Instructor’s Manual
for
BOWENIAN
FAMILY
THERAPY
with
PHILIP GUERIN, MD

Manual by
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psychotherapy.net
The Instructor’s Manual accompanies the DVD Bowenian Family Therapy, with Philip Guerin, MD (Institutional/Instructor’s Version). Video available at www.psychotherapy.net.

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Instructor’s Manual for Bowenian Family Therapy, with Philip Guerin, MD

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Tips for Making the Best Use of the DVD

1. USE THE TRANSCRIPTS
Make notes in the video ‘Transcript’ for future reference; the next time you show the video you will have them available. Highlight or notate key moments in the video to better facilitate discussion during and after the video.

2. FACILITATE DISCUSSION
Pause the video at different points to elicit viewers’ observations and reactions to the concepts presented. The Discussion Questions section provides ideas about key points that can stimulate rich discussions and learning. The Role-Plays section guides you through exercises you can assign to your students in the classroom or training session.

3. LET IT FLOW
Encourage viewers to voice their opinions; no therapy is perfect! What are viewers’ impressions of what works and does not work in the sessions? We learn as much from our mistakes as our successes; it is crucial for students and therapists to develop the ability to effectively critique this work as well as their own.

4. SUGGEST READINGS TO ENRICH VIDEO MATERIAL
Assign readings from Related Websites, Videos and Further Reading prior to or after viewing.

5. ASSIGN A REACTION PAPER
See suggestions in Reaction Paper section.

6. WATCH THE EXPERTS SERIES
This video is one in a series portraying leading theories of psychotherapy and their application in work with families. Each video presents a master family therapist working with a real family who have real problems. By showing several of the videos in this Family Therapy with the Experts series, you can expose viewers to a variety of styles and approaches, allowing them an opportunity to see what fits best for them.

Perspective on Videos and the Personality of the Therapist
Psychotherapy portrayed in videos is less off-the-cuff than therapy in practice. Therapists may feel put on the spot to offer a good demonstration, and clients can be self-conscious in front of a camera. Therapists often move more quickly than they would in everyday practice to demonstrate a particular technique. Despite these factors, therapists and clients on video can engage in a realistic session that conveys a wealth of information not contained in books or therapy transcripts: body language, tone of voice, facial expression, rhythm of the interaction, quality of the alliance—all aspects of the therapeutic relationship that are unique to an interpersonal encounter.

Psychotherapy is an intensely private matter. Unlike the training in other professions, students and practitioners rarely have an opportunity to see their mentors at work. But watching therapy on video is the next best thing.

One more note: The personal style of therapists is often as important as their techniques and theories. Therapists are usually drawn to approaches that mesh well with their own personality. Thus, while we can certainly pick up ideas from master therapists, students and trainees must make the best use of relevant theory, technique and research that fits their own personal style and the needs of their clients.

Privacy and Confidentiality
Because this video contains actual therapy sessions, please take care to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the clients who has courageously shared their personal life with us.
Guerin’s Approach to Bowenian Therapy

Bowenian therapy is a model of clinical intervention that has evolved over the past forty-five years. The method traces its beginnings to the pioneering efforts of Murray Bowen. As a model of therapy, Bowenian therapy is a multigenerational systems approach based on a series of interlocking concepts and clinical models. These clinical models are used for intervening with dysfunctional children, adolescents, and adults as well as with individuals whose relationships are conflictual.

Guerin’s work has focused on clarifications and elaborations of the concepts of Bowen theory, as well as the specific application of the theory to the building of clinical models for the treatment of marital conflict and child- and adolescent-centered families and the treatment of the individual from a systems perspective. Guerin’s sophisticated clinical approach has led to a more differentiated set of therapeutic goals. These goals are derived from highly articulated clinical models developed to deal with problems of children and adolescents, marital conflict, and dysfunctional adults.

Guerin’s general goals are:

1. Placing the presenting problem in the context of the multigenerational system by doing a thorough and accurate genogram;
2. Connecting with key family members and working with them to calm their own anxiety and level of emotional arousal and, thereby, lower anxiety throughout the system; and
3. Define the parameters of the central symptomatic triangles, as well as important interlocking triangles.
4. More specific goals are determined by the presenting problem and which unit of the family is the primary clinical focus.

In summary, the Bowenian model of therapy consists of the multigenerational family unit as the context in which to study individuals and their relationship conflicts under the siege of intense anxiety.

Clinical Techniques in Bowenian Therapy

The major techniques used in Bowenian therapy include the genogram, the process question, relationship experiments, neutralization of the symptomatic triangles, coaching, the “I-position,” and displacement stories.

The genogram, which is also known as the family diagram, is an organizing tool that documents the developmental and situational stressors in a three-generation family system. The function of the genogram is to collect comprehensive information about individuals and the family in a short time and to serve as a road map for the development of a treatment plan.

The process question is a question aimed at calming anxiety and gaining access to information on how the family perceives the problem and how the mechanisms driving and maintaining the problem operate.

Relationship experiments are behavioral tasks assigned to family members by the therapist to first expose and then alter the dysfunctional relationship process in the family system.

The neutralization of the symptomatic triangles is a method for the management and neutralization of reactive emotional triangles. This five-step process includes finding the triangle, defining the triangle’s structure and the flow of movement within it, reversing the flow of movement within the triangle, exposing the emotional process and, finally, dealing with the process and moving toward improved functioning.

Coaching is a Bowenian therapy technique that is used when highly motivated individual family members have attained a reasonable degree of self-focus, can be in charge of their own internal emotional reactivity, and can read the predictable relationship patterns in their system with some facility. With these conditions in place, the therapist offers some options that might be tried as a change from the robot-like usual patterns of behavior.
The “I-position” is a non-emotionally reactive, clearly communicated statement of opinion and belief. In a situation of increased tension and emotional reactivity, it often has a stabilizing effect for one person to be able to detach from the emotional furor and step into an “I-position.” In Bowenian therapy, family members are encouraged to take functional “I-positions.”

Displacement stories are used to teach people about the emotional processes in their own families without raising their defensiveness.

Bowenian family therapy may be used across the diagnostic spectrum with psychoses, anxiety disorders, major clinical depression, cognitive and attentional difficulties, and all manner and forms of relationship conflict. As a therapist working with this model, it is possible to incorporate biological and behavioral interventions, and use twelve-step programs to assist in the management and alleviation of symptoms. In addition, techniques from other family systems models, such as narrative therapy, may be used to facilitate the elaboration of underlying relationship symptoms and process.

*Adapted from a chapter entitled “Bowenian Family Therapy” by Philipp and Katherine Guerin in Theories and Strategies of Family Therapy (John Carlson, editor) and from Family Therapy: Concepts and Methods by Nichols and Schwartz.

Guerin’s Reflections on the Session

The family on this video is adult-child focused. “Adult-child focused” means that the presenting symptoms reside in an unmarried adult who presents to therapy as part of her family of origin. The symptom bearer is an adult child, aged thirty-two, brought to therapy by and with her parents. A young woman with physical and developmental difficulties from birth, she is still living at home with her parents. The mother works outside the home and appears, at best, unhappy. The father, who retired at a fairly early age, appears angry, controlling, and intimidating by nature.

In this demonstration interview we have seen an attempt made by the therapist to: engage and connect with each family member; make it safer in the therapy and safer in the family to address the family’s phobic areas, which are the father’s anger, the mother’s loneliness, the toxic issue of the brother’s death, the daughter’s restricted and unfulfilling life, and the parents’ marriage; operate and neutralize the relationship triangles as they presented themselves; and define the symptoms and begin to propose a change in the direction of movement in the central symptomatic triangle between mother, father, and daughter.

The first goal of the interviewer is to engage the family in the joint endeavor of alleviating their pain and gaining more control over their problems. There is an attempt to make a connection with each member of the family. This is done by assuming the position of a calm, interested, compassionate investigator. As the session moves along, an attempt is made to understand how they define the problem and to validate for them their emotional experience. In addition, the therapist attempts to avoid a control struggle with the father and to stand clear of the fallout left behind from previous interviews. In other words, he is attempting to make a connection with all three family members and to avoid activating the preexisting therapy triangles. At the same time, the therapist is trying to determine the pathway through which the family will allow him access to their lives and the relationship process of their family system.
In the beginning of the interview, the father’s anger and need to control are palpable. The potential traps for the therapist are many-fold. The therapist can be controlled and paralyzed by the father’s anger and need to control, or confront the anger directly, risking that the entire session will be absorbed by the fallout from his confrontation or, even worse, the father might leave the session. True to the model, the therapist uses a series of process questions aimed at neutralizing the father’s anger. That is, he has as calm a discussion as possible while putting the father’s anger on the table as an open issue. The additional agenda of the therapist in this initial exchange of comments is to probe this closed system by addressing the issue of emotional safety. How safe is it to talk about emotionally loaded things in this family? The implied message emphasizes the importance of somehow making it safe to talk about difficult issues in the therapy in order for that safety to carry over to the family system outside of the therapy session.

