Clinical Applications of Bowen Family Systems Theory

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Nodal events that evoke anxiety in the family fields refer to those significant events that are central to the life course of the multigenerational family system. Bowen (1978) uses the term nodal points to refer to the intersection of the onset of symptoms in the child with dates of nodal events in the parental relationship (p. 172). Bradt and Moynihan (1971) were the first to elaborate upon Bowen’s use of the term nodal event. Bradt and Moynihan (1971) call these events nodal “because at these points there is the clustering of phenomena which stimulates the family organism to take on qualities of greater openness, closeness, or to fly apart explosively” (p. 5). The following are the main nodal events: (1) school initiation, (2) school change, (3) family migration, (4) marital separation, (5) divorce, (6) remarriage, (7) job stress, (8) unemployment, (9) retirement, (10) physical change (menses, puberty, menopause), (11) illness, and (12) death. In addition, certain religious rituals of transition or other events that are more idiosyncratic can be nodal events for certain families. Births are categorized as nodal events by Bradt and Moynihan (1971) and along with deaths are considered the two most significant forms of nodal events for a family system.

The interaction of nodal events, patterns, themes, and levels of differentiation are explored as they reveal relationships between the nuclear and extended family emotional systems. Nodal events are not only correlated with symptom eruption and family life cycle stage, but they are also correlated between extended and nuclear families. Patterns and themes that characterize the functioning of both nuclear and extended family emotional systems are interwoven. Symptom typology, fusion and emotional cutoff, significant triangles, the projection process, and transmission of differentiation/undifferentiation need to be integrated in order to properly assess the family system.