

Schema-Mode-based Family Therapy: a multigenerational & intercultural approach

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Tony is 16 years old. His parents call the psychological practice and seek help because he is aggressive towards them and sometimes towards the siblings (2 and 4 years younger). Initially the parents seek only individual counseling for Tony, but are willing to support the therapeutic process. The parents would be happy, if the adolescent boy could be helped or even "fixed"???

Requests like this are not uncommon, if you work in an area of counseling with children, adolescents and young adults. We often experience parents bringing their children to therapy, hoping that the therapist takes over the responsibility to make sure the adolescent changes his or her behavior.

Using Schema Therapy (ST) before individually with adults, adolescents and children, we focussed more and more in the last few months using Jeffery Young's approach in working with family systems.

Impressed by the approach of Mauricio Andolfi in his "Accademia di Psicoterapia della Famiglia" in Rome, we tried more and more to combine ST with Andolfi's family therapy approach. Having in mind that families highly influence one's development, we try to integrate the family in order to implement change in the family system. In the last few years we used ST in many family therapy settings in Luxemburg and in Basel. We will describe here our experiences, the protocol we developed so far (as we also learn a lot from the families, it's an on-going process of development) and some of the techniques used in **Schema-Mode-based Family Therapy**:

THE SETTING, THE BONDING, THE DIAGNOSTIC

In **Schema-Mode-based Family Therapy** we start already in the telephone call to arrange the first meeting by asking the family, who should be present to support the therapeutic process. Next to the adolescent, the parents, the siblings, it is often the grandparents, uncles or aunts, who then come to the session. Andolfi describes in his work the strong benefits of bringing in the three generations of a family to improve a difficult situation or difficult relationships in a family. Of course this approach is not always possible, therefore we then try to invite the core family to the session, and later on the 3rd generation (grandparents) will participate.

Additionally to the observations during the sessions in the first phase, the family members get the ST Questionnaires by Jeffrey Young or the Schema Questionnaires by Loose, Graaf & Zarbock for the children and adolescents. In this phase, we evaluate the questionnaires, the relationships between the family members, the family-life-events ("River-of-Life-Exercise") which had an impact on how the core emotional needs were met and what modes the family members developed over time because of unmet core emotional needs.

An important part of this phase of treatment is also providing a proper and clear understanding about the schematherapeutic concept. The psychoeducational approach in the beginning helps to give every family member an idea of the therapeutic process and it provides structure in a complex system.

Inspired by Anna Mascellani we use the "gas station exercise" to start talking with the family about what everyone needs, to have a healthy and happy life. That leads us to introducing the core emotional needs and we start reflecting with the family how the needs were met for every family member.

We also use the i-modes by Prof. Dr. Bernstein to show the pictures of the core needs, which make it easier for the adolescents and the parents to connect to feelings when speaking about the core emotional needs.

In ST as well as in Andolfi's family therapy approach the therapeutic relationship to the clients is very important to create changes. Inspired by Mauricio Andolfi we like to see the adolescent as the co-therapist in **Schema-Mode-based Family Therapy**. As described above, the family often comes to therapy and defines the child/adolescent as the client. We try to change that perspective from the very beginning by introducing the child or the adolescent as the one, who can help us to understand the family system and who can help to initiate change in the family system, instead of being seen as the one, who is causing the problem. As in ST with couples, the goal is to see the unhealthy dynamic as the common "enemy", not the individual him- or herself. This perspective of working together to change the unhealthy dynamic, leads to a healthy bonding within the family. Hence their healthy modes get activated and help them change the family dynamic.

SCHEMA MODE AWARENESS AND MODE CHANGE IN THE FAMILY

Very soon in the therapeutic process we introduce the i-modes (www.i-modes.com) of Prof. Dr. Bernstein to the family. We introduce the different coping styles to the family and the resulting healthy or dysfunctional modes every family member developed throughout their lives. Every family member gets a set of i-modes and tries to find the modes they can identify with. Later in the therapeutic process we use the i-modes in the beginning of the session as a tool to assess the individual modes of every family member. Using the i-modes we do different exercises with the family to explore and create awareness for the different mode-clashes between the family members.

Goal is to help the family members to get in contact with their own vulnerable child modes, which are sometimes triggered by the family dynamics. For the family members it is very helpful to understand and see the vulnerable part of the others behind some over-compensation or avoiding strategies. We help the family with various exercises to reduce their dysfunctional reaction triggered by the dysfunctional coping strategies of another family member and instead using healthy strategies to connect with their vulnerable and healthy part.

Especially with the multi-generational approach schemas and old wounds of the parents can also be addressed and sometimes healed, instead of the parents just focussing on the child's symptoms or even sometimes projecting their emotions on the child or adolescent.

Andolfi describes some family sculpture exercises, by creating a sculpture of the parents' core memories from childhood and then creating a sculpture of the family, when the parents' needs would have been met. With this exercise we try to create an emotional re-scripting and with that a corrective emotional experience like we do it in imagery work in individual ST. Thus the parents can create awareness of their own triggers and dysfunctional coping strategies that are being falsely directed to the child.

Generally, working with couples or families the clients are much more triggered in the sessions than in individual therapy. The complexity of the family system and the individual relationships of the family members can create a mode-clash – either between the parents and the children, between the two parents or between the parents and the grandparents. A good therapeutic relationship with the family in these sessions is very important. Staying connected with the family members can be a challenge and has to be obtained in order to stop the mode clashes. Using empathic confrontation can help them connect with their vulnerable parts and lead to their functional modes.

One example of using ST within family therapy is that we use small, little chairs (used in Kindergarten) for the vulnerable parts of the family members and we ask each family member to put the little chair behind their "usual" chair in the meeting and put the picture or mode-card representing their vulnerable child behind them on the little chair. Each time one family member gets triggered during the session, we try to get in contact with the vulnerable part of the family member and ask the person to switch to the little chair, exploring what emotions were triggered right now in the session and what they need in that moment. Also in this exercise, we try to help the family to notice when and how they get triggered and how they can connect to their healthy parts in order to get

their needs met within the possibilities of a family system instead of giving in to dysfunctional parts, which then lead to a mode clash.

That is just one example of our **Schema-Mode-based Family Therapy** approach. It is important to note that due to the complexity of the family system in family therapy, the continuity of the process gets interrupted more easily. Thus more repetitive work in terms of modes can be needed in order to reach the goal of a healthier system and to bring structure into the system.

As mentioned above we learn a lot from the families we are working with and the protocol of the Schema-Mode-based Family Therapy is an on-going development. For further information feel free to contact us via our websites www.hadinia.com or www.upgradeyourlife.lu.

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