

# Family Dynamics During the Pandemic

## Series One: Closeness-Distance Cycle

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# **Family Dynamics During the Pandemic!**

## **SERIES ONE**

### **Closeness-Distance Cycle**

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## **Series One: Closeness-Distance Cycle**

### **Family Dynamics**

The higher the anxiety the greater the symptom development. This is true for individuals and it is true for families. Three primary areas of specialization in my work are “Violence Threat Risk Assessment (VTRA™)”, “Crisis and Trauma Response” and “Family Therapy: Assessment and Intervention”. Although viewed as distinct practices they are inseparably connected. Living through a worldwide pandemic has exposed how subject the human organism is to all of the above areas of human functioning. For years I have asked professionals, “Can a family make a child sick?”, “Can a workplace make a staff member sick?” or “Can a community make an entire race, religion, culture or just one unwanted family sick?” The notion is a simple one: individuals can generate symptoms in others. Some do it by nature and others (more insidious) do it by design. This monograph will focus on one natural relational dynamic, that if understood, could save family relationships from the emotional intensity of quarantine: the “Closeness-Distance Cycle” (Bowen, 1985).

Any parent or caregiver (hereafter referred to as parent) with two or more children should concur that no two children are alike. Each child has some uniqueness that separates them from the other. In their infant state the child is completely dependent on their parent(s) to sustain life. If they are provided for physically, emotionally and mentally they can attach well to a relationship system that requires intense closeness between parent and child for their early survival. However, for many young children traversing the narrow path between intense closeness and venturing away from the parent for the first time (or the parent venturing away from them) can be an anxiety provoking experience. For some children anxiety is heightened during bedtime routine and for others it is being left with another family member, even ones they know well, while the parent(s) go on a much-needed date or outing. Some parents cannot “bare” the anxiety of their distraught child’s pleadings to not abandon them as they are being told to enter into what some children feel, is the most dangerous part of their existence: Sleep! Some young children see the “end of their existence coming” because the parent goes out of their view to answer the knock at the door. Parents who understand that momentary distress is good for their child’s development and that it does not denote abandonment, will feel far less resentment about their child’s drive for closeness.

In essence, separation from those we love or need drives us to want to be reconnected. Yet, once reconnected, everyone also has a natural mechanism that once triggered says, “that was great but now I need a little distance, I need a little space.” In other words, as the closeness phase nears an end, being stuck together no longer lowers anxiety but begins to increase it as we become saturated with too much togetherness. Space then becomes essential in maintaining a healthy relationship because as the distance phase is triggered it at first lowers the anxiety and then reaches a point where “separation anxiety” starts to manifest. This growing anxiety then drives us to want to re-experience the closeness again. Couples who see themselves as individuals who choose to share their lives together are not threatened by their partners (or their own) desire for distance. Parents who likewise recognize the same cycle in their



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relationships with their children are less likely to be offended when a child needs some solitary time. There is one aspect of the Closeness-Distance Cycle that until understood leaves many couples, parents and siblings feeling like their relationship may be on the rocks: we do **not** all have the same Closeness-Distance Cycle.

Some children require more closeness with their parents than others and sometimes parents require more closeness with one child than another. A family experiencing the tragic loss of a parent may find that the surviving parent relies on the oldest child and needs intensified closeness in order to get through the loss. Years later, that oldest child may struggle to disconnect from that parent for long, fearing they are abandoning their parent. Depending on the maturity level of the parent, they may generate those feelings in that child because they “believe” their oldest is abandoning them. No words need to be spoken in order for both of them to feel the pull for closeness and yet the desire for the child to be reasonably separate.

Members of the healthiest relationships acknowledge we can be continually connected through our love of each other without needing nonstop physical proximity to prove it. In other words, a child should be able to go on a play date without feeling that leaving their parent behind means they must not love them anymore. Even greater, the child should not get the message that they are somehow abandoning their own parent by going. A child only needs to receive the silent treatment once when picked up by the parent after that visit to know “they hurt their parents’ feelings”. From that point on they may never go on a play date again because of how painful trying to make it up to the parent was. During this pandemic, there should not be play dates away from home but a child wanting alone time in their bedroom or their own reserved time on the computer needs to be viewed as healthy.

