

FAMILY MATTERS
(Family Wellness Education)

A Recovery Model

GROUP LEADER'S MANUAL

Linda G. Bell, Ph.D. LMFT, ABPP

8/20/2013

INTRODUCTON

The Family Matters course was developed over a period of 5 years. It has been taught to both men and women in prison, and to a group recently released from prison. Research supports it's value primarily as a way to help people better understand their families and to improve relationships with family members¹.

Family work is most important for the children of prisoners, but any family healing will likely effect multiple relationships, both within the family and with others outside the family. Children who grow up in a family where adults get along better, have better communication and problem-solving skills, and children who feel more nurtured, are more likely to stay in school, less likely to do drugs, and will be better parents themselves.

The course supports effective re-entry by strengthening family relationships through increasing understanding of family patterns and teaching effective skills for marital and family communication and parenting. By supporting stronger and healthier relationships with family members, with parents and grandparents, as well as with mates and children, the course increases the family support for the released individual and thus supports healthy recovery and effective re-entry into the community. It is also expected to have secondary effects on other family members. Healthier relationships with parents lead to more support for children/grandchildren. When people become better parents, it supports the character development of their children, thus increasing the probability that those children will be effective, law-abiding members of society.

The Family Matters course can stand alone or provide a strong foundation for parenting and marriage programs. It also reinforces and builds on aspects of addiction and recovery courses and can be used as part of a recovery program sequence of courses. It is valuable for individuals just entering the institution, but also at any period of the incarceration where individuals show an concern for family matters. It can also be integrated into re-entry programs to increase family support for individuals returning to the community.

Research supports the value of maintaining family ties in prison. The 2003 Annual Review of Sociology summarizes findings of several studies and concludes that stronger ties between inmates and families and close friends during incarceration led to better post release outcomes.² These outcomes include decreased recidivism, improved mental health both for prisoners and their family members, and a greater likelihood that the family will hold together after reentry. Researchers found family acceptance and encouragement, as well as perceived emotional support from family, were related to post release success. The negative effects on children of incarcerated parents (increased academic and behavioral problems, increased substance abuse) can be mitigated by visits with incarcerated parents, particularly if the visits are in a child-friendly environment.³ A study funded by the Urban Institute concluded that families were critical to successful re-entry (along with employment and having had substance abuse treatment): *Our analysis found that respondents with closer family relationships, stronger family support, and fewer negative dynamics in relationships with intimate partners were more likely to have worked after release and were less likely to have used drugs.*⁴

LINDA BELL, PH.D, ABPP, LMFT

Dr. Bell is a Licensed Psychologist and Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. She is Professor of Communication Studies (School of Liberal Arts) and Family Health (School of Nursing) at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), and Professor Emerita of Psychology and Family Therapy at The University of Houston – Clear Lake (UHCL). At UHCL, Linda developed and led a respected nationally accredited program in family therapy (1976-2006). Since coming to IU, she developed an on-going weekly psycho-educational group for women who are keeping their babies in prison with them, the Indiana Women's Prison Wee Ones Nursery (WON) program, in which she brings interns from graduate family therapy and nursing programs into the prison to discuss family, personal, life skills and other issues as well as focusing on building a supportive community among a diverse group of inmates. She has taught courses in family wellness and healing in both a men's and a women's prison.

While teaching family psychology at a men's prison in Texas, Dr. Bell found that great value can be had by helping people understand family dynamics and getting a different perspective on their parents. Important healing could occur when people took small steps, a call or letter, for instance. It was amazing to her how one small insight, or one letter could have a major positive effect, both for the individual student, and their family relationships. The Family Matters class includes asking students to focus on one relationship which they would like to improve – then use role-play, discussion, letter-writing phone calls or visits to address specific issues.

While working with mothers in the Indiana Women's Prison (IWP), Dr. Bell discovered that many parents in prison are worried about their children and have difficult relationships with those who are caring for those children. Many have strained relationships with mothers, fathers and mates. In a classes at IWP, most of the relationships people wanted to work on involved other family members, particularly relationships with children and parents. The same was true in an classes with men.

A tenet of family systems theory is that any change in any relationship effects the whole system; so each positive shift has multiple ramifications. Thus even one small change can support the current and future health of all family members.

Questions an suggestions regarding the course can be sent to lgbell@iupui.edu.

