

HEALTHQUEST

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOCUSING ON
MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AND CONCERNS.

THE YEAR OF THE FAMILY

The United Nations had proclaimed 1994 as the Year of the Family. Since many of the concerns brought to the Warren Shepell Consultants' Employee Assistance Program centre around family-related issues, we invited four members of the WSCC counselling team to examine the family, and the wide range of changes emerging from the family environment.

The impact of family issues on our ability to perform a job can be severe. We can be preoccupied with thoughts of the situation. We can be less tolerant and attentive to detail. Sometimes, we can even become physically ill due to stress, anxiety or fear. By identifying the more common family-related problems and potential counselling solutions, we may answer some of your questions or help you see that counselling can often help identify and explore your options. Often, by addressing our concerns, our self image is restored and performance on the job improved.

As Kathy King, a WSCC counsellor in Edmonton observes: "I'm seeing a lot more diversity, certainly a lot more single parents, and more common-law unions, which, twenty years ago, you rarely saw at all. Now, I'm seeing common law couples who claim legitimate rights to work through their problems, while arguing that 'marriage' isn't really the issue."

As King notes, we're seeing new and varied forms of families, which create new and different issues. You're getting children learning to cope the parent's boyfriend or girlfriend's children visiting every other weekend, and parents coping with diverse definitions of children.

"Kid are having to cope with what these relationships are," continues King, "and what they mean. The issue for the child is how they relate to all these different people coming in and out of their lives. The adults have to adjust to different parenting styles. The way you would parent our own child is not necessarily the way you would parent your stepchild, or your spouse's kids when they come for a custody visit."

Karen Durnin, a WSCC family therapist in Toronto, says, "The biggest change I've seen in family life is the change in the demands that people feel are place upon them. People seem to be busier. They have more financial pressures, and there's more

stress to make their financial ends meet. They're stretched, trying to work more, while leaving less time for their relationships."

Durnin also sees a change in what is a family; previously seeing a lot of single parents, "in couples counselling, I would say that people are making more of an effort to stay together today." The reason, she feels, has less to do with society's reaction to the problems of single parenthood, than with the fact that "financial realities are more of an issue right now."

Durnin points to an example of a couple experiencing relationship problems that surface under financial stress. Difficulty in making decisions was one issue. Each parent had their own priorities about what they wanted to spend money on, what's important to do, like vacations, where you are going to live, commuting time, and so forth." While nothing seems out of the norm, "The issues they were having before just became a lot harder to deal with because they were compounded by financial pressures. It was the last straw."

The thing about financial pressures," continues Durnin, "is that it's not something that just happens, you have a crisis, and it ends. Generally, it's chronic, and it wears away until the relationship is broken down by the on-going stress."

Durnin sometimes recommends that couples ask their children to attend counselling with them "because I think the kids have to become more aware of the changes occurring in the family due to the financial pressure. Often, both parents are feeling so much stress that they're feeling overwhelmed. But instead of being mutually supportive, they begin to take it out on each other. It's important to help them to turn that around, recognize the stress, and understand that their feelings and frustrations are normal. We help them, so that instead of blaming each other they will support one another. They need to feel they're in it together. They have to get by the anger and fear and reach the real feelings that are behind it."

Peter Crawford-Smith, a marital issue counsellor with WSCC for over three years, notes that "more and more families are coming in with added stress and pressure. That's not to say that the stress and pressure wasn't there before, but the feel it in a different way. I think that there are more demands placed on families these days. Especially in the '90's and the year 2000, parents want to offer and give as much as they can to the kids."

It's different, says Crawford-Smith, from the past. "I think, with the economic recession, that more parents are coming in with a sense of hopelessness, fearful of the kind of world their kids are going to grow up in. Back in the '60's, 70's, and 80's, there seemed to be a lot of jobs, an air of optimism." In other words, says Crawford-Smith, the assumptions that kids would do better than their parents, have been lost. "What's happening more now is that many adult children are coming back to live with their parents, which puts extra demands on the family, not only financially, but also emotionally."

The nest was supposed to be empty, but, says Crawford-Smith, "they're coming back like homing pigeons. Added to that are the effects of their own parent's aging process. Many of their parents are reaching their seventies and eighties." They are sandwiched between the generations, parenting both their children and their own aging parents. "If you add to that that some parents in their forties are going through their own mid-life crises, you see that they are developing much more awareness and sensitivity to what is around them, from their parent's standpoint, from their children's standpoint, and from their own role as parents."

Crawford-Smith notes that, as a result of all these problems coming together at once, the family often becomes split apart. There will be communications gaps. He counsels that the couple needs to draw support from each other. The men sometimes feel they haven't done what they thought they could do. Things are not under control and life is not the way they thought it would be. The women, on the other hand, might feel that they have never had a life of their own. They have been in the traditional role of parenting the kids; and just as the kids start flying from the nest, their own parents are now old and ill and need to be looked after. Sometimes a woman may feel as if she doesn't have an identity herself."

Kingston-based Rob Graff agrees. Graff, a family issues specialist, observes the trend of the vanishing homemaker. Among many of the families he counsels, "Both the women and the men are breadwinners." The reason is partly the need for two incomes. "But, it's also because the majority of the woman prefer to have a career and don't feel fulfilled staying at home. And yet, they still have the need and desire to be a mother and a parent."

In the absence of the homemaker, says Graff, you see a rise in the number of surrogate parents: nannies, part-time babysitters and day-care workers who assume the parental role. But without the parental authority, these fill-in parents create new problems raising the children. "We are seeing kids who are much more comfortable challenging authority."

Gloria Hart, specializing in multi-cultural issues in our Mississauga office, counsels many New Canadians, Hart encounters the special difficulties immigrants from different cultures face in coping with Canadian life. Loneliness, strangeness, and problems of raising children, these parents are torn between the new ways of their friends and the customs of their parents.

Hart explains that most issues in a multi-cultural family centre around communication. For example, one partner (either spouse), may be from a culture where being direct and to-the-point is seen as a strength and valued by that society. The other partner may come from a culture where being direct and stating exactly what you think is a sign of disrespect. Neither partner understands the other's culture. "That's why they become depressed. When I point out the differences and ask, 'what's this and what's that,' the clients start to feel better. They realize that it's not because something is wrong with them, but just that there are differences in culture."

As Hart explains, "the key element in counselling families is to show them that their differences don't have to be problems. If each family member makes an effort to understand the differences within their family and to understand each other's needs, the problems will be understood, shared, and openly communicated. Our culture is changing. We have a wonderful opportunity to make change positive and see our differences as opportunities to learn and grow, not as problems to overcome."

It doesn't matter what year it is when reading this piece, the concepts and basic concerns outlined will hold true. It will always be a question of how to improve communication between family members, the need to learn better methods of parenting or help in accepting a new definition of the family unit. As a parent, you may have to change your feelings to adjust with the times. When this piece was written some of the concepts about the changing family unit and multi-cultural concerns were newer concerns and not as familiar to you as these issues are now.

Since families and family life is always changing, new challenges will arise for parents and the family. Please feel free to contact an EAP counsellor to help with any family concerns or issues that you would like to talk about.

If you have any questions about this topic, or if you wish to discuss a personal situation you may be experiencing, we invite you to contact your EAP counsellors to arrange a telephone or in-person counselling session.

All contact between you and your counsellor is completely confidential.

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