Some children were clingy before the pandemic and will be more so now. Other children need the occasional one-on-one conversation with a parent to keep them grounded and may need it a little more. Another may be the silent type whose quiet may become more sublime. One of the best strategies in a family is for the adults to consider what are the typical Closeness-Distance Cycles of our children and ourselves. Most family members will need distance and allowing them to have it guilt free can lower their anxiety. Pre-planned private time in the computer room, bedroom, tv room or a proper social-distanced walk on their own may be just what the doctor ordered. Helping children and adolescents understand we all need private time is good. Helping them understand we all need it at different times and in varying degrees is even better. We can help to turn a conflictual family into an insightful family whose lessons learned about each other during this pandemic will last a lifetime.

How parents and their children maneuver the push and pull of wanting to be close, yet occasionally needing to be apart from each other during the pandemic, will lay the foundation for their adult requirements for how much closeness and how much distance they will require in their future intimate relationships. For us parents, partners and caregivers our childhoods are in the past but their influence on us is very much in the present. Although most people are not trained family therapists and may not





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understand family of origin dynamics influencing their current relationship system, they can now. Knowledge is power.

During the engagement phase of an intimate partnership the desire to be close is naturally intensified because of the newness of the experience. Once we are committed and settle into a longer-term partnership, family of origin dynamics will emerge. In one relationship, Partner 1 may come from a family of origin where family closeness was that their family was “together all the time” except for one week each summer where siblings spent individual time with grandparents. Now in their adult intimate relationship their closeness phase is similarly protracted. They are happy being together all the time except for maybe supper out with their best friend once every six months, which once concluded, they actually feel anxiety for intense closeness with their partner again. Partner 2 comes from a family where both parents worked during their adolescents and often left them home alone to fend for themselves. They felt loved but enjoyed the distance. As such, they enjoy regular closeness with their partner but do not require it to feel loved. They can have a busy week at work with little spousal contact and believe everything is ok not realizing that Partner 1 is beginning to feel neglected and more importantly beginning to feel that maybe Partner 2 does not love them anymore. They misinterpret the lack of physical intimacy and verbal and emotional connectedness to mean their relationship is at risk.

Many marriages (relationships) have misfired simply because of not understanding how the incongruence between their closeness-distance cycles was leading to misunderstandings. If in fact you love your partner and want to be together then openly talking about what each other wants and needs to feel secure and loved in the relationship can bring insight and stability. Sometimes the cycles are only off by a few days and meeting each other half ways solves it all. In other cases, there is an area requiring therapeutic intervention if prior trauma or historical dynamics seem to be impairing the relationship. But in most cases, the recognition of this cycle will allow parents and children to understand how our individual differences played out in the same home is part of what uniquely makes “us” a family like no other.

In other relationships couples have acknowledged “there are three people in this marriage”. That usually refers to one member of the marital dyad who is still emotionally fused to one of their parents. When that parent senses the closeness between their adult child and their child’s new partner, it becomes a threat to them and they send the “message” that “you don’t care about me anymore” and place their child in the middle of trying to be close to their parent and partner at once. This is a very common marital/relational dynamic. Working through it requires the adult child to be more mature than their own parent (easier said than done) if they want to save their marriage.

