

Comprehensive Family Treatment Plan & “Execution”

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Vignette

Alex Dunphy is a 17-year-old female and is the identified client presenting for therapeutic treatment. Alex's family unit includes her parents, Phil and Claire, her little brother, Luke (13) and older sister Haley (21). Alex presents as an anxious adolescent with concerns about what she describes as her "OCD tendencies," concern about her family, and her older sister's procrastination to start her adult life. She describes her relationships with her siblings as "normal sibling bickering" and her relationship with her parents as "strained".

In their initial phone call with the therapist, Claire describes Alex as "incredibly intelligent, astute, a little nerdy, and not a social go-getter." For the intake session with the therapist, all family members were present. During this session, Claire and Phil report that their children are reasonably close for their age gaps but that they "lovingly fight" with each other a lot. They also report that Luke, the youngest, and Haley, the oldest, are "not the brightest" and may need to be tested for learning disabilities.

Within the session, Alex mentions that she is not happy with her social skills outside of her home. She also reports that she finds talking to people difficult because her "mind is racing with thoughts about what could go wrong". Haley reports that while they were at the same high school, Alex usually ate alone or "with the other nerds" and rarely, if ever, branched out.

One of the last details reported during the session by Claire and Phil is about their relationship with Alex. They describe that they do not know how to be "on her level" because of her incredible level of intellect. Alex subsequently reports that she struggles to talk to her parents about school, "the most important thing in her life," because they want to focus on the social aspects. Alex describes that this makes her feel like they do not care about what she is good at and that they only focus on her negative qualities.

Case Conceptualization

Alex is identified as the client of the Dunphy family. While Alex is the identified symptom bearer of this family, their structure plays a huge part in Alex's symptoms. She appears to be experiencing her current symptoms because she feels pressure from her other family members to be someone who she feels she is not.

Haley is another issue that the family is currently experiencing. Haley should be in college and moved out of the family house, but she is having a very difficult time moving out and starting her adult life. She went to college for a few months before she was kicked out for accidentally assaulting a police officer. Because of this, she is having a hard time finding a job and has begun to get comfortable in her parents' house again.

The Dunphy family as a whole must also be identified as the client. Their relationships are, more or less, strained in some capacities. Special attention needs to be placed on the youngest and oldest siblings and their potential learning disabilities and how this affects familial relationships. While Alex believes that she has her own set of issues, as previously described, she also believes that her siblings and parents "need help."

Subsystems

In observing and listening to the Dunphy family during their intake session, the therapist has identified a number of subsystems. The first subsystem is between the parents, Claire and Phil. The next subsystem is between the siblings, Luke, Alex and Haley. There are also subsystems represented by gender in this family. The females, Claire, Alex and Haley are one system and Luke and Phil seem to have their own subsystem. Lastly, there seems to also be a subsystem between the sisters Alex and Haley. The therapist's initial thought is that this may be due to them sharing a room.

Coalitions

There appear to be two coalitions within this family system. The first is the most potentially harmful. This is Luke and Haley being absorbed into the parental subsystem. This is evidenced by the amount of times Luke and Haley affirmed Claire and Phil as they listed Alex's issues. The group seemed to target Alex and align their beliefs about how she is not social like the rest of them. The second coalition is males versus females. The males tend to group together and pull pranks and practical jokes on the females. This has caused a somewhat significant family divide.

Boundary Assessment

The Dunphy family seems to have fairly poor boundaries among them. The only person who appears to have well-defined boundaries is Claire. She reports that she has read "Boundaries" by Dr. Cloud and has worked on how she uses, and previously abused, them. The remainder of the family appears to have very rigid boundaries with each other with the exception of Phil who has very diffuse boundaries.

Between the sibling, their rigid boundaries present as not confiding in each other about what is going on in their lives. They do not share life experiences. This also presents as not being willing to ever share their personal belongings with each other. They appear to be very possessive and untrusting in this way.

Between Phil and the children, this presents as only willing to stay at a surface level with the children. He, too, is unwilling to share his life experiences with his children. He tends to use humor as a defense of his boundaries. This allows him to keep everyone at arm's length. His diffuse boundaries also force Claire to be in the parental role alone.

From the children to Phil and Claire, there is a distinct lack of emotional vulnerability caused by a lack in trust. This could potentially be due to Phil's representation of the parental unit as at arm's length and unwilling to share life experiences leading to his very diffuse boundaries.

Hierarchy

The hierarchy of this family is off kilter in that Phil is seen as less of a parental unit and more as a child/one of the siblings. This is likely due to his practical jokes, pranks, rigid boundaries and constant joking around with the children. This leaves Claire to be the disciplinarian on her own. She is seen as the "not fun" parent while Phil gets to be one of the kids.

Complementarity

In the Dunphy family, there are a few complementarity patterns. Alex identifies her family members as "bad" and herself as "good." Per her description, they are judgmental and do not focus on what she does well. There is also a complementarity pattern created by the parents about their children. Claire and Phil identify their oldest and youngest children as strong and Alex as weak.

Family Development

The developmental stage that the Dunphy family is currently in is called school-age or adolescent children. Their boundaries are reasonably appropriate for this stage but they will need to shift over time as their children get older and begin to leave the house.

As previously mentioned, Haley is having issues moving out of the house. She should be preparing the family for the transition of boundaries to the next stage and allowing her parents to have a taste of what it is like to have their children move out, but she is behind.

