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## **Financial Enmeshment: Untangling the Web**

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*Children learn through observing and interacting with their parents. Much of what children learn about money comes from these observations and interactions. An area of concern in parent – child relationships is the impact of boundaries and roles. Parents whose boundaries with their children are rigid and inflexible do not prepare their children to effectively deal with stress in their lives. Similarly, parents whose boundaries are too flexible may impede their children’s ability to develop appropriate coping skills. This is true of their development of personal finance, money, consumption, and debt coping skills. Financial enmeshment occurs when parents involve their children in adult financial matters before the children are cognitively and emotionally ready to cope with the information. Financial enmeshment may have a negative effect on the child’s development. Financial enmeshment can be addressed through financial therapy. This paper explores the dynamic of financial enmeshment and discusses tools available to financial professionals to help identify the dynamic and structure interventions.*

*Keywords: enmeshment; financial enmeshment; family systems; family structure*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Financial enmeshment occurs when family financial structures become so intertwined that the traditional roles of parents and their children become blurred (Klontz, Britt, Archuleta, & Klontz, 2012). Family enmeshment creates stress, which results in negative consequences for the children (Minuchin, 1974). To date, there has been little scholarly attention given to exploring the financial enmeshment dynamic and its impact on family members. This paper explores financial enmeshment as well as its impact on

families in order to help financial professionals identify, understand, and help clients untangle the web of financial enmeshment.

While financial enmeshment may occur in a multitude of social relationships, this paper is focused on financial enmeshment in the parent-child relationship. Family is one of the most important learning environments for children. Children learn a lot about the world by observing their parents' behaviors. Children learn by seeing what their parents do and model their behaviors to fit with parental expectations. When it comes to learning about money, children often learn from their parents' example (Klontz, 2011). It is important to recognize that there are healthy examples of parents sharing their financial situation with their children, such as elderly parents preparing for transitions. It is not the intent of this article to suggest a reduction in parent-child financial discussions; we believe these discussions should occur more often. Rather, emphasis is placed upon the importance of having appropriate financial conversations between parents and children.

A considerable amount of research has examined parents' impact on the development of children's attitudes about money, which has been termed financial socialization (Gudmunson & Danes, 2011). A direct relationship was found between parental financial socialization of their children and those children's financial attitudes and behavior (Jorgensen & Savla, 2010). Researchers identified the importance of early learning in the areas of consumption, spending, and saving (Allen & Oliva, 2001). Other researchers noted the importance of teaching children about finances in an age appropriate fashion (Danes & Dunrud, 1993). A positive association between parents arguing about money in front of their children and those children carrying higher levels of credit card debt as a college student was found (Hancock, Jorgensen, & Swanson, 2012).

The evidence of parental impact on their children's financial literacy may be best observed in the financial choices made by young adults. College students report they learned more about credit cards from their parents than from any other source, and the more a parent was involved with their child, the lower that child's credit card balance (Bao, Fern, & Sheng, 2007). Parental consumption habits and skills are also passed down to their children (Bao et al., 2007). Parents also can mitigate the impact of advertising and peer pressure on their children, as their children will first seek their parents' examples before relying on mass media and peers when making consumption decisions (Moschis, 1985). Parents also have an influence on their child's financial knowledge, self-efficacy, attitudes, and behaviors (Shim, Serido, Bosch, & Tang, 2013).

A parent's impact on the child's financial well-being is influenced by not only what is taught, but also by how it is taught. For example, parents with a nurturing style are more likely to create a home environment promoting a healthy, skeptical view of mass media advertising (Wisnblit, Priluck & Pirog, 2013). In contrast, parental styles that are more rigid or overly involved do not provide an environment of healthy childhood consumption development. A more open, communicative parental style promotes discussion about advertising and can play an important role in childhood consumption learning (Wisnblit et al., 2013). For example, college students who had fewer money conversations with their

parents report owning more credit cards than college students who had more money conversations with their parents (Norvilitis, & MacLean, 2010).

