

# Questions & Answers

in the  
practice of

# Family Therapy

edited by  
Alan S. Gurman, Ph.D.

## 26. Home Rehearsal of Tasks in Behavioral Family Therapy

### Question:

Home rehearsal of tasks has been considered an integral part of the change process in behavioral marital and family therapy. Although the purpose and types of tasks rehearsed have been described, the actual steps in choosing and developing the task assignment have not been clearly defined. What benefits are there in task assignment and home rehearsal for both the therapist and the family? What are the responsibilities of the therapist who chooses behavioral homework as a technique? What are the specific steps in the task assignment sequence?

### Discussion:

Change in dysfunctional behavioral patterns is thought to occur when families experiment with new and different interactions which are positively reinforced. The rewarding experience then leads to the recurrence of the new transaction which, with repeated performance, becomes integrated into the family's behavioral repertoire.

Therapists may structure this learning experience in different ways. The therapist designs a task which can be rehearsed during the counseling session, at home or in both places. Some therapists believe that change is maximally facilitated if the task is rehearsed at home, generalizing the new behavior to the couple's own environment.

There are many purposes for home rehearsal in marital and family therapy. One purpose is diagnostic. The rehearsal experience provides data about the problem area by further clarifying how family members interact. These data are the basis for the strategies the therapist may use in continuing therapy with the family. A second purpose concerns the reinforcement when practiced at home of a new behavior which has been directed and supported during the in-session rehearsal by the therapist. The encouragement of the therapist decreases anxiety and makes home rehearsal of the task less threatening and more rewarding. A third purpose for home rehearsal is the generalization of the

therapeutic experience to the home environment where the learning of the new behavioral interaction is to be applied. And, finally, the family members are working together, perhaps a new experience, to develop new ways for resolving interpersonal conflicts.

It is the responsibility of the therapist to identify and assign an experience which facilitates the acquisition of more positive behaviors by family members. The therapist develops and translates this interactional task to the family during the therapy session, persuading them to agree to carry out the task by emphasizing positive individual consequences. He or she directs family members in how to implement this interaction within the home environment, encouraging them to risk new behaviors while, at the same time, accepting and supporting their anxiety. The therapist then follows up on the home rehearsal experience in the subsequent therapy session, lending importance to the task assigned as well as establishing it as a part of the treatment's developmental change process.

#### *Task Assignment Procedure*

1) The therapist meets with the family and observes the interaction among the family members. The transactional pattern of the family is observed and areas of conflict are identified.

2) One, and only one, area of conflict is chosen as the therapist focuses on the family's most urgent need. This choice usually involves the presenting problem which the family brings to the therapy session.

3) The therapist develops a task for the family which forces them to alter old, negative behavior patterns and substitute new, positive ones.

4) The new behavior is rehearsed under the supervision of the therapist during the session. For example, in the family where the presenting problem is the acting-out behavior of the adolescent child, it may be clear to the therapist that the child is blocking communication between the parents. Therefore, the child is in a very powerful position. In order to help the parents regain their power, it may be necessary to have the parents, as their task, unite to develop rules and consequences for the behavior of their adolescent child. Therefore, the attempts of the child to interfere may have to be blocked when the parents discuss these child management issues during the course of the therapy session. The therapist directs the parents to speak to each other about the child's specific behaviors that they would like changed and specific consequences for the child's actions. When the child tries to interrupt the parent's discussion, it is the responsibility of the ther-

apist to help the parents block the interference of the child. The increased communication between parents and the more clearly defined boundaries between parents and child are the goals resulting from the supervised rehearsal experience.

5) It is of the utmost importance that, in assigning the family the practice of this new interaction in the home environment, the therapist work with them toward structuring the specific context of the rehearsal experience such as time of day, the length of time for rehearsal and the activity each person will be performing during this rehearsal period. The reason for this clarity in task assignment is to block anything or anyone which may sabotage rehearsal. Based on the homeostatic component underlying change, there is a tendency for family members to return to past interactional sequences when new sequences are being learned. In predicting this regressive pull, obstacles for implementing new behaviors are anticipated and methods developed to decrease their power.

For example, if the parents of the acting-out adolescent were to schedule a specific time to discuss their child's behavior, there might be a tendency for the parents or child to sabotage that experience. Consequently, the home rehearsal structure should be formulated by both therapist and family members so that they have a personal investment in its successful completion. The parents should decide together what time is convenient for them to talk privately, excluding their children. The therapist should help the parents arrange realistic guidelines in planning for their discussion. For example, the parents may enthusiastically say they will discuss their child's behavior daily for one hour five times a week. The length of time and frequency of rehearsal are considered and the therapist decides what is realistic in terms of change goals or steps. Tasks should be designed which are realistic and appropriate for the life style and changes needed for each family.

Since the home rehearsal experience is often different from past interactional experiences, difficulty with implementation should be predicted and considered acceptable. Consequently, when problems occur, neither family nor therapist experience failure, yet they collect further information on family interaction and steps which may be necessary to implement change.

The family should be told that they will be reporting the results of the home rehearsal experience to the therapist during the following session. By directing the family to implement an activity independent of therapy, the therapist is already beginning to transfer some responsibility for change to family members. However, this change oc-

curs under the supervision and with the support of the therapist.

Tasks to be rehearsed at home are developed during the therapy session and time is necessary for planning and reviewing the specific roles of individual family members regarding their home rehearsal experience. Family members need to verbalize reservations regarding the planned experience so as to predict those obstacles which may prevent its successful completion.

Implicit within the process of change is a step-by-step sequence of slowly letting go of old negative patterns of interaction and experimenting with more positive ways of relating. The home rehearsal experience can provide a testing ground for family members to experiment with new behavioral interactions under the supervision of a trained clinician. Most important is that this new experience can be tested within the home environment where these behaviors are to ultimately occur.

**WENDY JOFFE, Ph.D.**

*Family Life Center  
Miami, FL*