CONNIE S. CORNWELL, M.A., LPC, LMFT

Ms. Cornwell, is a Licensed Professional Counselor and Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. She is Senior Supervisor/Faculty Associate at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center Family Studies Center in Department of Psychiatry. Ms. Cornwell has over 30 years experience in couples and family therapy.

LYNDSAY H. CURRAN, APRN-CNS

Ms. Curran is a mental health nurse practitioner and Assistant Clinical Professor at the Indiana University School of Nursing. For several years, she worked with Linda in the WON program at the Indiana Women's Prison and in 2012 took over primary responsibility for this work.

SHYTIERRA GASTON, B.S.

Ms. Gaston's degree is in Criminal Justice from Indiana University Purdue University, Indianapolis. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Criminality and Criminal Justice at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

SOME OF WHAT FOLKS SAID THEY LEARNED (women's comments in italics)

I'm more open minded.

My children open up and tell me how they are feeling what's going on with them even if its hurtful.

I learned that it's OK to have different feelings. Everyone has their own opinion.

My father has had no contact with me in many years but through the group my family has been talking to him about me and I've even been given his address. I just haven't used it yet because I'm still a bit angry at his treatment of me.

This course helped me build back up my relationship with my mother.

My brother and I did not speak to each other at all for the last 10 years. Now we are mending our hurt feelings and lost time. My brother also took on the responsibility of raising my two sons recently.

It seems like the family started to take more of the consideration of talking to one another when there's a misunderstanding than yelling at each other.

When I first started this class my Mom and I didn't get along or communicate. Since being in this class, we are doing 100% better at everything in our mother daughter relationship.

This course helped me to look farther deep into myself and my soul and see what it is that was wrong with my life; and were it might of generated from; the course really showed me how to go to my parents, and significant other and learn about me.

My daughter and I have better communication and understanding with each other My daughter is more open since I have learned to communicate better.

I hug my sons now, not just my daughters. And they really like it and come to me.

My daughter has opened up her inner most feelings, fears, and goals and dreams to me. We both became more willing to be honest about our anger. I am excited to have such an open, loving and realistic relationship with my daughter.

A person who had not met his father and said, "I guess it's too late now, I'm all grown up," was encouraged to ask Mom about his father; about what attracted her to him, for instance, when they were first together. This individual talked with his mom and was very happy he had done so. He decided to try to meet his father.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR THE CLASS

Leading the course is primarily a matter of providing a safe context for learning and guiding discussion. All of the material you need is included in the workbook. There's nothing you must teach. You're not expected to be the expert. If pushed, just say you don't know, or don't understand, or that you have your own opinion, but that everyone's opinion is valuable.

The course can run for an hour and a half for 20 classes, or for 16 classes, or less. A good class size is 12-18 people. If there are more (up to 25), it can work if there is more time devoted to the class (so more people can share) or if you decide to have less time for sharing. You have the responsibility (along with the class, if you wish), for selecting what exercises or sections to omit, or to assign as homework -- if homework is an option, in order to adjust to a larger group or less class time.

You are encouraged to devote one whole class to each of the first six chapters: Getting Started and Family Systems. *Go slow to move fast*. There is a lot of basic material included in these chapters, and the amount and depth of sharing at the beginning of the course sets the tone for the rest of the course. Concerning encouraging discussion, if you share briefly, others will likely share, too. After the pattern is established, you won't have to start off every time. Another suggestion is to not jump into the silence when people are slow to talk. One technique is to be quiet for one whole minute (count or watch your watch) and wait.

Suggestions for combining later parts of the course to fit a 16-class schedule are made below. However, these are quite general. And you may find that something else works better for you. You may find that one chapter goes exceptionally fast and you can move on, or that a great discussion leads you to 'cover less ground' than you expected.

It's better to cover less material and to cover it well, than try to squeeze everything in. Exercises and sharing are the meat of the course. The goal is not to pour knowledge into people's heads, but to nurture reflection and growth. People can always read the material; they will have the workbook at the end of the course. Class time is a chance for slowing down, listening, and trying out new communication and relationship behaviors. Sometimes the exercises are scary – for the group leader as well as for the students. Here you must make a judgment call. Pass on the particular exercise because people aren't ready for it. Or just *feel the fear and do it anyway*. If you model patience and persistence, people will participate. Trust that there is wisdom in the group. It's your call.