Parents have a significant impact on the financial behaviors of their children. When families engage in more open and nurturing communication around money and model healthy boundaries within their relationships and around money, an environment for learning about appropriate financial behaviors can be created and healthy financial behaviors can be transferred from parents to children. However, when unhealthy boundaries are at play, whether they are too rigid or too flexible, financial enmeshment and other disordered money behaviors may occur.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the dynamics of financial enmeshment and its impact on financial health, and present tools available to financial planners, financial therapists, coaches, and mental health practitioners to help them identify the dynamic, understand it, and structure interventions.

### **FAMILY SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURE**

In order to understand financial enmeshment, it is important to understand family structure and how family systems operate. Family systems theory suggests that individual behavior can be best understood in the context of the whole unit or system of interrelated family members (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990). A family system is comprised of subsystems, such as the relationship between spouses, among siblings, and among parents and children.

A major assumption of family systems theory is that the “whole is greater than the sum of its parts” (Cox & Paley, 1997, p. 243). This means that to truly know an individual, one must understand his or her family system as well as the family subsystems and their interrelations. The functioning of individuals or subsystems cannot be fully explained without looking at the dynamics of all of the relationships within the system. Another assumption of family systems theory is that a change in one part of the system will impact change in another part of the system (Minuchin, 1974). Due to the interrelatedness of the subsystems involved, when a change or stress is introduced into the system, the whole system must adapt to these changes. As such, if a facilitator is able to influence the behaviors of one individual, he or she can have an impact on the entire family system.

Family structure is a concept introduced by Argentinian family therapist Salvador Minuchin (1974), to describe the rules that govern a set of relationships to understand the proximity of relationships within the family. Proximity is defined by roles and boundaries established with a family system. Set within this family systems context, family relationships can be too close or too distant. Enmeshed relationships are created when too much information is allowed into or out of that family system. Alternatively, family relationships can be distant or even emotionally cut-off where no information is shared outside of the sub-systems due to very rigid boundaries.

Other key concepts of family structure are hierarchy and alliances, or triangles (Minuchin, 1974). Hierarchy is the organizational leadership of a family. A parent-child

relationship has a clear hierarchy. For example, parents are the “leaders” in a family as they are in charge of the children. Typically, conflict occurs between two people. However, conflict between two people can lead to what Minuchin refers to as triangles, wherein one of the people in the conflict relieves stress by involving a third party, and these two individuals form an alliance against the other (1974). While initially decreasing an individual’s tension or stress, the formulation of triangles in family systems can have a negative effect on members of the system, particularly when children are being brought into the conflict.

Individual behavior is impacted by changes or stress in the overall family system. The more effective the overall system, the better it and the individuals participating in the system can deal with that stress or change (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990). Effectiveness is considered to be the types of communication within the system. An effective family system is one that has enough communication to succeed, but with clear and appropriate boundaries between individuals and subsystems (Minuchin, 1974).

In order for the system to effectively produce the desired outcomes, the family members must operate efficiently and cooperatively (Minuchin, 1974). The desired outcomes for a family system may include happiness, individual health, growth and success, financial well-being, perpetuation of the system, and reduction of conflict. The efficiency of the family system is based on the subsystems willingness and ability to fulfill their responsibilities. This requires subsystems to communicate effectively, especially when the subsystem is faced with stress (Minuchin, 1974).

The interactions among these family subsystems are an “invisible web” of highly complex interactions (Minuchin, 1974, p. 54). These complex subsystems require coordinated effort to function well, especially when stress is introduced into the system (Minuchin, 1974). Within the system and subsystem, family members hold certain roles. The roles within a family are defined by expectations set by the person and by other family members. These are expectations or boundaries of how that subsystem member should and should not act.

