



## Bowen Family Systems Theory: A Case Study in the Treatment of Adolescent Depression

4 CE Hours

Approved by the California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists (CAMFT Provider #029056) to sponsor continuing education for LMFTs, LCSWs, LPCCs, and LEPs. CAMFT is approved by the California Board of Behavioral Sciences (BBS) as a CE Provider Agency. CEUCafe.com maintains responsibility for courses and their content.

Rhonda Thomson, LMFT, LPCC  
Copyright 2017 by CEUCafe.com. All rights reserved.

## **Rationale for a Family Systems Approach for the Treatment of Adolescent Depression**

Research suggests that there may be a bidirectional effect in which an adolescent's depression may influence depression in a parent and vice versa. Treating either the parent or adolescent may result in a virtuous cycle in which improvement in one confers to the other (Wilkinson, 2013). Bowen family systems therapy is one such treatment option that takes into account this potential effect.

The following detailed case study will help to illustrate one way a child with depression can be treated starting from the initial intake call to the last session of therapy. Bowen family systems therapy is the primary modality used. The individuals presented in this case study are fictional. Any similarity to real individuals is coincidental and unintended.

### **Basic Principles of Family Systems Theory**

#### **Introduction**

Bowen family systems theory is a theory of human behavior that applies systems thinking to conceptualize family functioning. Psychological disorders, including depression, are related to an imbalance in the emotional system, "both within an individual and within his relationship system" (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). When a high level of anxiety characterizes the emotional system, the individual is likely to function in reaction to the anxiety rather than responding in a differentiated way. People who are not self-differentiated cannot separate feelings from thinking and are not capable of objective thinking (Nichols & Schwartz 1991). They are governed by how other people view them and therefore are constantly emotionally reactive. Those who are self-differentiated are able to balance feeling and thinking and are able to look at situations and interactions more objectively and therefore resist emotional impulses.

Bowen's theory states that triangles are the basic molecules of relationships and family systems. Triangles are the smallest stable relationships in families and consist of two people with the third leg being another person or thing (a job, school, drug use, etc.). When anxiety is high between two people, a third person or thing is pulled in to reduce the tension. Often, a child is pulled into a triangle to reduce tension in a marriage. This child may suffer from depression or other mental disorders as a result of being triangulated into the unhealthy and anxious relationship.

Family systems theory defines the Family Emotional Process as a concept that deals with the emotional forces in families that repeat themselves over time (Nichols & Schwartz 1991). Lack of differentiation in the family of origin can lead to cutoff from parents, which leads to unstable fusion in the marriage. This fusion can lead to physical or emotional dysfunction in one spouse, marital conflict or projection of the problem onto one or more of the children. Projection onto a child can be damaging and cause numerous physical and emotional problems, including depression.

### **Differentiation of Self**

The differentiation of self is the one of the core aspects of Bowen Theory which states an individual who is self differentiated has the ability to separate feelings from thinking. A higher level of differentiation also allows a person to maintain his or her individuality while being in emotional contact with others (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Conversely, the undifferentiated individual does not have the ability to distinguish thoughts from feelings, and their intellects are flooded with feelings governed by an accumulation of feelings from those around them (Nichols and Schwartz, 1991). The lack of differentiation between thinking and feelings occurs in conjunction with the lack of differentiation between the individual and others. Individuals who are not differentiated tend to react emotionally to most circumstances. When asked what they believe, undifferentiated individuals will adhere to the beliefs of others and either "conform or assume pseudo-independence

through counter-conformity (Nichols and Schwartz, 1991, p. 367).” Differentiated individuals are able to take stands on issues, are able to think things through and decide what they believe before acting in a given situation. Guerin goes on further to define differentiation as freeing the self from the family of origin by analyzing one’s role in relationship systems and instead of blaming others, taking responsibility for the self (Guerin, Fay, Burden, and Kautto, 1987).

### **Triangles**

Bowen states that a triangle is the smallest stable relationship within families, work environment or social group. When a relationship consisting of two people is unstable, it goes through periods of closeness and distance. When anxiety increases in the relationship, a third person or thing is pulled into the relationship. For example, if the marital relationship is having problems, many times one of the spouses will focus on one or more of the children in the family. The spouse may also spend more time at work or start using drugs or alcohol as a way to reduce the anxiety. An extra-marital affair is another example of how a triangle can be formed. Another point on the triangle might be a group of people such as extended family members or friends. Typically, these triangles may overlap and there is very little direct communication happening. People within these triangles usually talk behind each other’s backs and gossip frequently. Guiren points out that it is helpful to remember that any relationship will go through periods of closeness and distance (Guerin, Fay, Burden, and Kautto, 1987). These cycles help to form autonomy within the individual and connectedness within the relationship. When the relationship is experiencing distancing, triangles are likely to be formed. Usually, the spouse who is experiencing the most discomfort seeks another person or object to pull into the relationship to decrease the anxiety. Those who are pulled into the triangle typically respond by trying to reduce the tension in the relationship.

### **Nuclear Family Emotional Process**

The nuclear family emotional process is the concept of reoccurring emotional patterns that have been brought from the family of origin. “Lack of differentiation in

the family of origin leads to an emotional cutoff from parents, which in turn leads to fusion in marriage (Nichols and Schwartz 1991, p. 369).” The less differentiation of each individual before the marriage, the more fusion will occur after the marriage. Because the fusion is unstable, it could lead to one or more of the following:

- 1. Emotional or physical dysfunction in one of the spouses*
- 2. Reactive emotional distance between the spouses*
- 3. Marital conflict.*
- 4. Projection of the marital problem onto the children.*

The level of differentiation of the spouses will determine the degree of stress in the family or marital relationship.

### **Family Projection Process**

The family projection process describes how parents who lack self-differentiation transmit their emotional process to their children. For example, a husband who is emotionally distant from his wife could create a setting for the wife to be overly involved with the children. Usually, one child is singled out for attention and is commonly the most like the parent. This projection onto one child is different than a healthy and caring concern. Instead, this projection produces anxiety and over-involvement, which results in symptoms of emotional dysfunction.

### **Multigenerational Transmission Process**

Bowen takes the Family Projection Process one step further by stating that when working with families, it is important to look at several previous generations to identify patterns of functioning. Bowen says that in every generation, the child who is the most fused with the family will have the lowest level of self differentiation and the child who is least fused with the family will have the highest level of self differentiation.

