

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the 46th issue of WE, a newsletter for and about groups of people who get together for the purpose of giving each other personal support. Thanks for your helpful responses to the survey questions in the last two issues. I'll report on them later.

This is an issue about Frame of Reference. Connie Dawson helped me write it. In *Cathexis Reader*,* Jacqui Schiff, et al say: "**An individual's frame of reference is the structure of associated (conditioned) responses (neural pathways) which integrates the various ego states in response to specific stimuli. It provides the individual with an overall perceptual, conceptual, affective, and action set which is used to define the self, other people, and the world both structurally and dynamically.**"

Since we live in a rapidly changing world that provides regular challenges to long held beliefs and assumptions, several of you have asked me to share ways of exploring our Frames of Reference. I hope you enjoy your exploration.

Sincerely,

Jean Illsley Clarke, Editor

**Cathexis Reader* by Jacqui Lee Schiff et al, Harper & Row, 1975.

What is Frame of Reference?

Every adult has a special, unique way of looking at the world and of interpreting life's events. This complex system of pervasive and ever present responses is called Frame of Reference. It is built bit by bit from childhood as a composite of the decisions the child makes in responses to personal experiences and to family and culture.

In any given situation there may be five or fifty possible ways a child could respond, decide and behave. Since children have to survive in the family in which they find themselves, they usually choose life-saving decisions that are tolerated or rewarded by the family. Out of these highly individual experiences, and the decisions we make about our experiences, each person constructs an individual view of the world, a Frame of Reference. Then he uses his Frame, his unique set of attitudes, beliefs, feelings, habits of approach and physical responses to define himself and others. On it he bases his interpretations of the world and his responses to it. Without even thinking about it, he uses his Frame as a filter to screen incoming data. "This is true, that is boring, this is safe, that is a threat, this is how it should be, that is weird."

The Importance of Our Frames

Our Frames serve us well because they let us know what things to pay attention to and what to ignore. From our Frames we draw our approach to life; our internal feeling and thinking ways of interpreting life experiences.

Our frames also limit us because they encourage us to ignore some dangers and some opportunities for growth, joy and celebration. Frames also cause difficult communication problems when people are trying to discuss issues about which they have very different assumptions.

If it is part of our Frame of Reference that it is important to change and grow, it will be possible and sometimes easy for us to incorporate new data and change our responses. If we have made decisions that change is hard or hopeless or that one can't teach an old dog new tricks, we will need to change those decisions first in order to free our energy for needed growth.

We Built Our Frame of Reference From Necessity

If, as we examine our Frame, some of the things we find don't seem to make sense, remember, we built our frames from necessity. All people have a need to make sense out of life. This

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is not difficult when what is going on around us seems sensible. However, when the experiences that life offers don't make sense, we are puzzled and confused. When adults have an experience that doesn't make sense they try to change the situation, or they move away. If they feel powerless to change the situation or to move away, they accommodate, they adjust.

For children, the process is different. Since children do not have much power to move away or to change the situation in which they live, they must adjust. Young children can accommodate to difficult situations by changing themselves in ingenious ways. Sometimes they forgo important developmental tasks in order to please or placate their parenting ones and thereby assure care for themselves. For children, this can be a matter of life or death. A child cannot be blamed for finding a way to stay alive. Let us remember this, with love, and refrain from passing harsh judgement on ourselves or others for building our Frames as we did.

Some of these accommodations, made at a very early age, work well later in life and others do not. Some parts of our Frames help us to be responsible, open, congruent, and respectful of ourselves and others. Some may not.

What Influences Our Frames?

You may have started to think about some of the experiences that contributed to your Frame of Reference. Cultural and personal influences that are pervasive in the whole atmosphere of our lives, especially in the early years, are very deep in our Frames.

For example, a Washington bureaucrat, a veiled Pakistani matron, a Russian diplomat and a Bolivian campesino have built their Frames based on their cultural views of the world, each shaped by their individual life experiences. Small wonder that their interpretations of life differ so widely.

Other factors from which we build our frames are: religion, geography, sexuality, birth order, race, physical characteristics and health, family, community, our knowledge, ignorance of or misunderstanding of history, decade of birth and individual giftedness. Let us look at four examples.

