

# ILLNESS in the Context of FAMILY COMMUNICATION



–Em von der Ruhr

## Shifting Focus from Individual to Familial

The diagnosis of a serious health issue to a family member can be a particularly difficult time. There is a lot to consider from multiple different perspectives: the perspective of the diagnosed individual, the main caregiver -whether that be a partner, a guardian, or a sibling- and family as a unit. These dyadic relationships are particularly important to the context of communication in managing family health uncertainty.

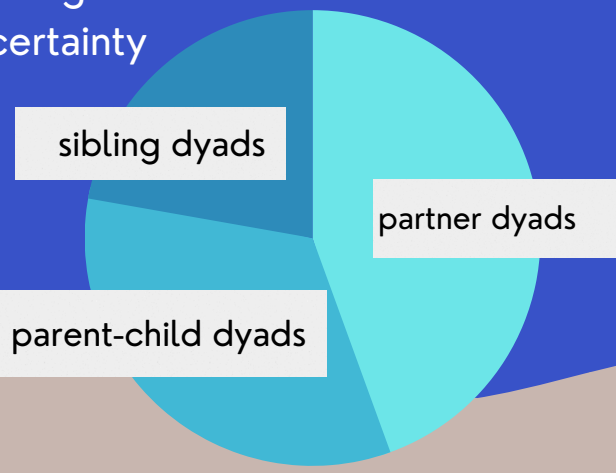


- sharing family stories & recalling what other family members have experienced
- Discussing family plans to cope with uncertainty
- Families can find comfort in their shared lack of control over the situation, planning for the future helps to alleviate the threat of uncertainty
- Shifting to familial focus results in appraisal and reappraisal

## Information Needs & Seeking

Both family of the patient, and the patient themselves are impacted greatly by a health diagnosis. There is a need for information in order to maintain a sense of duty and ability to plan for the uncertain times ahead. Information is needed on a diverse range of topics; particularly, there is a significantly strong connection between information needs and information seeking on both the behalf of the patient to understand the diagnosis, but also for the family members because they take on much of the information bearing responsibility in taking care of their loved one. Among scholars, this effect is known as Family Systems Theory; which theorizes that families are much like ripple patterns in water- what effects one member of the family effects the whole family.

## Use of Planning to Manage Uncertainty



## Information Seeking Solutions

- 1 Incorporate medical librarians into healthcare settings
- 2 Medical librarians can help assist families in finding additional resources and bridge gaps between doctors and family
- 3 The level of satisfaction understanding information relayed by a doctor can be low, given the amount of medical terminology used by the professional.
- 4 Medical librarians can meet with patients and families after seeing the doctor and use a checklist referral system to assist in finding more information



## 4 Patterns of Successful Communication

- 1 Talking together as a family.
- 2 Sharing illness-related information
- 3 Maintaining family relationships
- 4 Decrease worrying by increasing security and honesty

## Sense Making in the face of End-of-Life (EoL) Discussions

End of life discussions are difficult, period. However, in the face of familial uncertainty, they are also quite important to discuss. Here are six themes to keep in mind when facing this difficult topic:

**Protection:** protection is an important theme to keep in mind as you navigate expressing feeling of hope, and shielding

**Control:** pay attention to verbal and nonverbal strategies of maintaining control, uncertainty is scary, we all want control

**Meeting of Needs:** discuss important matters such as medical wishes, legal documents, conversations with doctors & other needs

**Family Dynamics:** different dyads in the family mean there is a range of influence and emotions, keep this in mind in your interactions

**Guilt/Regret:** encourage discussions about important matters, things that are left unsaid can haunt us, don't avoid these topics too much

**Types of Communication:** nonverbal (ex: embracing) is just as important as verbal

## What Next?

Suggestions for Families Facing a Health Crisis:

- Don't be afraid to reach out for help and support from a professional. A family counselor or interventionalist can provide helpful discussion prompts for families facing medical uncertainty.
- Talk as a unit, keeping in mind that everyone has their own emotions and coping mechanisms. Do your best to remember that as a family facing this crisis, you are all a part of the same team.
- Ask doctors what information seeking resources there may be, whether that be medical librarians, support groups, or forums.
- Remember you are not alone, if you or anyone in your family is struggling with the mental and emotional effects of crisis and uncertainty. If you live in the United States, you can call 1-800-985-5990 any time of the week to get help from trained crisis workers.



## Sources:

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