

EMOTIONAL CLIMATE IN THE FAMILY AND THERAPY

THOMAS F. FOGARTY, M.D.

It is not by accident that I selected the word "climate" to describe the emotional systems in the family. There are many similarities between the weather and the emotional barometer among people. There are many similarities between weather reporting and emotional reporting in the family. The weather, with its many fronts — highs and lows — swirling from every direction, with variations in wind and humidity, with various elements — heat or cold, wetness or dryness, calm or storm, clear or cloudy, or any other meteorological phenomena — with all of these ricocheting against each other, the weather becomes highly volatile, subject to many changes and unpredictable. Under such circumstances, weather forecasting becomes a confused and oversimplified attempt to arrive at probabilities. In similar fashion, learning to operate in an emotional system is something of an experimental process. Some elements are known and a certain amount of trial and error approach is called for. It is no arena for the perfectionist who wants to be sure. In such an arena, he will retreat to objects rather than people. Objects are generally safer, predictable and can be kept under control.

As a starting point, we might ask, "what goes into the development of an emotional climate? What are its component parts?" Any person, object, idea, issue, thought or feeling can be a part of an emotional climate. This includes people long dead and episodes from the past, held in memory. It matters not whether anything be real or imaginary, past or present, with us or apart — the list is infinite. To simplify this complex picture, we can start with the components of the system consisting of people both present and absent. To focus it more, we can generally place emphasis on those people related to us by blood and marriage — family members. Other people in our network at times assume critical emotional importance but never as consistently and intensely as a member of the family. And, finally, at least three generations in the family are necessary as a minimum overview of the emotional system and its climate. See how many people, unseen, are floating around every room. Issues and objects can play a part. They do not contribute feelings but serve as a repository for the emotional content we invest in them. They act simply as displacements, smoke screens, activators or

garbage cans in relation to the real emotional difficulties. To focus the emotional system, all emotional problems are converted to people problems. All people problems are converted to their equivalent in the family. And the problem is placed in the overview of at least three generations.

Within this simplified view, all emotional problems can be visualized. But further complications enter. The emotional climate is always shifting and has a strong tendency to overload at one or more points. There is the family in which the mood of one member is powerful, dominant and, seemingly, the only one present in the room. Others in the family either agree and become "non-persons" by denial or solve differences by silence and distance. There is the family in which moods openly conflict, one clashing against the other. Differences here are resolved by alternating clashes and distances. Ultimately, extremes of distance lead to the formation of triangles inside or outside the family, to divorcing the problem person out of the family, or to an emotional divorce. When the perception of each person becomes fixed an emotional divorce ensues. In many families, the sensitivities between people are so acute and cast such an intense air of tension that the emotional climate can almost be touched. The emotional tension takes on a life of its own. People constantly sniff the air to get a reading on the climate and then govern themselves accordingly. They are not merely sensitive to the emotional climate but determined by it. Under these circumstances, the emotional climate acts as the third leg of the triangle. This is clearly seen in the situation in which the submissive wife stages a revolution and wants to leave her husband. The formerly dominant man is enraged but afraid of losing her. He becomes so acutely sensitive to the emotional climate that he relates to it. He gets into the "no-self" position to try to get her back. He rates progress and failure by the mood he senses between them. The person to person relationship is lost.

Now, readings of the emotional climate are important but represent only one factor in the over-

view of people systems. If one asks members of the family what kind of a week it was, he will often get such varying answers that he has to wonder if they live in the same house. The variety of answers comes mainly from the fact that different members are taking readings of the emotional system from different indicators. Some take readings from inside themselves. Anyone who is going through a process of personal change will have some negative feelings inside himself from parts of self that do not want to change. These parts of self are almost like a bureaucracy fighting to perpetuate itself. Readings may come from other members of the family. Personal change, often or always, will elicit some negative feelings and comments from other members of the family system, urging the changer to get back where he was. Change is, in the long run, a lonely business. Over time, the process of change can cause positive feelings in self as confusion clears, plans for change become determined and hope springs up. This takes time. In an emotional system subjected to change, there is almost always a deterioration in the emotional climate for some period of time. As one or more members of the family strive to clarify and express their "I" positions, the previous tenuous balance in the family fails. Feelings, submerged over the years, erupt. Negative feedback from others in the family who feel hurt, threatened, and misunderstood create emotional turmoil. During all these periods of change, emotional readings on where one is going are simply discouraging, unreliable and conducive to avoiding change. Readings also vary because some will base their opinion on feelings, others on thought, and some on actions. Time, itself, is another variable. Some members of the family are bogged down into a bitter memory from the past and base their present on it. Others say, "Forget the past and let's start anew." Still others are thinking and feeling into the future, planning next week and missing today. If the emotional reading about the climate comes from different moments in time, the weather report is indeed confusing.