Religion

Religious heritage is a powerful part of our frames. Fred, a member of the Methodist church, is aware of differences in thinking between himself and a Catholic friend. But, when he goes to work in a Muslim country, he encounters very deep, pervasive attitudes that differ from his Judeo-Christian heritage. He may discover personal values based on his own heritage that he had never thought of before.

Birth Order

Think about the impact of *birth order*. Bryan is the youngest of four brothers and sisters. He can only guess what it is like for Matthew to be the oldest or for Bobby to be an only child. A birth order change is one of the major adjustments that some children have to make when their parents remarry and blend families. If Matthew, the oldest, finds himself third to two older brothers, he experiences a profound change in role. His old Frame doesn't work as well as it did before.

Sexuality

Sexuality is a huge influence in Frame of Reference. Listen to how one family's perception of sex roles affects communications. Eleanor is a daughter and a mother and she views her husband and sons through the frame she brought from her home. As a female she has been conditioned to respond to people in a nurturing and conciliatory way. When she asks her men for advice, she expects them to be interested in her feelings and her problem, and to nurture her. They often respond in the way her husband's family taught him to be male, they act disinterested in her feelings and sure about the problem. They offer advice about skills and solutions, often preceded by, "Here is what you should do." She feels neglected and they don't understand why.

Conversely, when her son asks Eleanor what she thinks he should do about something, she asks how he feels about the situation. He becomes irritated because he wanted options, "not a personal grilling."

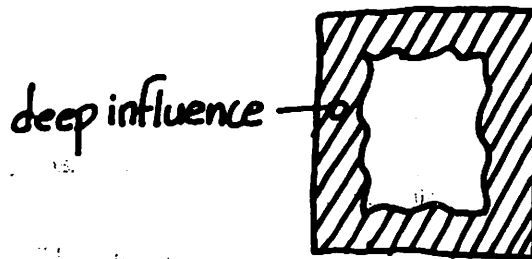
Decade of Birth

The *decade of birth* is a significant factor in Frame of Reference. Marie, age 67, is quick with math and doesn't really trust computers. Daniel, her fifteen year old grandson, takes his skills with his computer for granted, treating the machine almost as an extension of his very self. Marie valued being a virgin at marriage. Daniel has observed from the media that sexual intercourse is an accepted or even expected activity, within a casual relationship.

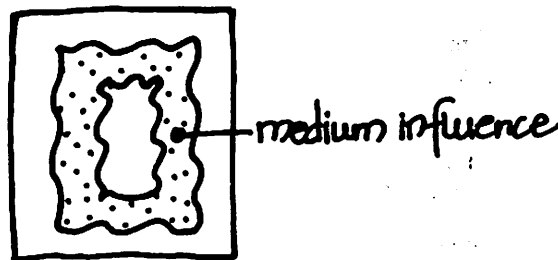
Suggested Activity: Examining Our Frames

Since a large part of the Frame is developed during childhood, it is often outside of awareness, and the use of it becomes automatic. During our adult years we embellish our Frames but we often leave the basic childhood decisions intact unless we deliberately examine those perceptions, decisions and responses and change them.

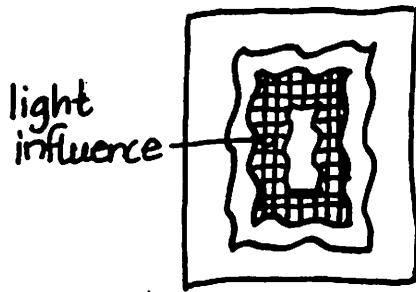
You can think of your frame of reference as a picture frame or a window frame that is bordered and held together by an outside band of *deeply entrenched* aspects — which may be so much a part of you that you are not aware of them.



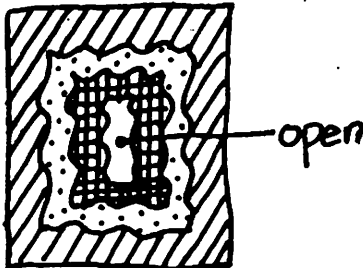
Inside are *influential* aspects that we are aware of and sometimes think about changing.



Toward the center are aspects that we are aware of and can easily examine.

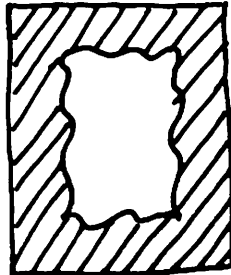


The open space in the center represents the part of our Frame through which we look when we are most fully aware of the data we are taking in and are not shaping it to make it compatible with attitudes and decisions we already hold.



