THE FAMILY DIAGRAM

PURPOSE

The Family Diagram provides an interactive way for individuals to map their multigenerational families, and for groups, this interactive tool stimulates dialogue about family dynamics. Learn how families operate across multiple generations by bringing awareness to patterns of behavior. Understand why exploring a family narrative can benefit both individuals and families, as well as encourage more effective decision-making.

OUTCOMES

- **Explore the relationships that exist within families of origin;**
- **Deepen understanding of the family narrative;**
- **Detect patterns and complex family material in a more clear, concise way;**
- **Develop more objectivity and awareness about roles and relationships in the family system;**
- **Create the awareness to make decisions and manage behavior with more clarity.**

ABOUT THE FAMILY DIAGRAM

A Family Diagram[1] is a family map that visually portrays family history and relationships across at least three generations. The diagram goes deeper than a typical family tree; it includes special symbols to describe relationships, roles, major events, and interactions between family members. Some professionals use Family Diagrams in a more complex form called *genograms*[2]. Here, you'll find an accessible version of this tool that all can use to learn more about their families and themselves.

WHO CAN BENEFIT

Family Diagrams are useful for anyone interested in understanding family patterns and relationships. This tool helps you approach conversations about family and history; it gives you a starting place to ask questions you may not have known how to broach. The diagram provides a powerful way to gather, document, and visualize information about any family.

WHY USE THIS TOOL

As family systems theorists suggest, individuals do not act in isolation, but rather as part of a larger, complex emotional system in which everyone plays a part. The family is the first and most intense emotional system to which we belong. Like all natural systems, families govern and regulate themselves. Styles of communicating and patterns of behavior tend to repeat themselves within and across generations. Members become involved in predictable, often unexamined, life patterns, which are created in part by what they have learned in their first relationship systems: their families. When such patterns become ingrained, they may be passed down to other family members and eventually show up in relationships outside the family, either consciously or unconsciously.

The Family Diagram offers a good way to gain awareness of family roles, relationships, and patterns. By unpacking a family narrative, you can start to see patterns not only within the family, but also in other groups with which family members are involved. By developing more awareness, you can move toward making conscious, thoughtful choices, and feel more freedom in how you approach situations and solve problems.

WHEN TO USE THIS TOOL

The Family Diagram provides a reflective exercise that examines a family, its patterns, and the story you tell about that family and your role in it. Through this tool, you'll see a family graphically depicted, have the ability to examine it more objectively, understand the emotional response behind patterns of behavior, and, if appropriate, choose to operate differently. While anyone can draw a diagram on his/her own, working in pairs or in the presence of others provides a richer experience.

You can use the Family Diagram in a number of ways, be it on your own, in pairs, or in a group.

HOW THE DIAGRAM WORKS:

