

It's Not the Guacamole: *How Relationships Affect Health*
by P.H. Fischer

I can't stomach my family. I love my parents and my three brothers but they give me diarrhea. Sorry, but it's an important discovery for me. You see, I always thought it was the guacamole, the salad dressing or the cheesecake my mother's famous for. But after spending countless get-togethers huddled on the couch moaning like our sick dog, it finally dawned on me that this predictable state isn't the result of anything I eat. It is the result of the anxiety that always accompanies the scallop potatoes, roast and the bottle of Maria Christina served on these occasions. Whether it's arguments about politics, religion or when to put Buffy (the dog) out of her misery, my first inclination is always to physically or emotionally distance myself from family arguments as quickly as possible. I eat the anxiety instead of working through it in a mature manner. Long after the leftovers are sealed in Tupperware, the maelstrom of the family meal still churns in my stomach while the rest of the family moves on to other things like the fate of our beloved Toronto Maple Leafs.

How we deal with anxiety and stress directly affects our health. That's nothing new. The burgeoning stress-reduction industry is indicative of how anxious we as a society are and how insatiable we have become in finding new ways to combat anxiety and stress. While meditation, yoga and the latest Yanni release are helpful ways to "cool" our minds and "quiet" our anxious bodies, a far more effective (yet under utilized) approach to managing our anxiety is to objectively examine our stress, emotions and reactivity in light of our relationships in general and our place in our family of origin in

particular. How emotionally entwined are we in these primary relationships? Are we the resident sponge when it comes to familial anxiety? Or have we made efforts to achieve a level of self-differentiation that effectively manages stress and empowers us to be a non-anxious presence enabling other family members to calm down? Many behavioral scientists and family therapists now assert that where we stand on these questions will be reflected in our biology and health.

Family Systems therapist and popular conference speaker, Victoria Harrison, has studied the influence of relationships on health and reproduction for over twenty-five years. She says: *“Health...[is]governed in large part by emotional reactions to relationships in the family, reactions that affect biology as well as how we think and feel and act. A brain that is capable of recognizing reactions to relationships and of self-regulation provides the human additional resources for adaptation.”* In a nutshell, it’s not the guacamole; it’s how I think or react to the family sharing the guacamole that will determine whether I reach for the Pepto-Bismal or not. Recognizing and managing one’s own emotional reactivity in relationships, according to Harrison, will not only improve one’s own health but also the health of others in the family. And not just for current members of the family. Harrison contends that managing ones reactivity among family members also ensures a better future in terms of reproduction. That alone ought to inspire us to cool our emotional engines and try to think more clearly about our relationships. What family couldn’t use a few more little hockey fans around to spice up those get-togethers?

If you'd like to find out more about how relationships among family members regulate physiology, brain function and behaviour, a great place to start would be Victoria Harrison's upcoming conference "**Giving Nature A Better Chance**" sponsored by North Shore Counselling Centre and co-sponsored by Douglas College on **October 22nd & 23rd** at Douglas College. Victoria Harrison is the Founding Director of the Center for the Study of the Natural Systems and the Family in Houston Texas and is the current Director of the Special Postgraduate Program at the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family in Washington DC. During "**Giving Nature A Better Chance**" Harrison will present her work on how levels of self-differentiation impact health using three generations of her own family as a case-study. The two-day conference, which includes a public lecture on Friday evening entitled "Work Systems, Family Systems and Health," will demonstrate how efforts made working on our primary relationships can "give nature a better chance" in terms of health and reproductive ability. Sounds great. Anything that gives me a better chance of stomaching my family is a good thing. George Bernard Shaw once said, "*If you can't get rid of the family skeleton, you may as well make it dance.*" Well, I may not be ready to dance the "Macarena" with my family yet but here's hoping that I can learn to at least share that guacamole with them in peace.

To purchase tapes of this past conference contact Leila Howard at 604-926-5496 ext. 300 or visit living systems website www.livingsystems.ca.

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