Step One — Deep Influences

Examine the outside first, the most deeply entrenched part of the Frame. Look at the words: *religion, geography, history, birth order, cultural and ethnic heritage, race, physical attributes and health, sexuality, giftedness, decade of birth, family and community*. You can start to identify your Frame by writing a few words about how each of these aspects was important for you. Write directly on the Frame on the insert page. The importance may have been positive or negative in your life or a mixture of both. Write as many things as you can think of today. You can add others later.

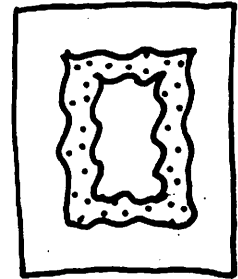


- Think about *geography*. You may have grown up in the mountains, or in a very warm climate, or lived on a dead end street where it was hard to get past the block bully.
- For *giftedness* you may note a gift that set you apart from the other kids. Or perhaps your brother had a gift so great that you felt second rate.
- You may have special *physical* characteristics. You may be left handed, well coordinated, or have some physical limitation from birth or an accident.
- Now consider *family and community* as aspects of your life that have had a deep effect on you. Perhaps you are an immigrant, are adopted, had a parent die or leave early in your life, lived with parental alcoholism, were victimized by incest, or physical or psychological abuse, were born a very active, fast paced person in a laid-back family. Note how often you moved, where you lived and what your community, school and play group was like.
- Now make notes about your *religion* or lack of it, your *birth order*, your *race*, your *cultural heritage*, your *decade of*

birth, and any other influential experience you think about. Perhaps your family was buffeted by a war or a depression or a natural disaster or by some great good fortune.

Step Two — Medium Influences

The next section of the Frame holds the assumptions about yourself and the world that have grown out of easily remembered experiences in the family where you grew up. Start to look at these experiences and decisions and attitudes by examining five critical areas of your early experiences.



1. Criticism/Affirmation.

Were you criticized or affirmed more often? How did you respond to each? What decisions did you make about how to handle criticism? Affirmation? Which do you give more of?

2. Irresponsibility/Responsibility

Who was responsible in your family? How was irresponsibility handled? Were you expected to be responsible? Were you taught skills for responsibility? Were there sex or age role differences in who was responsible for what? Did people think and feel for each other? When? About what?

3. Secrets/Honesty

Was honesty valued? How were secrets handled? What was kept secret? What were you taught about what secrets to keep? About when and whom to tell what?

4. Double-binds/Consistency or Congruence

Double-binds are situations, requests or demands that are both true and are incongruent or mutually exclusive. Some examples are:

I love you/Go away

I love you/until you grow up, disgrace me, are real, are messy, have needs, are sexual

God loves you/You will never be quite good enough for God

You should know how to do that/You did it wrong

Be successful/Be dependent

Grow up/Don't grow up

Don't make a mess/Have fun

Do whatever you like/Do it my way

Go and learn/You can't learn

Be perfect/Don't be better than I am

Always tell the truth/I don't want to know

Were there a few, some, lots of double-binds in your family of origin? What happened if you pointed one out? Do you easily recognize double-binds now? How do you deal with them? Do you give conflicting messages often? What value was put on congruence? What value do you put on congruence now?

5. Scarcity/Abundance

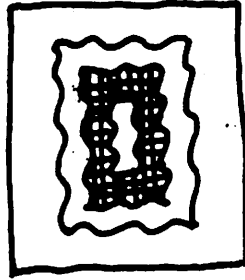
What was there enough of? (Love, money, food, excitement, stimulation, time, energy, good health, support, freedom, laughter, etc.) What was there a shortage of or what were you warned to expect there could be a limited amount of? What do

you expect a shortage of now? An abundance?

6. Add other topics that are in the medium influence part of your Frame.

Step Three — Light Influences

Closest to the center of your Frame are the values and assumptions you hold but are expected to examine and make decisions about routinely. For example, let us say that you have a preferred political party. If your political affiliation is firmly placed near the outside of your frame, you can cast your vote by party line without thinking a lot about the candidate. If your political party preference comes from the medium influences layer, you will do more data gathering, deciding, and even worrying before you cast your vote and it may be difficult to vote for a candidate from the other party. If your position about party is in the light influence layer you may start the campaign thinking, "I hope I can vote party preference, but I will learn about the candidates and what the parties are doing, and then decide how to vote."