In this environment, members of the family, increasingly unsure, are confused by trying one thing and then the other. They search for the "right" move to make. In their impatience, they try everything for too short a period of time. Frustration leads to anger and desperation. The emotional climate deteriorates further. More issues thrown into it catch fire. Ultimately, the family tries to fix responsibility for the process on one or more members, or in a physical symptom or illness, or outside the family.

"Change is in the long run a lonely business. The process — can cause positive feelings in self as confusion clears — plans become determined and hope springs up."

Example

John is a 55 year old physician. A former drinker, he has been dry for 20 years. He is also deeply religious in his own way. He is married to a woman who loves him dearly but is afraid he will return to drink under any stress. One son, John Jr., was on hard drugs but has now stopped using them. He has changed his habit but not his personality. He is still secretive, guarding his privacy by telling lies, partial truths and explanatory make-up stories. He denies that he steals but does associate with the drug culture. His older brother, Paul, is the "good" brother. He listens to father, mother and brother and has understanding answers to all problems. Naturally, he is the only member of the family that does not live at home. From his secure distance he understands everybody. He is the family therapist.

If one asks father how things are going, he becomes flooded by the memories of his own "alcoholic," rough father and his "good" mother who put the children above herself. His impatience for an end to the frustration with his son, the desire to kick him out of the house and the faint hope that he will be what father wasn't, conflict within him. Recent episodes of lying, stealing and lack of openness aggravate him. Anger at mother's secretiveness when she slips son money conflict with his genuine caring for her. He struggles to maintain an atmosphere of reasonableness in the psychiatrist's office. Mother has been under the care of a psychiatrist for many years. She knows that she has been uncooperative with her husband but wants sympathy for her nervousness. They stumble toward and away from each other. Mother came from a very "close" family and wanted to create the same. Preoccupied with peace at any price, she moves into any conflictual area between father and son. Father's potential anger, her own fear and son's use of drugs, conflict for her attention. She ignores her own self to keep peace. A good week for her is a peaceful week between father and son. There is no report about herself. Tired and worn, she plods on. John Jr. sees a good week as one in which he can do what he wants. He pays no attention to the emotional climate or to his parents until it starts to invade his private space. His readings are all inner.

Paul, the saint, gives innumerable readings which are all plausible but lack emotional involvement. He has and wants to keep his distance. The loneliness of son, the anger of father, the confusion of mother snowball into a huge mass that overhangs the family.

The explosive aura of tension, unsureness and foreboding in the home are so real that they have become a member of the family. Father searches around in his turmoil for something to hang his hat on. He finally preaches from his one secure position as an AA member and a religious person. Mother jumps back and forth, agreeing to everything and holding fervently onto human nature's love of the peacemaker. Son defends his privacy — his rights. A legalistic touch.

Into this breach jumps the therapist — overloaded with information, surrounded by a million episodes to resolve as the final judge, plagued by his own bias and emotional dysfunctions. No spot for a timorous soul. He looks for feedback from the family to get his own self centered. But, emotionally speaking, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. This works for therapists as well as families. The poor therapist who depends on emotional feedback gets conflicting readings. The rich therapist who can follow the flow of movement gets richer. The same process occurs in the family. There, a large sized problem calls for great distance between the members of the family who are involved. The distance can become so great that there is, in effect, no feedback. Without feedback, it is impossible for the person to understand himself. It

" — Emotionally speaking, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. This works for therapists as well as families. The poor therapist who depends on emotional feedback gets conflicting readings. The rich therapist who can follow the flow of movement gets richer. The same process occurs in the family — a large sized problem calls for great distance — The distance can become so great there is no feedback."

is impossible to understand self outside of a context. Another possibility with large sized problems is that feedback can occur by narrowing the distance via conflict. Here the feedback is present but is so exaggerated, generalized, inaccurate, incomplete and confused in a scattered way that it is useless. Still a third form of feedback is by means of self denial

on the part of one so as to agree with the other person. In effect, this represents no feedback. With smaller problems, feedback is an invaluable aid to understanding. It can be relied on to some extent as having at least a germ of truth in it. The emotional climate is conducive to speaking clearly and listening acutely. Sensitivities interfere minimally and people aim at function rather than right and wrong.

