

COPING WITH FAMILY PROBLEMS

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The family is the basic unit of society. This sociological definition is common knowledge and is often quoted to define the family. Family is the microcosm that reflects the larger macrocosm: society. Family and society have a mutually influencing relationship. The health and atmosphere of the family reflects the health and atmosphere of society and vice versa. If families are divided, fragile, aggressive and value-less, society is bound to be fragmented, hostile, destructive and ethically unsound. On the other hand, if families are united, happy, peaceful, forgiving and upright then society too will be communitarian, peaceful, tolerant and ethical. While families influence society, society too influences the family. It is difficult for a fruit-bearing tree to grow in the desert, you know?

Everybody's Got Problems

Despite any attempts to romanticize the idea of family, it is basically and fundamentally a group of individuals who are tied together by bonds of blood and kinship. These individuals share many things in common but also differ in many others ways. One of the basic differences within a family is personality. Each individual in the family is different from the other, not only in physical characteristics but also in characteristics that are emotional, mental and spiritual as well. Since no two people are the same, friction is bound to occur when



the rough edges of both rub against each other.

"My parents and I never really saw eye to eye about anything. When I was younger it was just the simple stuff - the length of my skirt, how I chose to wear my hair or the movies I wanted to watch. But as I got older I found that there was a lot more that we didn't agree on - my choice of friends, what I wanted to study at university, political issues or how I chose to spend my weekends.

"I left home at 17 to study at a university in another city. Moving away from home has totally broadened my outlook on the world and has changed my opinion on lots of issues. Over the past two years I've met the most amazing people with the most extraordinarily diverse experiences. My circle of friends includes people with different religions, beliefs, values, cultures and different ways of approaching life. But the great thing is we respect each other's opinions. I've learnt to question what I've

been taught and not always agree just because that is what "everybody else" thinks.

"The first couple of times I went home to visit my parents I found it really hard to cope. I found it hard to deal with not being able to express my opinions as freely as I did when I was away from home. My mum didn't necessarily agree with my upfront attitude to life. While I was always out there trying to get people to take me and my beliefs and opinions seriously, her attitude was "why fight it... why not just go with the flow." It was really frustrating. I used to get really upset that my parents didn't agree with what I was doing."

When this young teen penned these words what she did was not only put down her own life experience of conflict and frustration in family life but also, in a way, she speaks about the experiences that everyone, I daresay, faces. The details may differ but the underlying truth remains steadfast. 'Everyone faces problems, difficulties, challenges, conflicts, frustrations and failures!' There is no denying that fact.

Scott Peck in his bestselling book, *The Road Less Travelled*, begins with these astonishingly plain yet insightful words: "Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult — once we truly understand and accept it — then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is

difficult, no longer matters. Most do not fully see this truth: that life is difficult, instead they moan more or less incessantly, noisily or subtly, about the enormity of their problems, their burdens, and their difficulties as if life were generally easy, as if life *should* be easy. They voice their belief, noisily or subtly, that their difficulties represent a unique kind of affliction that should not be and that has somehow been especially visited upon them, or else, upon their families, their tribe, their class, their nation, their race or even their species, and not upon others."

The family, which is a community of individuals, is not exempt from life's difficulties. Problems, difficulties, challenges, conflicts and frustrations are bound to occur at one time or another, in one way or another, so there is no need to be alarmed by it. What *needs* to alarm us, however, is how the family *cope*s with these setbacks.

Dealing with Family Problems

Each family deals with its problems in its own way. While there is no 'quick-heal' method, there are productive and counter-productive ways. How can you know if a method is productive or counter-productive? Simple. Look at the outcome. If a family member refuses to talk to another because of a misunderstanding or a past hurt, then that behaviour is counter-productive. Willing to listen and dialogue with one another is a sign of great maturity and a very productive way of resolving issues. So often we find ourselves in

a clash of wills. How can we proactively deal with our problems?