Another critically important part of the successful engagement process is the therapist’s avoiding triangular traps. As has been mentioned, from the beginning of the session the therapist is making his way through a maze of relationship triangles. In this instance, the therapist chooses to attempt to avoid being triangulated by being open to the family’s discussion, hearing their message—talk to our daughter, don’t focus on our son’s death. In addition, he doesn’t jump to defend the previous five “bad guy” therapists or contend that he will somehow be better than the one “good guy.”

After some success at engaging the family, the therapist turns to the central dysfunctional triangle of father–mother–daughter and begins his investigation of its structure with one simple process question: “Do you think Pam has a kind of, you know, just as much a relationship with you as she has with your wife?”

It is clear from the structural set up, and the positioning of family members in the room, that the father and daughter are linked in alliance with the mother on the outside and unhappy about it. The therapist tries to nudge the direction of movement in this triangle by urging the mother to close the distance with her daughter on her daughter’s terms and for the father to cease his efforts to promote the relationship between these two women and let them get on with it themselves. This entails not only an attempt to change the direction of movement in the triangle, but also proposes using the technique of relationship experiments in order to break the dysfunctional sequence.

In the final phase of the session, the therapist uses the triangle with Pam’s geriatric friend Jesse. In doing this he challenges the mother to face the reality of her daughter’s movement away from her and toward Jesse and for the mother to learn from it, even to the point of studying Jesse’s methods. Having done this, the therapist returns to the parents’ agenda and broaches the topic of Pam’s social phobia and gives Pam total responsibility for dealing with it. In this way, he hopes to relieve the mother of some of her guilt and feelings of responsibility for Pam’s isolation, while challenging Pam to take on the social phobia and do something about it.

If there were a follow-up session the next week, the therapist would probably begin the session by checking in with the family to see if they had tried his suggestions. He would ask Pam if she had done any thinking about what was going on. He would check with the mother to see if she had thought about Jesse’s method and why that worked with Pam and her method didn’t. He might ask the father if he felt left out because he didn’t have any assignments. He would then ask them what they wanted to work within that session and he would expect that they would go back to Pam. He wouldn’t be surprised if little or no change had occurred between sessions.
Reaction Paper for Classes and Training

Video: Bowenian Therapy with Philip Guerin, M.D.

- **Assignment:** Complete this reaction paper and return it by the date noted by the facilitator.
- **Suggestions for Viewers:** Take notes on these questions while viewing the video and complete the reaction paper afterwards. Respond to each question below.
- **Length and Style:** 2-4 pages double-spaced. Be brief and concise. Do NOT provide a full synopsis of the video. This is meant to be a brief reaction paper that you write soon after watching the video—we want your ideas and reactions.

**What to Write:** Respond to the following questions in your reaction paper:

1. **Key points:** What important points did you learn about Guerin’s approach to Bowenian Family Therapy? What stands out to you about how Guerin works?
2. **What I found most helpful:** As a therapist, what was most beneficial to you about the model presented? What tools or perspectives did you find helpful and might you use in your own work? What challenged you to think about something in a new way?
3. **What does not make sense:** What principles/techniques/interventions did not make sense to you? Did anything push your buttons or bring about a sense of resistance in you, or just not fit with your own style of working?
4. **How I would do it differently:** What might you have done differently than Guerin in the sessions in the video? Be specific about what different approaches, interventions and techniques you might have applied.
5. **Other Questions/Reactions:** What questions or reactions did you have as you viewed the therapy sessions with Guerin? Other comments, thoughts or feelings?

Related Websites, Videos and Further Reading

**WEB RESOURCES**
Bowen Center for the Study of the Family and the Georgetown Family Center
www.thebowencenter.org
The Princeton Family Center for Education, Inc.
www.princetonfamilycenter.org
Murray Bowen, M.D. and The Nine Concepts in Family Systems Theory
www.ideastoaction.wordpress.com/dr-bowen/
Psychotherapy.net interview with family therapist Monica McGoldrick, LCSW, PhD
www.psychotherapy.net/interview/monica-mcgoldrick

**RELATED VIDEOS AVAILABLE AT WWW.PSYCHOTHERAPY.NET**
Structural Family Therapy, with Harry Aponte, LCSW (Note: features same family client as Guerin session)
The Legacy of Unresolved Loss: a Family Systems Approach with Monica McGoldrick, LCSW
Tools and Techniques for Family Therapy by John Edwards, PhD
Family Secrets: Implications for Theory and Therapy by Evan Imber-Black, PhD

**RECOMMENDED READINGS**
Discussion Questions

Professors, training directors and facilitators may use some or all of these discussion questions, depending on what aspects of the video are most relevant to the audience.

INTRODUCTION
1. The Approach: What stands out to you as most important in Guerin’s introductory description of the theory of Bowenian Family Therapy? How would you describe your understanding of Bowenian therapy in one or two sentences?

FAMILY THERAPY SESSION
2. Beginning: What did you think of Guerin beginning the session by asking the father, Adrian, to start? Why do you think he started with him? How do you tend to begin your sessions? What factors do you take into consideration in deciding how to start?

3. Comparisons: How did you feel when the family was talking about the previous therapists they have seen? What came up for you when Pam said how much she liked the last therapist they saw and when Adrian shared how angry he got at another therapist? What did you think about how Guerin handled it? Have you had clients who have expressed strong negative and/or strong positive reactions to previous therapists when they begin treatment with you? How have you responded?

4. Triangles: Which triangles stood out to you as you watched this session? Where in the session did you notice Guerin defining the triangles? What did you think of Guerin’s attempts to change the direction of movement in the primary father-mother-daughter triangle? Were there any triangles that you would have attended to more if you were the therapist? Do you find the concept of triangles useful? Why or why not?

5. Therapeutic Style: In Guerin’s reflections on the session, he described his style as that of a calm, interested, and compassionate investigator. Do you agree with his self-
description? Why or why not? If you were to describe your therapeutic style using three adjectives, what would they be?

6. Making connections: One of Guerin’s goals was to connect with all three family members. How successful do you think he was at achieving this goal? Which family member do you think he had the easiest time connecting with? The hardest time? Is there anything you would have done differently to connect with this family?

7. Engaging Pam: Many therapists would find it challenging to engage Pam, as she looked down and gave brief answers such as, “I don’t know,” and “sometimes.” What do you think of Guerin’s attempts to engage her? What did he do that you liked and/or didn’t like? How do you imagine you might have attempted to engage her?

8. Emotional safety: How do you see Guerin establishing a safe environment for the family members in this session? What specific interventions or aspects of his style do you think increased or decreased the emotional safety of the session? Is there something you might have done differently?

9. Loss and sadness: What are your thoughts on how Guerin engaged this family around their feelings of loss and sadness. What reactions did you have to how he responded to Pam and Judy when they cried? What did you think of his choice to ask Adrian if he knew what their tears were connected to? If you were their therapist, how might you have worked with issues of loss in this family?

10. Fear of death: How did you feel during the part of the session when Guerin asked Pam if she worried about her parents dying? What did you think about Guerin’s way of being with Pam during this emotional segment of the session? Can you see yourself broaching this topic with Pam in the first session? How might you have responded differently?

11. Pam’s social life: Guerin hones in on Pam’s limited social life, asking questions about her friendships and encouraging her to be more social. How did you react to this? How receptive do you think Pam was to his encouragement? How do you think you might have approached the topic of Pam’s social life?

12. Process Questions: Guerin sees process questions as a way to calm anxiety and to gain access to information about how the family views the problem and how the family system operates. What are a few process questions that stood out to you as particularly helpful in this session? Were there any process questions that you think were unhelpful? Why? What are some ways you utilize process questions in your work? After watching this session, do you think you are more or less likely to utilize process questions with your clients? Why?

DISCUSSION

13. Closed system: Guerin described this family as a closed system. What does this mean to you? Do you agree or disagree with his assessment? What happened in the session that you think led Guerin to view them as a closed system? What experiences have you had working with families or couples that you would characterize as closed systems?