## **ENMESHMENT**

Within various family systems, there is a range of acceptable boundaries that are clear and support well-functioning families regardless of the family structure. When those boundaries are not clear and stress is introduced into the system, the functioning of the unit is negatively impacted. Boundary functioning can be seen as having two poles. At one pole, boundaries are disorganized and open with no concern for type and appropriateness of information shared (i.e., enmeshment). When family systems operate with so much fluidity that boundaries become so blurred that roles are not clear or appropriate, stress is induced and enmeshment occurs. As a result, families fail to communicate effectively or share information appropriately, hindering their ability to address the stress (Minuchin, 1974). For example, when a parent shares too much information with a child who has not yet built a context to understand the issue stress is added into the system. At the opposite pole, boundaries are rigid and closed—information is blocked and not shared. Systems that

are overly rigid may be paralyzed from action due to its inflexibility. Roles will be unknown and unproven, resulting in critical roles possibly not being fulfilled and no action being taken. Having some flexibility, somewhere in between the two poles, is essential to navigate change otherwise the system and subsystems fail (Henry, 2006).

Minuchin (1974) suggested that child learning systems are impaired in the enmeshed family. The child learning systems are intended for the child to develop their own identity and their own role in the family subsystem. An enmeshed family precludes full independent, individual development because family members are overinvolved and over responsive (Minuchin, 1974). The result is boundaries being confused along with confusion in family roles. The children are not permitted the opportunity to fail or succeed on their own, depriving them of social and cognitive development experiences.

Research on enmeshment has been sparse and when conducted, different definitions of enmeshment have been used. Enmeshment has been described as a lack of appropriate boundaries with family members who are overly integrated into each other's lives (Waller, 2010). These traits have been identified in lower functioning mother and adolescent relationships, and are considered to be maladaptive and an impediment to normal child development of individuality and identity (Waller, 2010). Enmeshment involves extremely high levels of cohesion, or closeness, between family members (Olson, 2000). The enmeshed family can be both intrusive with coercion and possessive and disengaged in other ways (Green & Werner, 1996).

Enmeshment can involve a form of role reversal within the family. This is a situation where the child exhibits parental or spousal behavior toward the parent, when age appropriateness, cultural context and the child's contributions are taken into account (Jurkovic, 1997). This role reversal occurs when the child is expected to make age-inappropriate contributions to the family system, while the child's own development needs are not met. (Jurkovic, 1997). Role reversal may hinder the ability to develop autonomy.

Enmeshment has also been identified as a characteristic of overparenting, caricatured by the helicopter parent who corrupts the child's ability to develop his or her own identity. Enmeshment has been suggested to be motivated by parental narcissism, which is the compulsion to fulfill selfish motivations (Segrin, Woszidlo, Givertz, & Montgomery, 2013). This overparenting leads to negative child outcomes, like poor coping skills and increased anxiety and stress (Segrin et al., 2013).

Another term used to describe enmeshment is emotional incest (Love, 2011). This may be characterized by the child having feelings of parental invasion, being a confidant of one parent, responsibility for their parents happiness or lack thereof and feeling their own needs were neglected in favor of their parent's needs (Love, 2011). Children of divorced or separated parents may also feel they are the mediator or arbitrator of conflict between the parents.

Adultification and parentification have been identified as types of enmeshed parent-child dyads. Parentification occurs when the child is placed into the role of the parent by

the parent while adultification occurs when the child becomes the parents' friend or confidant. (Garber, 2011). In one case the child is forced to become the decision maker, and in the other case, the child provides validation for the parent (Garber, 2011). In both cases the result may be alienation of the child from the parent.

### **FINANCIAL ENMESHMENT**

Financial enmeshment occurs when children are expected to fulfill adult roles in financial situations, including carrying the financial stress of the family. Whether perceived as a stressor by parents sharing too much information or because children are in the process of learning about money from their parents, 65% of teenagers have identified financial concerns of their family as a significant source of stress (American Psychological Association, 2013). If a parent inappropriately shares this stress or burden with the child in order to relieve the parent's stress, then financial enmeshment has occurred. Based on a review of the literature and the clinical observations of the authors, examples of financial enmeshment may include parents:

