COVID-19 as a Transformative Opportunity for Families and Therapists: Harnessing the Possibilities That Constraints Offer Us

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This article demonstrates several ways in which the constraints that the COVID-19 pandemic has posed for families can provide transformative opportunities to strengthen family relationships, become more resilient, and resolve conflicts and longstanding difficulties. Since most families worldwide have been greatly impacted on many fronts by the pandemic, they are looking to us for hope, guidance, and solutions for coping with high levels of anxiety about living in a world where life as we knew it has been turned on its head and we are struggling to cope with uncertainty about what the future will bring. However, in spite of all the limitations and health consequences COVID-19 has posed for our client families, the majority have been quite resourceful and creative in coming up with their own novel self-generated coping, problem-solving, and health-enhancing strategies well before we see them for the first time. Finally, the article discusses how the constraints of COVID-19 afford family therapists with many opportunities to further hone their therapeutic alliance-building skills, gain an intimate insider’s view of their clients’ daily lives that are not accessible in our offices, and co-design with them therapeutic experiments that can produce high-quality solutions.

Keywords: COVID-19, constraints, pretreatment change, radical acceptance, tele-health, counselling, family idea-generating

Key Points
1. Despite all of the constraints COVID-19 has placed on today’s families, we should never underestimate our clients’ resourcefulness, creativity, and resilience in coming up with novel self-generated coping, problem-solving, and health-enhancing solutions that we can utilise in our work together.
2. COVID-19 has provided families with much more time together for high-quality fun and meaningful activities without the distraction of digital screens.
3. Radical acceptance, Buddhist principles, and family mindfulness practices can reduce stress, provide emotional balance, and strengthen family members’ immune systems.
4. The constraints of COVID-19 have provided a multiplicity of transformative opportunities for families to strengthen their relational bonds, become more resilient, embrace gratitude, and resolve longstanding conflicts and other difficulties.
5. Telehealth counselling has afforded family therapists a great opportunity to enhance their listening, observation, and other relationship skills, gain an intimate insider’s view of their client families’ lives, co-design high-quality solutions together, and be more daring and creative with our use of self in the therapeutic process.

Introduction: The Constraints of COVID-19 as a Transformative Gift for Families and Therapists

Constraints like COVID-19 are often described in a negative way, as something that limits us or prevents us from changing something or a situation. For many, COVID-
19 has sparked widespread panic, social isolation, and a strong sense of hopelessness and despair about the future and the possibility of ever returning back to the world that we knew prior to the pandemic. Initially, when the pandemic struck and we were in lockdown, I was having grave difficulty personally and professionally adjusting to having to make major lifestyle changes, such as not being able to go to concerts, sporting events, and movie theatres; scheduled international workshops becoming webinars; and transitioning from in-person couple and family therapy sessions to seeing all my clients virtually. However, once I made the mental shift of accepting and viewing the new COVID-19 reality for what it is, by learning how to live with uncertainty and letting go of pessimism and frustration, it helped me to be more present and playful with my clients in our virtual sessions. I could also see more clearly all the possibilities the pandemic could offer us in our personal and professional lives. I discovered that constraints can be a gift for both our clients and us. They help us to step out of our comfort zones to take more risks, be less rational and more out-of-the-box creative problem solvers, adopt a kaleidoscopic perspective when approaching challenging situations or problems, elevate our motivational levels to complete projects when our backs are up against the wall with tight deadlines in place, and in the case of COVID-19, strengthen our family relationships by spending more high-quality time together. According to Morgan and Barden (2015):

Constraints are catalytic forces that stimulate exciting new approaches and possibilities. They can make us more than we were, rather than less we could be. In play, we understand that our limitations our favorite game’s rules impose also give that game character, energy, and pleasure.

