

ON EMPTINESS AND CLOSENESS

PART I

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Distance

Family therapists increasingly are using the ideas and language of movement to describe the many complex, interwoven patterns and reactions that exist in all families. This language is useful in teaching people that there are options to just standing still; that they have the option of distancing — moving away from others, or of moving closer to others. Standing still represents the helpless position, and therapists have spent long frustrating hours trying to get helpless people to make a move — any kind of move — toward or away from others. Often though, the more the therapist tries the less the “patient” moves, and some thought might be given as to whether this problem lies in the therapist, the “patient” or both.

Getting distance in a family is difficult. It is not easy for the overconcerned mother to retreat from her child. A feeling in the child is like having the same feeling inside her own self. It is also difficult for a husband, obsessed with his wife and fearful of losing her, to pull back from her and give her room to define herself. It is difficult for the child, struggling with his own unsureness and wanting independence at the same time, to leave home without an emotional cutoff from his parents. But when each of these situations is studied, the move that must be made is clear. Distance is necessary.

One can always take advantage of the available physical forms of distance — turning on television, taking a walk, reading a newspaper, going shopping — anything to avoid being in the presence of the other person. Distancing does not have to be done gracefully. One can scowl inside himself, kick the dog while walking around the block, or swear at a shopkeeper. No one in the family need know about these reactions. There is enough time to cool down and control oneself. In other words, the expression of negative feelings from the distant position will not neutralize the effectiveness of the move.

Closeness

Movement toward closeness is another story. *Closeness* results when two people move toward each other and get as close as possible without fusing. To avoid fusing into one, there must always be some space between them so that each can know where his own individual self begins and where it ends, and what is inside himself, and what inside the other person.

Closeness requires a keen sense of self-identity and self-differentiation. To the extent that either or both of these elements are lacking, fusion will cause a blending of one self into the other. Such fusion results in distance, as two people try to redefine themselves by wrenching themselves apart. In contrast to distancing, the feelings *inside* a person and *between people* are critically important in developing closeness and preventing fusion.

Closeness and Structure

A great deal is known about the structure that is involved in the development of a personal relationship. In such a relationship, we know that each person must assume responsibility for his own feelings. He must avoid telling others what to do; avoid triangles; stop reading the minds of others, and many other things. These structural notions are conducive to closeness. They are necessary because they allow closeness to happen. But, by themselves structural concepts will not create closeness. Closeness is not a natural phenomena. The desire for it is universal but one will never attain it by “doing what comes naturally.” One cannot force it. To force closeness is to kill it off. Forced closeness is experienced as a tremendous emotional push, a sense of being suffocated by another self. People will tend to either openly conflict with, or try to tune out or run away from such an emotional push. *Unlike distancing from another person, closeness must be accomplished gracefully.*

In the long run, closeness can only be accomplished by two people who both want it, and who appreciate both the beauty of such a relationship and

