

## **Thinking Systems about the Family Life Cycle**

### **Andrea Kiss, M.Ed., BCAMFT**

As a family systems therapist, I have worked with people aged 18 to 83. My general goal in therapy is to help clients at every age and stage to develop skills to manage their anxiety or stress, to define self in relationships, and to think through choices and decisions they face. The family life cycle (see chart page 2)) provides an outline of life stages and the adjustments, changes and developmental/growth in each stage. This chart lists “normal” transitions. It does not address variations or problems that may occur during a lifetime.

The family life cycle begins with the single young adult leaving home. She/he faces the two central challenges of life: love and work. The young person needs to find a place to begin the lifelong process of vocational development and financial sustainability. As well, he/she begins to form important relationships outside the family and to become more or less engaged in broader issues (social, environmental etc). These efforts are concurrent with the process of differentiating one’s self in the family of origin.

As the person passes through life, she/he will become more or less mature and developed depending upon how she/he responds to life’s challenges and navigates its stages. The individual and the family unit will grow and progress or get stuck and lose ground.

Stage 2 begins when the young person couples. The young adult will partner with someone at a similar level of differentiation. Again, the chart does not stipulate an age or provide for all the variations in coupling. However long the couple stays together, they become part of each other’s family and social group. Couples who have children (stages 3, 4, 5) expand the family system further and affect the system more deeply over time. Retirement is the major event in stage 6.

The family life cycle chart shows the stages as a continuous process. It does not deal with the unexpected transitions in life such as divorce, relocation, accident, job loss or illness. How the family responds to challenges and adapts and recovers from unpredicted life events will have either a positive or negative impact on the larger family system. The family is challenged to adjust whenever there is a change in the system such as additions and exits. Families that are more mature and flexible are able to adjust to changes be they predictable, unexpected or severe circumstances.

*Copyright @ 2007 by Andrea Kiss*

Family Life Cycle		
Stage	Primary Transition Process	Tasks & Adjustments
1. Single young adult	Leave home, become fully responsible for self	Define self in family of origin; make friends; establish self re: work and finances
2. New couple	Commit to couple system	Realign relationships in families, with friends; focus on work and finances.
3. New family with children	Adjust couple relationship to include children	Share child care, household, financial responsibilities; pursue career; realign relationships in extended families
4. Family with adolescents	Increase family flexibility to accommodate children's independence and grandparents' frailties	Adjust parent-child relationships to give child more responsibility for self; continue focus on work & finances; plan for care and support of grandparents
5. Launching children and moving on	Accept multiple exits and entries into family system	Return to couple as base for household; adult-to-adult relationships with children; realign relationships to include children's partners and grandchildren; deal with health and/or death of parents; deal with work and finances
6. Later life	Retirement Accept changing roles Life review and integration	Deal with finances and retirement lifestyle; face health & physical issues; accept children, now the middle generation, as family leaders; support/care for parents now elders; deal with loss of parents, spouse, siblings, friends and prepare for own death

*Copyright @ 2007 by Andrea Kiss*