14. Overall thoughts: What are your overall thoughts about Guerin’s approach to Bowenian therapy? What aspects of his approach can you see yourself incorporating into your work? Are there some components of this approach that seem incompatible with how you work with families?

15. Personal Reaction: How would you feel about having Bowen as your therapist? Do you think he could build a solid therapeutic alliance with you and help you? Why or why not? If you have ever been in family therapy before, how does Guerin’s approach compare with the approach of your family therapist?
Role-Plays

After watching the video and reviewing Philip Guerin’s Approach to Bowenian Therapy in this manual, assign groups to role-play a family therapy session following Guerin’s model. Organize participants into groups of four, consisting of one psychotherapist and three family members. If time permits, rotate so each person has a chance to play the role of therapist.

Rather than conducting a full session, invite participants to choose one segment of the session on the video to loosely reenact. The point here is not to try to resolve the family’s issues, but to use this role-play as an exercise in viewing the family from a Bowenian perspective and trying on Guerin’s style.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR ROLE-PLAYERS

One person will start out as the therapist and the other three group members will decide amongst themselves who will be what family member. Choose a segment of the video that you would like to use as a jumping off point; do not attempt to follow the sequence of interactions, but rather use the clients and situation in the video as a jumping off point, and allow the role-play to develop spontaneously.

Therapists should practice remaining emotionally nonreactive, meeting the family “where they’re at,” while trying to calm their anxiety. Get a feel for what it’s like to pay attention to triangles and dyads by focusing on:

1. the major triangle of mother-father-daughter,
2. one of the dyadic relationships (choose between mother-daughter, father-daughter, or mother-father), and
3. focusing on an individual family member, and trying to get them to take responsibility for themselves.

After the role-plays, have the groups come together to discuss their experiences. What did participants observe about this family in terms of the triangles and dyadic relationships? What did the therapist do to calm the family’s anxiety? Invite the clients to talk about what it was like to role-play this family and how they felt about the therapist’s interventions. Then, invite the therapists to talk about their experiences; how did it feel to conduct a family therapy session using a Bowenian approach? Finally, open up a general discussion of the strengths and the challenges in applying a Bowenian approach to working with families.

An alternative is to do this role-play in front of the whole group with one therapist and one family; the rest of the group can observe, acting as the advising team to the therapist. Before the end of the session, have the therapist take a break, get feedback from the observation team, and bring it back into the session with the family. Other observers might jump in if the therapist gets stuck. Follow up with a discussion on what participants learned about using Guerin’s approach to Bowenian Family Therapy.
Guerin: Now, it’s my understanding that you folks have been part of this program and have come already several times.

Adrian: Yeah, this is our seventh time now.

Guerin: So you are more veterans than I am because this is my first time, so you will have to lead me through the field here. Adrian, can you tell me what it is you came for, and maybe summarize for me what you think you got out of the seven times and if it’s had any impact?

Adrian: Well, we came here because we were having problems with Pam. For many, many years, we would tell Pam or ask Pam to do something, and she would either refuse to do it or she just wouldn’t do it. We’d ask her, we’d call her or something, but she won’t answer. I don’t know, she just won’t give you an answer. Like we’d say, “Pam, where are you?” Get no answer. Or “Pam, will you do this?” And you get no answer. And you have to turn around and say it three or four times. What else?

Guerin: Is that to both of you equally?

Adrian: Oh yeah, yep.

Guerin: And even if the two of you got together and said it in a chorus, Pam still wouldn’t answer.

Adrian: She still wouldn’t answer. Very rarely would she answer. You know, just to acknowledge that you had said something to her.

Guerin: And now you guys felt that was disrespectful, or it wasn’t getting done, what you wanted, or . . . ?

Adrian: I mean, it would get done because I would get angry enough where it would get done.

Guerin: So you just keep escalating the volume and the intensity and Pam would finally hear you.

Guerin: And then she’d do it.

Adrian: It’s a wonder you didn’t hear it in New York. Right?

Judy: No, no.

Guerin: Okay. So, you came to get some help to try to find a better way to make it work?

Adrian: Trying to find a better way to make it work. But the last five times it was always Judy and I, Judy and I that were doing the talking. Out of the five times, I don’t think Pam said a dozen words. And then the one guy that we had . . .

Judy: Last week. I mean last month.

Adrian: Two months ago the one guy we had ticked me off so bad—that’s why you heard me, I don’t know if you heard me apologizing to people today.

Guerin: I heard a little bit of that.

Adrian: He ticked me off at the very end. And I mean, I got ticked. And when I came in last month, I told her to tell them, “Don’t talk to us.” I understand you have to have a background on us and everything else in order to get the feeling of what’s going on. I do understand that, but nobody ever talked to Pamela. They were always talking to us about things that we didn’t even really want to talk about.

Guerin: Okay.

Adrian: And two months ago the guy really ticked me off. I mean, he . . .

Guerin: He got you.

Adrian: He got me. He got me so bad that last month I turned around and says, “If it happens again I’m out of here.” I mean, it would be the last time I would come. There would be no more.
Guerin: So, then, was it better last time?
Adrian: Yes. The gentleman was from—I think he was from New York too, wasn’t he?
Pam: No.
Adrian: Pennsylvania?
Guerin: From Phil...ly?
Adrian: And anyway, he was doing a lot of talking to Pam, and Pam was doing the talking last month.
Pam: Yeah, I liked the guy. It was good.
Adrian: And, it seemed to work a little bit. I mean, last month we had, this past month we didn’t have that much of a problem with her. Things seemed to . . .
Pam: Change a little bit.
Adrian: Change a little bit. Of course, we did have a wedding that she stood up to, where she was coordinator for.
Pam: And he walked her down the aisle.
Adrian: And I walked my niece down the aisle. And so she was on very good behavior situation this past month.
Guerin: So, you felt like that last one worked for you.
Adrian: That last one worked more than any of the other five.
Guerin: Put together.
Adrian: All put together, yes, definitely.
Guerin: So maybe you don’t even need to be here today.
Commentary: With this question Guerin distances himself, avoids selling himself and criticizing the other therapists. The family responds by endorsing the potential usefulness of the consultation
Judy: No, we don’t need to be here. You’ve got to be kidding.
Guerin: So, Pam, do you like it when the person sitting in my chair talks to you?
Pam: Especially the guy last month.
Guerin: What was it about him that appealed to you?
Pam: I don’t know. He, for some reason I was able to communicate with him because he was more pleasant. I mean . . .
Adrian: The other guys weren’t bad.
Pam: No.
Adrian: It’s just that they weren’t . . .
Pam: They were more focusing on you and Ma instead of me. And when he really started getting mad, I almost stood up and said, “Hey, we are not here for these two. We are here for me.”
Adrian: Why didn’t you?
Pam: I don’t know. I kept my quiet.
Guerin: What do you think it is about you that the three of you are here for?
Pam: To get me to communicate more, talk to these guys more. Control my anger.
Guerin: You’ve got some, huh? And is that when you shut down, when you are angry? Is that when you don’t hear and you don’t answer and just--
Pam: I think so, I just . . .
Guerin: --pull it all in? Do you ever blow?
Pam: No.
Guerin: No. Leave the blowing to daddy?
Adrian: She blows in her own way, by herself.
Judy: She throws things.
Adrian: She throws things and she does damage.
Judy: She has tantrums. She does have her damage.
Guerin: Pam, what are you angry about?
Pam: Nothing right now.
Guerin: No?
Adrian: Yet.

Guerin: If I keep bugging you will you be angry in the next five minutes?

Pam: I don’t think so.

Guerin: No? So somehow something happened between last time and this time that you are a lot less angry. That means you got to talk and that made it better. So what did you get to have to say that kind of made some of that go away?

Pam: I don’t know. I mean, the guy last week, it was more pleasant to talk to him. I don’t know, maybe . . . I don’t know how to explain it.

Guerin: Okay, but the anger, whatever happened, the anger has kind of been . . .

Pam: From way up here to down here a little bit.

Guerin: Okay. So then the next problem is to be able to communicate better with the mama and the papa.

Pam: Uh-huh.

Guerin: Do you know what it is that you want to communicate with them about?

Pam: Not so much about, but like they said, I have to answer, and I don’t. And I don’t.

Guerin: Now the anger is gone, so you don’t have to shut down anymore, so why wouldn’t you answer?

Pam: I don’t know why I don’t answer. I just don’t know why.

Guerin: So, it’s a puzzle.