- Having the child act as a mediator between estranged, separated, or divorced parents who are squabbling over alimony, child support payments, or other spending.
- Having the child run interference by answering phone calls from creditors.
- Using children as therapists, wherein the parent reduces his or her financial stress in an attempt to achieve emotional relief.
- Sharing too much financial information with children who are not developmentally ready, do not have appropriate coping skills, or have no power or ability to help with the financial situation (e.g., revealing the depth of parental distress and anxiety around bankruptcy, job loss, eviction, etc.).
- Using money to exert control over a child in inappropriate ways. This may take the form of monetary rewards for perceived good behavior or monetary punishments for undesired behavior, when these behaviors are not directly tied to work-for-pay scenarios. For example, when parents reward children financially for meeting the parents' emotional needs, such as when parents buy gifts for children who opt to spend time with that parent over others.
- Rewarding one or more children financially over the others for non-work related behaviors in homes with multiple children.
- Having children balance their parents' checkbook or pay their parents' bills in the context of a stressful financial environment.
- Borrowing money from children to pay for parents' financial responsibilities.

Financial enmeshment creates confusion for children as they have not yet developed the skills and experiences to understand their role, learning a damaging lesson for the future (Klontz, Kahler, & Klontz, 2008). This may lead the child to make unhealthy financial decisions as they mature. Financial enmeshment can result in children growing up feeling anxious and insecure around money. As such, financial enmeshment may create challenges for the financial professionals working with clients who have or are currently experiencing these types of relationships. For those who have experienced enmeshment in the past,

reducing the anxiety as an adult can be difficult because the individual does not know how to manage with our anxiety. For those currently in enmeshed relationships, clear boundaries must be set and then maintained. This is easier said than done as the person who sets the boundaries will be asked verbally or non-verbally to change back to the way the family formerly operated when the boundary was not set. Subsystem members' demands to return to the previous state of functioning may come in the forms of yelling, silent treatment, or cutting-off the relationship to name a few.

### **Consequences of Financial Enmeshment on Children**

Financial enmeshment may have significant consequences. Researchers have identified significant negative consequences for enmeshed families, and the same can result for financially enmeshed families. The highly enmeshed family has blurred boundaries and roles, which hinder a child's ability to develop his or her unique persona along with individual coping skills. Without these skills, children may internalize or externalize problems and concerns, leading to higher levels of depression, anxiety, or aggressiveness. The lack of coping skills can cause internalization, frustration and aggression (Barber & Buehler, 1996). This lack of individualization has been called identity foreclosure, which is defined as lacking the ability to build an individual identity and simply blindly following what their parents tell them (Perosa, Perosa, & Tam, 1996).

A lack of individual coping skills and internalization of stress has been associated with a number of psychological disorders. For example, enmeshment has been associated with Bipolar Disorder (Lawrence, Allen, & Chanen, 2011). Dominating, intrusive parenting has been associated with anorexia in their children (Johnson, Sansone, & Chewning, 1992). Children in enmeshed families have also been found to exhibit symptoms of failing to embrace the normal process of separation or "individuation" from the parent (Munich, 2009, p. 228). A child's perception of overprotectedness by parents has also been linked to symptoms of depression (Harris & Curtin, 2002).

An association between parent-child role reversal and general problems in functioning has also been observed, including symptoms of depression and anxiety (Jones & Wells, 1996). Without the enmeshed parent to lead them or to validate their choices, enmeshed children may become anxious and stressed. Spokas and Heimberg (2009) found a connection between overparenting and external locus of control, leading to social anxiety in children. Overparenting leads to the need for external validation in children; when the parent is not present, such as when the child leaves home for the first time, anxiety results from the lack of that external validation (Spokas & Heimberg, 2009). Love (2011) suggests that enmeshed children often experience the following psychological consequences: a) guilt, b) chronic low levels of anxiety, c) fluctuating self-esteem, d) fear of rejection, e) social isolation, f) inferiority complex, g) compulsive need to succeed, h) diffused sense of self, and i) inability to separate from parent. Kinnier, Brigman, and Noble (1990) found children of highly enmeshed families struggled with indecision, including difficulty making career decisions.

Klontz and Britt's (2012) investigation of financial enmeshment revealed that males with higher income were more likely to possess these behaviors. They found financial



enmeshment behaviors to be correlated with the money status script, wherein people see their net worth and self-worth as being intertwined. They also found that financial enmeshment was significantly correlated with a range of disordered money behaviors, including compulsive buying, gambling disorder, hoarding disorder, workaholism, financial dependence, and financial enabling.