## **Emotional Fusion**

People manage the lack of self-differentiation with varying degrees of emotional fusion, which can result in either over-involvement or cutoff. Higher levels of fusion that exist in the family of origin result in greater emotional over-involvement or cutoff. Some people manage their anxiety by clinging to others for emotional support. Others seek distance from their families by moving far away or by avoiding personal topics during conversations with their parents. Nichols superbly describes how some people misunderstand emotional maturity and replace it with emotional cutoff: "We take it as a sign of growth to separate from our parents, and we measure our maturity by independence of family ties. Yet many of us still respond to our families as though they were radioactive and capable of inflicting great pain. Only one thing robs Superman of his extraordinary power: kryptonite, a piece of his home planet. A surprising number of adult men and women are similarly rendered helpless by even a brief visit to or from their parents." (1986, p. 190)

## **CASE STUDY**

### **The Colbalt Family**

Mrs. Beth Colbalt is a part-time nurse and a mother of three children, Jack (age 6), Dalton (age 10) and Kaitlyn (age 14). She is married (15 years) to Jim Cobalt, a real estate broker who normally works long hours. The Colbalt family lives in an upper middle class neighborhood and all three children attend the local public school.

### **Initial Intake Call**

Beth Colbalt called Sue, a Licensed Marriage Family Therapist, seeking help for her 14-year-old daughter, Kaitlyn. Beth was upset and reported that she found instant messages and emails to and from boys that she considered extremely inappropriate. She also reported that Kaitlyn's grades had been dropping in school and she has been spending most of her time in her room. Kaitlyn had been moody and disrespectful towards her and her husband. In addition, Kaitlyn had been overeating, had gained about twenty pounds in the past six months and was

sleeping excessively during the day. Beth said that she didn't understand the weight gain because Kaitlyn actively participated in softball at school. Beth asked if Sue would be able to see Kaitlyn as soon as possible. Sue asked if Beth had brought Kaitlyn's recent weight gain to the attention of her pediatrician. Beth stated that she had, and that the pediatrician was also concerned because Kaitlyn's weight gain had been very rapid, and that her blood pressure was also a little high. The pediatrician had given Kaitlyn a meal plan, but she was not following it. The pediatrician had also recommended therapy because she was concerned that Kaitlyn was showing signs of depression. Sue asked a few more preliminary screening questions and they agreed to set up an initial appointment. Sue asked that Beth and her husband come in for a session together with Kaitlyn. This request surprised Beth, and she promptly stated that the problem was not with her husband, but with Kaitlyn and that she was the one that needed therapy. Sue informed Beth that therapy would be most effective if both parents were involved in the process. [It is typical for a Bowenian therapist to see a child with the parents during the initial evaluation period, but as therapy progresses most of the time is spent with the parents, either individually or together, even if the primary symptoms are with the child. If neither parent is willing to participate, a Bowenian therapist might elect to see an adolescent for individual therapy, but only if the child is personally motivated apart from the parents' agenda.]

Sue shared with Beth that she believed that she could be most effective in her work with Kaitlyn if both parents were involved in the therapy process. Beth said that she would ask Jim to attend the therapy session, but thought that due to his busy schedule, he would not be able to attend. Again, Sue stressed the importance of having both parents present. Beth said that she would do her best to have Jim attend the initial session.

## Summary of Session One (Kaitlyn, Beth and Jim)

### Goals

- Introduce office policies including limits to confidentiality
- Gather information and clarify goals for therapy
- Join with clients
- Instill hope for the future
- Make appropriate referrals

Beth and Kaitlyn arrived first for the session and Beth stated that Jim was on his way. Sue noticed that Kaitlyn appeared to be annoyed and uncomfortable and she gave her a reassuring smile and introduced herself. Sue gave Beth the required intake forms and insurance forms along with a consent to treat form for a minor. Sue also asked Beth to sign a consent form to exchange information with Kaitlyn's pediatrician and told Beth that it was important to continue to keep any follow up appointments with the pediatrician.

When Jim arrived, he was still on his cell phone and talked for a few more minutes before sitting down in the waiting room. When he was finished talking, Sue also asked that he fill out a separate intake form requesting information about himself. He asked why it was necessary since they were there for Kaitlyn. Again, Sue went over her therapeutic approach and told both parents that therapy would be most effective if she was able to work primarily with the parents, even though the symptoms they described were with Kaitlyn. [Although working from a Bowenian orientation does not require that all family members be present, Sue's personal philosophy when working with minors is to include the parents if at all possible. This is because Sue has found it easier to effect change in the functional level of differentiation in the parents, which results in increased differentiation throughout the system. However, Bowenian theory states that a change in the differentiation level of one person can change the entire system, and Bowenian therapists often work systemically with individual clients.] Jim looked at Beth and said that he



thought he would only need to attend the first session to give the therapist information. He then reminded her of his busy schedule.

At this point, Sue thanked them for their willingness to participate. Sue used the first portion of the session to go over her office policies, her professional background, her family secrets policy, confidentiality and privilege and the limits of confidentiality. During this time, Sue noted to herself that Kaitlyn appeared sad and held her head down. Beth was quick to clarify that the focus needed to be on Kaitlyn's problems. Sue explained to Kaitlyn, Beth and Jim that she wanted to understand how the family worked together and got along, and that this would help with the family's stated goal of resolving Kaitlyn's problems. She pointed out that a problem with one person in the family affects the entire family system. Sue also clarified her role within the system as a coach. [Bowenian therapists often take the stance of a coach to the family in order to neutralize the likelihood that clients will take a passive role in the process, and wait for the therapist to magically fix the problem.] Sue stated that one way she would help would be to encourage each family member to make "I" statements when talking about the problems within the family. Sue explained that "I" statements would ensure that each person spoke for themselves without blaming another, and would help each person to clearly define their position.

Sue asked Beth to begin by describing the situation as she experienced it. [Bowen therapists strive to be an objective observer and see things as they are, rather than how they should be. Eliciting each person's observation begins the process of helping clients develop the ability to observe.] Beth started by saying that the family used to get along great and that they had been relatively happy. She stated that in the past year, Kaitlyn's attitude had changed and that she just didn't seem to care about anything. She also stated that she was very upset about some e-mail messages that she had read between Kaitlyn and some boys. At this point, Kaitlyn's face turned red; she looked angry and embarrassed. Kaitlyn told her mother that she had no business reading her personal e-mail. Beth stated that she couldn't believe that

her daughter would be talking so dirty with boys. Kaitlyn started crying. Jim chimed in that crying wasn't going to work and that she was grounded from the phone, the computer and her friends for the next 6 months. Beth turned to Jim and said shortly that she thought that punishment was too harsh.

