

by UPAT Parent Educator, Sheila Chaney

The power of family genes lives on in our bodies, and the power of how we see ourselves, others, and the world, lives on in our psyche. That's the strength of family history. We inherit a genetic make-up and adopt values, attitudes and behaviors from those who birth us and rear us to adulthood. Nature and nurture—both leave influences that remain throughout our lives and influence who we are. As babies we also come with our own unique personality traits, temperaments, and innate spiritual selves.

By looking at our family history and patterns we can decide what patterns we want to keep and what we want to change. For example, If our parents suffered from heart disease, we may decide to watch our diet, exercise regularly, and get yearly medical checkups and advice. We also may want to teach our children healthy eating patterns.

Humans are masters of denial. Most of us will try to find ways to avoid examining painful experiences. We tend to act angry, or to withdraw when we are feeling afraid, especially if we have no safe place to vent our anger; no safe person to tell our fears. There is a tendency to 'stuff' the emotions deep into our denial satchel. Many people suffer bouts of depression, a common sign of anger turned inward, because their "satchel" needs a good cleaning out. As we look at negative family and individual patterns our job is to unpack the past and current behaviors, piece by piece, clean it out and decide what to do with it. If we need extra help 'unpacking' we can ask for help from a qualified, safe friend or counselor.

As we examine family patterns, we can also rejoice at the good qualities, habits, and patterns found in our family and build upon the tremendous foundation. As we incorporate those habits and values into our own family, generations after us will be solid in mind, emotions, body and spirit. As a parent, our job is to increase our awareness and understanding of family dynamics and how the patterns-of-behavior influence and each individual in the family.

Family Systems

Any system is made of parts working together. An automobile engine is a system. A computer is a system. A family is a system. You are part of a family system. In a family, the parts are the members. They work together for the benefit of the whole family. Each member is important to the survival of the family. Everything that happens to a member affects the entire family. Changes in the family and in society as a whole affect the family system.

- Marriage, living together, birth, or adoption of a child affects the whole family.

- Divorce, death, or a family member leaving home affects the whole family.
- Addictions, illness or incarceration of a member affects the whole family.
- Children getting into trouble in school or with the law affect the whole family.
- Job changes or a change in income affects the whole family.
- Abuse or neglect of one member affects the whole family.

Family members are individuals. Each is unique. Each reacts to change within the system in individual ways. Marriage or birth of a baby is usually joyous events. They are stressful, but we feel good about the stress. We handle the change. We feel happy.

Many changes cause pain. Family members may cope with pain in different ways.

- Some deny it. They pretend it didn't happen. They live with hidden pain.
- Some act out in anger or rage. They hurt themselves or others.
- Some face it, feel it, continue growing and go on.
- Some seek help or guidance through self-help books, counselors or therapists and classes so they too can continue growing.

Every family is unique and different. Still, all families have many things in common. They want to be happy and successful. They want to rear happy, successful children. They want to give and receive love.

Family Functions and Roles

All family members have roles. Roles have titles like father, mother and child. Roles involve tasks like care giver, wage earner and learner. The family, working as a system, has several tasks or functions:

- It provides food, clothing and shelter for the members
- It provides for the education of the children.
- It prepares children for other relationships.
- It helps children find their place in society.
- It teaches values and skills to the children.
- It protects and loves the children.
- It celebrates joys and grieves sorrows together.
- It sends children into society to accept new roles and tasks.

Healthy families help develop healthy feelings in the members.

- The members feel important and comfortable in their roles.
- The members show respect and honesty to each other.

Some families struggle with these functions and feelings. Their members struggle, too.

- They may have addictions to alcohol, drugs, sex, or even TV watching.
- They may gamble, over-eat, over-spend or even over-clean.
- They may abuse or neglect their members.
- They may develop depression or stress disorders.

All families function well at least some of the time. All families have struggles, too. We either use our family history to choose to learn from the past, or we can deny that our family has any problems or concerns. How we define our heritage assumes more importance than the legacy of our family per se. Or, we can chart our own course and decide who we are and what our "new" family (our own spouse and children) is going to be.