Seating arrangement. This is **very important**. You want a circle, or everyone around a table. You don't want a classroom atmosphere – chairs in rows. The course is structured as a group discussion, and everyone needs to be able to make eye contact with everyone else. The leader is part of the group, also sitting down.

Mindfulness ritual. It is very helpful in terms of how the class will progress and how much people can learn, to have a mindfulness ritual for starting each class.

When we are mindful of others, we are giving them our full attention; listening calmly to understand; not interrupting or giving advice. We just **focus, attend and listen**. Thus

by starting with a mindfulness ritual, people in the class are supported in bringing their full calm attention to the work of the class. Thus they can benefit more from that work.

There are a couple of mindfulness exercises included in the course workbook (page 30 and Appendices p. 86). Here's a good mindfulness ritual for starting the class: mindful breathing:

Say: "sit up straight; hand on abdomen; 'pull' air in by pushing abdomen out.. take longer breaths as we go along .. close mouth if possible; pull the air in and push it out from abdomen; can you feel the breath in the back of the throat ?. Please continue to watch your breath moving in an out while we have 2 minutes of silence". After the silence, ring a bell or say, quietly, "OK let's get to work."

Please note that there is no content (lesson, verse, poem) inserted into a mindfulness exercises. This is very important. The goal is calm, stillness, letting the mind settle WITHOUT giving it something to think about.

Repetition. A fair amount of repetition of important concepts is build into the course. Going over the basics more than once enhances comprehension. Also, the attempt was made to create a course that would be interesting and valuable to individuals at varying levels of education and personal maturity. This means that some ideas will seem very important to some people and simple or obvious to others; and the reverse, some will seem interesting or challenging to some while being meaningless to others. That's OK!

The goals of the course are to:

- Build/strengthen positive traits and skills (strength-based approach)
- Increase understanding of interpersonal dynamics.
- Support personal and relational healing.
- Increase effective interpersonal skills, particularly speaking and listening.
- Support effective parenting.

Method includes:

- Reading through the manual (class members take turns reading).
- Participation in exercises, primarily writing.
- Sharing thoughts/answers with the group (encouraged but not forced).
- Modeling by instructor.
- Homework, including calling or writing family members (optional, but encouraged).

The group leader is a very important model. Everyone has different ways of sharing; it's not good to be too open, or too closed! So, **according to your own personal comfort and style**, please model:

- Mindful attention
- Clear, respectful communication.
- Compassion/caring.
- Willingness to share some personal and family experiences.
- Active listening.
- I statements.

Managing participation. Engage class members in reading aloud the course content (i.e. the 'presentation' part of each session. Encourage participation and trading off reading after each paragraph, but make it flexible so that people who don't want to read (or can't read at the appropriate level) don't feel singled out.

There always seem to be a few people who don't care to talk and others who are happy to talk continually. It's important that you are able to interrupt a person who's talking non-stop and never seems to come to a period. One way is to hold up your hand – or make the T for time out sign, and say, "I'm sorry to cut you off, but I want to be sure everyone has a turn." If necessary you can talk to an individual privately saying that you know they have a lot to offer, but by taking so much they are "saving" those who are more shy about participating – and you'd appreciate their help in seeing that everyone participates.

Another method is to go around the circle and to be sure everyone has a turn. Another method of allowing one person to talk at time without interruption is to have a Talking Stick. This goes back to Native American traditions: *In a tribal council circle, a talking stick is passed around from member to member allowing only the person holding the stick to speak. This enables all those present at a council meeting to be heard, especially those who may be shy; consensus can force the stick to move along to assure that the "long winded" don't dominate the discussion; and the person holding the stick may allow others to interject.* (quote from Wikipedia) The 'talking stick' can be a stuffed animal, or a soft child's ball... it doesn't have to be a stick. In a large circle this allows for the 'stick' to be safely thrown to another, rather than passed around.

Very important. Personal sharing is encouraged, but not demanded or pushed for. It's necessary to respect where people are here and now. This kind of respect creates a safe environment and leads to more sharing and more learning eventually. AND, a person who says little, may be learning the most!