But the therapist is always faced with lark problems and a markedly dysfunctional emotion; system in the family. Into such a climate one can throw any issue or topic and people will take different, reactive, often conflictual positions.

The first task of the therapist is to reset the emotional barometer so that one person can listen to the other. With feedback so lacking because of turmoil, distance or denial, the therapist must introduce into the family an atmosphere and operating principles which will keep people connected but separate and differentiated. There are many ways of doing this. He can introduce abstract concept such as the triangle. These triangles are relevant to all problems in the family to keep things focused. Yet, it is far enough removed from sensitivities to calm the emotional turmoil. He can defuse a home system by moving the discussion into the extended family. This will often stop the crossfire between members present in the room. He can calm someone who is totally focused on his spouse by moving him into talking about his inner system — how he feels about himself. He can exert control by having each person talk directly to him, by "taking someone's tongue away" or by directly preventing interruptions. Distant people can be connected by ignoring them so they come in at their own speed. At this time he lends objective feedback to members of the family based on his concept of a functional person and family. To accomplish this, he must be in tune with and play the emotional chords in the family. Incidentally, that is why a simulated family is never the same as a real family — the emotional chords are lacking in the simulated family.

How does the therapist lend this objectivity? Let's return to the different readings that people in the same family take about the same situation. The therapist must give a different reading. Depending upon his theory about families, his reading will vary. I, myself, depend on the movement of the members — their position, closeness, distance, going toward or away from, etc. This reading is independent of the family's emotional system and can

be fairly objectively reported. This reading is always taken around a specific idea such as avoiding triangles. In terms of movement, a specific focus is necessary. One can never analyze a system within the general framework of making it better. A focused problem centers it and then movement can be seen around it. From this initial hypothetical reading, the therapist moves to observe and test out the hypothesis. Predictable results confirm the hypothesis. For example, in the family presented, one would see both parents moving toward son around his drugs. One would predict that, if the parents could move away from son, they would be relieved because they were no longer attempting the impossible task of being responsible for him. And son would now be upset because he has little to run from. Such movement would open minds, reset the emotional barometer and be one step in the direction of a new atmosphere.

Some Elements in a Functional Emotional Climate

Space: Distance implies that the space between people has a potentially explosive climate rumbling around in it. It implies the presence of fusion. Open conflict demonstrates fusion — people intruding into each other's area. Different people will want different amounts of space. People who are wide open will take their emotional context and pour it anywhere. Others will pull into themselves and create vacuums between themselves and others. Some will let you get near but never touch — literally. Space is a touchy area. It must be approached gingerly or one gets a closed off emotional system. Someone who is wide open must learn to slow down. Remember, wherever there is too much space between people, there is fusion and emotional turmoil whether it shows or not. This must be approached delicately or the climate will explode.

Optimism: Optimism sees reality as essentially good and believes that there is more good in life than pain and evil. It leads to an inclination to put the most favorable construction on actions and happenings, moving toward the best possible outcome. It is hopeful if balanced by reality. The pessimist would like to see himself as an optimist who practiced what he preached but is really one who, given the choice of two evils, chooses them both. Pessimism casts an air of hopelessness, anticipating difficulties before they occur. The very anticipation and the concern it brings may contribute to the occurrence of the event. In the example family, mother's preoccupation with preventing fights between father and son may help provoke the fights.

She has a kind of pessimistic anticipation. Whether one is optimistic or pessimistic depends on where he takes the reading from. If mother takes the emotional reading from inside herself, then she will be pessimistic whenever she smells any hint of trouble. If father takes the reading from the use of drugs, then he will be pessimistic if son comes to him and states he is not sure he will stay off of drugs. If the therapist takes the reading from the degree of openness between father and son and the fact that both are dealing with each other — even though not functionally — then he can be optimistic.

There is openness and two people are moving toward each other and mother is staying out of it. That is a more favorable emotional climate than hopelessness. In the presence of hopelessness, it is the human tendency for one to reassure the other. Often, the more reassurance comes, the more hopeless the other gets. It is possible to take a reading that is under the other person's and yet optimistic. If father feels hopeless about son and drugs, one can take a reading under his that goes, "Well, it looks awful but things could be worse. He could be in jail for murder. Perhaps you should accept him and be glad." This is an optimistic reading and the response is often one of hope. "I can't accept that. I will do everything I can to change it."