In this article, I present five major ways we can empower families in spite of the constraints that COVID-19 has imposed on their lives. The therapeutic strategies presented are designed not only to improve family communications and strengthen family relationships but to attend to the mind, body, and spiritual dimensions of family members to help them become more resilient and strengthen their immune systems to prevent them from falling prey to COVID-19. Following this discussion, I present a variety of ways in which the constraints of the pandemic have provided us with a great opportunity to be more therapeutically flexible and improvisational; further hone our relationship skills; gain a rare intimate insider’s view of our client families’ lives, such as learning about their rituals, highly cherished pets, possessions, and hobbies and how they manage stressors and crises; and co-design with families novel and effective therapeutic experiments in our telehealth family therapy sessions. Case illustrations are provided throughout the article.

**Five Major Strategies for Resiliency Enhancement and Strengthening Family Relationships**

Below, I present five major therapeutic strategies and rituals that are specifically designed to improve family communications and relationships and empower them to become more resilient; they are also health-enhancing to help protect them from COVID-19. The five strategies are as follows:
1. The family treasure chest: inquiring about and utilising family pretreatment changes.
2. COVID-19 as an opportunity to resolve longstanding conflicts and transform relationships.
3. COVID-19 as an opportunity to embrace gratitude as a family value and ritual.
4. Family adventure missions: escaping from the COVID-19 shackles and taking on family challenges out in nature.
5. Radical acceptance, key Buddhist principles, and family mindfulness practices.

The Family Treasure Chest: Utilising Family Pretreatment Changes

Prior to contacting our offices for service, families often take active measures to prevent their difficulties from getting much worse or better yet, have begun to resolve them on their own. Instinctually, when faced with adversity and life challenges, family members often know how to mobilise their strengths, resources, and self-healing capacities to better cope and co-generate potential building blocks for high-quality solutions. The best way to gain access to families’ treasure chests, which are rich in client natural gifts, life passions, and possibilities, is to offer the following modified for COVID-19 pretreatment experiment to families prior to coming in for their first appointments:

Over the years and during this pandemic, my colleagues and I have been amazed how creative, resourceful, and resilient families are in that, well before we see them for their first appointments, they are already taking big steps to better cope with the pandemic and their difficulties or better yet, beginning to resolve them on their own. To better come to know your strengths and resourcefulness, I would like you (the parent caller) to pull out your imaginary magnifying glass and on a daily basis pay close attention to what your son/daughter/kids is/are doing that you would like to continue to have happen and write your observations down regarding those positive behaviours. In addition, I want you to pay close attention to what you and your partner are doing during those times that may be contributing to those positive behaviours and write down what your actions were too. Please bring your list of important discoveries to our appointment next week so I can learn about what works and what further progress you have made.

(Selekman, 2017, p. 20)

Frequently, families come to their first appointments reporting four to five self-generated and effective coping and problem-solving strategies that both the children and parents have successfully implemented and that are either preventing further escalation of their originally reported difficulty or already improving it. The therapist’s job is to amplify and consolidate each of the family member’s reported self-generated coping and problem-solving strategies, which instills hope, optimism, and is an invitation for family members to compliment themselves on their creativity and resourcefulness. Even with all of the limitations COVID-19 has posed for families, they are not only taking healthy and positive steps to better cope with the pandemic but with co-generating creative solutions that even the most seasoned family therapist would never have come up with. With the help of the pretreatment experiment, the first family meeting becomes like the second session and it can greatly reduce length of stay in treatment. My colleagues and I have found that client self-generated pretreatment changes are not flukes or pseudo-flights into health but are embedded in positive
self-reinforcing patterns that persist throughout the treatment process and well into the treatment outcome (McKeel, 2012; Seleman, 2017).

**Practice example**

The case example below illustrates how even families presenting with serious difficulties and extensive treatment histories referred to us during the COVID-19 pandemic can respond quite well to this pretreatment experiment.