Pam: Yeah.

Guerin: Do you let your parents know what it is about each of them that bugs you? Do you know what it is about each of them that bugs you?

Pam: Mm-mm.

Guerin: If you knew, would it be safe to tell them?

Pam: I don’t know. I really don’t know.

Guerin: I mean, if your dad behaved in ways that really bugged you, would it be safe to say, you know, “Daddy, when you do this and this it really upsets me, makes me angry and makes me want to . . .”

Pam: I can try that one.

Guerin: Would it be safe? Yeah? It would be safe to . . .

Pam: I can try that one. I haven’t tried that yet.

Guerin: No? How come?

Pam: I don’t know.

Guerin: Is your dad an easy guy to talk to?

Pam: Eh, sometimes.

Guerin: What’s that mean? I mean, when is he and when isn’t he?

Pam: Well when he is hurting and real, real angry, no. No. I just back off.

Guerin: So, when he is in a good mood and he’s kind of light and stuff, then you can talk to him.

Pam: Yeah.

Guerin: And can you tell him negative stuff about him when he is in that kind of mood? Not angry but . . .

Pam: I don’t know. I haven’t tried yet.

Guerin: Never tried it. Would it be safe, Adrian?

Adrian: I don’t know. What’s negative about me?

Guerin: Oh, you can’t even think what it possibly might be?

Adrian: No.

Guerin: No.

Adrian: Oh lord, it’s hard to be humble.

Guerin: Can you sing that for us? That was a good country western song.

Judy: He used to sing it very well.
Guerin: So, but be straight with me now. Could you take negative feedback?

Adrian: Oh, probably.

Guerin: Would it be easier to take it from Pam than from Judy?

Pam: Yeah, let me try that one.

Adrian: It all depends on what it is. When you say negativity . . .

Guerin: Well, if they say, “Daddy, you’ve got too hot a temper and you scare me and you intimidate me,” would you be able to hear that?

Adrian: Oh yeah, I mean, I used to be a lot worse. A lot worse.

Guerin: Is that because you’ve been working on it or because you just got older and it mellowed out?

Adrian: No, I think I got older and it mellowed out, and I worked on it. I used to drink a lot. Many years ago.

Guerin: And so that would kind of . . . You were an angry drunk?

Adrian: Yeah, yeah. And since I quite drinking I think I’ve been a lot mellerower and everything else.

Judy: Well, it’s been many, many, many years, though.

Adrian: Yeah, it’s been many, many, many years. Yeah, I get angry, you know, like anyone else does, I would assume.

Commentary: In this segment, as mentioned earlier, Guerin takes the issues of emotional safety, open communication, and the father’s anger and gently, but factually presses the father and daughter about the presence of these issues in the family, attempting by this to open communication and begin the process of detoxifying and neutralizing these issues. If this can be successful, it will become safer in the therapy session and at home to discuss more openly emotionally charged topics. Otherwise, these toxic issues get buried, building negativity and tension.

An indication that Guerin is being somewhat successful in establishing therapeutic safety is seen in the father’s disclosure of his anger and alcohol abuse in the past and his improvement in the present. As you can see from this segment of the interview, learning the art of asking process questions is critical to using the Bowenian method of intervention.

Guerin: Do you think Pam has just as much of a relationship with you as she has with your wife?

Commentary: After some success at engaging the family Guerin turns to the central dysfunctional triangle of father–mother–daughter and begins his investigation of its structure with this simple process question.

Adrian: No, I think she is better with me than with my wife.

Guerin: Really?

Adrian: Yes.

Guerin: Agree?

Judy: Oh, yeah.

Guerin: What’s that about? How come it sets up that way?

Judy: I have no idea.

Guerin: No?

Judy: No, I just, I think it goes way, way back. I was the one that took her to all the doctors that she had to go to. And I just feel that maybe she associates me with hurt, you know— all the medical things and things she had to go through because we had a lot of things when she was a baby. And I was home, and so it naturally was me that took her to all this. But it goes way back when she was four or give years old.

Guerin: Now, does it upset you, Judy, to remember those times, or that the relationship with you and Pam isn’t better?

Judy: I’ve just grown to adjust to it, you know.

Guerin: I understand, but it seems like something we are talking about is upsetting you, and what I am trying to get clear about, is it the state of the relationship between you or is it some of that old stuff and reflecting back?

Judy: Oh, no. It, I just wish, because she was the daughter I always wanted, that we could be closer, yes.

Guerin: Okay, so you get kind of melancholy about that, wishing it could be so.

Judy: Yeah. But she doesn’t, so . . .
**Guerin:** Have you tried?

**Judy:** Oh, I’ve tried. I’ve asked her to do things and come places with me and she doesn’t want to, and stuff, so.

**Guerin:** So, when you say to her, you say, “Pam, listen, I got Saturday off. I want to go with you do what you want to do. What are we going to do?” She says “I don’t know,” and then she never . . .

**Pam:** Exactly what I would say, too.

**Guerin:** “I don’t know.”

**Judy:** Or it’s, “Come on, I’m going shopping,” or, “Come on, I’m going up to the mall,” and she won’t come with me.

**Guerin:** So, Pam, what’s that all about?

**Pam:** I don’t know. I really couldn’t say.

**Guerin:** Well, what about, let’s build some “supposes,” you know. I mean, what could it be about? I mean, is it hard for you to be with your mom? Is there something about her?

**Pam:** It’s not that hard, but it’s just, sometimes I like to go shopping by myself.

**Guerin:** Okay. Does she let you do that? Yeah? Does your mother hover and kind of overprotect you, or does she let you do what you have to do?

**Pam:** She lets me do whatever.

**Guerin:** Uh-huh. But there is, I mean, because she gets kind of sad that you and she aren’t better connected.

**Pam:** Yeah, that’s what we have to work out, too.

**Guerin:** So, what’s in the way? What’s the roadblock?

**Pam:** I don’t know what the barrier is.

**Guerin:** You get upset about it, too.

**Pam:** I don’t know what it is.

**Guerin:** Have you thought about it?

**Pam:** No, not really.

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**Guerin:** Do you want me to stop talking about this?

**Adrian:** How many times do I ask you to be nice to Mother when she comes home from work? Before she comes home from work?

**Pam:** I try to. I try to.

**Guerin:** Do you have a theory as to why the two ladies don’t do better with each other?

**Adrian:** No. None whatsoever.

**Guerin:** So you try to push them together.

**Adrian:** I try.

**Guerin:** Doesn’t work.

**Adrian:** She gets angry with me sometimes.

**Guerin:** Judy does?

**Adrian:** Judy does. Because . . . I don’t know what it is I’m trying to say there, but I had . . .

**Guerin:** She gets angry with you for trying to promote the relationship?

**Adrian:** She doesn’t get angry. I don’t know what the word would be, but she just says, “Leave it alone, leave me alone,” and walks away.