Independent of family dynamics, it is clear that personality traits and characteristics also influence our natural needs for how much closeness and how much distance we require to feel secure. To feel like a whole person engaged in a two-person relationship, the concept of anxiety is useful for understanding the Closeness-Distance Cycle. In any loving relationship, we are relieved to get home at the end of the day to see our partner. If it was a stressful day, then the closeness to each other helps to lower the anxiety as two healthy people can bare more anxiety than just one person can on their own, but it is a matter of



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degrees. I often joke when delivering Family Assessment Training that most people do not go home after work and race up to their partner and say, “I love you so much I just want to be stuck to you forever” and then hang on to them in a four-hour embrace. What might begin as anxiety lowering closeness will quickly become an anxiety inducing desire for distancing. The typical process is that we all desire closeness to a significant other. Time spent together lowers anxiety just because of proximity. Yet, our relationships become even more secure through intimacy and meaningful conversations that recalibrate what it is that continues to bind us together.

## **Violence Threat Risk Assessment (VTRA™) and Trauma Response Application**

We are now forced to be stuck together during a worldwide pandemic where most are in some version of quarantine. There are varying degrees of family anxiety being generated across the world and for some it is traumatic. High-profile trauma does not generally create new dynamics in a human system (families, workplaces, communities, etc.) but instead intensifies already existing symptoms. If fear of contracting COVID-19 is not traumatic to some, being confined in an already abusive home certainly will.

Many individuals whose pre-COVID-19 functioning was already distressed or who already exhibited violence potential or suicidal ideation may experience increased shifts in their level of risk as the quarantine extends. Even in the best of family circumstances, too much time together with the ones we love will naturally result in an increase in anxiety triggering a distance phase where we need time apart until separateness rekindles the desire to be close again.

Many of our higher risk families and their children were able to maintain some level of functionality because attending school for the children and work for the parents helped them to “bind” (manage) the anxiety that ongoing closeness would have generated. Quarantining, job loss or the threat of job loss during the pandemic, along with unabated closeness, has intensified family anxiety and therefore risks that may have laid dormant pre-COVID are now being activated. We are already seeing the increase in domestic/relational violence as well as child abuse in many regions. While most families will adjust to this temporary circumstance, abuse free, others will not. We refer to this pandemic as a contextual risk enhancer.

For example, consider the father who was raised in a physically abusive family. He has never played a role in the discipline of his children. His partner always assumed it was because he was lazy. Unknown to his partner, the father never engages in disciplining their children because of fear he may be like his own abusive parent. He feels a proclivity to physically abuse one of his children who reminds him the most of his abusive parent but has never acted on the urge. Now being laid off from work and home with a partner he is no longer emotionally connected to, and quarantined, his violent ideations increase. With heightened anxiety, a broken relationship, increasing depression and availability of a “target”, he acts out. When it comes to light what he did, many will say that was uncharacteristic, he must have just snapped. But trauma and intense stress does not usually result in new symptoms; instead it intensifies already existing ones.



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One of the ways we can help an isolated family where risk is present is to make regular strategic contact. That means the right person at the right time reaching out to the parent(s) or children can provide assurance that there is an outside world that still cares and that “we are not alone”. A parent who can feel their own risk is increasing can be distracted from it with a timely call where they can vent and recalibrate. They may not always tell the truth of how dark things are becoming but just outside contact with a caring adult can be enough to motivate them to reconsider the path they are on.

## **Clinical Considerations**

Some professionals and parents have not fully understood the reasons why we say “Connection, Connection, Connection” is so important. One of the reasons for us reaching out to others or having others reach out to us is that we can create an artificial distance phase. Even for those who cannot leave the home, a hushed conversation with a friend admitting “I can’t handle this anymore” or “why did I ever have kids” can allow someone on the phone, facetime or text to psychologically distance from a family member. Thus, the helper on the receiving end of the conversation can absorb some of the family-generated anxiety caused by too much closeness. The right aunt, uncle, grandparent or favorite current or former teacher strategically calling the one child “driving a parent crazy” can also create an artificial distance phase for them as well. Families also need to be reassured by those communicating with them from outside the family that this pandemic will have an end and we will return to some level of normalcy soon enough. Hope is essential to binding anxiety.