Sue intervened quickly as the family members began talking to each other all at once. She stated that each person would have a chance to talk, and coached those who were not speaking to not interrupt the person who was. She also reminded them to use "I" statements, and told them that blaming and making accusations would not help the process of therapy. She coached each person to speak directly to her, rather than to each other. Especially during the initial stage of therapy, when anxiety is high, speaking directly to the therapist reduces anxiety, which is a primary goal of Bowenian theory. This intervention is typical for a Bowen family systems therapist. It serves to reduce anxiety by establishing a therapeutic triangle in which the therapist acts as a stabilizing resource for the family. Sue established herself in this way by redirecting the interactions in the session to come through her, rather than going directly between the family members. Later, when the anxiety in the system has been defused, and the level of functional differentiation has been increased, the family members can manage more direct interactions successfully.

Sue then resumed speaking directly to Beth, and asked her what her goals were for therapy. Beth stated that that Kaitlyn would end her inappropriate communication with boys, stop being so moody, and have a good attitude. She also added that she wished Jim would be home more to help her out with the kids. Sue pointed out that each of these goals was focused on changes in other family members. She then asked Sue if she could think of any goals that related to changes that she could make. Beth couldn't think of anything. Sue coached Beth to make an "I" statement related to the problem. Beth was able to say, "I want to have a better relationship with Kaitlyn." Sue offered feedback to Beth that it must be difficult to be worried about Kaitlyn, and feel the need to keep very close tabs on her. Sue suggested that this seemed to be getting in the way of a relationship that was comfortably close, but respectful of

privacy. Beth stated that privacy wouldn't be an issue if she knew she could trust Kaitlyn. Sue stopped her, and reminded that blaming wasn't helpful right now. She reassured Beth that resolution of symptoms was likely as each family member focused on their own part in the system. Beth recognized her blaming statement, and commented on how hard it was to keep the focus on herself. Through this interaction, Sue was able to keep the focus on Beth's differentiation process rather than allowing Beth to project her anxiety onto Kaitlyn.

Sue then turned to Jim and asked him to give his view of the problem, and also state his goals for therapy. Jim began by stating that he wanted Kaitlyn's attitude to change, and that he wanted her to lose some weight. He stated that he thought a lot of the problem was that Beth needed to be stricter with Kaitlyn. "Beth lets her get away with way too much," Jim stated, "Kaitlyn needs more discipline." Beth jumped in at this point, and said, "You let the boys get away with all kinds of bad behavior, and yet you think I'm too lenient with Kaitlyn?" Jim responded, "boys will be boys." Sue stopped this interaction, and reminded them to take turns, and speak directly to her. She also asked Jim if he could frame his goals using "I" statements. Jim responded irritably that he wasn't the one with the problem. Sue recognized that symptoms in one family member are typically the result of that family member absorbing or reacting to anxiety in the system as a whole. She realized that in distancing himself from the problem, Jim was reinforcing the symptoms. Sue decided not to push Jim to continue at this time, as she worked to establish rapport. Instead, she thanked him for participating in the session today, and told him that by doing so, he was demonstrating his concern for the family. In this way, Sue defused anxiety and continued the joining process.

Sue then turned to Kaitlyn and asked about her observations and goals. Kaitlyn simply stated that she didn't know. She started crying again and completely shut down at this point. Sue noticed that Kaitlyn appeared to be using emotional cutoff as a way of managing her high level of anxiety within the family system. Since the goal of a Bowen family systems therapist is to reduce anxiety in the system, Sue

reassured Kaitlyn that there would be time to talk about those questions at another time. She refocused attention away from Kaitlyn, and used this time to summarize the work they had done in their first session together. Sue thanked them for coming and also expressed her confidence that the family could improve their relationships.

Sue requested that both parents come along with Kaitlyn for the next session. Both parents and Kaitlyn agreed to attend another session, however Jim stated that he wasn't sure he could be present for the entire session. Sue stated that she would like to spend some time individually with Kaitlyn during the first half of the next session, and meet together with the parents during the second half. Sue's therapeutic rationale for this approach was to continue to reduce the anxiety around Kaitlyn by providing therapeutic space separate from her parents, but to continue to engage the parents actively in therapy in order to reverse the family projection process that was reinforcing Kaitlyn's symptomology. [In Bowenian theory, the family projection process is the psychological process in which parental undifferentiation is transmitted to a child.] Sue also wanted to gather more information about the family system from Kaitlyn, and chose to do this individually since her anxiety had been so high during the family session.

## **Summary of Session Two**

### **(Individual Session With Kaitlyn, and Family Session)**

Beth arrived with Kaitlyn and reported that Jim would be coming about half an hour later. Sue took this opportunity to meet with Kaitlyn separately. The goal for the individual session was to join with Kaitlyn and also gain more perspective about Kaitlyn's experience in the family system in a setting of lower anxiety. Kaitlyn appeared to be nervous. In order to reduce Kaitlyn's anxiety, Sue asked her general questions regarding school, friends, what kind of music she liked, and what were some of her favorite movies.

Kaitlyn answered Sue's questions and started to feel more comfortable with her. Sue took an interest in her likes and dislikes and was genuinely interested in who she was. Focusing on the self of the client helps the client begin the process of differentiation from the family system. Sue asked Kaitlyn why she had come to therapy and what she thought was the problem. Kaitlyn shared that she thought her dad was too strict and simply didn't understand her. She reported that she felt embarrassed and upset when her parents started talking about her problems to other people. She also said that her parents simply did not understand that she was old enough to have a boyfriend because all her friends had boyfriends. Sue also asked about her computer habits and how she communicated with her friends. Kaitlyn reported that she connected with her friends through Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter. She also had made several new friends through these social media platforms. She said that she was really upset because she couldn't go on the computer and that her friends were wondering what happened to her. She expressed that she was mainly mad at her father because he wrecked her life by taking away her computer and phone.

Kaitlyn shared that when her dad was at work, her mother used to let her use her phone as long as her dad never found out, but then one of her brothers told her dad. She stated that this had caused a big fight between her parents. She questioned why her dad even cared because he wasn't home much and when he was home, he spent a lot of time on the phone and computer. She said that he spent his weekends playing with her brothers and playing golf with her uncle.