The ultimate in the optimistic position is the process of dealing with one's own death. This is a topic in itself. If one can put a positive construct on that, he really has accomplished something.

Positive and Negative Feedback: A positive attitude conveys a certain confidence and is characterized by acceptance and approval in an affirmative manner. It has a real energy to it and serves as a source of stimulation. Negative is burdensome, depressing and discouraging. Yet it is true that feedback must be both positive and negative if it is to have usefulness. Positive feedback is always welcome. It is important to note that it should be stated verbally. It is not sufficient to indicate by your actions that you approve, like, etc. A woman who has cooked a good meal knows it because people want more and more. Yet she still likes to hear someone state that she is a good cook. Another point: don't believe positive feedback. It can be as far off the mark as negative stuff and just as destructive to an emotional climate (in a "nice" way) as pure negative feedback. The trouble lies more with giving negative feedback so it can still be heard. Especially in sensitive areas marked by a tendency toward emo-

tional disruption, one should be careful to start on the positive side by giving a long buildup. Then he can hook in the negative at the end in a kind of vague, incomplete way so that it can be digested. This does not overload the system and does eliminate the tendency to attack-defend-counterattack. If one is not up to this, then he should espouse the old saying: "If you can't say anything positive, don't say anything at all." Without feedback the emotional climate will disintegrate. It cannot be taken for granted. Some people will wonder if it is worth it all to be so careful and cautious. All I can say is that, if one is not, what he says will not be heard or will cause increased disruption in the person and between people. If disruption is the goal, then blurt it out and accept the consequences. Doing what comes naturally will not work any better in the family than it does at work or socially.

Respect for the "I" position: Respect implies that one considers the other worthy of esteem. He is concerned about the other to the extent that he will not obtrude on that person. He gives attention, regard and consideration to the person. At the same time, he holds his own opinion in esteem. He acknowledges differences and is more interested in clarifying differences than in agreement. Sit in your office with a husband who does not want to return because he sees the problem in his wife. Sit there with the mother who intrudes between father and son because she does not trust her husband. Sit there with the teen-ager who thinks spending time with you is a waste because his parents are wrong and that is the real problem. See if you can respect each and every viewpoint and still have one of your own without obtruding on theirs. Respect for an "I" position often vanishes when someone enters our office and dares to differ. Everybody is for differences except . . . Then take this idea into your own family and see how easy it is. This respect for the "I" can reach the point where one encourages it and not just tolerates it. It provides the atmosphere with a certain amount of freedom and eliminates many resentments and the sense of suffocation which comes from overcloseness.

Correcting emotional overloads: Emotions can overload themselves both in the system generally or in certain parts of the system. One of the best ways to picture this is to recall the old time movies. They would put the words of a song on the screen and then a little dot would bounce along the top of the words to indicate where one was at in the verse while singing. The best way that I have found to follow the emotional flow in the family is to use the four dimensional self with the ideas of

position, movement and space. This provides a viable format for following the flow. Exquisite sensitivity derived from experience, acute listening and the use of one's own feelings provides the necessary radar system to monitor the flow. Especially in

"Respect for an "I" position often vanishes when someone enters our office and dares to differ. Everybody is for differences except — respect for the "I" can reach the point where one encourages it and not just tolerates it."

sensitive areas, this radar system must be developed. With it, a person is forewarned that, given such and such a reaction, he must do such and such to avoid overloading. There is no substitute for experience. To develop that radar one is obliged to see and keep seeing as many families as he can fit in. Overloading simply destroys the emotional climate and leads to war and destruction of all within the system.

Using that little dot in the family verse, one can proceed to follow movement into self (father starting to talk about his own feelings), toward objects (father discussing alcohol), toward people (father then directing a sermon toward son), countermoves back toward the person (son countering father with an accusation that father can only be interested in his own self), clashes in the emotional climate between people tending toward systematic overload (an angry charge and counter-charge affair between father and son), two joining against one that overloads the emotional climate in the third person (mother hearing drugs enters in on father's side and both are critical of son), the third person moving away from the emotional overload (son grows silent and pulls into himself), one of the twosome empathizing with the outside member of the triangle (mother feels sorry for son), that same person becoming the peacemaker and trying to calm the climate (mother tries to quiet father and son), the peacemaker keeping herself out of it (mother says nothing about her own self but only about others), the systematic emotional overload shifting between the formerly aligned partners (father feels a lack of support from mother and the two of them clash), the formation of a new twosome with a different member outside (son and mother join together, very critical of father), increase in distance to handle the rapidly increasing emotional overload in each person and in the system (father leaves the

house). Left to itself, emotional overload in the system leads to the development of symptoms in one or more members, periodic fiery clashes between members, the formation of triangles to avoid facing the overload, extremes of distance between members and broken systems. Over time, the therapist tries to create an environment of balance that avoids overloads both in the person and in the system. He divides the emotional pie among all the members of the family and narrows distances slowly. He uses control and structure.

