Establish ground rules before beginning marriage/conjoint sessions: 1) speak for oneself, not for the other, 2) do not interrupt, 3) no harsh or abusive language. Get couple to agree that they will accept your refereeing.
- Don't introduce new material. Use the language (actual words), the assets, the experiences, the values, etc, in order to develop simple and bold interventions. If the family members works on one issue successfully, they will expand their work to other areas without your help.
- Keep it simple. Remember that any progress anywhere will have an overall positive effect everywhere. If you open up too many new angles, the family will become confused, and may achieve nothing.
- Helping a family discover a competency that is already "in place" should be part of your initial goals. Be on the lookout for what the family has overlooked in its own resources. (Solution-Focused)
- Keeping extended family members out of the family's business can be an important part of your work. Of course, you have to remain sensitive to cultural values, but the authority of the couple—as parents, and as spouses—has to be supported in order to deal with problems. Having the couple insulate themselves from advice and intrusion from parents can be the single most important part of family work. (Bowenian therapy)
- Most of us do not use symptom prescription in its most dramatic forms, such as "have three arguments this week." But it is extremely valuable to encourage people to "take it slow," and to "expect a continuation of the problem for a while, at least." This is strategic, yes, but it's realistic, and it insulates (innoculates) a family against disappointments. So don't hesitate to be a "little" pessimistic in the short term. This relieves the family from the pressure to do well too quickly, and gives them a chance to practice getting better. (Solution Focused)
- It is a good idea to eliminate the question, "How do you feel?" from your repertoire completely. If you want to find out what a person is feeling, ask "What are you feeling?" (Gestalt)
- Beginning counselors have a way of focusing on feelings too much in family therapy. Inquiring about personal feelings has limited use in family therapy, because it diverts the attention to internal, rather than interactive processes. In contrast, a process question is very valuable, and can include an inquiry about feelings. But a process question is always structured in such a way to tie a person's behavior to its impact on someone else. So if you want to do relational work, and you want to discuss feelings, these questions are useful process questions:
 - "Have you ever thought about telling him what you are feeling instead of giving him the silent treatment?"
 - "When you feel lonely, how could you let her know in ways that wouldn't make her think that all you want is sex?"
 - "So what happens when she tells you her feelings and you try to fix the problem?"
- Usually it is best to maintain an impartial view toward everyone. From time to time, however, it can be appropriate to put pressure on one person or another, who needs to take more responsibility for him/herself. This usually means aligning yourself with one

parent and supporting him/her in putting pressure on the other, or on a child. This is a rare, but powerful tactic called “unbalancing,” which should be used when you are trying to break up a coalition and establish a new alliance that will serve everyone’s interests. Example, supporting the parents against a teenager, who needs to take responsibility for himself. Or supporting a disengaged parent and child against enmeshed parent, so that the relationship between the previously disengaged parent and the child can deepen without interruption. (SFT)

- It is always a good idea to offer operational descriptions of problems, rather than emotionally charged labels. Language is powerful, so instead of accepting labels such as “acts lazy” or “disrespectful,” it is a good idea to use words like “procrastinates” or “disagrees” to describe the behaviors. Using operational (or neutral) descriptions can be the first step toward reframing the behavior positively. However, the family might not be ready for reframing, so operational language is a good first step in that direction.
- When someone does something well, it is good to ask, “Wow, how did you do that!?” This give the person a chance to become more aware of the process that led up to his/her accomplishment, and how to do it again. It also puts the counselor in a “one-down” position, such that the client can take full credit for what he/she did. (Solution-focused)