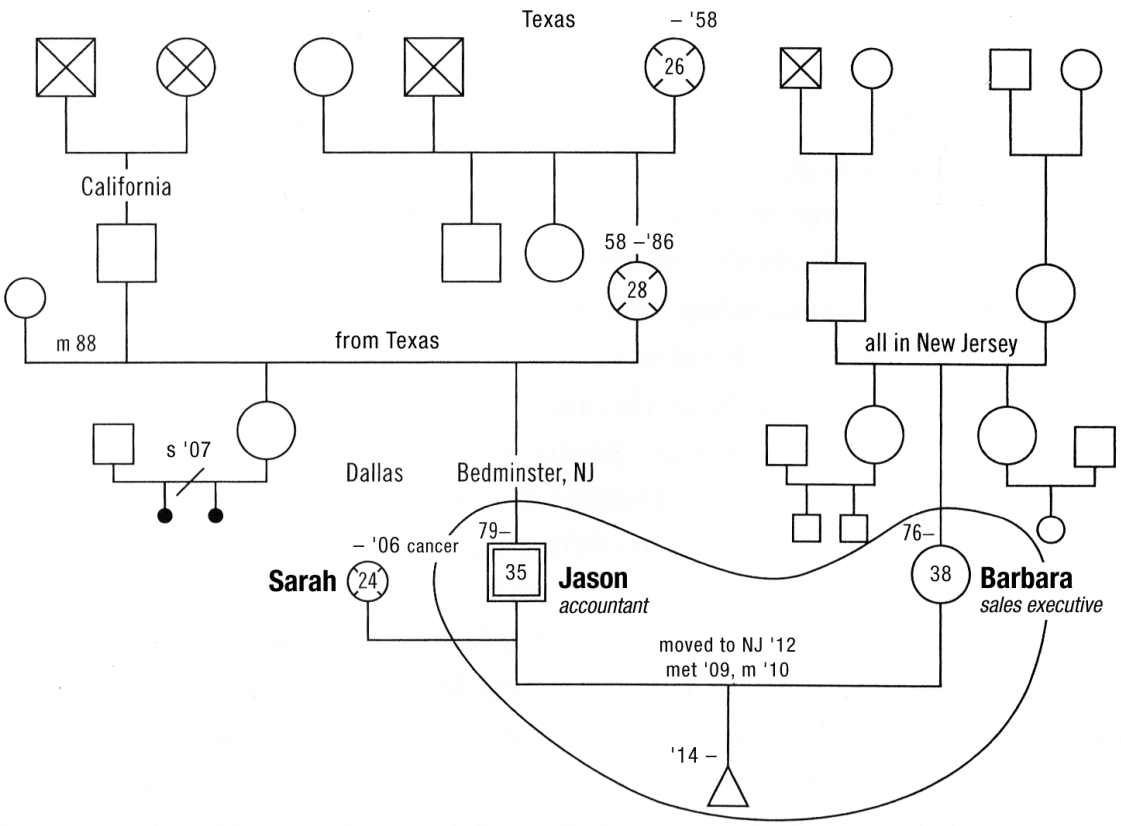
STEP ONE: THE PEOPLE

Symbols act as a visual indicator of the data. You can find a key to these symbols on the legend that accompanies the Family Diagram Pad.

A. **Begin drawing the diagram in the middle of the page, starting with you** and the other members of your generation. Write your age in the center of a square if you are male, or a circle if you are female, and then write your name to the side.

B. From here, expand the diagram, trying to include **at least three generations**—whether that means going back to your parents' and grandparents' generation, and/or going forward to your children or grandchildren. Then add siblings, spouses, cousins, etc. When drawing siblings, start on the left, drawing from eldest to youngest.

Sample diagram



Original Diagram by: Monica McGoldrick, Randy Gerson, Sueli S. Petry. *Genograms: Assessment and Intervention, 3rd Edition.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008. P. 245.

STEP TWO: THE DATA

A. Once you have drawn all the people in each generation, **fill in as much data as you can**. For example, you might include dates of important events (marriage, divorce, pregnancy or miscarriage, birth or adoption, moves, death, etc.), where people were born, religious affiliations, occupations, education, health, illnesses, or causes of death.

For each of these events (or other data you draw), feel free to get creative and add your own notations and symbols that resonate for you. At this stage, try to avoid overthinking, self-censoring, or going into the "story" of what you are drawing. Just fill in the data as it comes to you, knowing that you can come back to it later.

B. (Optional) Once you have completed Step Two, take a photo or make a photocopy of your diagram. You can use this basic diagram again and again to explore different themes and roles.

STEP THREE: MAKING MEANING

A. **The next phase is a process of discovery**, where participants can go more deeply into one area of focus. This is a chance to slow down, look at what's there, talk through it, and make new meaning out of the family map. If working with a partner, it's a time for receptive listening and asking skillful, open-ended questions.

B. **Choose one area of focus below** (or another of your choice). There is a lot to unpack in each of these areas, so take your time with this. **Spend 20 minutes** on one of these sections, tackling more, if you'd like, over time. If you are working on the Family Diagram in pairs, partners can ask questions of the storyteller, remembering to ask open-ended, thoughtful questions without judgment.

— **Alliances**: Circle the people who are allies, or people on whom you readily rely. How did these alliances form? What have these alliances accomplished? What's the implication on the family, on you?

— **Distance:** Draw a dotted line to designate people who are more distant physically or emotionally. How has this distance emerged? What was the event or pattern of behavior that may have catalyzed the distance? Are there similar patterns elsewhere in the family?

— **Wealth:** Draw a dollar sign where wealth exists in the family. How was it made? Who has wealth now? Who does not? Who will inherit?

— **Philanthropy:** Draw a heart symbol to represent the philanthropists in the family, counting those who give time and talent as well as treasure. If there is formal giving, who set it up? Who plays a role today? Who will inherit stewardship?

— **Conflict:** Draw a squiggly line between people where there is conflict, anxiety, or tension. What is the reported cause of this conflict? Do all parties see it the same way? What might account for the difference in how people see it? How does it play out in the family?

— **You Choose:** What else is important to track in your diagram? What emerges as you look at this data?