**Guerin:** Okay. Now when Adrian talks to you about your relationship with Pam, do you feel he is criticizing you?

**Judy:** No, I don’t think . . . Well, a lot of times he’ll say . . .

**Adrian:** “Change the tone.”

**Judy:** “Change the tone.”

**Adrian:** That’s my biggest thing.

**Guerin:** It’s like you are being instructional in telling her how to do it, you mean?

**Adrian:** Yeah, yeah.

**Guerin:** Uh-huh, like the boss.

**Adrian:** Well, not really.
Guerin: No?
Adrian: It’s the tone that she uses, would be the boss tone.
Guerin: The tone Judy uses or you use?
Adrian: The tone Judy uses, and I would just turn around and say, “Change your tone.”
Guerin: Oh, you say that.
Adrian: Yes.
Judy: But that’s just me. That’s just the way I talk, so.
Guerin: You’re bossy?
Judy: I don’t know if I’m bossy or not, but, you know, it’s just probably the tone of my voice or something, that he will always say that to me. Let’s see, I’m just trying to think of something.
Adrian: I was trying to think what you would say too, and I can’t think of anything.
Guerin: Are the two of them kind of in a conspiracy avoiding you telling them what to do?
Judy: Oh, yeah.
Adrian: No, we’re not.
Judy: Like today, when she is home, she’s got the whole day off and he’s home. And then when I come home and I see the house isn’t very well cleaned or dinner isn’t made . . .
Pam: I did good today, so . . .
Judy: You did real well today, but . . .
Pam: Come on.
Judy: We were coming here so . . .
Guerin: “I’ve got to be on good behavior,” right?
Judy: Or I’ll say to him, “How come you didn’t make her do this?” or something. Well, he said that she was gone most of the day today again. So, I mean, you know, there’s just whatever comes up or something. I’m gone all day, you know, and when I come home I don’t expect to have to clean house and . . .
Guerin: You’re gone all day working?
Judy: Working, yeah.
Guerin: Do you like working?
Judy: Yeah, I like work.
Guerin: Do you like what you do?
Judy: No, not right now, but I do like my job. Right now I’m under a lot of pressure.
Guerin: At work?
Judy: Yeah, it’s a busy season, and we lost three people and training three new people is not . . .
Guerin: They quit or they got let go or . . .
Judy: No, they quit, and now I am losing another one, so that . . .
Guerin: What do you do, Judy?
Judy: I work for a roofing company and I do the invoicing for them. Guerin: Okay. So any type of administrative help coming in, you have to train them, and you just get them trained and they leave.
Judy: Yeah, more or less. Well, this one I didn’t really have to train because the one that’s leaving is more in the accounts payable and I’m on the accounts receivable side of it, but she is in our office. Anyway, but . . .
Guerin: So, if you come home all weary and upset from working, are either of those two guys there for you?
Judy: No.
Guerin: No?
Judy: No, I don’t think so. He doesn’t like me working, and I don’t think . . . He’s instilled that on her, so I guess . . .
Adrian: I did not.
Guerin: This means you are supposed to be home taking care of the
two of them?

Judy: Yes.

Adrian: Isn’t that where every good wife is supposed to be?

Judy: No.

Guerin: It’s so hard to be humble. We’ve got a real liberated husband over there, huh? So how come you are working if they want you home?

Judy: Why? Because we can’t afford for me to stay home.

Guerin: Is that you can’t afford it financially or you can’t afford it emotionally?

Judy: No, I can’t afford it financially.

Adrian: Both. Both.

Guerin: So you wouldn’t mind being home if you didn’t mind the extra income?

Judy: I don’t know. I really couldn’t say. I mean, we enjoy ourselves when we are together. We spend weekends together.

Guerin: You mean you and Adrian or you . . .

Judy: Yeah, we go out of town on the weekend, and . . .

Guerin: Do you? Where do you go?

Judy: We go to Michigan.

Guerin: Do you have a place there?

Judy: Yeah, we’ve got a place up in Michigan.

Guerin: And Pam stays home?

Pam: Cleans house.

Guerin: And you like that?

Adrian: Through choice.

Pam: Sometimes.

Guerin: Sometimes yes, sometimes no? What determines yes or no?

Pam: It depends on how I feel. So If I want to go, I’ll go.

Guerin: Will they let you go with them?

Pam: Yes.

Guerin: So, all you have to do is say yes, and you get to go.

Pam: Yes, I want to go this weekend.

Guerin: So, how often do you go? Once a month, twice a month, what?

Pam: I don’t know.

Judy: Well, whenever we can get up there on the weekend we do try. During the summer especially.

Guerin: And how often does Pam go with you?

Commentary: Not all questions in the interview are aimed at elaborating or uncovering process. Some are what we call “information questions” aimed at the elaboration of the facts. These questions serve the purpose of opening a closed system and replacing overanxious distortion with a more factual representation.

Judy: When we beg her to come up and help.

Adrian: Maybe three times a year, four times a year.

Pam: No.

Adrian: If you come up that often now.

Guerin: So, what do you do when you stay home?

Pam: Clean house.

Guerin: Just make the house immaculate so that when mother comes home she’ll be real happy?

Pam: Yeah.

Guerin: Do you do anything else?

Pam: Vacuuming, bathrooms, dishes.

Guerin: What do you do for fun?

Pam: Fun? Just stay home, watch TV.
Guerin: Right.
Pam: On Saturday.
Guerin: Does anybody come and watch TV with you? Have you got some friends?
Pam: I have a dog at home that keeps me company.
Guerin: What kind of dog do you got?
Pam: It’s a German shepherd mix, collie mix.
Guerin: Yeah? Nice dog.
Pam: Mm-hmm.
Guerin: So you get a lot of TLC from, what’s your dog’s name?
Pam: Pumpkin.
Guerin: Pumpkin. How old’s Pumpkin?
Pam: How old?
Judy: About three years old. Three years.
Pam: No.
Adrian: Three, maybe four. In that vicinity.
Guerin: You had her since she was a pup?
Pam: Six weeks old. No, she’s got to be five.
Guerin: Do you take care of her? Do you take care of her? Walk her, feed her, get her her shots, all that stuff?
Pam: I take her for her shots. I take her for the haircut. I don’t walk her too much because from the gate to the driveway is a good running area, and she runs.
Guerin: So she has a run, like?
Pam: She runs. I have to feed her just about every day.
Guerin: But you don’t make your father walk her?
Pam: Well, we don’t walk her.
Guerin: How come you don’t get out and socialize? How old are you?
Pam: Thirty-two.
Guerin: How come you don’t have some friends and some groups you hang out with and stuff? You don’t want to do that? You just . . .
Pam: Nobody that I want to.
Guerin: No what?
Pam: Nobody that I want to hang out with.
Guerin: Really? You’re sure, or is it just that it’s hard to find them?
Pam: Mm-mm.
Judy: Oh, she bowls.
Guerin: Do you?
Pam: Oh, yeah. I go to bingo.
Adrian: She goes to bingo on Tuesday nights and she bowls on Friday nights.
Guerin: Are you a good bowler? You bowl on a team?
Pam: Yeah. Mixed league.
Guerin: Is the team made up at the bowling alley or is it from another place like the church or something like that?
Pam: Uh-uh. I don’t know where . . .
Adrian: From the bowling alley I’d say.
Pam: Just the bowling alley. That’s fun.
Guerin: So, it doesn’t bother you that you don’t have friends to hang out with, to come over to the house, to go to the movies with? You haven’t made friends with any of the people on the bowling team?
Pam: Oh, yeah, but . . .
Guerin: But you never go to the movies with them or any of that stuff.
Pam: Oh no, because they all have families.
Guerin: They all have family, so they’re all older and they have families. Do you want to have a family?
Pam: I don’t know. I’m still thinking about that one.
**Guerin:** You're still thinking about that one. How long are you going to think about it?

**Adrian:** Another 30 years, huh?

**Pam:** No. No.

**Guerin:** So you don’t get upset about not having a bunch of friends to hang with, go to the movies with, whatever?

**Judy:** She doesn’t care for movies, that’s why.

**Guerin:** Oh, well, I mean, I don’t know. Whatever else--the automobile races.

**Judy:** She is great because she doesn’t drink. I mean, occasionally, but she doesn’t go to bars.

**Guerin:** She can’t go to bars.

**Pam:** I don’t want to go to bars.

**Judy:** And she does not watch a movie. I mean even on TV, she will not watch a movie through, almost.

**Guerin:** Really? What do you like to do, Pam?

**Pam:** Play on the computer.

**Guerin:** Do you? Are you good at it? Are you on the internet?

**Adrian:** I refuse it. I won’t hook up the phone line.

**Pam:** Yes, you will.

**Guerin:** You won’t go to the internet?

**Adrian:** Huh?

**Guerin:** Why not?

**Adrian:** Too much money.

**Guerin:** How much?

**Adrian:** Well, it’s going to run me at least 50 dollars a month.

**Guerin:** Do you do the computer?

**Adrian:** Do I mess with the computer?

**Pam:** Very rare.

**Adrian:** I am a complete illiterate with the computer.

**Guerin:** Me too.

**Adrian:** I can’t even get into it anymore. When we first got it she taught me how to get into it and that.

**Guerin:** Who taught you? Judy?

**Adrian:** Pamela.

**Guerin:** Pam. Pam taught you.

**Judy:** You were playing.

**Pam:** Yeah, I taught him how.

**Adrian:** Yeah, I did.

**Judy:** You were playing the games that were on it.

**Guerin:** I’m going to make some trouble here now. Would you like to be on the internet?

**Pam:** I won’t say internet. What’s the other one?

**Judy:** She asked for it and I told him to hook up the line, but she would have to help pay for it.

**Pam:** Which is fine.

**Guerin:** Do you work?

**Pam:** Yeah, I work.

**Guerin:** What do you do?

**Pam:** In a grocery store.

**Guerin:** How many hours a week?

**Pam:** It depends.

**Guerin:** Thirty, twenty, ten?

**Pam:** No, it’s not 10.

**Guerin:** So it’s more like 15, 20?

**Pam:** No, more than that.
Guerin: Thirty.
Adrian: About 28 or 30.
Pam: Twenty-five, thirty.

Guerin: It's hard to pin you down Pam, you know? Do you like working in a grocery store?
Pam: At times yeah, at times no.