Expectation and roles: The resolution of any emotional problem always involves redefining what one expects from someone else. It involves redefining the meaning of certain key words such as son, daughter, mother, father, in-law, out-law, husband, wife. When we expect something, we look forward to it with some confidence as our due, and consider the other person as bound to deliver it to us. It implies a high degree of certainty that we should get it and keen disappointment when we don't. An attitude of "should do" replaces that of "freely given." It is a kind of amazing thing to realize that two people walk up the aisle as single, respecting each other as separate and distinct people. Then they walk down the same aisle married, husband and wife, and now, magically, their level of expectation of each other has changed. It is no longer two separate people who happen to be married but a married couple, a "we." It is as if being married creates not only a new context (which it does) but also a different person. It is true that, in defining oneself, it is important to do it in a context and not in isolation. But it must always be remembered that everybody is a person who has many contexts. It is not that he is many different people but that different facets of his person are used in different situations with different people. It is an overcorrection to allow the context to determine the person. The person should determine the marriage and not vice versa.

It is our level of expectation of the other person, much of it derived from our perception of our extended family, much of it in reaction for and against various members of that family, that helps create emotional climates in the family bound to deteriorate into disappointment, anger, bitterness, rejection, helplessness and hopelessness. Not exactly the emotional climate conducive to self development. I have personally found that, in any effort to change, it is important to keep my level of expectation of myself as high as I can and my level of expectation of any other person involved as low

"I have personally found that, in any effort to change, it is important to keep my level of expectation of any other person involved as low as I can. This makes me less vulnerable to the reactions of others and more determined about myself."

as I can. This makes me less vulnerable to the reactions of others and more determined about myself. This has to be done only in problem areas. In other areas, one can raise his expectation to the point of reality. In this fashion, one gets from the other that which is freely given and only that much. By removing the expectation from the other, much of the reactive elements that destroy the emotional climate are removed. This places a burden on the inner system of the person trying to change. But whoever said that self change is anything but a lonely, difficult, hurtful process?

The creation of bridges to maintain connectedness: From communications theory we know that everything one does can be considered a form of communication. But communications do not occur in a vacuum. Sound cannot cross a vacuum. If there is not a functional climate, communications tend to deteriorate into nagging, complaining, fault finding, etc. It is important to realize that one can only communicate after the emotional climate has been established in a suitable way. It is a part of the definition of a positive emotional climate that one person moves toward the other. And it is impossible to influence someone who is moving away and does not want to listen. Witness our total lack of impact on families that are made to visit us by schools, court, etc.

True understanding of this implies that one never closes the door completely on another person. He will never believe that another person is impossible to get to — even if the other person is his mother. He will assume that everybody can be reached. He will know that connectedness is the first step — that openness precedes the content of what has been opened up. He will search for bridges to the other person as the first step. His assumption is that anything — I repeat, anything — that throws a bridge across between people related by blood or marriage can neither be bad nor too much to do. In this sense, anger can be seen as a bridge, even criticism because it moves the other person toward me. This commitment to bridging shows in every positive emotional climate.

Continual identification, differentiation and con-

nectedness: The closer people get to each other, the more demands are put on them to be aware of themselves. They must know what is inside them and how to use it. They must know what the other person can deliver to them. They must develop the ability to stay bridged or connected despite emotional turmoil. Therapists, being people, have the same difficulty. The more they get connected with one member of the family, the more their sympathy flows toward one member, the more they turn off other members. In the therapist, this bias is obviously dictated by his own nuclear and extended family. Just as this bias influences and damages his own family, so it tends to reduplicate and reinforce the very problems that the "patient family" is experiencing. If the therapist, for example, tends to look for causality at home, he will do it in the office too.