Sixteen-year-old Johnny was referred to me for marijuana abuse. He had been to two chemical dependency programs and had seen a number of outpatient therapists before me for his marijuana abuse and delinquent behaviours. He was recently caught with an ounce of marijuana and was placed on probation and court-ordered to see me for family therapy. His father Roger reportedly had an alcohol abuse problem and once got a DUI (drinking under the influence violation). The mother also had shared with me on the telephone that both her husband and Johnny had increased their substance use since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was greatly impacting their marital relationship and her son's academic performance. According to the probation officer, the parents had marital conflict issues and rarely agreed on how best to manage Johnny.

One week after receiving the pretreatment change experiment, the family came in reporting a number of monumental changes. One day, the father had an epiphany that in order to save his son from becoming a drug addict and/or going to jail, he had approached Johnny and told him, ‘Let’s do this together, I will stop drinking if you make a commitment to stopping your weed use.’ Johnny was shocked that his father was willing to give up his drinking to help strengthen their relationship. He had longed for a closer relationship with his father for a long time, which the alcohol abuse undermined and created more distance in their relationship. Roger also had disposed of all alcohol in the house and attended two Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. Johnny had gone a whole week without using and the hair follicle analysis he was randomly given had indicated no THC or other substances present. He made a commitment to stay away from his drug-using friends or any locations where drugs would be available to him. Johnny was keenly aware that any violation of his probation contract would result in having to do juvenile detention time and he wanted to avoid this at all costs.

Finally, the other huge change was the parents wanting to contract with me to resolve their marital conflicts and try and become better parents for Johnny. When asked about how they came to this realisation, both parents shared that they had been having very deep and long civil conversations about how these changes were necessary for Johnny to stay out of further trouble and they wanted to be the best possible parents for him. Not only did I shower the family with compliments but fell out of the chair in our virtual session amazed how in one week they had done such incredible work. I also asked them what their consultation fee was so they could come into my office in the future and help me out with other families plagued by alcohol and substance abuse difficulties. They laughed. Future sessions involved amplifying and consolidating the family gains, and goal-maintenance strategies like keeping track of the positive triggers that were helping the two men to stay on track and remain abstinent, and worst-case scenario planning.

My friend and colleague Michele Weiner-Davis used to have a sign in her office for clients that read: ‘Please solve your problems before you come in here so I can...’
help you more.’ Johnny’s family was living proof of this suggestion, that when faced with adversity they mobilised their strengths and resources to co-generate their own effective solutions for their difficulties. Clients’ epiphanies like Roger’s and their serendipitous practices are two important areas for therapists to inquire about with families when reviewing their pretreatment changes and throughout the course of family therapy. Serendipitous practices are rituals or activities our clients engage in that tend to bring them good luck and offer a context ripe for solution-finding. Finally, with families reporting a number of pretreatment changes but still having some concerns about a particular problem area, we can negotiate solvable goals and in the spirit of doing more of what works, have them experiment with some of their own self-generated coping and problem-solving strategies in an attempt to resolve this difficulty.

**Covid-19 as an Opportunity to Resolve Longstanding Conflicts and Transform Relationships**

One major blessing COVID-19 has provided for families is more time together than ever before to engage in high-quality and meaningful activities, to strengthen their relationship bonds, and to resolve longstanding conflicts and difficulties in their relationships. It has always been my clinical preference to both utilise and have families co-generate their own novel ideas and solutions for achieving all of the above. Our job is to co-create with families a therapeutic climate ripe for change where the main emphasis is on their competencies and resourcefulness to increase their awareness of their key strengths and encourage them to tap their expertise to co-generate solutions.

Below, I present two brief case examples that illustrate how creative and resourceful parents and adolescents have been at tapping their expertise to resolve longstanding conflicts and transform their relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Practice example**

Seventeen-year-old William had a long history of poor academic performance and anxiety difficulties. The pandemic had further exacerbated William’s anxiety problems. For years, William had lived in the shadows of and was frequently told by his father Jim that he should aspire to be like his two academically successful older siblings and ‘not be a loser.’ According to William, for years his father has told him he was ‘a loser,’ lectured and yelled at him about taking his schoolwork more seriously and needing to help out more around the house during his leisure time rather than playing his ‘stupid videogames.’ William had shared with me that he feels highly anxious around his father, and even hearing his voice would trigger paralysing anxiety where he could not concentrate on his homework or whatever he was engaged in.