Guerin: What determines whether you do or you don't?
Pam: The customers. Some of the customers really get to me, so I have to walk away.

Guerin: Uh-huh, there's that anger thing again. You walk away, shut down your ears, right?
Pam: From the customers. I mean, there are several that I will walk away from.

Adrian: They are usually older people. Explain to him.
Pam: No.

Guerin: Older people bug you, Pam? Do they?
Pam: No, they don't.

Adrian: Aren't they the older ones?
Pam: No, these are specific customers that I will walk away from.

Guerin: You mean like they are regular customers every week. You know when they are coming. You see them coming, and you go back and start rearranging the milk case rather than . . .
Pam: Uh-huh, you'd better hide.

Guerin: Now, do your parents get upset because you don't have more of a social life and stuff?
Pam: I don't know. I never asked them.

Guerin: They never say anything to you about it? Would they tell you if they were upset about it?

Adrian: Have we ever said anything to you about it?

Pam: No, not that I know of.

Adrian: Oh, you don't remember, huh?
Pam: Uh-uh.

Guerin: I guess that means you have.

Judy: Oh, yeah. There is a nice young fellow that comes around and has asked her to do things and she has treated him very . . .
Pam: No, I have not. Not lately.

Guerin: She is getting bugged at you just for mentioning it.

Adrian: Well, he hasn't been around lately.
Pam: Well, he's been working a lot, too.

Adrian: Well, I would too.

Judy: Some of the time what you say to him and the way you treat him is not very nice.
Pam: Not lately.

Adrian: You know the old saying, "You treat them like dirt, they keep coming back"? Well, that's the way she treats him. Worse than dirt.

Guerin: Why do you do that, Pam?

Adrian: So he's stopped coming around now.
Pam: I have not.

Guerin: Pam?

Judy: And he's been around since they've been in college together, so . . .
Pam: I just don't like . . . He's not my type of guy.

Guerin: What's the matter with him?
Pam: I don't know, he's just not my type of guy.

Adrian: He's heavy like I am.

Guerin: Yeah?

Adrian: He's a young man, but he's very heavy like I am.
Judy: Well, he just got heavy, though, in the last year or so.
Adrian: He always was . . .
Guerin: You don’t like heavy guys?
Pam: I just don’t like . . . there’s something about him I don’t like.
Guerin: Why would you think it’s because he’s heavy?
Adrian: Because of the way she used to talk about him.
Guerin: She used to say he’s a fat guy or something?
Judy: Well, she used to . . .
Adrian: She said it to me anyway.
Judy: She didn’t like him because he was hairy, is what she told me once.
Pam: That, too.
Guerin: Oh, you think that’s really the reason?
Pam: I don’t know, I just . . .
Guerin: Do you want to not talk about this? What’s this guy’s name?
Pam: Mark.
Guerin: Mark? Where did you go to school with him?
Pam: South Suburban.
Guerin: And so you’ve known him for how long now? A long time. Ten years?
Pam: Something like that.
Guerin: And he still keeps coming around and you still keep . . .
Pam: I just don’t like, there is something about him I don’t want . . . I just don’t want to deal with him.
Guerin: Do your parents pressure you to encourage him?
Pam: I don’t know. Do you?
Judy: I just say she has to be nice to him.
Pam: Which I do, which I have been.

Judy: And if he’s asked you to go out, to go out with him. What does it hurt?
Guerin: So you guys do worry, I guess, that she kind of spends most of her time other than working in a grocery store and bowling . . .
Judy: Oh yeah, well, she was going up to the truck stop all the time, and I am not in favor of her being up at the truck stop. So.
Guerin: You think she might get herself in some difficulty?
Judy: Yeah, I’m afraid, up there, with all the truckers and all the things you hear. I mean, granted, truckers are good people at times, but then there are also some that are out there that aren’t the greatest either, so.
Guerin: So, have you been trying to light a fire under Pam to get her out and get her more active socially and get her . . . Or have you been just letting her be the way she is?
Adrian: No, just more or less just letting her be now.
Guerin: You used to do that.
Adrian: We used to try to.
Guerin: You kind of gave up doing that?
Adrian: Yeah.
Judy: Her trouble was that whenever she decided to go and do something with somebody, she would not tell us until she was leaving.
Guerin: How come?
Judy: I have no idea.
Adrian: I mean, she could have had something planned for two weeks ahead, and she doesn’t say nothing until she is walking out the door and then maybe we would still have to pull it out of her.
Guerin: Well, sometimes that happens because kids think that their parents are going to ask too many questions—“Where are you going, who are you going with?”
Judy: Or tell her no.
Adrian: Well, that’s the basic questions.

Guerin: But sometimes kids want to put that boundary in there. They don’t want their parents to ask questions. They just don’t like their parents asking questions.

Judy: But it’s not just from teenage. It’s been back even when she was little, she would not tell me things.

Adrian: Us. She would not tell us thing.

Judy: Well, I know she made plans to go to the library with somebody, and their parents were picking her up. Well, all of a sudden she is flying out the door. I was down in the basement and she’s flying out the door, and I didn’t know about it. I didn’t even know where she was going. And I just, you know, if I was there and she wanted to go to the library I would take her to the library. Or tell me that she’s going, not sneak out on me. So, I mean this stems back from since she’s been a little kid.

Guerin: Maybe she feels like you guys are too controlling?

Judy: I don’t, I’ve never been. . . I don’t feel I’ve been that way over her. I’ve worked most of my time, so, I mean, there is. . . I just . . .

Guerin: Are your parents too controlling? Do they ask too many questions? They want to know what you are doing? They are bugging you to do this, bugging you to do that? You just want to be left alone?

Pam: No, they are not really controlling.

Guerin: No?

Pam: They just like to know where I’m going.

Guerin: And you don’t want to tell them.

Adrian: Why? Why do we want to know where you are going?

Pam: So that if something happens I get a hold of you.

Guerin: And what do you think about that? Do you think it’s okay? Are you happy with the way you got life, Pam?

Pam: It’s all right.

Guerin: Would you like it to be different?

Pam: A little bit better.

Guerin: What would be better?

Pam: I don’t. . . I don’t know.

Guerin: Do you think about what it would be like if it were better, or do you just not even think about it?

Pam: I don’t even think about it.

Guerin: Are you afraid to think about it?

Pam: No.

Guerin: Am I upsetting you now? So I can keep asking questions? I told your parents not to ask too many questions, and here I am asking a million questions, you know? Some guys got a lot of nerve, you know? Do you ever think about the future? So you just take it a day at a time?

Pam: Day at a time, yep.

Guerin: That works better for you?

Pam: Mm-hmm.

Guerin: What would be bad about thinking about the future?

Pam: I don’t know. I just haven’t thought about it.

Guerin: You’re not afraid of it?

Pam: Mm-mm.

Guerin: Do you worry about these guys dying? How long have you been worried about that?

Pam: Oh, I don’t know. I can’t even tell you.

Guerin: Ten years, five years, two years?

Pam: Oh, more than that.

Guerin: Yeah?

Pam: More than that.

Guerin: How often do you worry about it?

Pam: Oh, I don’t know. I don’t know.
Guerin: Do you talk about that worry?

Pam: Mm-mm.

Guerin: What do you do when we talk about that?

Pam: I don’t know.

Guerin: Do you guys talk about that?

Adrian: Every so often we would, and off she’d run.

Guerin: Now, would you talk about it as a way to try to light a fire under her by saying, you know, “We are not going to be here forever”?

Adrian: That’s, that’s about the size of it. We’re not going to be here forever.

Guerin: Because you don’t look like you are worried about leaving very soon.

Adrian: I’m not. When I go, I go.

Judy: I hope not. But there is that possibility.

Adrian: I just hope I go before she does.

Guerin: Yeah, married people do that, you know. They get into, when they get older--I mean you guys are young. But when they get older they start racing each other. They get in their seventies, eighties, they start racing each other. Who is going to get there first?

Adrian: No, we got a neighbor who is in his seventies and he just got married.


Adrian: He got remarried. His first wife passed away, and he just got remarried. So.

Guerin: So, what would happen, Pam, to you, if they died? Would you be okay?

Pam: I don’t know. I don’t know.

Guerin: So you like not to think about it.

Judy: See, that’s something we worry about.