### **FINANCIAL THERAPY FOR FINANCIAL ENMESHMENT**

Traditional financial planning has focused on understanding client goals, developing a plan to attain those goals, and then implementing the plan. It has not focused on the reasons for those goals or any personal impediments to the action plan outside of financial resources. For this reason, the study of the relationship between personal finance and mental health has gained increased attention within the past decade. More mental health professionals are treating financial disorders and more financial planners are being equipped with psychological tools to help facilitate the financial planning process (Grable, McGill, & Britt, 2010). Much of this work is due to the realization that our views and actions toward money and personal finance are psychologically-based (Klontz et al., 2012). Often, financial planners, working with clients to change entrenched behaviors, require the planner to have effective skills in facilitating behavior change.

The goal of treating financial enmeshment in the context of a family system is the creation of emotional and psychological differentiation, also known as boundaries, between the parent and their child. The key is the establishment of healthy boundaries around money that have been missing in the relationship. Enmeshment intervention efforts are not intended to dissolve relationships, but rather to maintain the nurturing and supportive aspects of relationships while maintaining appropriate boundaries (Prior, 2011). For clients prone to financial enmeshment, this can be a challenging task. Often, these clients' inappropriate boundaries are a product of their own socialization. As such, inappropriate boundaries around money may have been modeled for them throughout their development. It can be difficult for them to distinguish between what financial information is appropriate or not to share, given a child's developmental age. In these circumstances, parents who are motivated to change their behaviors could benefit from an ongoing dialogue with a financial therapist to help them make this distinction. For example, in the case of a parental job loss or eviction from a home, it would be almost impossible to withhold the reality of this situation and its consequences from one's children.

The psychological residue of financial enmeshment will often manifest when the child begins making his or her own financial decisions. These symptoms may be poor consumption or debt choices, money avoidance, or financial anxiety. Often the recommendations from the financial professional address symptoms rather than causes. For example, typical financial advice entails save more or spend less. Without understanding the psychological motivations behind the individual's action or inactions, the recommendations to change may never be implemented. This is where financial therapy can help. It is important to discover the cause of the problem before a recommendation can be successful. This awareness has been a challenge for financial professionals who lack education and tools for facilitating change in clients who may be

resistant to advice (Horwitz & Klontz, 2013; Klontz, Kahler, & Klontz, 2008). Financial therapists can assess money beliefs and disordered money behaviors, including financial enmeshment.

To assess financial enmeshment, a financial enmeshment subscale within the Klontz Money Behavior Inventory (KMBI) (Klontz, Britt, Mentzer, & Klontz, 2011; Klontz et al., 2012) was developed. The KMBI may assist financial professionals, mental health professionals and financial therapists identify more patterns of self-destructive financial behaviors such as financial enmeshment (Klontz et al., 2012). It includes the following items: (a) I feel better after I talk to my children (under 18) about my financial stress; (b) I talk to my children (under 18) about my financial stress; and (c) I ask my children (under 18) to pass on financial messages to other adults. In the cases where a disordered money behavior like financial enmeshment is identified, financial therapy may be needed to facilitate change. Ideally, financial enmeshment would be addressed on a systems level, where interventions can target the various family subsystem. At times, however, this might be difficult or impossible and interventions will need to target the parents in isolation, or the adult child in isolation, who experienced or is continuing to experience the dynamic of family financial enmeshment.

### **Working with the Financially Enmeshed Family System**

The two most notable family therapy approaches to specifically treat dysfunctional boundaries within families are structural family and Bowen family therapies. These same therapeutic models can be applied to understanding and intervening with a family in which financial enmeshment is occurring. Overviews of these two therapies are described below.

**Structural Family Therapy.** Developed by Minuchin, the goal of structural family therapy is to shift the boundaries within a family so the family can solve its problems (Nichols & Schwarz, 2001). For parent-child relationships that are financially enmeshed, this means establishing a clear hierarchy where parents are clearly in charge of the children and to strengthen the boundaries around the parent subsystem, the child subsystem, and the parent-child relationship subsystem. Individuals are encouraged to differentiate themselves in order to create autonomy and independence.