Or, look at an example from an area of parenting. If you were beaten regularly from an early age and you decided early "That is the way life is", beating your children will come naturally for you. If you were beaten but really never quite gave in to full acceptance of it and kept some thoughts that there must be options for disciplining children, you may use physical punishment without much guilt but will also look for other methods of discipline. If you had little experience with physical punishment and believe there are better ways to discipline, and you raise children with someone who expects to beat children, you will have much thinking and deciding to do.

List a few of the things you think carefully about that you are aware some other people take for granted or respond to automatically. Jot those words here or on the third layer in from the edge of your Frame.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

Step Four — Strengths and Weaknesses

Now that you have started to examine the layer of experiences, behaviors and decisions that make up your Frame of Reference. Think about the following questions.

- What are the strengths in my Frame?

- Have I identified strengths that I was taking for granted? Note them.

- Are there some parts of my Frame that I want to change? Note them.

- What are some ways I can get support and help while I make those changes?

Loving Your Frame

As you learn more about your Frame, please remember not to be judgmental about it. Celebrate the positive aspects and accept any negative, even painful ones, as past experiences that you learned from. If you are tempted to think of yourself as a victim, try switching to "I am a survivor". If you find things you wish to overcome, try thinking, "I will now claim a new part of my life or another part of me." By bringing your own Frame of Reference into awareness, you have the opportunity to celebrate the many strengths you find. If it was not all you wanted, grieve your losses so you will be able to forgive yourself and your parents, and make the changes you want to make.

For most of us this is a sometimes painful but highly rewarding lifetime journey. You can visualize and affirm yourself as you go about this process.

Visualize yourself with a broad understanding of your Frame of Reference and a deep appreciation of the family and cultural heritage that is embedded within it.

Affirm your ability to explore your Frame — "I can become more aware of my Frame each day. I can appreciate its uniqueness and learn to appreciate the Frames of others."

Suggested Group Activity Comparing Frames

This activity allows people to compare Frame information without arguing.

Choose one topic and ask each person in the group, "Will you tell what you learned about that topic during your growing-up years and what you believe now?" Other people listen and can ask clarifying questions but are not to judge or comment. There may be great differences in Frames, even within families, as in the following example.

"What did you learn about war in your family of origin and what do you believe now?"

Male, age 50+

I learned that war is glorious and I served in the Korean War. I never saw combat and I got to see some of the world. I thought it was a good deal. Now I'm not so sure about it.