Developmentally, this is an unrealistic expectation for this family and will need to be monitored over time.

Strengths

This family has two major strengths. The first is that Claire has a big interest in helping her family from the inside out and has no issue with accepting help for her family. She loves to read books about things such as boundaries, attachments and family structure. She also loves to implement the theories and ideas that she reads about.

The biggest strength that this family has is Claire's immediate family members. Her brother and his husband live very close with their child. Her father and his wife, Claire's step-mother, also live very close. For the Dunphy family, this means a lot of great people that help to build the village that it takes to raise children. This village helps with babysitting, supporting the children, support for Phil and Claire and good companionship when times are rough.

Attachments

Attachments in this family are Anxious. The children feel that they are not secure in their attachments with each other because there is so much competition between them. They do not feel like they can attach to each other because they are always trying to find ways to "beat" each other. They also expressed that they do not feel like they can securely attach to their father because he keeps them at surface level. For this reason, their attachment to their dad is Avoidant. Luke and Haley have a Secure attachment to Claire while Alex has an Anxious attachment to her. This is due to Alex's feeling that she is not accepted by her mother because she is "socially challenged."

Phases

Starting Phase

The first phase of therapy for the Dunphy family will focus on working on the boundaries and attachments that have been built by each family member. The therapist will want to meet with the family as a whole for a few sessions, perhaps 3-4 depending on how they go, to gain more information about the family as a whole. This will help the therapist plan out how to proceed with this family and their treatment.

For the first 3 sessions, the family discusses how they interact with each other at home and the parents are asked questions about their parents and their childhoods. This reveals that Claire feels she is parenting alone most of the time. Alex reveals that she does not feel safe to be who she is in the home setting because of her perceived judgements on her social skills by her family members. Luke and Haley both reveal that they feel like Alex treats them like they are stupid. Phil does not talk much during these first few sessions. He seems to sit on the couch with his wife and listen intently but when asked what he thinks, he appears to have a hard time expressing his opinions.

Claire reveals that her parents were divorced when she was fairly young. She and her brother were grateful for the split because the fighting between her parents on a daily basis had created a great amount of stress in their home. After the split, they were shifted between homes every week. This was hard because Mitchel, Claire's brother, liked their mom the best and Claire preferred her father. Claire felt like that the weeks with her mom were some of her most difficult times in life because she did not feel cared for by her.

Phil expressed that his parents were very happy throughout his childhood and that he lived a great life. He and his father are particularly close but that they do not share much about their personal lives with each other. Phil's mother raised him to be very dependent on her, so he found it hard to start his adult life.

To the therapist, these things are all great pieces of information to have. It reveals to her that there is a lot going on in this family that they have been trying to express for a long time. The children were very forthcoming with information about how they feel. It seems to the therapist like they feel like they could really benefit from these therapy sessions.

The therapist's observations about the parental subsystem is that Claire tends to take control. Phil is very tight-lipped with his feelings and even his life story. The therapist thinks that Phil may feel overpowered and potentially emasculated by his lack of control in his family.

Middle Phase

Going forward, the therapist asks to see the parental subsystem two times, the sibling subsystem two times and each child alone for 1 session each. She decides toward the end of these sessions to repeat this pattern once more before seeing the family as a whole again. This is to help create attachments within subsystems and work on each family member's personal issues and issues with the rest of the family.

During the parental subsystem sessions, Phil divulges that he does feel powerless to his wife. He feels as though he cannot speak his mind with her because she is so controlling in their lives. Claire reveals that she feels she has to be because, in her mind, Phil will not step up to the plate and parent their children.

To aid this issue, the therapist had Claire and Phil speak with "I feel..." statements to each other. This helped to replace the blaming statements with the expression of feelings. In doing this, Phil and Claire learned how the other feels and how they can help each other in their parental roles.

During the sibling subsystem sessions, the siblings reveal that they do not feel like they can relate to each other due to either lack of social skills, Luke and Haley to Alex, or personal interests, each sibling to the others.

To aid this issue, the therapist asked the children to name 3 things that they like about themselves and their siblings. This helped the sibling to understand that they do have things in common and they can lean more on each other.

After these sessions, the therapist met with each sibling once. Each sibling expressed their frustrations in their personal lives, family lives and school lives. With Luke, the therapist used play therapy of drawing to help him express and connect how he feels to potential solutions. With Alex and Haley, separately, the therapist suggested journaling how they feel for 30 minutes each night. The girls found this to be helpful because they share a room and designated a time to journal in their beds at night and then talk about their frustrations.

Ending Phase

During the last phase, the therapist plans to meet with the Dunphy family at least 2 more times to wrap up everything that they have learned from their sessions and to iron out any kinks that may have arisen during the individualized sessions. The therapist also wants to take into account what the family feels that they need in terms of number of sessions going forward.

When the therapist met with the whole family again, 4 final sessions, many of their issues in the home seemed to have been resolved. They were able to voice their concerns and frustrations with each other using the “I feel...” statements that the parents learned. Because they did this, many more attachments had been built. The family was also more willing to listen to Claire about her reading of “Boundaries” by Dr. Cloud.

Moving forward from their therapeutic experience, the therapist told the family that they are welcome to come back any time for a “tune up” to help with any issues that may arise. The family expressed their thanks and came in for only 2 sessions to discuss new issues in the following year.