In order to achieve these goals, structural therapy calls for seven steps: (a) joining and accommodating, (b) working with interaction, (c) diagnosing, (d) highlighting and modifying interactions, (e) boundary marking, (f) unbalancing, and (g) challenging unproductive assumptions (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001). Joining and accommodating refers to the financial therapist developing a trusting and respectful relationship and adapting to the family (Minuchin, 1974). Joining is the most important step in most any interpersonal relationship in the financial industry or the mental health fields. For structural family therapy, it is the key step. This relationship between financial therapist and client must be maintained over the course of treatment in order to challenge the system's functioning effectively.

In the second step, patterns of family interactions are observed, including: (a) who talks to whom; (b) who does not talk; (c) when these interactions occur; (d) how they talk to each other; and (e) who is listening and who is not listening (Minuchin, 1974). Once the financial therapist sees what is happening within the family, not how the family describes it or how the professional imagines it (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001), then diagnosing can occur. Structural diagnosis does not refer to making a mental health diagnosis, such as depression or pathological gambling. Rather, it means the financial therapist expands the problem beyond an individual to the larger family system. Because problems are typically focused on one or two individuals that are “causing” the problem, structural diagnosing moves the focus from past interactions to enactments happening within the family in the present (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001).

After the dysfunctional interactions are observed, a financial therapist can increase the affective intensity of the enactments to highlight and modify the patterns. Nichols and Schwartz (2001) stated, “structural therapists achieve intensity by selective regulation of affect repetition, and duration” (p. 254). This means that tone and volume of voice, timing, and carefully selecting the therapist’s message as well as extending the length of the interaction can help to increase the affective intensity. Structural therapists may seem forceful but are clear in the purpose of their message. To modify the interactions, competence is shaped by pointing out what family members are doing correctly.

Making boundaries is particularly important to the structural family therapy process as a way to protect the integrity of the whole system and the independence of its individual parts (Minuchin, 1974). For enmeshed families, this means that that family members learn to speak for themselves and interruptions are blocked to allow individuals to talk to each other. Structural family therapists typically work with the whole family at once. However, in highly enmeshed families, some individual or subsystem work may be recommended at this stage. Individual sessions focus on boundary making and encouraging members to express themselves. Another important intervention at this stage is to consider how one’s own actions are either creating or maintaining problematic behaviors of others. Family members are asked to emphasize what other family members are doing well to help support each other in the change process.

One of the final stages of structural family therapy is unbalancing. Unbalancing may help to change the relationships between family members. This intervention is difficult to describe as a therapist is encouraged to take sides to create balance and fairness. Unbalancing may seem counterintuitive for a helper; however, it can create intense pressure for subsystems to change their interactions (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001). The final step is challenging unproductive assumptions. This involves changing the ways family members view reality and relate to each other. This may be done by providing education about family structure or create paradoxes that force family members to search for alternate realities.

**Bowen Family Systems Therapy.** Another theoretically informed modality that can be effective in working with financial enmeshment is Bowen Family Systems Therapy (Canale, Archuleta, & Klontz, 2015). In Bowen Family Systems Therapy, the family

emotional processes are seen as multigenerational, wherein patterns of behaviors are passed from generation to generation. The goal of Bowen Family Systems Therapy is to “decrease anxiety and increase differentiation of self” (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001, p. 152). Differentiation of self is the ability to distinguish between one’s thoughts and feelings. For example, when clients consistently make emotional decisions, but don’t recognize that they have not cognitively thought about the decision, lack of differentiation of self may be at play. Bowen theory proposes that people’s inner emotions regulate how people relate to each other and anxiety creates emotional reactivity (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001). When people are emotionally reactive, they become defensive rather than trying to understand one another. Those who are undifferentiated have difficulty thinking independently and/or lack autonomy. Essentially, individuals who are undifferentiated may be engaged in an enmeshed relationship.

