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The value of family therapy: Setting goals, finding solutions

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Guest Columnist

Family. It makes up our earliest identities. We use the term "family" to describe people in our lives who we love and are related to, live and interact with daily, and upon whom we depend. Each person in a family has a role and a unique perspective of what that role entails and how it affects the way the family functions. Roles can include caregiver, supporter, provider, protector and more commonly child, sibling, grandmother and many others.

Today, families are no longer defined by the standard parental unit with 2.5 children. Our community is made up of families blended with half siblings, step-siblings, siblings-by-choice, grandparents, great grandparents, non-blood related caregivers, family friends and many other combinations that comprise the modern nuclear family. In addition to the unique composition of families within our communities, each family often has its own ethnic culture, socio-economic status, and may live in the city or in a rural area. The combination of all of these factors affect the functioning of the family and sometimes can result in conflict among its members. Effective communication can break down and can weaken the structure of the family as a whole. These increasingly nega-

tive interactions and relationship conflicts can wreak havoc within the family system. In addition, if problems escalate and lead to severe dysfunction within the household, they can cause what psychologists call Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). ACEs are common stressful traumatic experiences which affect children's development and health throughout their lives. ACEs have been linked to chronic physical and mental health conditions in later life such as substance misuse, obesity, illnesses such as diabetes and heart disease, depression and even suicide attempts.

When families no longer function in ways that work for its members, therapy can be extremely beneficial to improve interactions and communication, solve family problems, work through complicated family situations and improve the overall quality of life for family members.

Solution-focused therapy, created by co-founders Insoo Kim Berg and Steve De Shazer in the 1970's, follows the philosophy that the person or in this case, the family, already has a vision of the solution. The technique uses a number of key concepts that support a "future-forward solution" way of thinking rather than focusing on the "problem." This approach is based on the family's strengths and encourages positive thinking over negative thinking. For exam-

ple, a family may be asked, "What will your family be doing in the next week that would indicate to that you are continuing to make progress?" This prompts the family to think positively about an outcome and imagine their own solutions.

As mentioned earlier, family therapy provides an opportunity to explore the unique roles played by each family member and how each member views those roles. By validating each member of the the family, solution-focused therapy encourages compliments between family members and supports mutual be-

lief that each member of the family is doing his or her best to solve problems. When families unite in a solution-focused mindset, they are able to find resolutions to their problems and can reframe the family's ability to work together toward common goals, and to improve overall family functioning.

The solution-focused technique works by highlighting the fact that families are strong and already have the innate skills and solutions for their individual and unique family, which is very empowering. Sessions focus on expectations and goals, and each mem-

ber of the family takes part in identifying solutions to move the family toward reaching its goals. Family members gain an appreciation for each member's perspective and learn how problematic behavior affects the entire family system. Sessions include time for family members to really "see it one way and then see it another way," a basic tenet of Berg and De Shazer's method. Therapy sessions often conclude with an agreement on next steps and goals to work

on throughout the week. Family therapy does not need to take months or years. It is often provided in brief treatment of 4 to 12 sessions, depending on the family and the goals desired.

If you or someone you know could use help to clarify family goals and find solutions to challenges that are making family life difficult, contact Greater Nashua Mental Health at 603-889-6147 or visit our website at www.gnmh.org for more information.

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