Now, personal responsibility is a serious and important issue, but when it is used to pin the fault, blame or cause on one member, it is destructive to looking at the family as a process. When one looks at the family as a process, he sees what happens as an occurrence, a series of interconnected events with each member playing a part. The idea of who started what is irrelevant and is regarded as a chicken-and-egg question. Which came first? An unanswerable question and a dysfunctional thought designed to excuse one's own self because the other person did this first. The only real way that a therapist can work on this idea of his own definition and differentiation is to work on his own family. There are so many things that he must keep in mind to preserve an equitable yet real emotional climate in the office. Personal, first hand experience at home is a necessary part of the training. This process of self definition and differentiation is crucial to the development of the kind of climate conducive to the transaction of any piece of emotional business. It teaches one how to make system statements when one is in a sensitive area. A system statement says something about self connected with something about the other person. It prevents one from making individual statements. It also makes balanced statements so that, if I say something critical about you, I say something critical about myself too. This leaves the door open for the other person to enter.

" — One never closes the door completely on another person. He will never believe that another person is impossible to get to — even if the other person is his mother.

If things are not moving in therapy, the therapist takes an "I" position which defines his part in the process. He does not put fault in the family or in himself. Then he lets members of the family take their positions. All of this lets reality be introduced but keeps the door open for discussion. Also, the therapist tries to present his views in a somewhat vague way so that his positiveness does not turn off the listener. This positiveness might overload and turn off communications with a timid soul or lead to a fight with a more conflictual person. All of this demands a balanced view, a very difficult position to attain, a kind of ideal to struggle toward. Other ways to keep a system open but pertinent include the therapist, like a member of the family, telling stories about himself, positive and negative, to illustrate his viewpoint. He expresses viewpoints rather than statements of truth and never tries to convince or convert the other person to his view. To maintain his objectivity and balance with the family members, he keeps reminding himself that people of the same level of maturity or immaturity marry each other, that people in the nuclear and extended family deserve each other emotionally. He carefully distinguishes a personal viewpoint or reaction from a professional matter of theory. A personal viewpoint expresses my feeling reactions and perceptions. A professional viewpoint is a theoretical universal truth. Believe it or not, some do exist. The focus continually circles around self and other, and the clarification of this definition in a functional emotional context. Gradually a sense of self develops and with it feelings of relaxation, freedom and conviction.

Real versus verbal positions: Much of the difficulty in an emotional system and much of the turmoil in the emotional climate is due to the gap between the real and the verbal position. **The verbal position.** The verbal position will often represent one of exaggeration under the influence of anger, one of threat in the presence of fear, over-

"Many people agree to stay out of triangles until they begin to realize the price of such a posture."

statement in the presence of unsureness, independence in the presence of dependency, accusation in the presence of guilt in oneself, etc., etc. To narrow this gap, one must shoot arrows into the emotional system. It is not uncommon for husband and wife to talk divorce as long as they assume that the therapist will take a position that they should stay to-

gether. When the therapist seems to go along with their verbal positions, often, one or both will talk about getting together. By taking a different position, the therapist gets at their real position and eliminates the reactive, purely verbal part of their stand. Another example.

Many people agree to stay out of triangles until they begin to realize and experience the emotional price of such a posture. More. Therapists are for accepting people until they disagree. Then these people are called uncooperative, unmotivated, etc. Psychiatrists listen acutely to people in their own office and then engage in bitter hassles with those who belong to different schools of psychology. The verbal positions, to the extent that they mask the real position, allow problems to scatter and become defocused. In such a process, small problems grow in size, complexity and detail. The emotional climate deteriorates and eventually any issue thrown into it will cause disruption.

Humor: "The one ingredient that is necessary in every successful joke is the sudden alteration in the point of view." (Isaac Asimov) It can be simply stated that humor is a necessary part of a functional emotional climate. It includes the ability to laugh at oneself and others. It provides relief when things get overloaded. It puts events in perspective. It makes points in an indirect way. It relieves tension and provides space for people to move about. It displaces criticism, buys time and many more things.

Dealing on the same level: If you ask three people how they are doing, you can expect to get three different answers. The answers will vary not merely in detail but in other ways. One can give a feeling response, e.g. "I feel depressed." Another can give a thinking response, e.g., "I think I am beginning to figure this out." A third can give an action response, e.g., "I was very busy at work this week." Most responses will be a blend. All are valid parts of the person but neither relates to the other on the same level or in the same medium. In the presence of a dysfunctional emotional climate, they often appear to be foreign languages to each other. They never connect. Also, one has to do different things when relating through each of these media. For example, to meet a feeling from the other person with a thinking answer is often interpreted as not listening. Action reports tend to exclude the inner self from the conversation.