In my work with him, William voiced a strong desire to improve his relationship with his father, not only by being more assertive with him but for the two of them to build and repair things together. Despite his academic difficulties, William aspired to become an engineer or work in the research and design department of a company. William would become quite animated when he showed me in our telehealth counselling sessions the proto-type sketches he had made of future gadgets, machines, and cars he would like to make some day, how he likes ‘to tinker with things to create something new,’ and ‘rapidly experiment’ with and picture in his mind how his inventions would work. He had never shared this passion or his future career dreams.

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with his father. William also had a great idea about building a kayak out of wood and asking his father to build it with him. He had already made his prototype sketch and found some wood boards in their garage but would need some additional supplies to complete the project.

After our first family meeting, William requested that I see him alone for some sessions out of fear that his father would more than likely blow up at him in our family meetings, which had occurred once before when they had been in family therapy together. Knowing that his father was working at home due to COVID-19 and around more, William courageously agreed to step out of his comfort zone and try a session with his dad and let him know both about his kayak idea and future career aspirations. Much to William’s surprise, Jim not only agreed to build the kayak with him but expressed hope that his son could finally visualise a future career path for himself.

After a few weeks of hard work together and some highly productive father-son family therapy sessions, not only did they build a beautiful-looking kayak but the father invited William to help him fix his old truck and cook some meals together. Thanks to William’s masterful ‘tinkering’ abilities that the father came to discover, he helped him to successfully repair his truck. In response to the great job that William had done, Jim for the first time asked his son to join him in the kitchen to help him prepare some gourmet meals for the family and some visiting relatives. Gourmet cooking was a passion and a strength of Jim’s that William had admired. Over time, not only did these two men transform their relationship for the better, but William started doing better academically and his anxiety difficulties were resolved.

In some cases, it is the parents that have taken the lead in utilising their professional strengths in their work roles to empower their children and transform their relationships with them. Often when parents can adopt a pause and reflect position when the children are pushing their buttons and triggering anger and frustration, they can avoid unproductive power struggles and arguments. Additionally, it is more productive to coach parents to focus on times when children are cooperating and being respectful and what parents are doing differently to promote positive behaviours. Once they discover what works, we should encourage them to do more of it!

**Practice example**

Mindy and her 15-year-old daughter Isabella had a long history of clashing and major power struggles about getting up for school and Isabella relinquishing her digital devices at bedtime. This pattern became so entrenched that Isabella refused to go to school and once the pandemic struck, attend her e-learning classes or do her homework, and she was failing all her subjects. In addition, she had major temper fits when confronted by Mindy and threatened to kill herself; three times she had been admitted to a psychiatric hospital and had been diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder. The father, George, tended to put his consulting work before his family and leave Mindy to manage Isabella’s challenging and provocative behaviours. There was a clear split between Isabella and her parents: according to Isabella, Mindy was the ‘bad parent,’ and George was the ‘good and fun parent’. In terms of strengths, Mindy used to be a professional actress and dancer she had starred in TV shows and movies and had had some success making short films. George had high-paying corporate jobs but before the pandemic had become a freelance consultant. However, he
struggled to bring in consistent work projects. Isabella’s top strengths were her intellect, great singing and acting abilities, and strong desire to make it to Broadway.

Family therapy was an emotional roller-coaster ride with Mindy’s family. In some sessions, Mindy and George would erupt into an intense blame-counter-blame exchange. Other times, when the parents were more unified and confronted Isabella she would storm out of the session and not come back. Both parents agreed that their current way of operating was not working and George agreed to step up as a disciplinarian in relation to mornings, bedtimes, confiscating digital devices at night, and managing Isabella’s e-learning school attendance and homework completion. Apparently, George used to take charge of Isabella’s school situation in the past and she had performed at a high academic level. George also was tired of bearing witness to and putting out fires in Mindy and Isabella’s relationship when they had intense clashes. He, like me, wanted to see them transform their relationship by having more positive interactions and utilising Isabella’s strengths.