An important concept to Bowen Family Systems Therapy is triangles. When a conflict between two parties exists and one of those parties complains to a third party about the person with whom they are in conflict as an effort to relieve emotional stress, a triangle is formed. This new alliance may seem helpful since the person is able to share their emotional distress with a third person. It may make the person feel temporarily better, but the conflict between the two parties is left unresolved.

One of the quintessential techniques used in Bowen Family Systems Therapy is the genogram (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001). The genogram is like a multi-generational family tree that is used to collect information about relational patterns and behaviors and identify triangles. Genograms can be powerful tools to assess and evaluate over the course of therapy the relational processes. It can also serve as an intervention to help clients de-triangle and improve differentiation of self. One task of creating a genogram is for clients to build relationships with as many people in the family as possible in order to gain information that helps explain the family’s relational patterns. Information collected for a genogram may include ages of family members; important dates such as weddings, divorces, and deaths; types of relationships (e.g., enmeshed, distant, conflictual), education attainment; employment; socioeconomic status; and ethnicity to name a few. To observe financial patterns, one can denote money attitudes and behaviors to describe members of the family. Questions about how money was handled in the family can be asked to help elicit more information (Mumford & Weeks, 2003). When clients can visually see the family dynamics, they can process emotional information at cognitive level. The insight gained from recognizing family patterns helps family members to engage in interventions that can increase differentiation and disengage from harmful triangles.

One such intervention to help de-triangle is to have the family members try new or different behaviors or to experiment with their relationships (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001). For example, a parent with a financially enmeshed relationship with a child may be asked to seek out an emotional support network of trusted friends or an organized support group with whom to share financial burdens so the stress is not shared with the child. A child in such a relationship may ask the parent to stop sharing such information because it makes them uncomfortable. One way to approach this request is through the use of I-Positions that are a popular technique used in this modality (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001). I-Positions

are considered to be an effective form of communication as a way to clearly communicate one's thoughts and feelings and to reduce emotional reactivity. Using an "I statement" means that a person identifies what they are feeling about a situation rather than using "you statements" to blame or put down the other person for what they are doing. For example, a couple in conflict around money will likely further inflame the dispute when using statements such as "you never talk to me," or "you don't spend money wisely." In contrast, "I statements," such as "I am concerned about our spending," are much less likely to trigger a negative response and are more likely to support the couple's movement toward problem resolution. An important assumption about Bowen Family Systems Therapy is that conflict increases anxiety in the system and reduces a person's ability to process at a cognitive level (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001). I statements help reduce anxiety in the system in order for the family to think clearly.

Much of Bowen Family Systems Therapy revolves around the use of process questions (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001). Process questions focus on the underlying dynamics of what is being talked about. How people within the system relate to each other is at the heart of process-oriented questions. For example, a mother has shared with her 10 year-old daughter that her father is not paying the child support. A financial therapist, using process questions, may ask the mom to tell about her thoughts of how she is affecting her daughter when she invites her to participate in an inappropriate triangle. The mother may acknowledge that her remarks to her daughter create tension between the daughter and the father or that her daughter feels she is to blame for dad's actions. Although these are not the intentions of the mother, process oriented questions help the mom recognize her role in the enmeshed relationship and invites the financial therapist to explore the mom's responsibility in the situation.

### **Working with the Financially Enmeshed Parent**

It is critical for financially stressed parents to take care of themselves, find appropriate outlets to discuss their financial stress, and develop a plan to tackle their financial concerns. This could involve securing the help of a financial planner, a financial therapist, a marriage and family therapist, a debt counselor, attending a support group (e.g. Debtors Anonymous), or engaging other professional and social supports. Taking steps to manage one's own financial stress in appropriate ways is an essential component of stopping the pattern of financial enmeshment.

It can also be important for parents to let their children know they have inappropriately involved them in adult financial matters in the past, and are committed to avoiding doing so in the future. This could involve saying something like: "I have told you too much in the past about your father and I's financial disagreements. I should not have done that to you and I am not going to do it anymore." Chances are, sharing too much financial information in the past didn't sit quite right for the child. As such, an amends serves the purpose of acknowledging the difficulty of that experience for the child with the added benefit of modeling the appropriateness of apologizing when one makes a mistake.