A letter to a newspaper advice column brought up an issue that frequently makes its appearance albeit in different guises in such columns: how to respond to difficult people, particularly obnoxious family members. A woman wrote, "My mother and I have had a poor relationship for years. She is self-absorbed, demanding and consistently hurtful. She seems to find great amusement in upsetting me and takes every opportunity to do so... This kind of behaviour is typical of her, and I am tired of it. I have tried to discuss it with her, and she refuses to accept that she has done anything wrong. I finally decided to sever all contact... The problem is that the rest of my family berates me for being "mean" to her. They expect me to maintain this destructive relationship."

Many people seem to think that such a situation can be dealt with in one of three ways:

1. Cut the offending family member and his/her family allies completely out of your life.
2. Grow a spine and fight back.
3. Try to let it go in one ear and out the other.

The second and third solutions seem to say, "Brave it out". I've heard many people doling out such advice in abundance. Do you think that helps resolve the issue? Let's suppose for a moment that it does. Are you aware of the damage it does to the receiver? Imagine being the butt of other's anger, frustration, sarcasm, pessimism and gossip for a period of a week? Can you pic-

ture that scenario? How do you expect to feel at the end of it? Now, multiply that by fifty years. That's what the receiver is 'supposed' to endure, just so that the conflict can be resolved!

Solution 1 seems easier and far less painful, but again, how productive does it prove to be? Divorcing yourself from your family is going to leave a scar whether you like it or not. Every-one develops emotional bonds with other family members no matter how 'good' or 'bad' they might be. Severing these bonds may produce a short-term solution but has long-term effects. Psychological studies show that unresolved dysfunctional family relationships quite frequently affect one's relationships with one's own children. Some abused children become abusive parents themselves, while others go to the other extreme and end up smothering their children with parental care and guidance. The later pattern sometimes results in a generation of, say, alcoholics begetting a generation of uptight teetotalers who then beget another generation of alcoholics.

Since none of these three prove to be productive, we are still left with the question: How can we constructively deal with family problems? Allow me to offer a few tips. These tips are not fool-proof and don't guarantee success but they have been tried and tested and found to be helpful. You may find that the tips offered are directed to the individual even though they can also be applied to the family as a whole. This is because change



often begins with an individual. Families that come together in an environment of openness to discuss its problems and collectively come up with a solution are the ideal. But since most families are not anywhere near that ideal, the option to bring about change from the level of the individual is the most viable.

The first thing I believe we ought to do is **pray**. Now you may wonder how prayer is going to help, but trust me, it does. Prayer may not change the situation or the person but it will definitely change you! Your problems may not go away after your prayers but you will receive the grace and the strength to face your problems and come up with amiable solutions. Prayer will remind you that you do not have to face your problems alone; God is there to support you. Surrendering your difficulties to God will relieve you from your pain, stress and anxiety, and help you see things differently.

We could **seek help** from competent or trustworthy people; it could be a psychotherapist, counselor, priest or even a good friend. Sharing your problems with someone wise could help

you experience freedom from your troubles. They can help you see things in a new light. Expressing your feelings and working with them could help you develop strategies for coping. When you talk to someone else, he/she can help you see the other side of the story. You perhaps may be able to step into the other persons' shoes.

There is nothing like **forgiveness** to give you peace of mind. Often enough, people hear the devastating words, "I never want to see you again!" from a parent, a sibling, or a child, and we all know what a devastating feeling that is. What happened to this family relationship? Where did the marriage or family unity go? Sometimes people would rather fight than make love! Or keep a grudge rather than forgive! You could go on suffering from the side-effects of a broken relationship or you could step up and forgive. I know that this is easier said than done, but hey, isn't that what Jesus commanded us to do?

"This I tell you: love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in Heaven. For he makes his sun rise on both the wicked and the good, and he gives rain to both the just and the unjust. If you love those who love you, what is special about that? Do not even tax collectors do as much? And if you are friendly only to your friends, what is so exceptional about that?... be righteous and perfect in the way your heavenly Father is righteous and perfect" (Mt 5:44-48). □