Copying the Workbook. You may download the workbook and course leader's manual (at no cost) from <http://www.familymatterscourse.com>. The manual is designed so that it will print it in black and white or in color. It is designed to be printed two-sided (page numbers will be on the outside, i.e. even pages bottom left; odd pages bottom right). If you arrange it in a ring binder so that it can be opened flat, participants will be best able to see (two) related pages at once. **To save costs, you can print off the more expensive color copies, enough for one course, then reuse them with each course.** You would need, then, to acquire inexpensive journals for students and ask individuals to write their notes and exercises in their journals. You would still want to Xerox some pages – for instance the first day questionnaire – have people fill it out, but save it in the journal until the last day when they revisit it. You might also offer to make Xerox copies of any particular exercise or appendix information which they would particularly like to keep. This way you can re-use the journals.

Supplies. Participants need the course workbook and a pen. It is also very helpful if you have **colored markers** and, if permitted, some animal stickers (for the Family Map exercise, and for the last day – draw a picture of the future exercise).

CHAPTER NOTES

(Space is left after each main section for you to add your own notes and observations – idea that might help the next time you teach the class.)

GETTING STARTED (first class)

This class sets the tone for the class. So take your time. Start with whatever ritual you have chosen for beginning the class. End with praise for people's participation and hopefulness for future learning.

For the Introductions, if you share something of your own family first, it will set a model for others to follow. Be open, but don't disclose more than you wish. Encourage others to do likewise.

As they share, focus on LISTENING – acknowledge that you hear what they're saying, but don't problem-solve or offer solutions.

Be sure everyone has a turn even if you have to be very directive ("We need to move on so everyone has a turn.")

Here's some examples of relationships people have said they would like to work on:

- Mate: get own place; be independent
- Son: get my son to open up to me
- Mother: regain the trust we used to have
- Mother: I would like to regain the trust that we once shared
- Mother: good relationship
- Son and family: interact with son and family more
- Mate: want mate to be more active, involved
- Mate: in the area of emotions
- Friend: communication
- Mate: emotions
- Father: would like to meet him.
- Mother: with my mother communicate more with her than I have been.
- Son: I would just like to be there more often for him.
- Mother: stop her from doing drugs.
- Son: make him open up to me sometimes.
- I want to understand why my family members do what they do.

FAMILY SYSTEMS

Culture and Ethnicity: Strengths and Challenges: The goal here is to focus primarily on strengths. Another goal is to support respect for diversity. Some people may say that the chart stereotypes people and that can be harmful (or wrong). Respect this opinion. It's a valid criticism. Note that this chart, while intended to support respect for diversity, might also discourage it!

Family History, Roles, Rules: Give an example from your own family. The reading about **FAMILY SYSTEMS** (Appendices pp. 72 - 83) can be assigned as homework for the next class to save class time.

Drawing Your Family Map: This is another good chance to model by drawing and sharing aspects of your own family map.

BRING: Colored markers and lots of animal stickers (as many different kinds of animals as possible).

Healthy Families: Again, try to draw out strengths; focus mostly on the positive. It's also very important to note that personal strengths can develop out of difficult early family experiences. Much of the hard work of the world is done by individuals who have overcome trauma.

Grief and Loss in the Family Life Cycle: Most people in prison have experiences a lot of losses. This is a very important chapter and, if possible, should receive a whole class. Encourage participation in the letter writing. The Empty Chair exercise should be only for people who volunteer readily. Your role here is to support them and allow others to do so. Don't give advice. Don't allow drawn-out discussion by others in the group. Comments like "It took a lot of courage to do that" or "I think that was very important what you said" are appropriate.

ACTION AND REACTION: The Amazing Brain and Strengthening the Ability to Act can be combined.

The Amazing Brain: The Amazing Brain model is an attempt to convey some of the recent research being done on the brain. Mindfulness and other cognitive techniques (cognitive behavior therapy, for instance) can strengthen the effect of the ‘thinking brain’ on the ‘emotional brain.’ Also facing core emotions and releasing them reduces their power and leads to strengthening the “thinking brain.”

Strengthening the Ability to Act: Guidelines on how to nurture self control -- impulse control. How to ‘be in control,’ instead of letting other people ‘push my buttons.’ **SIX STEPS TO RESOLVE CONFLICT** (Appendices p. 88) can be assigned as homework for next week.

Manage Difference and Conflict: This chapter may be assigned as homework, or done fairly quickly. As the class reads through the suggestions on page 32, you can ask for examples after each paragraph. The section can be expanded by discussing and focusing on examples for each of the steps described in **SIX STEPS TO RESOLVE CONFLICT** (Appendices p. 88).

HEALING and HOPE: What Causes What and Destructive Patterns: Breaking the Cycle can be combined.