Sue asked Kaitlyn what her goals for therapy were and she stated that she wanted her parents to understand who she was and let her have the computer back. Sue also asked about Kaitlyn's recent weight gain. Kaitlyn told Sue that gaining weight had added to her current unhappiness, but she also stated that she couldn't seem to stop herself from eating junk food. She stated that she liked going to the local Dairy Queen that was within walking distance of her school. It was a popular hangout where she often went with her friends, although she only binged when she went

alone and took her order to go. Sue asked her what she liked to eat there, taking care to show interest but not judgment. Kaitlyn said that with her friends, she usually ordered fries and a diet soda, but when she was alone she usually ate a double cheeseburger, two orders of fries, and a sundae. She stated that she always felt a lot calmer after she ate, and it made her feel good inside, but then she regretted it as soon as she was finished eating. She stated that she had gotten into the habit of going to Dairy Queen at least 3 times a week and eating on her way home. She stated that if her parents knew, they would be very angry. Kaitlyn asked Sue not to tell her parents about it. Sue assessed for any history or current presence of purging or restricting behavior, and Kaitlyn stated that she had never purged or restricted. Although Sue had explained her “No Secrets” policy at the beginning of therapy and felt comfortable sharing this information if necessary, she decided that it was not therapeutically indicated to bring this up with Kaitlyn’s parents during this particular session, while anxiety in the system remained high.

From the information gathered in the individual session with Kaitlyn, and from information from the previous session, Sue hypothesized that a triangle existed between Kaitlyn and her parents. She noted that Kaitlyn’s relationship with her father could be characterized as somewhat distant and conflictual, and her relationship with her mother could be characterized as overinvolved—at times closely aligned, and at other times conflictual. Sue also surmised that Kaitlyn’s parents were emotionally cut off from each other and were projecting anxiety onto Kaitlyn. Kaitlyn’s symptoms served to take focus off this cut off, and to manage her anxiety within the system. Her symptoms were also circular, in that the more her symptoms worsened, the more emotionally reactive her parents became. Sue hypothesized that by taking the focus off Kaitlyn and facilitating a healthy, differentiated relationship between the parents, Kaitlyn would more easily recover her premorbid level of functioning, and her symptoms would likely dissipate.

At this point, Sue told Kaitlyn that she would like to meet with her parents separately for the remainder of the session. Sue thanked Jim and Beth for attending.

She shared that the time she had just spent privately with Kaitlyn had been helpful in gathering additional information that would be useful in formulating a treatment plan. She then told the parents that based on her assessment she would like spend the next few sessions working with Jim and Beth, without Kaitlyn present. Jim immediately spoke up and stated that the problem was Kaitlyn. Sue stated that she was not choosing to work with Jim and Beth together because they were the problem, but because they were the parents, and consequently were in the best position to initiate positive change in the family. Sue told Jim and Beth that children usually respond to changes in their parents, and that the changes would be more long lasting when they come from the parents. Although it might not solve all of Kaitlyn's problems, it was nevertheless the preferred place to start. [Bowen believed that families could decide on "we" solutions that work temporarily, such as agreeing to communicate better, but as soon as one person does not cooperate, the solution breaks down. He believed that people focusing on their individual contribution to the system would effect more lasting change.]

Sue told Jim and Beth that she wanted to spend the next session together to construct a genogram. She explained that a genogram is a map of the family that they would construct together to include Jim and Beth's parents and siblings, as well as their current family. [Bowen family systems therapists usually try to construct a genogram of at least 3 generations.] Sue explained that understanding the roles and patterns in their families of origin would help them better understand their current family functioning. Jim and Beth agreed to cooperate with this course of therapy.

### **Initial Treatment Goals**

Based on Sue's initial assessment, she generated the following goals to guide the therapy process:

- Construct a three-generation family genogram.
- Use the genogram to discover patterns of behavior that have carried through

the multigenerational family system.

- Work initially with Jim and Beth together, without Kaitlyn present, to refocus their emotional energy away from Kaitlyn and towards the parents' individual differentiation process.
- Address the triangle between Jim, Beth and Kaitlyn by helping them identify and communicate more neutral, differentiated positions when patterns of overinvolvement and cut off arise.

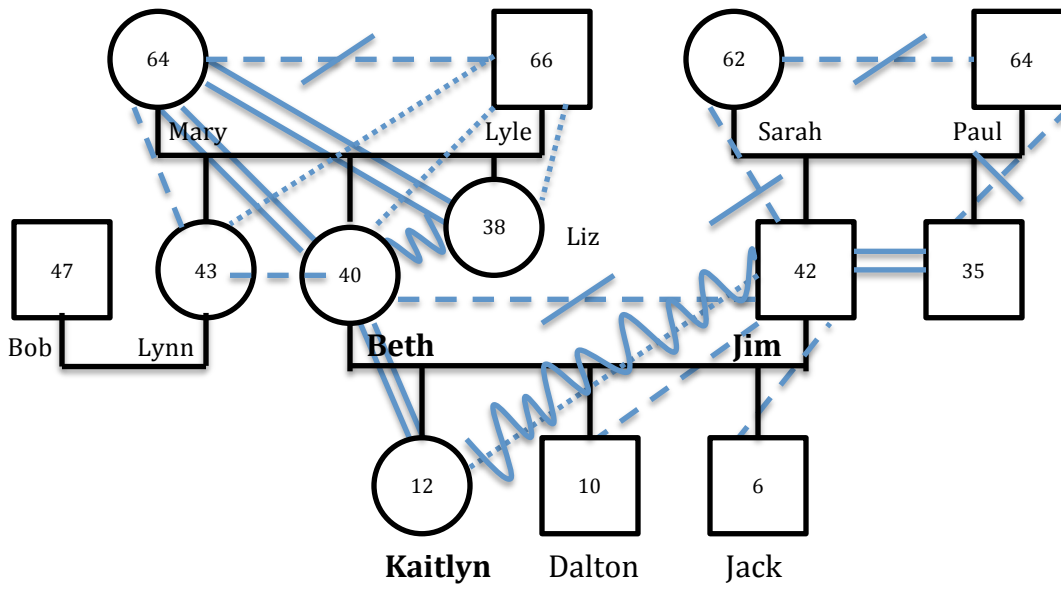
### **Summary of Session Three (Jim and Beth)**

The purpose of constructing a genogram with both parents was to help them understand how they may be bringing patterns of behavior from their family of origin into the marriage and the family. The genogram is an excellent tool to help gather information and give insight to current levels of family functioning. While working on the genogram during session, clients may discover things about their families that they have never identified in the past. While gathering questions, the therapist creates a *therapy triangle*, a technique that is based on Bowen's assumption that whenever there is conflict, those in the relationship will seek to pull another into the system. Therapy can be a healthy triangle if the therapist refrains from becoming emotionally entangled in the couple's system.