I reminded them about Isabella’s future aspirations for a Broadway career and her love of singing and acting. We mutually agreed that George would take over with the mornings and bedtimes, and tightly monitor the school situation while Mindy would utilise her professional acting and dancing background talents to establish a more positive and playful relationship with her daughter. Mindy and Isabella subsequently spent a lot more high-quality time together singing and dancing, and watching and critiquing TV shows and movies, and Mindy shared her positive acting experiences with well-known actors and what had worked in her professional career. As a consequence, there was more warmth and positivity in their relationship, which completely transformed, with no more power struggles or clashes. Isabella attended her e-learning classes and completed her homework, and George did a masterful job of enforcing their rules and expectations, still carving out fun, high-quality time with his daughter.

COVID-19 as an Opportunity to Embrace Gratitude as Family Value and Ritual

Another effective way to strengthen family relationship bonds is to have the family create a gratitude and compliment box. The family can find an old shoebox and cut a slit in the top and the kids can be in charge of decorating it any way they wish. On two selected days a week, each family member writes on signed slips of paper things they are grateful for and appreciate about one another including:

- nice things they have done for one another that really resonated with them;
- family members’ qualities they appreciate;
- meaningful activities;
- special vacations;
- events engaged in together they treasure and have fond memories of;
- anything else they really like about their family and their lives.

After dinner on the selected slip delivery days, family members take turns reaching into the box and reading what is written on the slips, sharing the family member’s name. This family ritual can improve family communication, foster warmth and closeness in family relationships, and trigger positive emotions, the biggest bonus being hearing something new and special from each other. This links with a growing body of research which indicates that gratitude has psychological and physical health benefits: it increases optimism and happiness levels, neutralizes negative emotions,
helps us to be more empathic with family members and friends, calms our nervous systems, and improves sleep quality (Emmons, 2007; Froh & Bono, 2014).

**Family Adventure Missions: Escaping from the COVID-19 Shackles and Taking on Family Challenges in Nature**

In many ways COVID-19 has created the same monotonous reality for us that is analogous to what Phil the weatherman, played by Bill Murray, experiences in the hilarious movie *Groundhog Day*. Phil is covering the annual 2 February event in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania to determine whether Groundhog Phil will see his shadow when he is out in the sun. Folklore has it that if the groundhog sees his shadow, there will only be six more weeks of winter. Unfortunately, Phil gets ensnared in a repetitive pattern where the same Groundhog Day repeats itself ad nauseam. Over time, Phil becomes so familiar with the day’s events and people he will run into that he begins to experiment with altering what he does when approaching events about to happen and his interactions with people encountered. Eventually, he is able to break free from the redundant pattern by improvising and doing things differently and in the process becomes a more sensitive and caring person and finds love with his co-worker.

One fun and enjoyable way we can empower families to break free from the COVID-19 shackles and redundancies of life is to get out in nature and engage in a family adventure mission. This could entail going on a challenging and long canoe trip, hike, walk, bicycle ride, or swimming in a lake or in the ocean. The selected activities need to be physically challenging and outside of comfort zones. I leave it to the family to decide together what their outdoor adventure will be and where it will happen. They can decide in a given week when they engage in their family adventure mission. What typically happens is that family members come to love being out in nature, find it healing, and will do both the family adventure mission and engage in physical exercise activity solo. Families often report liking the challenge and workout and can choose different activities and locations for the family adventure mission. Whatever the selected family adventure mission, the repetitive cardio activity helps with stress and strengthens immune systems so family members are less likely to contract COVID-19. After regular weekly family adventure missions, family members tend to spontaneously introduce a solo exercise into their daily regimes. Finally, family adventure missions also help members find balance in their life, disconnect from digital devices and videogames, and spend high-quality time together in the offline world.

