

Problems come in families and not in people:

A few months before her wedding, a bride-to-be, Grainne, came to see me. She had done a pre-marriage course and some issues had come up that concerned her. When I met her she looked tired and nervous. She had begun to get anxious about her up-coming wedding and began to wonder if she and her fiancé, Brian, could make things work. Consciously, at least, she loved Brian, though she did feel frustrated by the fact that he was not taking stronger stands with his ex-partner, Ciara, regarding their mutual daughter. Grainne was also perplexed by Ciara's hostility toward her, given that they had never met. Adding to her burden was increasing indecision over having children. She said that she was beginning to have doubts about her ability to do anything and wondered if there was something wrong with her.

Trained in family therapy, my approach was not to see her problems as located inside her head but rather to see her difficulties as family-centered. I suggested that she might resist her temptation to think that there was something wrong with her and the temptation to analyse herself to death. I suggested that what was happening to her was a symptom of her relationship with Brian, for whom she had begun to take too much responsibility, and to give him back some of his anxiety.

It is interesting in relationships that very often you will have an over-responsible spouse and an under-responsible spouse where the over-responsible one carries most of the worry and anxiety while the other one carries little. Grainne was clearly an over-responsible type so all of my suggestions were geared toward helping her off-load her anxiety onto some of the other people in her family who could or should be carrying that anxiety.

I suggested that she hand some of her anxiety back to him by saying something like "You know Brian, I find myself getting anxious recently about us and I wonder would you have any ideas why that might be happening to our relationship?"

In order to let go of some of the anxiety about Brian's ex-partner I then encouraged her to get out of the triangle between Brian and Ciara by establishing a direct relationship with Ciara. I suggested she might give her a ring and say something to the effect of "Though we have never met I thought I should introduce myself to you since Brian and I are to be married and I will be involved in caring for your daughter when she comes over. Brian has told me how important your little girl is to you and I hope you will feel free to communicate your standards or concerns to me so that I can help raise her in accordance with your wishes".

Finally, because issues related to having children can be connected to issues with one's own mother, I suggested that she might invite her own "bossy" mother to lunch and reverse her tendency to shy away from leaning on her mother "at all costs" by presenting her mother with the childbearing conflict.

Months later, just before the wedding, she looked radiant and mentioned she had not slept as well in years. Her own mother had begun "gushing" about their long-standing relationship and Brian's ex-partner was very supportive and helpful regarding their daughter participating in the ceremony.

Months later when some problems did erupt between Brian and Ciara instead of Grainne getting into the middle of it she took a stand and referred Brian in to see me. Brian came in and this time spoke about his difficulty sleeping. It turned out Brian was the kind of person who tried to keep the peace and kept out of conflicts. Again, rather than getting him to confront his ex-partner I explored his relationship with his own mother to find that she was someone he was always fearful of upsetting. In helping him relate to his own mother as an adult he learned the skills of dealing in a healthy way with his ex.

As you can see here, problems come in families rather than in personalities. The person who carries the anxiety or carries the depression is very often the symptom bearer for the family and the solution is not always for that person to get themselves sorted out. More often than not, what needs to be realigned and sorted are the relationships within the family. This means transferring some of the anxiety and depression to the relationships where it belongs.

If you are feeling anxious or depressed instead of thinking “what is wrong with me?” ask yourself how you might relate differently to certain people in your family so that someone else lies awake at night instead of you!