Guerin: Yeah. So do you guys talk about it? You and Adrian talk about it.

Judy: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

Guerin: But you don’t talk with Pam?

Adrian: Pam won’t talk. She won’t even be in the room with us.

Judy: I think we’ve mentioned it to her.

Guerin: Don’t talk to anybody else? Do you talk to anybody else?

Adrian: You talk to Jessie.

Pam: Well, that’s different.

Adrian: Well, he said anybody else.

Guerin: Who is Jessie?

Pam: My bingo partner.

Guerin: Oh yeah?

Adrian: It’s an older lady that she goes to bingo with, I guess, she could be in her seventies.

Guerin: Yeah? Jessie’s a good lady? So you can talk to her about lots of things.

Pam: No, I wouldn’t say lots of things, but . . .

Guerin: Some things.

Pam: Yeah.

Guerin: You wouldn’t talk to her about something personal like that, though.

Pam: Nope, nope. But she spoils me like a grandkid. She spoils me.

Guerin: She what, spoils you?

Pam: Like a grandmother would.

Guerin: Yeah? That’s good and that’s bad?

Pam: No, not really.

Adrian: Well, my girlfriend in back would treat you that way too if you would do things for her.
Pam: Please.

Guerin: What would happen if you won a lottery and part of it was that you go your own condo, you know? Fully furnished and you could live?

Pam: Let’s go, guys.

Guerin: You’d bring them with you? Yeah? You don’t listen to them, you plug your ears, but you’d bring them along.

Pam: Yeah.

Guerin: Now you know, when you are talking to a psychiatrist and you say that, they are liable to say, maybe you have a problem separating. What do you think?

Pam: Sure, I’d rather stay home.

Guerin: Yeah. Now, is that a problem, or should everybody just sit back and accept that?

Pam: I don’t think that’s a problem.

Commentary: A third type of question is what we term a “suppose question.” These questions displace the content to a “what if” scenario that allows the family to respond more openly by diminishing their defensiveness. The “just suppose” question is a variant of the displacement story technique described earlier. It provides a fantasy alternative as a way of uncovering and documenting underlying individual and relationship process. In this instance, it documents the degree of anxious attachment present in the family. Guerin offers the daughter the fantasy of freedom and she automatically, in just a heartbeat, elects to bring her parents along. This maneuver accomplishes the parents’ goal of continuing to focus on the daughter, while simultaneously allowing Guerin to define the level of the separation difficulties inherent in this family system.

Guerin: So, it’s not a problem as far as Pam considers it. So everybody just ought to leave you alone with it.

Pam: That’s true.

Guerin: Do you ever get kind of worked up about things and wish you had somebody to talk to about them?

Pam: Uh-uh.

Guerin: So, you’re not a talker. You keep things in? So you guys are not the only people she doesn’t talk to. She doesn’t talk to anybody.

Judy: No, she talks.

Guerin: Oh, who does she talk to?

Pam: Not at all.

Judy: If we get out and it’s a family gathering, if somebody will talk to her, she ends up rattling off, and I’ll even to say to him once in a while, “Look at her over there talking like crazy,” and I says, “Yet she can’t talk to us.” I don’t know what the conversations are, but you know, socializing with somebody.

Guerin: But, you know, how unusual do you think it is for well you say this went from when--how old was Pam when she stopped talking to you?

Judy: When she stopped talking?

Guerin: Two or something?

Adrian: When she started talking she stopped talking.

Guerin: So, it goes way back.

Adrian: Yeah.

Guerin: Does that remind you of anybody in the family? Are there any great non-talkers in the family?

Judy: Well, Pam is adopted, so we really don’t know too much about her. And I just felt that . . . I just thought that maybe she kind of associated me with suffering or something, because I was the one that was always, you know, taking her here and taking her there.

Commentary: It is clear from the structural set up, and the positioning of family members in the room, that the father and daughter are linked in alliance with the mother on the outside and unhappy about it. Guerin tries to nudge the direction of movement in this triangle by urging the mother to close the distance with her daughter on her daughter’s terms.
and for the father to cease his efforts to promote the relationship between these two women and let them get on with it themselves. This entails not only an attempt to change the direction of movement in the triangle, but also proposes using the technique of relationship experiments in order to break the dysfunctional sequence.

Guerin: Maybe she thinks you worry about her too much. Do you?
Judy: Well, I do worry about her, yeah. But you know, the way things are out there, you know, nowadays, you can’t say you can’t worry. Like when she comes home at night if she comes home late, I always tell her to make sure she wakes me up.
Pam: Which I do.
Judy: So I know she’s home.
Commentary: Guerin, having begun the investigation of the father–mother–daughter triangle, moves first to the mother and then on to the mother–daughter relationship.

Guerin: Would you say you’re an anxious mother?
Pam: A worrywart?
Judy: No, I don’t walk the floors.
Guerin: You go to sleep anyway.
Judy: I do go to sleep.
Adrian: She goes to sleep but you’re not sleeping. Do you have children?
Guerin: Do I? Sure.
Adrian: I don’t know how old they are, but when they’re out late, you go to bed, you’re sleeping, but when that door opens outside, you’re really out.
Judy: Yeah, but you know that I’m a very light sleeper. I hear all sorts of noises and stuff.
Guerin: Now, you know when we’ve been talking both Judy and Pam get tearful. I’m not sure what the tears are connected to. Do you know?
Adrian: I don’t know. I think Judy really wants Pam to love her, to be a pal with her, and with Pam, I don’t know. I think Pam is just embarrassed to talk about it, and she is doing something that she doesn’t want to do. So she will get very teary-eyed, and she’s sorry that she’s acting that way towards her mother, but she’s still going to do it.
Guerin: Is Adrian right about what you are tearful about?
Judy: I don’t know. I cry very easily. I can watch a movie and sit there and cry, and it could be the funniest movie in the world, but I still cry.
Commentary: With her last comment, the mother boxes Guerin out.
Guerin: So we shouldn’t pay any attention to those tears?
Judy: Not always, no.
Commentary: Guerin presses on.

Guerin: Is there a difference between when you cry just because you are a sentimental person and when you cry because there is something really pinching your insides?
Judy: Oh yeah.
Guerin: How can we tell the difference?
Judy: I don’t know.
Guerin: Can you tell the difference?
Judy: I could probably tell the difference myself, yeah.
Guerin: Do you let anybody in on . . .?
Judy: No, I just hold it into myself.
Guerin: Mm-hmm.
Adrian: I caught you a couple of times.
Guerin: Everybody holds up into themselves. Do you do that too?
Adrian: Yeah. Guerin: So everybody goes off into their box, right? Pam does. She says, “Leave me alone.” Mother says, and you do too. How come?
Judy: It’s easier that way.
Guerin: It’s easier. What makes it easier, Judy?
Judy: Well, there is no fighting, no arguing, or . . .

Guerin: So if you start talking about what’s upsetting you then the fight would ensue?

Judy: Well, it might if it was something said that wasn’t . . .

Guerin: You mean if it was critical or . . .

Judy: Yeah, if it was something that . . .

Guerin: But suppose it was just sadness or upset . . .

Commentary: At this point Guerin pokes gently at the sadness, loneliness, and sense of loss in the family without mentioning the dead brother.

Judy: Oh, I think we can talk about that. I think we talk about that if it was something sad or something was bothering us . . .

Guerin: So if the tears are coming from frustration and anger and it’s frustration and anger with somebody else and you try to talk about it, then it’s not safe. But if it’s because there’s been a loss, or your feelings have been hurt, or you are frustrated because things are not going well at work, then you can talk about that.

Judy: Probably, yeah.

Guerin: Now, what Adrian tells me is that you have upset feelings, I’m not sure they are hurt, that you and Pam somehow can’t have the kind of connection you would like to have with your daughter. Is that accurate?

Judy: Well, yeah . . .

Commentary: Guerin pushes the mother to move toward her daughter and communicate directly with her.

Guerin: And have you told Pam about those?

Judy: I’ve asked her, you know, to do things with me and . . .

Guerin: Have you told her about your feelings?

Judy: Oh, I think so.

Guerin: Has she, Pam? Do you remember?

Pam: Mm-mm.

Commentary: Guerin checks out the daughter’s availability and openness to change in mother’s direction of movement.

Guerin: Would you prefer her not to tell you?

Pam: Prefer her to tell me.

Guerin: Would you? So, if she were to tell you, “It really upsets me that you and I can’t find a way to be connected and have fun together and be comfortable together,” you want her to say that? Do you believe her, Judy?