**Radical Acceptance, Key Buddhist Principles, and Family Mindfulness Practices**

For many of us, one of the biggest challenges with the COVID-19 pandemic is radical acceptance of the reality of the situation; as the popular saying goes, ‘It is what it is’ (Brach, 2004). Most of us have complained, ruminated, and stewed and fretted about the pandemic’s constraints on socialising with friends, going to concerts, the discomfort of going out for a meal, not being able to travel, and living life as we used to know it. It has been an existential crisis and has fuelled nihilistic fear about the future. It can be liberating to accept that we cannot control how long the pandemic will last or have the power to make it miraculously disappear but can change our
thinking about it. We can have control over the following: spending high-quality time with family members; having a healthy diet; what form of exercise we do and how often we do it; engaging in beloved hobbies or pursuing new ones; regularly staying connected to friends online or face-to-face wearing masks, and keeping the right amount of social distance, and so forth.

Eventually, we discover that there are a lot of things we do have control over and life becomes much less stressful; we can channel our time and energy into constructive action and achieve a sense of contentment. Buddhists have long believed that life is suffering, that is, there will always be rough moments or stretches of time in our lives that are stressful and emotionally upsetting, however, it is the suffering that makes us more resilient and reminds us that life is filled with trials and tribulations, and that we are all fallible. What is closely related to radical acceptance is the Buddhist principle of non-attachment (Hanh, 1999). Ultimately, when one adopts a daily mindfulness meditation practice, they learn how to observe negative thoughts and feelings passing through their mind without latching on to them or flinching in response. It is important for our clients to know that these negative thoughts and feelings are temporary visitors in their minds, not permanent residents. Once clients are on solid ground with radical acceptance and non-attachment they can calmly sit with strong negative emotions and powerful irrational and self-defeating thoughts without becoming depressed, anxious, ruminating, lashing out with anger, or engaging in self-destructive behaviours, and instead stay emotionally balanced and calm.

For parents, rather than yelling at their children and dishing out consequences, the Buddhist principles of loving-kindness and compassion can come into play when they resist attending e-learning classes, doing their homework, melt down about not being able to socialise with friends, or engage in sports and other activities they did prior to the pandemic. It is helpful for parents to be empathically attuned to their children’s emotional distress and listen to and comfort them in a loving and compassionate way, which will help to calm them and foster cooperative partnerships.

Family mindfulness practices can help families cope with the constraints of COVID-19 and here are two simple ones that family members can do separately and together daily.

**Sound meditation**

Family members find a quiet place in the house, get comfortable in a chair or on a couch, sit back with an open chest, close their eyes, and carefully tune into all the different sounds they hear around them. While listening to the different sounds, they are not to try and figure out why they are hearing those sounds but simply label what they are hearing silently to themselves. They are to do this mindfulness practice for 10–12 minutes.

**Mindful walking**

As a family they are to walk on a nature path and pay very close attention to all they see, hear, smell, and feel on their skin, such as the heat of the sun or a cool breeze, carefully observing the colouring and movements of birds, insects, and ground animals, listening closely for any sounds they make. Also, paying close attention to the fragrances of wildflowers, the greenery, and trees. If walking along a body of water, they are to pay close attention to the sound of the waves crashing onto the rocks, coming ashore, and the breeze on their skin. This mindfulness exercise can be done.
in conjunction with the family adventure mission, which will help ground family members in the moment, savouring all the beauty in nature.

Some of the physical benefits of maintaining a daily mindfulness practice include lowering breathing, heart and pulse rate, strengthening immune systems, and sleeping better. Psychologically, we are more centered, less reactive to negative emotions and thoughts, and tend to feel happier and more optimistic about our lives. For therapists, a daily mindfulness meditation practice helps us to be more present with our clients, and raises our awareness levels to pick up on important client nonverbal responses and positive interactions occurring in family sessions to utilise as potential building blocks for solution construction.