Sue will remain calm during periods of stress and conflict between Beth and Jim, which will encourage them to be less reactive so that they can work on solutions to their problems. Sue will also pay attention to her own reactions, and seek consultation to manage any anxiety or reactivity that could adversely affect the therapeutic triangle. Bowenian therapists consider it essential to "do their own work" in order to be effective in the therapeutic process.



## The Cobalt Family Genogram



CODE:

-  Conflict
-  Fusion
-  Connection
-  Less connection
-  Distance

Beth stated the names and ages of her parents, siblings and their spouses. Beth reported that she came from a family where her father worked a lot and her mother stayed home with her and her two sisters. She noted that she is really close to her mother and that they talk on the phone quite frequently. She related that she has never been that close to her father because she thought he always wanted a boy. She described her parent's marriage as emotionally cold. She stated that her parents were never that affectionate with each other and she never heard either of them say "I love you" to the other. Beth shared that she was close to her older sister, Lynn, but that she does not have a good relationship with Liz because she rebelled and was always spoiled by her mother. She expressed that she was bothered by the fact that Liz was still not married, nor did she have a steady career. She stated that her mother was always bailing Liz out of bad situations.

Jim reported that his parents were not close either, and that for the most part, neither of them was home very often. Both Jim's parents are physicians and Jim spent much of his time with his grandparents. Jim noted that he had to grow up quickly and spent much of his teenage years taking care of his younger brother. Jim reported that he was close to his younger brother who was single. While Jim described his family, Beth interrupted to say that he was a little too close to his younger brother and that he spends too much time playing golf with Kevin when he should be spending time with his family. Jim was upset by this remark and stated that Kevin doesn't have a lot of friends and that his parents really don't care about Kevin. Jim stated that he resented Beth for being jealous of Kevin.

Sue encouraged Beth and Jim to look for any patterns that might relate to their current behaviors. Although Jim was apprehensive about the genogram process, he was able to use the time to explore the patterns in his family. Beth and Jim both seemed willing to participate in this activity, and Sue coached them to use "I" statements instead of blaming each other for current problems. Beth and Jim noticed that both of their parents had relationships that were emotionally cold and distant, and they were able to see how they had replicated that pattern in their own

marriage. Sue suggested that increasing their connection as a couple would allow them to parent more effectively because they would be less likely to triangle their children into their relationship in unhealthy ways, and would be more able to develop and maintain a unified parenting plan. Sue was also able to frame Beth's resentment of Jim's relationship with his brother as a possible indication of her desire to have a closer relationship with Jim. This helped reduce Jim's reactivity to Beth in this situation, and it also moved Beth into a more honest "I" position.

Sue then moved the discussion to an examination of the relationships and bonds they had developed with their children. Sue suggested that Beth's mother might have developed an overinvolved relationship with Beth as a reaction to her emotional distance from Beth's father. Sue also pointed out that Beth appeared to be overinvolved with Kaitlyn, and hypothesized that this appeared to be a pattern that she had replicated from her relationship with her own mother, also as a reaction to her current emotional distance from Jim. Sue used the example of Beth allowing Kaitlyn to use the phone when Jim wasn't home as a way that Beth aligned herself with Kaitlyn against Jim. Beth stated that although she agreed with Jim's restriction of Kaitlyn's computer, she thought taking away the phone was too harsh. Sue pointed out how Beth's action reinforced the distance between Kaitlyn and Jim, the distance between Beth and Jim, and the overinvolvement between Beth and Kaitlyn. Sue also noted that Beth might have a similar pattern of aligning with her own mother against her youngest sibling. Beth stated that she could see how her actions could be reinforcing distance between Kaitlyn and Jim, but she didn't know how she should handle the situation when it seemed so obviously unfair. Sue reassured her that she could coach her to take a more neutral position in this situation, and that she would explain what this would look like as they continued to work together.

Sue then pointed out that Jim appeared to be emotionally cut off from Kaitlyn, perhaps in the same way that his parents were cut off from him. Jim noted that he didn't have a problem relating to his sons, and he felt more comfortable with them than Kaitlyn, more like his relationship with his own younger brother. Beth noted

how she had felt rejected by her father because she knew he wanted a son only had daughters, and how this made her feel even more protective of Kaitlyn in the family. She stated that she didn't want Kaitlyn to feel like Jim favored her brothers over her. Jim initially blamed Beth for aligning with Kaitlyn against him, but Sue defused this blaming stance by framing it within the context of the multigenerational emotional process. Jim was able to recognize how his distance from Kaitlyn triggered Beth's anxiety about her own distant relationship with her father. He also realized that his close relationship with his brother made it easier for him to take that role with his own sons.

Sue also pointed out that the systemic nature of the problem meant that it was circular, and mutually reinforcing. This meant that the more cut off Jim became from Beth, the more overinvolved Beth became with Kaitlyn, and the more cut off Jim became from Beth. Beth and Jim were also able to recognize that these patterns did not develop in a vacuum, nor were they malicious in nature. They were patterns that predated their relationships within the current nuclear family. This frame went a long way in defusing blame, and facilitating empathy and connection between Beth and Jim. Jim and Beth agreed to meet again with Sue, and seemed to begin to understand their role in facilitating change within their family.

### **Summary of Session Four (Jim and Beth)**

Session four began with Beth voicing her concern about the inappropriate e-mail correspondence that Kaitlyn had recently had with boys online. Even though Kaitlyn was currently restricted from using the computer, Beth was concerned about what kind of interactions were going on at school. Beth asked for some guidance on how to deal with the situation because Kaitlyn was very evasive whenever Beth asked her questions about whether or not she was still having contact with the boys in question, and was frequently sullen and angry. Sue offered two observations. She noted that the more Beth pushed Kaitlyn for answers, the more Kaitlyn distanced herself from these advances. She talked about the pursuer/ distancer pattern that

was evident between Beth and Kaitlyn, and offered the Bowenian axiom, “Never pursue a distancer”. Instead, she suggested that Beth work on connecting with Kaitlyn in ways that were less emotionally charged at this point, and reestablish trust and developmentally appropriate boundaries. Beth was concerned that ignoring the situation would make things worse, but Sue encouraged her to be willing to step back from her feelings of anxiety, and choose a less reactive stance that would allow Kaitlyn to feel emotionally safe enough to share with Beth in the future. Beth agreed to try.

