Edwin H. Friedman (1932–1996) was an ordained Jewish Rabbi and a family therapist who established the Center for Family Process in Bethesda, MD. He suggested that there are three ways to change a relationship, i.e. ways that primarily address one's own anxiety and role in a relationship and thereby open up the possibility of change.

1. **Silence.**

2. **Insert a 7-10 second delay** between the other’s comments and any responses one makes.

3. **Say the opposite of what one is thinking**—180 degree response. I.e. **paradox.**

This posting focuses on that third way of responding. Friedman frequently spoke of the value of **using paradox** in addressing anxiety and maintaining a self-differentiated position in one’s relationships. He insisted that such use was not a “technique,” but rather a way of thinking. It is a matter of thinking one thing and saying another as a response to seriousness—and seriousness is usually related to anxiety.

Paradox is a natural part of systems thinking, because “life itself is paradoxical.” So to use paradox in relationships (or in therapeutic practice) is to engage life. Nobody gets the problem they can handle; otherwise it would not be a problem. Problems, in turn, are crystallizations of patterns of interaction. They don’t come full-blown; they develop over time. And they are not interchangeable between relationships, i.e. systems.

Friedman suggested the following description as the nature of paradox in family systems: *A man wanted to go home to deal with issues he had with his family, but every time he took a step toward home, he went two steps back. He finally had to turn around and go away from home in order to get there.* (Here “home” is the established systemic way of relating.)

He also noted, paradoxically, that people have to get stuck before they can get free. Thus one not only must return home to work on issues; one must return to the upset/anxiety within which patterns of behavior/relationship were established. Occurrences of change are really occasions of one thing displacing or replacing another in an otherwise unchanging object/system.

Friedman suggested five things about the use of Bowen Family Systems Theory in the practice of therapy that are paradoxical:

- Transference is discouraged.
- The therapist is responsible for the session, not responsible for the client.
- The therapist is responsible to the strongest rather than to the weakest in the system. Strength is reinforced rather than weakness supported.
- The therapist asks questions rather than giving answers.
The client becomes his/her own therapist.

Now think about those paradoxical elements in terms of other/any relationships.

- Don’t take on another’s problems/issues.
- Be responsible for your own integrity in a relationship, not that of the other.
- Always encourage strength, i.e. challenge the other, rather than trying to comfort weakness. You may acknowledge, but don’t take on, another’s pain.
- Be curious; approach the other with a keen interest in how they are interacting, but without letting yourself be coerced by it. Retain the choice for your own response.
- Allow and encourage as much as possible the other person to be responsible for their own issues.

The following are my understanding of some of the ways the use of paradox is helpful in maintaining one’s health and the health of one’s relationships and relationship systems:

1. It addresses (calms) one’s own anxiety, assuming it is genuinely playful.
2. It disrupts homeostasis. Paradox changes the other’s perspective and encourages thinking.
3. It moves toward challenge; it challenges the other person to assume responsibility for their own work.
4. It is doing research, i.e. it tends to raise information and thought in the other person that might not otherwise be uncovered.
5. It helps people think the “other side” of their issues. It can operate as a kind of “reverse psychology”: one’s thoughts are symptomatic of the system one is in at the moment, e.g. one’s family, work system, client-session, etc., and paradox can help a person break out of a systemic bind.
6. It is a way one may engage contrary people, i.e. a way of “distancing” from them or suggesting that one cannot help them and thus inclining the other to pursue you, which changes their perspective in the relationship and hopefully their functioning. (EF: One cannot give people insight who do not want it, and one should not waste his/her time trying.)
7. It is a de-triangling move (viz no. 1 above). It challenges a system’s most predictable reality or response, and pushes people in the direction you are most fearful of them going. In so doing, it relieves one’s own anxiety and assigns responsibility to the other, i.e. where it belongs.
PARADOX ala Ed Friedman
From: W. Thomas Soeldner