"It can be simply stated that humor is a necessary part of a functional emotional climate. It includes the ability to laugh at oneself and others. It provides relief when things get over loaded. It puts events in perspective — It displaces criticism — "

The creation of a third system: When two people marry, they both leave the extended family system and enter a new one. They bring with them their perceptions of that system and the people in it, the improvements they want to make and the parts they want to continue. Depending on their perceptions and their emotional reactivity, they will include parts in their nuclear emotional system which will work or not work. Their perceptions tend to be fixed by time and the emotional content. Instead of developing a third system based on what works, they end up with a blend of both systems. This blend must include emotional perception, misperception, myth, reactivity to specific members and dogmatism. This blend can and does affect the emotional climate. It tends to be argued about in terms of right and wrong. The key question to ask about any emotional system — Does it work? — is often neglected.

Experimentation: Many things can be defined about emotions but, in the long run, much remains to be discovered and much is probably unknowable. This calls for a certain air of experimentation and observation when dealing with the emotional climate. This is the area where one can get a kind of delight by constantly tinkering. It is a part of life that things could always be better and that one of the greatest limitations one puts on himself is his fear, even of the unknown. One must be willing to experiment and take a reasonable risk to develop a functional emotional climate. He must be willing to invest emotionally and be hurt, to try again in spite of failure, to avoid the self-protective position.

Hierarchy of values: Emotional climates come in different stages just like weather conditions. One would not carry an umbrella in a tornado. Yet many therapists will attempt to do the equivalent. An emotional climate may be so out of hand that it demands **control**. This is the situation when someone is actively trying to commit suicide, a husband is beating up a wife, or a child is running away repeatedly. The climate may be under control but so disorganized that it needs **structure**. This is the usual situation we see. It is simply impossible to deal reasonably with a situation when triangles are

all over the room, when people interrupt continually, when threats are made. This situation calls for structural moves of eliminating triangles, etc. The situation may be in the third stage when it is receptive to **openness and inquiry**. This is the stage we all enjoy. People go one on one, talk personally, etc. This is when we often sit back and learn from the family. But to introduce the third stage when one of the first two is called for is to invite chaos, confusion, hopelessness, frustration and an increase in anger. One comes before two, and two before three. Change is an evolution. For example, open-

"The less one reveals, the smaller the target he provides."

ness precedes the nature of the open movement. One is first interested in seeing a person open up and later in what comes out. With children, we are first glad that they speak and when they are good at that, we begin to correct their English.

Painting pictures rather than conclusions: Some people, when asked a question, will think awhile and then give an answer. These people tend to give conclusions. If this becomes a way of life, they are very hard to get to know. One never gets beyond their answers into their thinking, feeling and the process of arriving at a conclusion. They do not know or do not see the value in **thinking out loud**. They are men of few words and usually very cautious. The less one reveals, the smaller the target he provides. Of course, when the therapist does the same thing by not answering a question it often gets called by a favorable word, "fostering transference." Into the unknown picture behind the conclusion, the tendency is to project assumptions, indulge in motivational mind reading, and build up an **assumptive emotional climate** built on guesses and speculations that ring with the loudness of truth. This explicitly sensitizes the individuals and the climate into a state of extreme reactivity. The sensitivities accumulate and become so tender and multiple that the emotional system acts like a walking time bomb. The person who contains himself too much is invariably connected with the "express yourself and get it off your chest" person. You can imagine what happens to the emotional climate when they get together.

Depersonalizing the malignancy by an overview: Depending on the microscope one uses, things will be magnified. If one uses an individual microscope, then the individual will be

magnified with all his various feelings shading from love to hate. If one looks through a sexual or a power lens, he will see sex or power magnified. Now, if one looks through a three generational or larger microscope, he automatically decreases the emotional content in any one portion of that system. The emotional system is calmed and the climate is more open to reasonableness. Therapists with a theme, e.g. anger, will pound away at it with an astounding persistence even with minimal evidence. They focus through one lens and end up picking on one member of the family system since any one member can look "bad" or "good" if the criteria are too narrow. The therapist then wonders why that member of the family does not want to participate in family meetings. Projection? An emotional climate can be diffused by enlarging the lens so that individual members understand that feelings and emotional problems come not from one person but are spread about, even over the generations. This perspective on feelings takes the destruction and provocation out of them. There is a kind of objectivity that comes if one person places himself in but one portion of a larger system. Emotionality comes into proportion and the significance of any episode fades into perspective. Feelings are taken less personally when one knows that they are being radiated all over the place. Thus, one would assume that, the larger the lens, the better the climate.