Sue also pointed out that it might be possible that Kaitlyn was looking for attention in these online relationships that she was not getting in her relationship with Jim. Jim expressed that he could understand how this might be the case and stated that he wanted to work on strengthening his connection with Kaitlyn, but was not sure where to begin. Sue offered encouragement to Jim, and stated that she would coach him in the steps he could take that would help him build a strong relationship with Kaitlyn. She encouraged Jim to take some time during the next week to spend with Kaitlyn. She asked Jim to think about ways he connected with his sons, and use that information to help him come up with ideas for his time with Kaitlyn. Jim agreed to give it some thought.

Sue then emphasized that in order to build a caring and trusting relationship with their daughter, the couple needed to work on establishing a healthy emotional connection in their marriage. Sue explained that the triangle that existed between Jim, Beth and Kaitlyn needed to get realigned, and the first step was to strengthen the bond between Jim and Beth, and then to strengthen Jim’s relationship with Kaitlyn while defusing the overinvolvement and unhealthy alliance between Beth and Kaitlyn. Sue explained that when the family relationships were more equally balanced in terms of individuality and togetherness, maladaptive behaviors would diminish.

As an initial step, Beth and Jim were asked to think about ways they had connected in the past that had been enjoyable for them. After some discussion, both Jim and Beth stated that they had enjoyed going out to dinner on Friday nights together when they were dating, and before they had kids. Jim shared that this was something he always looked forward to at the end of the week, and Beth added that it was also a nice way to start the weekend. They realized that they had gotten out of the habit when the children were young, but felt like it was something they could now do. Beth and Jim agreed to meet with Sue again the following week as a couple.

### **Session Five (Jim and Beth)**

Sue began this session by asking if Jim and Beth had made time to go out together on Friday night, as they had discussed in the previous session. They shared that they had, and that it had been very enjoyable. Beth noted that she felt more connected to Jim than she had in a long time. Beth also stated that she didn't feel as resentful when Jim played golf on Saturday with his brother because they had spent time together the night before. Jim agreed that the time together was very positive, and that it was something they wanted to continue to do on a weekly basis. Sue congratulated them on making this change. Sue then asked how Beth's interactions with Kaitlyn had been during the previous week. Beth stated that she had tried very hard not to push Kaitlyn for details about her relationships with boys. She stated that it was initially hard because she didn't know what else to talk to Kaitlyn about, and so their conversations seemed more like awkward small talk that didn't mean very much. Sue suggested that Beth continue with this important change during the coming week even though it felt difficult. Sue predicted that as Kaitlyn readjusted to Beth's lack of pushing on sensitive subjects, their conversations would start to feel more natural. Beth noted that at least Kaitlyn hadn't been so sullen, and so she was willing to continue for another week.

Sue turned her attention to Jim, and asked if he had been successful in connecting with Kaitlyn during the previous week. Jim stated that he had tried sitting down and watching a television show with Kaitlyn, but in his opinion, the stuff she liked to watch was crap, and he had gotten into an argument with her. Jim asserted that he felt angry because he was making an effort, but Kaitlyn was unwilling to meet his effort with anything but a bad attitude. Sue postulated that Jim would be more successful if he decided not to focus on Kaitlyn's response to what he chose to do. Sue coached him to define a position for himself with Kaitlyn that was emotionally accessible and non-reactive, and then allow Kaitlyn the time she needed to adjust to his new position. She encouraged him to keep the focus on whether he was able to change his behavior, rather than focusing on Kaitlyn's response.

Sue then asked Jim if he had spent any time with his sons during the previous week. Jim stated that he had taken Jack to soccer practice, and he had taken Dalton to get a new bike helmet. Beth chimed in that Jim had also taken Jack out for burgers after practice, and had stopped for ice cream with Dalton. Sue wondered if Jim could think of a way to spend time with Kaitlyn that was similar. Jim asserted that he couldn't take Kaitlyn to any of her activities because they conflicted with his work schedule, and Jack's soccer practice didn't. Beth then pointed out that he could take Kaitlyn to her softball game on Saturday if he would just skip golf with his brother every once in awhile. Jim glared at Beth, and told her he was aware of her resentment of his brother. Sue intervened and asked that Beth allow Jim to come to his own conclusions about how to engage with Kaitlyn. Jim stated grudgingly that he could probably get an earlier tee time and be home in time for Kaitlyn's game, but that he was definitely not taking Kaitlyn out for any food because she really needed to lose weight. Sue asked Jim if taking Kaitlyn to her game was a solution he felt was in line with the value he placed on the relationship with Kaitlyn, or if it was a decision that was in reaction to Beth's earlier remark, as an effort to prove something to Beth. Jim thought for a moment, and then responded that it was a decision he was personally choosing.

Sue then suggested that Jim rethink his stance in relation to Kaitlyn's weight. She pointed out how Beth was learning not to push on the subject of boys, and that if Jim could back off of his criticism of Kaitlyn's weight, it would give Kaitlyn an opportunity to take personal responsibility for this issue. Sue noted that it was impossible for Jim to control Kaitlyn's weight anyway, so it would be more positive for him to define a position regarding Kaitlyn's weight in which he was not personally responsible, but was able to provide support as needed. Sue also asked Jim to talk about what he was reacting to when he thought about Kaitlyn's weight. Jim stated that his opinion of overweight people was that they were lazy and didn't have self-control, and that seeing his daughter with a weight problem felt like a reflection on him as a father. Sue pointed out that Jim had an opportunity to differentiate himself from his daughter in relation to her weight.

Sue asked Jim to consider taking Kaitlyn out for a meal after her baseball game, and practice letting go of control in this area by making no remarks about any of her food choices, and also making sure not to give any non-verbal messages of disapproval. Sue encouraged him to instead focus on opening up the conversation to whatever topic Kaitlyn wanted to talk about, and to practice listening and establishing trust. Sue asked Jim to roleplay an interaction with Kaitlyn, with Sue taking the role of Kaitlyn. Jim was able to practice being neutral, and expressed confidence that he could do it "at least once." Jim and Beth agreed to meet together with Sue the following week.

### **Session Six (Jim and Beth)**

Sue checked in with Jim and Beth at the beginning of the session about their previous week. Jim and Beth looked at each other, and smiled. Beth began by saying that they had had a very successful week. They had followed through on their plan to go out together on Friday night, and they were arguing less about the children. Beth also stated that Jim was spending more time at home, and had been making an effort to be home for dinner during the week instead of working late like he usually



did. Beth also stated that Kaitlyn seemed a little more open, and was spending less time in her room with the door closed. She still wasn't opening up about school or her friends very much, but Beth was not pushing the subject, and felt more confident about the direction their relationship was going.