COVID-19 as an Opportunity for Family Therapists to Hone Their Relationship Skills and Fly Out of Centre as Daring and Playful Improvisational Artists

For many family therapists not used to doing telehealth counselling sessions, online family therapy has been a huge adjustment and for some it has been quite stifling. However, there are certain aspects of the constraints of the telehealth counselling experience that afford us special opportunities that we typically will not have in our offices. First, the telehealth counselling context compels us to pay much closer attention to family members’ nonverbal communications, to really be present and listen generously to their words with a third ear. Second, we have become like cultural anthropologists gaining an intimate insight into a family perspective providing a wealth of information about daily lives, values, what they find meaningful and special, how they manage challenges and crises, and their resourcefulness and key strengths in action. Third, we can strive to make our family sessions high-quality by tapping families’ inventiveness in co-designing therapeutic experiments and giving ourselves permission to fly out of centre by bringing humour, playfulness, and surprises to every family meeting. These great opportunities offered by telehealth family therapy are discussed below.

Telehealth Family Therapy: A Therapeutic Context Ripe for Building Strong Therapeutic Relationships and Seizing Opportunities

One big advantage of meeting with families online on their home turf is they tend to be more relaxed and natural in our interactions with them. There is a built-in level of comfort and safety that makes it easier for them to establish meaningful working alliances with us so we gain access more quickly to how family members get stuck in their problem-maintaining interactions and what works when they get along and problems are absent. The telehealth counselling experience in general seems to heighten our awareness and concentration levels, compelling us to pay close attention to family members’ nonverbal responses and listen more carefully with a third ear to how they respond to our questions and to one another in their interactions. By being more present with our clients, we can more easily seize opportunities for solution-building and disrupt problem-maintaining patterns as they occur in the therapeutic process.
Telehealth Family Therapists as Cultural Anthropologists

Another advantage of telehealth family therapy is that we are like cultural anthropologists gaining insight into the family perspective that we don’t get in our offices. We learn about their daily lives, how they manage life stressors and crises, what members find meaningful and special to them, and examples of their resourcefulness and key strengths in action. It is important to remember that successes families have had in successfully managing past stressful life situations and crises can be used as possible blueprints for solving their current presenting difficulties. From children we can learn about their highly cherished pets, special mementos and possessions, and hobby creations, such as the artwork, music, and items they created and are proud of. These important family treasure chest jewels can be utilised by crafting intriguing questions and co-constructing solutions. Some examples of the type of questions the author has asked in telehealth family therapy sessions are as follows:

- If Henry (the dog) could talk and offer you and your mother advice about how the two of you could argue less, what would he say?
- How might that help?
- What else would Henry suggest you try?
- If you discovered one day that your special quartz rock emits magical powers when you squeeze it, what would be the first thing you would want to change about your family with it?
- How would that change make a big difference to you?
- If we could enlarge your LEGO Star Wars space craft and it could really fly into outer space, what planet or location would you take your father to so that you can hang out together and work on making your relationship better?
- What would the two of you be doing together on the moon which would be really cool and fun?
- What will the two of you come to know about one another during your moon exploration?
- How specifically will your relationship have changed after returning to Earth?

These are just a few examples of how we can gain access to and utilise the meaningful possessions and creations that clients share with us for co-constructing solutions in the telehealth context.

Telehealth Family Therapists as Daring and Masterful Theatre Directors and Improvisational Artists

For many families, the COVID-19 experience has made life feel redundant and humdrum. Our job as telehealth family therapists is to bring novelty, humour, playfulness, and an element of surprise to their family therapy experience with us. We can do this by keeping our sessions upbeat and inviting so that families become rapidly engaged and look forward to trying out new ideas and strategies that grow out of our conversations. We need to give ourselves permission to be daring, provocative, and share jokes, stories, and meaningful quotes that fit family beliefs and offer a new way of viewing their presenting problem situation.