C. The roles we play in our families greatly influence how we see ourselves in relation to other people. **What role do you play?** Every person in a family, no matter what generation or age, contributes to the identity of the system through the role or roles s/he takes on. These roles usually develop silently, without anyone realizing it. We have provided you with a list of possible roles below.

Choose one or more of these roles, or others that you define, for each family member you have diagrammed. Can you identify who plays what role? How does playing that role help or hinder the family? Keep in mind that things are not always as they appear at first glance, and each role has both opportunities and challenges. For example, there may be a high cost to being the *Golden Child*, and the *Diplomat* may always prioritize the needs of others over his/her own.

— The *Ruler* holds a position of power in the family system, often acting in a decision-making capacity, assuming an authoritarian position. S/he may not have earned the power, instead arriving in this position due to external circumstances such as gender, age, or position.

— The *Decision Maker* makes the final decisions, but consults with others in the process. S/he has earned the trust and respect of family members and is in a position to make decisions on behalf of others when required.

— The *Golden Child* tends to be responsible, respectful, and successful in school and work, reflecting well on the family.

— The *Diplomat* may be the most attuned to a family member's discomfort and recognizes when disputes have erupted, helping to calm fears, assuaging hurt, and mending differences.

— The *Pot Stirrer* may cause unrest or dissent, often raising issues on purpose to encourage debate or slow things down for some reason.

— The *Scapegoat* receives negative attention from the family, reducing the amount of energy available for dealing with the family's problems.

— The *Caretaker* takes responsibility for the emotional and/or physical well-being of the family and its members.

D. Now put your pen down. **Reflect on the data you have just mapped**. Either on your own or with a partner, consider questions such as:

— What do you see?
— What patterns or ideas emerge when you look at what you've drawn?
— What is your role? How has it changed over time?
— As you reflect back, how have you typically responded in the past to a particular family pattern?

E. **Over time, consider examining more areas of focus.** You may find it helpful to chart each of these areas on a separate photocopy of your Family Diagram to see each focus area on its own. Plan to update and add more to your Family Diagram as life progresses.

FACILITATING THE FAMILY DIAGRAM FOR GROUPS:

A Sample Session

TOTAL TIME:
2 hours

WHAT YOU NEED:
Family Diagram Pads, Stencil, Legend, and Colored Pencils

SAMPLE AGENDA:

1. Introduce the Family Diagram. (5 min.)
2. Facilitator demonstrates. (15 min.)
3. Review User's Guide Steps One and Two with participants. (2 min.)
4. Organize the group into pairs–decide who will share his/her story first. (3 min.)
5. Partner A completes Steps One and Two, drawing her/his own family diagram while Partner B listens, observes, and asks clarifying questions. (15 min.)
6. Partner A chooses one area of focus (Step Three) to explore and reflect upon with Partner B. (15 min.)
7. Partners switch roles.
8. Partner B completes Steps One and Two, drawing her/his own family diagram while Partner A listens, observes, and asks clarifying questions. (15 min.)
9. Partner B chooses one area of focus (Step Three) to explore and reflect upon with Partner A. (15 min.)
10. Debrief with the group as a whole. (35 min.)

FOR FACILITATORS, IN ORDER TO BEGIN:

As a facilitator, start by framing and demonstrating the exercise. Use the language in the User's Guide for ideas. Begin by reminding participants that discussing one's family is always personal in nature and can at times be upsetting for some. Thus, it is important to respect each person's need to keep material to him/herself and define how much or little to share.

1. **Communicate the purpose** of the Family Diagram and the expected outcomes (see User's Guide: Purpose and Outcomes).

2. **Explain why a family narrative is useful** and can benefit participants in their everyday lives. Acknowledge that the more we understand our family roles and relationships, the better we can organize relationships elsewhere (see User's Guide: Why Use This Tool).

3. **Demonstrate your own Family Diagram.** This serves two purposes: it explains step-by-step how to draw the diagram, and it builds rapport and trust with the audience. Because you are willing to open up and share about your own family, it encourages others to do so as well. If you are hesitant to demo the tool using your own family, *you could choose a famous or hypothetical family.* (See sidebar for preparation tips.)

4. **Create a safe, confidential space for participants to begin using the Family Diagram themselves.** Acknowledge that you're asking them to reveal family history, which might feel personal and emotional. *Set a confidentiality ground rule, and ask everyone in the room to adhere to it*, so that individuals can trust that the information they share will be kept in the utmost confidence.