FRAME OF REFERENCE

Cultural & Ethnic Heritage

Religion

Geography

FAMILY

COMMUNITY

Birth Order

History

LIGHT INFLUENCE

MEDIUM INFLUENCE

Decade

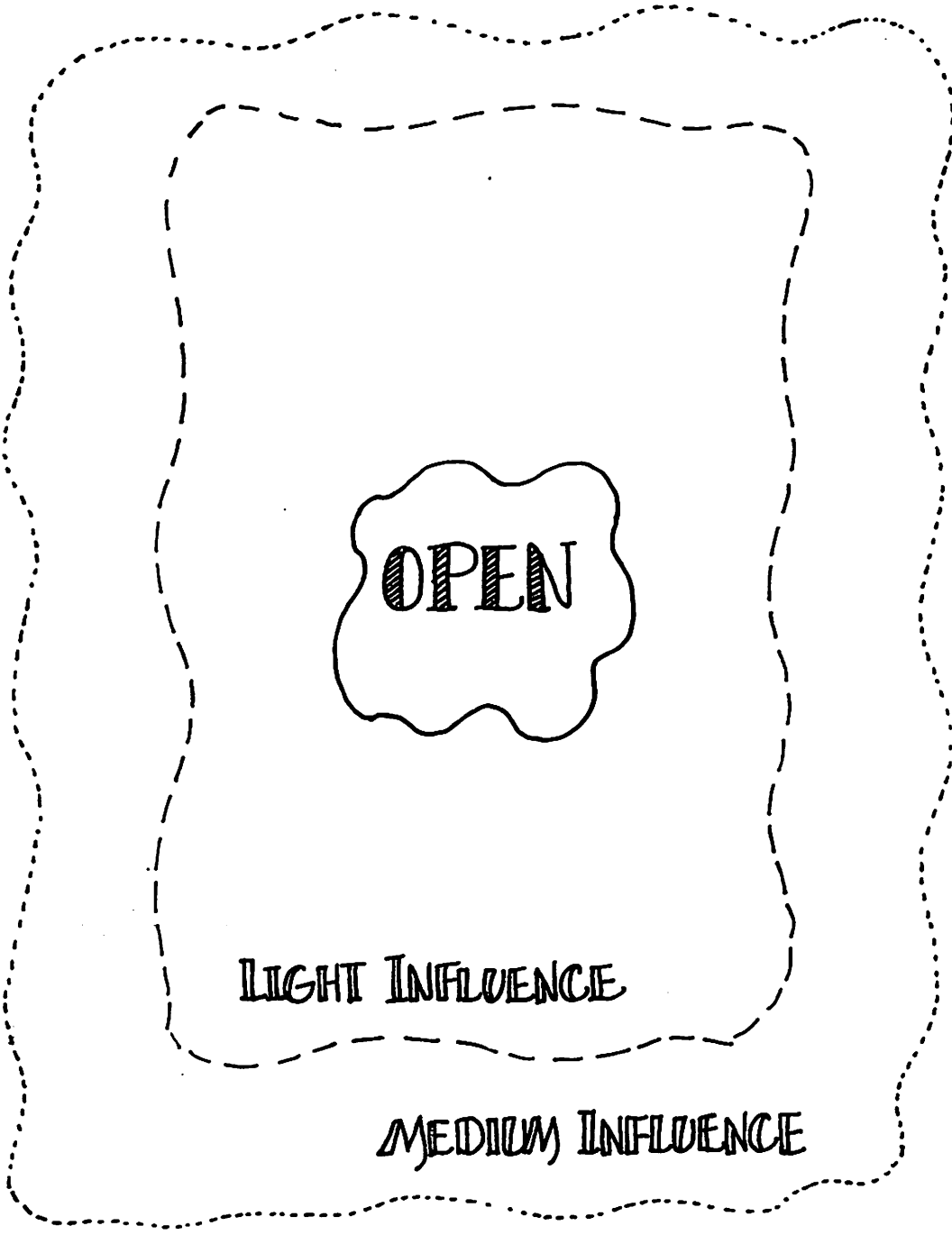
DEEP INFLUENCE

RACE

GIFTEDNESS

Physical Attributes & Health

Sexuality



Male, age 50+

I read stories about soldiers and sailors as a boy and it never entered my mind not to go into the service. When my health kept me out I had quite an adjustment to make. I still think it is good for young people to do a couple of years of service.

Female, age 50+

I thought men in uniform were the most handsome. I still think so.

Female, age 50+

In my family I learned that war is horrible. Now I think it is unthinkable.

Male, age 30+

I learned it is important to be ready to fight for your country. If we get into a war I'll go.

Male, age 20+

I learned that war was exciting and good for the economy. I think it doesn't solve problems and I am a conscientious objector.

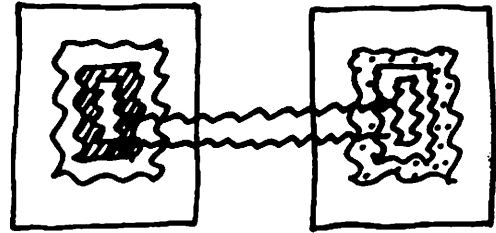
Female, age 20+

I learned that war is hard on all living things. I don't think anyone should have to go to war, but if men have to go I think women should too.

Male, age 20+

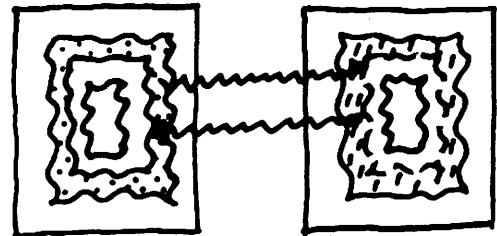
I grew up in the service and I mostly liked it as a way of life. I'm in the service now and plan to make a career of it.