Judy: No.

Guerin: Why not?

Judy: Because if you knew Pam, she can sit here and tell you exactly what you want to hear.

Guerin: Is that what she’s doing right now?

Judy: Mm-hmm.

Pam: No.

Adrian: A lot of it.

Pam: No.

Adrian: A lot of it.

Guerin: Pam?

Pam: No, no, no, no, no, no.

Commentary: To this point the session dealt with extra-familial triangles involving the previous six visiting clinicians, and has been defining the structure and process of the central symptomatic triangle involving father, mother, and daughter, and proposing ways in which the mother might experiment with change. Guerin now very gently opens the issue of the brother’s death by returning to the previously discussed topic of loss.

Guerin: Now, you’re getting mad. Okay.
Judy: Because, we've told her that. You are going to tell us exactly what we want to hear.

Pam: No.

Judy: And nothing more.

Guerin: So, then, if you tell her that and you are saying, “What I’d like you to do is to pick some things to do with me. You pick the day, you pick what we do, and I’ll go do it, and I won’t ask any questions, and I won’t tell you what to do for the whole time we are out there doing it. We’ll do what you want. I won’t tell you what to do. We’ll have a good time, kinda light and fun,” would she go, or would she never set the time up?

Adrian: Never set the time up.

Judy: What was it? Last week Friday, Saturday. We went to get my hair done together, the two of us went. And, oh, she wanted to go out to lunch afterwards. Well, I knew it was late, and she knew it was late, but she insisted on lunch, so I says, “All right. We’ll go to lunch. You pick the place.” And I just thought we were going to a fast food place, you know, real fast. Well, that wasn’t so. We ended up at a restaurant. Well, that was fine. I didn’t care. We sat there and I figured, “This is my time with her.” I wanted this to be a good time out, so. And then we were sitting there, and I didn’t know what to order because I don’t normally eat lunch.

Pam: I said, “Why don’t we split a taco salad?”

Judy: And I thought that was the greatest thing I could hear from her. So that’s exactly what we did, and we ate, and we left, and we came home.

Pam: We ate, we ate.

Judy: But that was a great . . .

Guerin: So that was a success.

Judy: Yes. I really enjoyed it, even though I was really in a hurry, but I decided this was my time with her. I might as well go.

Guerin: And so maybe you need to do that more? To just let it be on her timetable and doing what she wants to do. Is that hard for you?

Judy: No. There was a time a couple of weeks ago he was out, and I says to her, “Well why don’t we go and play bingo together?” It was Saturday night, and I said, “We can go and play bingo.” I had other things to do, but I thought she enjoys playing bingo, and I enjoy going out once in a while, and she said, “No.” Then a little later on she said, “I’ll call Jessie up and I’ll get Jessie, and we’ll go together.” Well, I wanted this time together.

Guerin: Mm-hmm, as opposed to having Jessie along.

Judy: And I said, “Well, forget it. I just don’t care to go then.” And, she didn’t really . . .

Guerin: And your feelings got hurt.

Judy: Well . . .

Guerin: Yeah.

Judy: Yeah, I would guess so.

Guerin: Now what do you think it is about Jessie that Pam’s drawn to spending time with her as opposed to you?

Judy: Well, Jessie treats her like her granddaughter, you know, and that’s sweet.

Guerin: And you know how you treat granddaughters, like they never do anything wrong and you never criticize them. Whatever they want to do, that’s great.

Judy: She takes her out to lunch.

Guerin: But there’s a formula, so why don’t you try Jessie’s formula?

Adrian: Because Pamela don’t take Judy shopping. Go out for four hours . . .

Guerin: Well, why I’m just talking about . . .

Adrian: That’s what I’m talking about. Today, that’s where Pamela was today. Five hours. She went out and went shopping with Jessie. She knew we were supposed to come here.

Guerin: I understand.
Adrian: And she knew she was supposed to help me with dinner.

Guerin: But, I think that, you know, my thoughts on this whole thing would be that there would be something you could learn from Jessie in terms of what Pam feels comfortable with in a relationship. Not as a criticism of the two of you, because Jessie doesn’t have any of the responsibility. It’s kind of easy. That’s one of the great things about being a grandparent. I’m a grandparent now, for three years. I’m a grandparent, and you know, that’s great. You get to go home. You get to not have to be responsible, you know, stuff like that. You get to not have to yell.

Adrian: There’s the ice cream you threw up tonight. That’s fine, because you won’t be here.

Guerin: But there is something to be learned from Jesse.

Judy: Well, like I said to him, I says, “Maybe she is looking for a grandmother that she doesn’t have.”

Guerin: Where are the grandmothers? Were they ever there?

Judy: No, my mother passed away when she was about, what, six or seven, we decided, and his mother had also passed away when she was about three or four years old. So the grandparents, grandmas passed away very early, so she didn’t have that.

Guerin: I don’t want to dwell on this. I just want to ask a question about it because I know you’ve dealt with some of it in the other session. Is it easy for you guys to sit around and talk about the losses that you’ve had in your life like when the grandmothers died and when your son died and stuff, or is it hard?

Adrian: Everybody but my son.

Guerin: That one’s kind of a no-no.

Adrian: That’s a touchy one.

Guerin: Real sensitive. Have you worked on getting that less sensitive or have you just left it in its compartment?

Pam: Left it be.

Adrian: We just put it away and let it be there.

Guerin: Do you think it would be a negative to take it out of the compartment and work on it, or . . .

Adrian: I think it would be.

Guerin: Okay. Would you agree?

Judy: Well, we talk once in a while about the good times we had together with him.

Pam: But that’s it.

Judy: We remember things that we did together, so.

Commentary: Guerin chooses not to press on here leaving further exploration for another day. In the final phase of the session, Guerin uses the triangle with Pam’s geriatric friend Jesse. In doing this he challenges the mother to face the reality of her daughter’s movement away from her and toward Jesse and for the mother to learn from it, even to the point of studying Jesse’s methods. Having done this, Guerin returns to the parents’ agenda and broaches the topic of Pam’s social phobia and gives Pam total responsibility for dealing with it. In this way, he hopes to relieve the mother of some of her guilt and feelings of responsibility for Pam’s isolation while challenging Pam to take on the social phobia and do something about it.

Guerin: Hey, Pam. I’m going to tell you something. You ready? I have a hunch. Now, it’s only a hunch. I have a hunch that one of the reasons you don’t kind of move out a little bit more and find some things to do with people your own age is that you’re a little bit scared. And I think you ought to work on that. I know it is not easy for you to talk about these things, but it might help to have somebody, and maybe you can talk to Jesse about it, and Jessie can help you with it. But I think that it would be worth it for you to start working on that. Does that make any sense to you?

Pam: Mm-hmm.

Judy: I think she needs to find a nice young man.

Guerin: Well, let’s start getting . . .

Judy: A friend. It doesn’t have to be . . .
Guerin: I understand, but let’s not program it for it. I would like to see Pam take the step to do it in whatever way. I mean I don’t care if it’s a church social group that goes bowling or whatever she finds and whatever she wants to do. Mostly, so she has to confront whether it is that she is anxious and scared, because then she has something that she can work on. And the more you guys are not hovering around to see if she is doing it, the more likely she is to do it. She will shut down and go back, you know? And it’s hard not to because you wish that for her so much. You hear? I know that. But somehow she’s got to, and I think it’s going to be scary for her, but I’d really encourage you to try to do it. She can talk to Jessie about it because it’s probably too scary to talk to you. She can maybe find somebody like me to talk to about this. I think it would be useful. But let her think about it. It’s got to be Pam’s idea or it’s not going to happen, you know? Right Pam?

Pam: Guess so.

Adrian: What’s the small problem there, Pam? What is the small problem with his last statement there, Pam?

Pam: I don’t know.

Guerin: What is it? What is it?

Adrian: It’s got to be Pam’s idea.

Guerin: Don’t you think that’s true?

Adrian: It’s true to a certain extent, but Pam won’t have the idea.

Guerin: Oh, but now I think there is a difference between having the idea and acting on it. You see, my thought is that I bet the three of you guys, I’ve only sat with you for 45 minutes, but I bet the three of you guys can all be strong-willed, strong-headed you know? Am I right?

Pam: Mm-hmm.

Adrian: Yeah.

Guerin: Judy, you’re not chiming in. So, I mean I would just like to see that be, you know?

Commentary: As the interview draws to a close, Guerin moves to reinvolve the father.
Video Credits

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