

CHANGE IT: How to create change in the session and beyond

The theory of change in SFT is very specific: you create change by actually providing people with a new interpersonal experience that alters what is possible between them, and alters how the family works.

The vital elements that make this possible are:

- a good relationship between therapist and family members that means they will follow your lead;
 - o a strong sense of the structural patterns that run the family and how they happen (“see it”)
 - o a good way of talking about the dysfunctional structure and working on it actively (“name it”)
 - o (most important) the therapist’s ability to rework those structures and patterns actively, directly, positively and effectively (“change it”).

The process of creating change is most often based on **enactment**, the sine qua non of SFT, and the most powerful single tool we have. If well done, enactment creates new, different and powerful sequences of altered behavior that can change relationships and family structure.

Changing patterns means taking recognized, immediate patterns and reworking them in ways that are structurally healthy, meaningful to the family, clearly experienced, and successful.

Enactment (not re-enactment; not role play; not “as if”) is a genuine experience of an altered pattern. It must be about a real issue, with emotional weight, that can be transacted in the room in the present, with intensity and focus, and it must “work”. Enactments are always about a positive change, and lead to a better relationship, connection or understanding. You never set it up to fail, and you never allow it to fail.

The therapist in an enactment is an important element – leader, guide, motivator, creator of safety, container of affect, architect of success. BUT, the therapist does the least s/he possibly can, and keeps the action between the family members as much as possible.

Enactments usually need to be built up to: you need a scaffolding of understanding that the family, usually the parents, can join you on. The

enactment needs to make some sense to them, and to feel useful, positive, and doable. The bigger and more central the enactment, the more you want to build a good scaffold, and prepare the process to have some power and impact. Smaller more spontaneous enactments (“Can you let him know that you really appreciated that?”) may happen without much preparation, but real enactments shouldn’t be tossed around without some care and attention to them working well and making a difference. You do not want family members to learn to treat them lightly. They are important.

A brief example of an enactment might go like this. You have named to the family the repetitive pattern whereby mom coddles the 9 y.o. son through various problems and protects him from her angry husband, giving gentle abstract lessons about goodness but never expecting him to do better. Now the enactment.

Th.: So you see you’ve been teaching him it’s really OK to mess up, and you’ll get him through without making him feel bad?

M: Yes, I see that, and I can see I really have to change it.

Th.: Good, let’s change it right now. What do you want to tell him about the consequences of taking your money?

M: ell, I don’t think he knew...

Th.: You’re doing it right now. You’re making excuses for him and not expecting him to have consequences.

M: Oh my, you’re right. I just can’t get tough with him. I think it’s because...

Th.: Don’t talk about you right now, get the job done with him. Can you do it?

M: I’ll try. Bobby, stealing my money was wrong, and there will be consequences. You have to pay me back, and you can’t go to the fair with Billy and them.

Bobby: No Way! The heck with that! I’m going. I’ll pay you back, but I’m going to that fair, and don’t say I’m not.

M: Well, do you think you’ll learn from that?

Th.: Mom, wait – he’s got you retreating already. You made a very reasonable consequence for an illegal act – gentle, even – and he’s threatening you and you’re backing off.

M: Well it’s so hard!!

Th.: Of course it is – that’s why you’ve been coddling him. But you’re changing it now. What is your decision of what’s best?

M: I believe it's best if you stay home and realize what you done is wrong. And that's that.

Bobby: We ain't listening to this idiot, this is crazy! Mama, I swear, if you don't let me go...

Th.: Dad, can you help your wife here?

F: Son, what your mother said is right and I agree with her, and we ain't talking about it no more.

Th.: Mom? How does that feel?

M: That feels really good because I can see he's on my side and he's being gentle and it makes it easier for me to be tough. But it's still hard!!

Th.: Of course it is, but you're changing it. Change is always hard.

There are other mechanisms of change that the therapist can use.

Unbalancing is the process of altering the power relationships in the family in a way that gets people's attention and teaches new possibilities. Having the less powerful spouse take the lead and manage the scenario, instead of the usual power pattern, is one example. Keeping a peripheral member central, or a central member peripheral, is another. Likewise, disallowing a common distraction or defense mechanism ("Don't start with explanations again, stay with what you want him to do") can unbalance a family that maintains its equilibrium by using it. Unbalancing is usually fairly hard to maintain over time, and is used to make clear patterns of dysfunction that the family cannot see otherwise.

Repetition and intensity are important aspects of change, because they bring the family's attention, again and again, to new ways of being, and help them experience that actively and intensely. Therapists are generally too nice and gentle with clients, and feel uneasy about making points and pushing for change too directly. Families in general are very sturdy and well defended, and much more apt to miss the point than to be overwhelmed by it. Repetition of the pattern, and of the change of the pattern, are likewise very important, and are often required to help the family see it clearly. Repetition can be playful or challenging or indirect, but it is important to repeatedly name and focus on a maladaptive pattern, or an adaptive change, to keep the family aware and working. To frame the change intensely and clearly, and bring it to the fore unmistakably, is usually required. We think we are hitting them over the head, while they often think we are just chatting: it is a misunderstanding that should never happen. A family should have a reasonably good idea of what they are working on with you, once it is clearly established, and a good idea of how they need to be different.

The process of enactment is a major skill in all forms of therapy, but particularly couples and family therapy. All change occurs not because people see what the problem is, but because they do something different. Sometimes it helps to see why – “insight” – and sometimes it hinders; but insight by itself seldom changes anything. Work at getting good at creating change actively and directly via enactment, and it will become your major single tool in helping people change.