5. **Let participants know there is no "one way" to draw their diagrams.** Ask participants to notice any tendencies to want to "do it right" or make their diagrams look neat or pretty. Encourage creativity, and remind them that it doesn't have to be perfect. In fact, *try to get messy!* Gently remind participants of the *objectives of the tool: to see their family systems as a whole, and learn about the relationships and patterns at play.*

6. As the facilitator, take care to follow the User's Guide for instructions on each step. There are several options for presenting this exercise; we list three below:

   — **Option One: Utilize it on Your Own.** Encourage individuals to find a good working space with their own Family Diagram Toolkits. Starting with Step One and proceeding through Steps Two and Three, this becomes a tool for exploration and self-reflection.

PREPARATION FOR FACILITATORS

Demonstrating Your Own Family Diagram

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

First, consider how you want to use your family story to illustrate the Family Diagram and to create the kind of rapport you want members to exhibit with one other.

- **Choose an aspect of your story that you can use symbols to illustrate.**
- **Think about what you want the impact of your family presentation to be. We recommend a balance of thoughtful and interesting, without overwhelming the audience so the presentation becomes too much about you.**
- **Practice presenting before you're in front of your audience to ensure the presentation achieves your goals.**
- **If presenting your own family diagram does not seem right, consider presenting a sample diagram of a well-known person.**

— **Option Two: Conduct in Partnership.** See sidebar for how to use the Family Diagram in this way.

— **Option Three: Storytellers and Scribes.** Group the audience into pairs of Storytellers and Scribes. The Scribe draws the family diagram of the Storyteller as s/he describes it. The Scribe asks questions as needed to fill in the diagram, such as, "Who was born next?" or, "What year was s/he born?" Remind Scribes to practice neutrality in their questioning and to also practice skillful listening.

7. Emphasize the importance of listening well. Because of the sensitive nature of the sharing, it's critical that listeners do no harm with the information they receive. To promote good listening skills, share these tips with participants:

— Maintain warm, receptive body language and practice active listening techniques (refer to 21/64's tool *Leadership Tools for Change: Active Listening*).

— Practice neutrality. Carefully ask prompting or clarifying questions (rather than judgmental or leading questions), such as, "I'm curious about…" or, "How did it become this way? What was that like? How did that impact you? Can you tell me more about that?"

— Conclude by inviting pairs to thank their partners for sharing and for trusting each other with their family narratives.

8. Bring the whole group back together and ask participants to reflect on their experiences. Ask them to notice if and how using the tool has shifted their perspectives. Not all group members need to retell their family histories here, rather, encourage participants to notice their high-level realizations or take-aways. Questions to stimulate discussion might include:

— How did it feel telling your family story using this tool? What stood out to you?

— Did you discover anything new about yourself in the telling of it?

— What felt gratifying and/or challenging about this exercise?

— What areas do you know more about than others? How come? Where could you go to learn more?

— What behaviors might you change, given this new view of your family map?

— How did it feel to be a partner (or Scribe, if applicable) observing someone else's family system unfold? What did it bring up for you, if anything, about your own family?

Remind participants that the diagram is not intended to resolve everything between family members, it's simply meant to display patterns, articulate one person's point of view, and promote a greater understanding of the family. Groups will want to respect each participant's process of discovery.

Contact Us

The Family Diagram Toolkit provides an interactive way for individuals to map multigenerational families; for groups, this interactive tool stimulates dialogue about family dynamics. Each toolkit contains a Family Diagram Pad, a User's Guide, a Family Diagram Legend, a stencil for drawing symbols, and a set of colored pencils. To order additional Family Diagram Toolkits or other tools, visit www.2164.net/store or www.relative-solutions.com/family-leadership-management-tools. Or, to learn more about the Family Diagram, email info@2164.net or info@relativesolutions.com, respectively.

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Bibliography and Resources

The following books and articles were instrumental in the development of this tool:

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[1] This tool is based largely on our understanding of Bowen Theory and its use of Family Diagrams. If you wish to learn more about Bowen Theory, contact: The Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, Dr. Anne McKnight, Director. 4400 MacArthur Blvd. NW, Suite 103, Washington, D.C. 20007. (202) 965-4400. https://www.thebowencenter.org

[2] Dr. Monica McGoldrick is a leader in genogram scholarship. For more on her work, consult: *Genograms: Assessment and Intervention*, 3rd ed. Michael E. Kerr, M.D. is a principal thinker in Family Diagrams and Bowen's Family Systems Theory. To learn more, consult: *Family Evaluation: An Approach Based on Bowen Theory*.

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