Development of a positive emotional bank balance: The emotional climate in any family is susceptible to the vagaries of time and fortune. It reacts like a financial bank account. If one gets an unexpected bill, it can be very small in the context of a positive bank balance. This is not so with no money in the bank or if one is already in debt. Here it could become the straw that breaks the camel's back. A disruptive emotional climate of jealousy, bitterness, hurt, etc. arising from some incident becomes less prominent if played against a substantial emotional bank account built up over many years. It has less duration and is more easily absorbed into the emotional system. It becomes worthwhile to build such an account of fond memories, warm experiences, shared feelings. One cannot afford to wait for a crisis situation and then call for trust, consideration, etc. Crisis intervention tries to capitalize on the stimulus of misery. Its Achilles heel is the absence of a positive bank balance emotionally. "Brief therapy" suffers from the Achilles heel of insufficient time. Any way you cut it, a positive emotional bank balance takes time to develop.

Truth and honesty: "Tell the truth" and "Be honest" probably represent one of the largest known blocks to discussion, openness, and negotiation that exist. In the classical situation, poor John sits in the therapist's office for ten visits and hardly says anything. Wife continually wishes that he would speak. Finally, he leans forward to say something, hardly gets three words out before she says, "Now tell the truth." He doesn't utter another word.

In my dealings with families, I have at times told incomplete stories, taken positions that I did not believe in, given readings on situations that were not the truth and told what might be considered as a downright lie. These have been generally helpful to the family over the long run. I have to wonder then about truth and lies. If it helps a family, can it be so bad? Should I tell that which will overload a person or system? Unfortunately, truth and honesty in the family are often confused with "my viewpoint," with the individual's perception. How often are they a disguise for obstinacy, self-righteousness and cruelty? I solved this issue by deciding that the real lie is when a person deceives himself. I describe truth to the families I see as a precious and rare item — that we are all sitting around in a circle with the truth sitting in the middle. At some point in the future, we all hope to arrive at it or a portion of it. We start with the assumption that everybody has viewpoints, no one the truth.

Different reaction times in family members: There is a different tempo, a different rhythm pulsating in different sections of the family and between different members of the family at different times. Return to the example family. Father and son are fast reactors. There is a quickness that can flash about them. They have a quality of being with it. Mother is slower, more patient, dancing to a different beat. When the twosome of father and son flash at each other, she moves in, plodding slowly. Eventually, either father or son or both turn on her in their impatience and she reels back, confused. These individual tempos can change with the context or the mood. A man can move fast in business or slowly while fishing. Sadness brings a slow tempo and anger speeds the beat up. People

out of rhythm with each other are like two people dancing to two separate bands. They pull and tug at each other and there is a general air of awkwardness and discomfort. Finally they sit down and stop talking. Some people can do this with one band. Time and tempo then enter into the development of the emotional climate. One must be able to regulate his rhythm to that of the present emotional climate. He cannot operate at 75 miles per hour while others are going at 25.

It is the task of the therapist to detect and get in touch with this rhythm in the family he is seeing. Then he must try to bring them all into the same relative speed zone, to teach them to speed up or slow down. He waits for the slower one to come out, prevents the rapid one from jumping in. He tries to orchestrate the performance. He, himself, must stay one step faster than they are going but no more. He goes at the speed of the teacher who prepares the night before for the next day's classes. Ahead to keep the family moving, close enough to stay in touch. In regulating the tempo he accentuates attention to issues of patience, impatience, interruptions, listening, vocal tones and pitch.

Summary

Though emotional climates are labile, unpredictable and complicated, there is hope in the human equation. After all, systems do not run humans but humans do run systems. It should be a great source of hope that we all do so many things well, that many mistakes are allowed.

There once was a gigantic computer that took up the whole of a monstrous wall, completely dwarfing the two tiny mathematicians standing before it. A sliver of paper emerged from the vitals of the computer and one mathematician, after studying it gravely, turned to the other and said, "Do you realize that it would take 400 ordinary mathematicians 250 years to make a mistake this big?"

Copyright 1973-1978
Center For Family Learning
Compendium I
The Best of The Family