What Causes What: To start this chapter, look back at the Amazing Brain. This is a good opportunity to have a discussion about choice and personal responsibility. The 'right answer' for 'what causes what' for people in prison is usually that they are totally responsible for their behavior. The answer for social scientists is usually that genetics and environment (nature and nurture) call the shots. One approach to this issue is to say that we got where we are for a number of reasons, some of them beyond our control (e.g. child abuse). But that our best chance going forward is to **take** personal responsibility for our actions. This give us our best chance to achieve the life we want.

Destructive Patterns: Breaking the Cycle: The exercise on page 37 can be very useful. Many of us can see others' situations better than we can see our own. Don't allow too much advice. Discourage others 'pushing' people to do something. Summarize briefly one or two ideas offered for each person as 'something they might want to think about trying.'

How to Listen Effectively: The listening exercise is the most important thing (page 40). And it's difficult. You might want to demonstrate with a volunteer – and you be the listener. Really – just being present and listening is the key. You're a witness. When people feel heard, they have a good chance of getting something positive out of the exchange. You don't have to FIX anything!!

Finding the Right Words: The exercise at the top of page 45 is very useful (first writing what I *really* want to say, then editing it for effectiveness). You don't need to do it with everyone. But if you can write out a few sentences on the board, and then get suggesting for edits, it can get the main concept of this chapter across in a very solid way.

Forgiveness and Gratitude: Very important exercises; this material has probably is less likely to have been included in other courses your students have taken. Save time for the exercise on page 48. Give people time to write; those who want can share what they've written. Assign the gratitude journal for homework; as you check-in for the next class (or the first class after 10-12 days) see if anyone wants to describe their experience of writing the journal.

PRECIOUS CHILD: Parenting Basics and Male and Female can be combined.

Parenting Essentials: Affection and Respect: The main point of thinking about attachment is that the early patterns we learn as a child filter and shape our later experiences. If we think the world is full of hostile people, then we're more likely to 'see' hostility – and call it forth in others. Likewise, if we expect people to be trustworthy, we are more likely to notice trustworthy people, and to call it forth in others. The other important point is that by being aware of our tendencies to feel anxious or to avoid others (and to understand that they are natural), we have a better chance to change – to try something different.

Male and Female: It's good to bring in both women's and men's perspectives; perhaps the participants are one gender and the class members are another. At the least, if you're all men, make a point of asking "I wonder what a woman would say? What would your mother or grandmother say about this?" And similarly, what would a man say if you are all women.

ANGRY FATHERS (Appendices p. 90) can be assigned as homework for the next class.

Parenting Basics: Positive Attention and Modeling: There are few absolutely right answers to the question of discipline except that physical, emotional and sexual abuse, as well as hitting in a rage, are to be avoided. They harm others and handicap children's chances of becoming successful adults. Ideas about correct ways to discipline vary widely among cultures. And they have varied widely over time. What was considered 'good discipline' when my grandparents were kids may very well be considered child abuse today.

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES (Appendices p. 94) and **STAYING CONNECTED** (pp. 59 – 62 of the workbook) are good things for people to look at before the next class.

Parenting from Prison: This is the meat of the course for many people. Please try to devote at least one whole class, even if it means covering the first three chapters of Precious Child in one class.

COURSE SUMMARY AND FUTURE PLANS

This is a very important part of the course. Please make time for it even if you have to skip something else!!

BRING: Colored markers. Drawing the picture is very important; as is sharing future plans. So is sharing about progress made with family relationships. Please be sure there is time for both!

Make a note of some of the things people said, about what they learned. Can you use these ideas to make the class better next time?

Citations

¹ Linda G. Bell and Connie S. Cornwell. (2015) Evaluation of Family Matters: A Family Wellness Course for Persons in Prison. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 66, 45-57.

² Christy A. Visher and Jeremy Travis (2003). Transitions from Prison to Community: Understanding Individual Pathways, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 29, 89 – 113.

³ Julie Poehlmann, Danielle Dallaire, Ann Booker Loper, and Leslie D. Shear (2010). Children's Contact With Their Incarcerated Parents, *American Psychologist*, 65, 575 – 598.

⁴ The Urban Institute (2011). Family Support, Substance Abuse Help, and Work Release Programs are Essential as Ex-Prisoners Restart Lives in Baltimore, <http://www.urban.org>.