I like to even the playing field with families by co-designing therapeutic experiments together. This can be done in one of two ways. First, by utilising family
members’ strengths, favourite pastimes, life passions, and interests when crafting questions, and by solution-finding together. Second, we can use family idea-generating games so that family members can tap their creativity and inventiveness to come up with new ways of viewing their family situation and novel solutions for their presenting difficulties. Below, I present client examples that grew out of the use of these solution-finding methods for co-designing therapeutic experiments with families.

With the first method for co-designing therapeutic experiments, we can ask the following types of questions:

- What advice would the Black Panther and Ironman (the adolescent’s favourite Marvel superheroes) have for you and your brother that would help the two of you fight less?
- Let’s say your fantasy came true that your favourite rapper Kendrick Lamar agreed to help you out with your parents by inspiring them to see you in a new and more positive light, what song do you think he would sing to them?
- How might that improve your relationship with them?
- What advice would your favourite soccer star Neymar have for you (the child) to help you to score more goals with your parents?
- If Rene Magritte (the adolescent’s favourite Surrealist artist) were to make a painting of your family, how would it look?
- What objects, symbols, and themes would be present?
- How would family members appear and what would they be captured doing?

What can grow out of these carefully crafted questions that tap into family members’ imagination powers, key strengths, and interests are therapeutic experiments and rituals which help them to achieve their goals and strengthen family relationships in a fun and playful way. For example, with the Neymar soccer question above, an 11-year-old client not only came up with steps he could take to better get along with his parents, but his parents came up with concrete steps their son could take over the next week to score additional goals with them. This resulted in a fun family ritual with the son scoring lots of goals with his parents because playing soccer was his passion.

With family idea-generating games, the clients take the lead in coming up with their own novel ideas and change strategies while playing the game together. Here are brief descriptions of two of the most popular family idea-generating games used by the author with couples and families (Selekman, 2017, 2018).

**The famous guest consultants’ game**

Family members pick one or two famous people that they have been inspired by and whose accomplishments have greatly resonated with them. The famous people can be historic figures, authors, artists, architects, musicians, philosophers, spiritual leaders, politicians, popular TV, movie, cartoon, and book characters. Next, family members pretend to put themselves in the minds of their famous people to decide how they will tackle their presenting problem. Together, they are to exchange what their famous people recommend and co-construct two or more potential solutions they could try out over the next week.
Question-storming

The family is asked to respond to the central question: ‘What are the essential questions we have not yet asked about our current family struggle or difficulty?’ Next, each family member separately is to generate a list of four to five questions beginning with qualifiers like: ‘What?’ ‘What if?’ ‘How?’ or ‘Why?’ After spending 20 minutes crafting intriguing and bold questions, they are to take turns sharing their questions with one another. Family members can respond to each other’s questions and have ample time to dialogue about new ways of viewing their family situation and how they were both newsworthy and made a difference in a meaningful way. Any potential solutions that grow out of their dialogue can be experimented with over the next week. In addition, they are asked to continue to reflect on any of the questions that really resonated with them, write down any after-thoughts they had about them, and bring their ideas to the next family meeting.

The famous guest consultants’ game is a fun and playful way for family members to tap their creative problem-solving abilities to co-generate solutions. With the help of their selected famous people, family members often come up with some highly creative and high-quality solutions for their presenting difficulties. Question-storming is not only helpful for empowering family members to co-generate solutions but it can open space for them to take risks with one another by revealing secrets, sharing unspoken concerns, hopes for the future, and learn about aspects of the family politics that members have been curious about. If painful secrets are revealed, the author goes to great lengths to ensure family members’ safety and honour how they wish to proceed in the current session and in future meetings.

Conclusion

In this article, I have presented several ways in which the constraints of COVID-19 have the creative potential to benefit families and therapists alike in doing meaningful and transformative collaborative work together. No matter what your preferred family therapy approach, it is critical that we utilise families’ strengths and resources to the maximum degree and attend to the mind, body, and spiritual dimensions in our work with them to help further enhance their resilience in coping with COVID-19 and in co-creating compelling future realities with them.

Note

1 In the following case examples, names have been changed and autobiographical details altered to protect privacy.

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