Jim stated that he had followed through on taking Kaitlyn to her baseball game, and was surprised that Kaitlyn seemed genuinely happy about it. He stated that it went so well, he didn't have any trouble taking Kaitlyn out for an early dinner after the game, and they actually had a very nice conversation, and Kaitlyn had even talked a little bit about school and her friends. Beth turned to Jim and teased him that he was now going to be Kaitlyn's favorite parent. Sue cautioned Beth and Jim that even though it was easy to tease about this now, there was a real possibility that Beth might feel some anxiety about changes in the relationship between Jim and Kaitlyn, and that she would have to stay aware of her emotional process as this realignment continued. Beth acknowledged that this could become a challenge. Sue pointed out that maintaining a relationship with Jim with a healthy level of connection and differentiation was crucial.

The rest of the session was spent discussing a parenting plan that both Jim and Beth could agree on for the kids. Both of them acknowledged that they had been so focused on Kaitlyn they didn't have much of a plan when it came to expectations for their other children. Sue asked questions regarding what kind of responsibilities and expectations the parents had for the kids. Neither of the boys had any chores, nor did they keep their room clean, pick up after themselves or receive significant consequences for inappropriate behavior. Both parents agreed that they expected more from Kaitlyn because she was older, and they had always just perceived that the boys were too young to have much responsibility. Jim and Beth both began to realize that the boys really were old enough now to take more personal responsibility. Sue pointed out that having age-appropriate expectations for all the children would be another way for them to encourage differentiation in each member of the household, and would further improve family functioning.

Sue asked Beth and Jim to come up with strategies, rewards and consequences. As needed, Sue intervened and offered suggestions including using logical consequences for inappropriate behavior. Expectations of the kids were to be in writing and were to be displayed on the refrigerator. The plan included a chore chart as well as clear consequences when the task was not completed. Included in the parenting plan was an incentive chart with specific rewards for desired behavior. Sue also stressed the importance of refraining from using empty threats and making statements without following through.

Sue also encouraged Jim and Beth to come up with a plan for Kaitlyn's computer and phone use. Beth was concerned that Kaitlyn would think the plan was too strict. Jim expressed his frustration that Beth couldn't stand up to Kaitlyn. Sue encouraged Jim and Beth to keep working on a solution that they could both agree was in Kaitlyn's best interest, and to talk about the personal values that motivated each position. Jim and Beth finally agreed on a plan and how it would be monitored, but Beth still expressed anxiety about implementing it.

Sue encouraged Beth and Jim to sit down together with Kaitlyn, and go over the plan. Sue also had Beth rehearse what she expected Kaitlyn's response would be, and also rehearse what she would say to Kaitlyn if Kaitlyn tried to get her to change the plan when Jim wasn't around. Beth decided that if she felt tempted to cave in to pressure from Kaitlyn to change the plan, she would disengage from the conversation with Kaitlyn, and call Jim if he wasn't home. Sue reminded Beth that she couldn't call Jim to take over for her, but she could call to maintain her connection with Jim. Sue explained that this would help break the old pattern of Beth aligning with Kaitlyn against Jim. Sue also reminded Jim that his role would be to support Beth without giving advice or judging or criticizing either Beth or Kaitlyn. Jim agreed that he could do this. Beth and Jim agreed to meet together the following week.

## **Summary of Session Seven**

Jim and Beth reported at the beginning of the session that they had implemented their new parenting plan during the previous week, and that there had been some difficult moments. Beth stated that Kaitlyn was initially pleased to see that Jack and Dalton had more responsibilities, but quickly became angry when the phone and computer rules were discussed. Kaitlyn began yelling about how her parents didn't want her to have any friends, and they didn't care if she was a total freak because she was the only one of her friends who had to live with such stupid rules, and that obviously her parents must hate her. Jim stated that it was a good thing they had rehearsed in the previous session how to remain calm and non-reactive if Kaitlyn got mad. Jim asserted that he really had to work on sticking to the plan, and not yelling right back at Kaitlyn. Beth agreed that it had been even more difficult than she had imagined, and that after that initial outburst, Kaitlyn had gone back to being sullen and uncommunicative for the rest of the week.

Sue asked them if they still agreed that their plan was a good one, and was in line with their parenting values. Both Jim and Beth stated that they really did think it was the right thing to do. Sue suggested that they use that reasoning to help them deal with the emotions that Kaitlyn had elicited from them on this issue. Sue gave Jim and Beth positive feedback for maintaining their objectivity and staying non-reactive in this situation. She encouraged them to continue to reach out to Kaitlyn without pushing, and give Kaitlyn time to adjust to this new plan. Jim and Beth spent the rest of the session discussing other parenting issues relating to Jack and Dalton, and agreed to meet again the following week.

## **Summary of Session Eight (Jim and Beth)**

Sue asked how things had gone with Kaitlyn during the previous week. Beth stated that things were better. Kaitlyn was still not happy about the rules for computer and phone, but she was following them. Beth took an opportunity during the week to go into Kaitlyn's room and talk with her. Beth told Kaitlyn that she understood that

things were tough for her right now, and that she wanted Kaitlyn to know that she loved her. Kaitlyn responded by sharing with Beth that things were not going so well at school and that some of the girls at school were really mean to her. Kaitlyn also expressed that she was distressed about her weight and said that some of the kids at school were making fun of her. She stated that she wanted to lose weight, but didn't know how.

Beth asked Sue what she could do to help Kaitlyn lose weight. Beth realized that she shouldn't take over for Kaitlyn, and needed to know how to be supportive without overfunctioning. Sue encouraged Beth to follow the advice of Kaitlyn's pediatrician, and reintroduce the meal plan that the pediatrician had given her. Sue encouraged Beth and Jim to be supportive in terms of meal planning, such as shopping and cooking together, and making meals that were healthy for the whole family, not just singling out Kaitlyn for special meals. She also cautioned them to refrain from giving too much advice. She suggested that they continue to encourage dialogue between themselves and Kaitlyn, and to continue to offer opportunities for Kaitlyn to spend individual time with each of them. Jim noted that he felt much less critical of Kaitlyn's weight issue now that she seemed concerned about it herself. He stated that he felt like it would be easier for him to be supportive of her than before. Sue suggested that by backing off of his criticism on Kaitlyn's weight earlier, he had actually given Kaitlyn the space and opportunity to consider for herself whether she was comfortable with her current eating habits. She pointed out that this was the power in aiming for balance in relationships, and that when Jim was able to stop overfunctioning for Kaitlyn in response to her weight, she was able to stop underfunctioning and take personal responsibility. Sue reminded Jim and Beth that change is always more lasting when it is self-initiated and based on personal values rather than imposed from the outside and based on someone else's agenda. Sue suggested that she meet with Kaitlyn individually during the next session to check in and reassess goals. Beth and Jim agreed.