In the most extreme family cases the Closeness-Distance Cycle occurs between two emotionally fused individuals (parent-child, sibling-sibling, spouse-spouse, etc.). In these situations, both individuals’ identities are tied up in the dyadic relationship where each other’s emotional state (mood) is the primary determiner of whether or not their existence is secure. Everyone is peripheral to their relationship system. These can be the cases where the school-aged child experiences heightened anxiety at school not because of misdiagnosed social phobia but because of fearing the harm separation is causing their adult caregiver. When they are together, physical proximity is constant. Any natural distance that occurs in this relationship is usually accomplished through an argument and hurt feelings where separation is going to another room or maybe briefly leaving the home. The argument serves the function of creating the catalyst for transitioning to the distance phase because neither is mature enough to accept you can love someone and yet need distance from them. The distance phase is then resolved by one member of the relationship system accepting they were the cause of the conflict and apologizing for causing harm to the other.

In most cases, the same person is always viewed as the cause of the conflict and, as such, has to give up a part of themselves to maintain the relationship. The separation during school for the child or work for the parent is what maintains enough distance to lessen the necessity for extreme behaviors in order to disconnect. The same applies for two emotionally immature spouses. The benefit of at least one member of a marital/relational dyad working outside the home is that it results in a longer separation phase than



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would occur otherwise. This often means that by the time they get home from work, the desire for closeness, even if there is an immediate fight at the door, will be irreversible. They need resolution to feel secure. Quarantining during the pandemic where parent and child or both spouses are home all the time can result in a speeding up of the Closeness-Distance Cycle and eventually an increase in the intensity of the conflicts required for separation. Child abuse in all its' forms and domestic violence are likely once the cycle speeds up. At its most extreme is one member of the dyad feeling they can only escape through suicidal and homicidal ideation or action. As noted earlier, even our remote insertion into the family system at strategic times can help to lower the anxiety and disrupt the escalating cycle. Phone calls, text, facetime and other forms of reaching out can help absorb some of the families' anxieties and help protect children and adults alike. School leadership, mental health, health, child protective services, police, probation and other VTRA partners need to be openly collaborating when "Cries for Help" or shifts in baseline seem to be occurring in individuals, dyads or the family as a whole. In most cases, the emotional intensity can be managed by thoughtful collaboration with VTRA partners.

Parents and children can be educated that the Closeness-Distance Cycle is natural yet diverse in frequency and intensity. Using your own family of origin or your nuclear family for "constructive use of self" in teaching those we are supporting is recommended. It is one of the few dynamics a helper should be able to share without any personal emotional reactivity. If for some reason, it feels too personal do not share your own but draw from the countless clinical examples from others.

One parent-child example of the effects of the pandemic on the Closeness-Distance Cycle is when a parent begins to pursue a child demanding they open up as to how they are "feeling" or "why won't you talk to me"? In some cases, parental anxiety has lead the parent to want closeness sooner than their child might naturally want. The pursuit by the parent heightens their child's anxiety at a time when a little more unencumbered distance would have resulted in separation anxiety driving the child back to their parent naturally. Some parents need a little professional coaching to help them determine if they should be pushing their child a bit or if their justification for pursuing their child is simply meant to lower their own anxiety rather than for the benefit of the child. With intensified closeness during the pandemic, one of the best strategies is for parents to strategically have an extended family member or friend they know their child respects or adores, "just happen" to call them. This pre-planned intervention, unknown to the child, activates the closeness phase with a third person who may be safer for the child to express how they are really doing. That third person can lower the child's anxiety by activating a new dyadic system for that day and lower the parents' anxiety by reporting that everything is good with their child. In more extreme cases, professionals, as already noted, can play that role within the parameters of ethical practice. Connection, Connection, Connection is good! But thoughtful and meaningful connection well timed is better. In a unique way, the pandemic has created space for helping professionals to move beyond the artificial setting of the office to the realities of our clients' real lives at home. Also, the Closeness-Distance Cycle is not just about those we are supporting it is about all of us as well!