For financially enmeshed parents, there can be a steep learning curve around what financial information is developmentally acceptable to share and what is not. This can be a challenge, as often the financially enmeshed parent did not have healthy boundaries taught to them when they were children. Financial information is not all or nothing, and the answer to financial enmeshment is not trying to avoid the topic of money altogether, which can cause its own set of problems. For example, in the midst of a parental job loss, saying to a child “I don’t know how we’re going to pay the bills this month” is inappropriate and will cause a child to be anxious (Butler, 2010). A better approach is to acknowledge the financial reality with confidence and involve the child in the solution: “Times are tight right now. Dad lost his job and is looking for a new one, but don’t worry about it because we have it handled. This is what we are going to do. We are going to eat out less. Do you have any ideas on stuff we can cook at home?” Children look to their parents to determine how they should respond to stimuli. When information is presented in a matter-of-fact tone, with parents assuring children that they are on top of things, children have little reason to carry anxiety.

With commitment, adequate support, and skill building, parents who are aware that they have made this mistake in the past can change their behaviors. It can be challenging for the financial enmeshed parent to determine the appropriate levels of disclosure, conversations, topics, and financial information to share with children. For this reason, ongoing consultation with a financial therapist can be very helpful.

### **Working with the Financially Enmeshed Child**

Children are quite adaptable and resilient. When parents shift their behaviors, children are likely to adapt. However, when parental behavior patterns do not shift, children can grow-up with a distorted belief system around money, resulting in self-limiting or self-destructive adult financial behaviors. For adults who grew-up in an environment of financial enmeshment, money can be seen as a dangerous topic to be avoided at all costs and is connected to poorer financial choices by the child later in life (Hancock, Jorgensen, & Swanson, 2012). Some support exists for changes in financial attitudes after participating in financial therapy (Klontz, Bivens, Klontz, Wada, & Kahler, 2008). As mentioned above, the goal of therapy for the child is to create separation from the parent, while protecting the child (Canale et al., 2015). The child can be taught to recognize triangulation and can be encouraged to stop the triangulation by setting boundaries themselves or cuing a parent who is committed to stopping the dynamic. Financial therapies in addition to the ones described here, such as cognitive behavioral financial therapy, can offer useful strategies for address distorted money beliefs to change financial behaviors (Nabeshima & Klontz, 2015).

### **CONCLUSION**

Families are complex systems that have a major impact on the children who are part of that family. The impact of nurturing, supportive parents who demonstrate boundaries with their children can be very positive. However, the impact of parents whose boundaries are overly porous can be very negative.

## Financial Enmeshment: Untangling the Web

Personal finance and money often create stress in family systems. This stress is accelerated when that system is not functioning well. When parents enmesh their children in the family's finances, by blurring the boundaries between parent and child, they may be setting the child up for long-term negative consequences in the child's own relationship with money. With the growth in the financial therapy field, a corresponding growth in the identification and treatment of disordered money behaviors would be expected, including problematic parent-child financial-relational patterns, such as financial enmeshment (Klontz et al., 2012).

Financial enmeshment has been identified as an area of concern for financial planners and financial therapists (Klontz, Kahler, & Klontz, 2008; Klontz & Klontz, 2009). Researchers have found evidence of the existence of the condition and its correlation with other disordered money disorders (Canale et al., 2015; Klontz & Britt, 2012; Klontz et al., 2012). However, more research is needed to identify financial enmeshment behaviors and the financial, emotional, developmental, and relational consequences of financial enmeshment. While financial enmeshment is a relatively new concept in the field of financial planning and financial therapy, enmeshment has been identified and studied quite extensively in the field of family therapy.

As discussed above, family systems interventions may be helpful in interrupting the pattern of financial enmeshment in families. Family system interventions should not be implemented without extensive training in family therapy. However, family systems theory provides a useful framework by which financial therapists, mental health providers, and financial planners can understand and work with financially enmeshed family systems.

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