- When people discuss a topic on which they hold different Frame positions, communication is difficult.



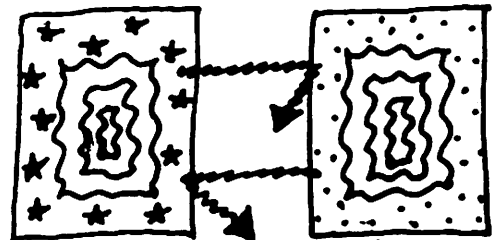
Different values, easily changed influence

Communication is possible but challenging or uncomfortable



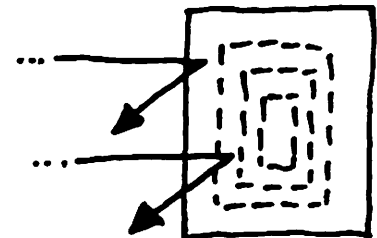
Different values, medium influence

Communication is difficult.



Different Values, deep influences

Communication is very difficult, takes great effort on both sides.

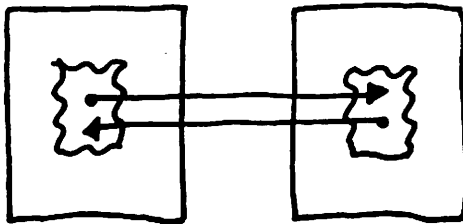


- When people are exposed to or confronted with data that is counter to or threatens their Frame of Reference, they often deny or deflect or alter the data by the process of discounting, as described in the last two issues of WE.

How Frames of Reference Affect Communication

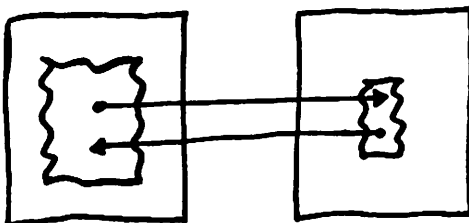
Frames can ease or confuse communication.

- When people are discussing a topic on which they are both open, communication flows easily as each seeks and shares information.



Both open, easy communication

- When people discuss a topic on which they hold similar Frame experiences and decisions at any level, communication flows easily.



Same values, easy communication

Suggested Activity

Four Ways of Separating

by Jean Illsley Clarke

This is an activity that a group can do because someone is going to separate from the group, because someone in the group is going through some difficult separation, or because it is interesting to learn about separation.

We go through many separations throughout our lives. We separate from our families of origin, we separate from friends, lovers, jobs, organizations, clubs, groups, ideas, dreams, and from our own children.

Background:

Read or tell:

There are four general ways that late teenagers separate from their families. Many of us, without realizing that we do so, use the same process when we go through other separations in our lives. Sometimes we expect other people to separate the way we do. This exercise will give the opportunity to experience some alternative ways of separating and to consider whether we want to make any changes in the way we separate or in the ways we support other people's separations.

Post a poster or write on a board:

1. Leave
2. Out and Back
3. Stay
4. Ejected

Say: These are the four general ways teenagers use to separate from their families. Some people separate pleasantly or with excitement and anticipation. Other people act angry and as if the people they are separating from are despicable, or disgusting or at least terribly boring.



The first way of separating, "Leave," is used by the child who leaves home in a calm way or in an angry way, is gone for some time (at school, at a job, in the armed services), and then comes home as an adult and functions as a responsible adult in the extended family. He or she may live at home as an adult or may live someplace else.



The second way of separating is "Out and Back." This child leaves home for awhile, then moves back home for a few months, then lives with friends for a few months, then moves back home again. This process of separation is completed when the young person is living at home or someplace else and is functioning as an equal adult in the world, not a financially or emotionally dependant child.



The third way of separating is to "Stay at Home," to grow up and function as a responsible adult in the family. This used to be very popular in America when we lived on big farms or took children into a family business. It is unpopular in some parts of the American culture now where it is viewed as unusual or as an inability to cut the apron strings. It is possible for the child to stay at home and become a financially responsible, emotionally differentiated adult.



Being "Ejected" by the family is the fourth way of separating. The child who chooses this way does whatever it takes to get the family to say, "Sorry, you can't live here and do that. You have to live somewhere else if you are going to act that way." So the child leaves; the separation is completed when the child has become a full, responsible adult in the community and is also functioning as a competent adult in the extended family.