## Summary of Session Nine (Kaitlyn)

Beth brought Kaitlyn to the session, and waited in the waiting room. Kaitlyn seemed somewhat anxious. Sue began by acknowledging that a lot of changes had taken place since they had last met. Kaitlyn agreed. Sue asked if Kaitlyn could share how the changes at home had affected her. Kaitlyn stated that things were actually better with her mom and dad, and that she felt like it was easier to talk to them. She stated that she still didn't like the phone and computer restrictions, but she understood why her parents had implemented them, and she could deal with them because it wasn't like she never got to use her phone or computer. She also stated that she felt like things were fairer between her and her brothers. She also liked that her parents got along better, and that her dad spent more time with her.

Sue told Kaitlyn that she was glad things had improved, and asked if there was anything else going on with Kaitlyn that she would like to talk about. Kaitlyn said that she was really struggling with her weight and that she was getting teased at school. Kaitlyn said she and her mom had been shopping together for groceries, and that she didn't have a problem with regular meals, but she still liked to go to Dairy Queen, especially when she was feeling sad or anxious after school. She had also begun buying candy bars and cookies that she kept in her room at home, and ate when she was feeling depressed. Sue asked her how much she had shared with her parents. Kaitlyn stated that she hadn't told them anything. Sue asked Kaitlyn if she would be willing to share her struggle with her parents in a therapy session. She explained to Kaitlyn that keeping her eating habits a secret would make them harder to change, and that it would help her to enlist her parents' support in making the changes necessary for a healthy lifestyle. Kaitlyn expressed that she was a little nervous about sharing this with her parents because she was sure they would be critical. Sue asked Kaitlyn to rehearse what she would say to her parents by roleplaying with her, and writing it down to read to her parents at their next session. Sue helped Kaitlyn include language in her script that focused on "I" statements.

Sue asked Kaitlyn to begin keeping a food journal in which she recorded everything she ate, when she ate it, and how she felt before, during and after she ate. She asked Kaitlyn to objectively observe, and to avoid any self-judgment or criticism of what she observed. Sue told Kaitlyn that they would use this information to figure out when Kaitlyn was most likely to eat in response to stress, and to come up with strategies for managing the behavior.

Sue arranged the next session to meet with Kaitlyn individually during the first part of the session, and asked Beth and Jim to join Kaitlyn during the last part of the session.

### **Summary of Session Ten (Kaitlyn; Beth and Jim With Kaitlyn)**

Sue met with Kaitlyn individually during the first part of the session. Kaitlyn stated that keeping the food journal had actually helped her change her eating patterns already because she was less likely to eat junk food when she knew she would have to write it down. Sue and Kaitlyn went over the food journal together. Kaitlyn observed that she was most likely to eat junk food when she was feeling stressed about school or friends, and was also much more likely to eat when she was alone. Sue told her that being able to recognize the patterns would help her take a step back from her behavior and reflect on what she wanted to do to change the situation. With Sue's help, Kaitlyn was able to identify some actions she could take that would help her alleviate her stress, and also set up her environment to avoid emotional overeating.

Sue and Kaitlyn then rehearsed what Kaitlyn would tell her parents during the last part of the session, and identified some things that Kaitlyn could ask her parents for in terms of support. Sue then asked Jim and Beth to join them in session.

Sue thanked Jim and Beth for joining them, and coached them to listen to Kaitlyn without interrupting or criticizing. Both Jim and Beth agreed. Kaitlyn shared with her parents that she had been struggling with binge eating in response to stress, and had been eating junk food in secret for a number of months. Jim and Beth listened attentively, and Kaitlyn went on to share with them that she had started keeping a food journal, and had identified some things about her eating patterns that she wanted to work on changing. With Sue's help, Kaitlyn was able to share with her parents that she wanted their support, and to offer some ideas for how they could help her. Sue emphasized that Kaitlyn was making the choice to address her binge eating for herself, and that nagging, checking up, and criticizing would only be counterproductive by taking responsibility away from Kaitlyn. Sue encouraged Kaitlyn and her parents to keep an open dialogue, but to let Kaitlyn take responsibility in this area. Beth and Jim agreed that they could do this. Sue encouraged Kaitlyn to let her parents know if she was struggling or needed additional help, and Kaitlyn agreed.

Sue pointed out that much progress had been made towards the family's stated goals, and that the family seemed to have the skills necessary to continue on their own. Sue suggested meeting again in two weeks for a final session. The family agreed.

### **Summary of Final Session (Kaitlyn, Beth and Jim)**

Sue checked in with Kaitlyn, Beth and Jim and asked how they had been progressing on their goals during the last two weeks. Kaitlyn reported that she had not had any binge eating episodes in the last week. She shared that she and her mom had started going to a yoga class once a week, and they were also practicing at home. Kaitlyn noted that she was still keeping her food journal, and it was helping her be more aware of her feelings around food. Kaitlyn reported that she was getting along with her parents, and she was going along with the rules for computer and phone. She also stated that she was getting along better at school.

Beth and Jim continued their Friday night out together, and reported that they both felt more connected. They also stated that understanding their family of origin and how they repeat patterns from their past was helpful. Beth and Jim both agreed that Kaitlyn seemed much happier, and that their relationships with her were much better. They both expressed that it was challenging to follow through with the parenting plan. Beth stated that it was sometimes easier just to pick up after the boys rather than following through with the chart. Sue reminded Beth that by doing their work for them, she was allowing them to underfunction in the family system, which would ultimately result in imbalance. Beth agreed, and stated that she would continue to work at it.

Sue gave each family member positive feedback about the changes they had made during the course of therapy, and encouraged them to continue to focus on staying connected. She informed them that it was easy to slide back into old habits, and encouraged the family to evaluate their progress regularly through personal reflection, and through honest, nonjudgmental feedback to each other. She also encouraged them to check back in with her during the next few months, and anytime they needed additional support.

#### References:

Wilkinson, P., Harris, C., Kelvin, R., Dubicka, B., & Goodyer, I. (2013). Associations between adolescent depression and parental mental health, before and after treatment of adolescent depression. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 22(1), 3-11.