Activity:

1. Hand each person a cardboard or paper frame with a number 1, 2, 3 or 4 written on the back.
2. Ask people to work in pairs, one person playing the adult role, and one playing the role of the separating teenager. Make sure that the two people working together do not have the same number.
3. Ask each person to notice the number on his or her frame but **not to tell** his or her partner what that number is. Ask each person to think of the frame as a reminder that he or she is looking at the situation from his or her "frame" of reference about separating, and to pretend that the way of separating indicated by the number is the correct, the only real way that people should separate.
4. Say: The young person finishes high school or vocational school or a job that he/she held, while living at home, in June. It is the end of April and the two of you are discussing summer plans. Young person, you look through your frame of reference and make your plans to separate in the way that is indicated by your number. Remember, that is the "right"

Practicing Communications: Four Ways of Separating

When people have different Frames and want to communicate, one way they can help themselves to do that is to deliberately explore their own possible unrecognized assumptions and to empathize with the other person's. The following activity, Four Ways of Separating, is one way to do that.

This activity is reprinted from *WE*, Vol 2, No 5. Many people have found it helpful and you can adapt it to examine any topic you like. Remember, if you think the assumptions come from the deep influence or medium influence part of the Frames of Reference, to warn people to role play as if this assumption is so widely true it need not be mentioned.

way to separate as far as you are concerned. Adult, you look through your frame of reference and make your plans to help your child separate the way that is indicated by the number on your frame. Remember, for you that is the "right" way and you expect your child to do it that way.

5. Call the group back together after 5 to 8 minutes.
6. Ask people to resume the role play with one of them saying "We are talking about separation. Maybe we each have assumptions about how that should be done?" After three minutes call the group back together.

Ask the following discussion questions:

1. Will you share one thing you have learned from this exercise?
2. How many of you think that people may make separations difficult by wanting other people to separate in a certain way?
3. Did anyone notice that they have a favorite way of separating that they have used many times?
4. Did anyone notice that the adult might be having more difficulty with the idea of separation than the child was having?
5. Is there anything else that you want to share or discuss?

Say: Think about the statement, "It is hard to say Hello if you haven't said Goodbye. Before you can say hello to a grown up child you need to say goodbye to the idea of having a dependent child. Before you can say hello to a new dream, occupation, or relationship, you need to say goodbye to the old one if it is no longer possible or healthy." Ask: If you agree with this statement, what messages or permissions do you need to help you make separations? People may want to write their messages on slips of paper and take them home, or have someone read them aloud.

OPENING ACTIVITY
For Identifying Deeply Held Beliefs

- Hand out name tags.
- Choose a partner. Make a name tag for her.
- Ask her to imagine that she is picked up by a ship from outer space and taken to a far away "civilization." In that place the people or creatures have values that are opposite to the ones we hold.
- Ask her to imagine which of their values would be most difficult for her to accept.
- Introduce your partner and tell the group about her value if she is willing for you to share that information.

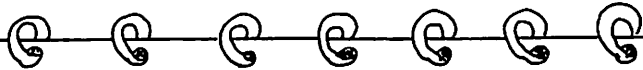


... until I was eight years old I believed that my sister was my twin... Never mind that she's four years younger than me! But so many people said, "Oh, you look just like each other!" that I decided we must be twins. And I told lots of people that I had a twin sister...

CLOSING ACTIVITY THAT OFFERS EVERYONE A POSITIVE PERSONAL MESSAGE

At the end of the meeting, briefly review the activities of the meeting.

- Ask several people to identify one thing they think very differently about now than they did as a child.
- Ask for Resentments. Listen to resentments, do not defend or explain.
- Ask for Appreciations.



Suggested Format for Group Meetings

Place _____
 Date _____
 Time _____
 Person in Charge _____

Program:

- Opening activity that offers everyone a positive personal message
- Ground rules
- Celebrating wins and sharing problems
- Asking for support
- Practice skills, new learnings, play
- Suggestion circle
- Plan the next meeting
- Resentments and Appreciations
- Closing activity that offers everyone a positive personal message.

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Led by Jean Illsley Clarke.
 Write to WE for details.

Edited by Jean Illsley Clarke
Design by Marnie Lilja Baehr

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- Thoughts on theory and purpose of support groups
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