

The problem isn't a person, it's the pattern of behaviour. When the pattern is named, the family can choose different moves



Ever notice how one person's mood can "infect" the whole house, and then everyone's reactions seem to make it worse? That's a pattern.

Circular questioning is one way therapists **map the pattern out loud**.

Instead of "Who started it?" or "What's wrong with you?", they may ask:

What do you do → what do they do next → what do you assume it means → how does that land on the next person?

The payoff is that the family can see the pattern keeping things stuck, including everyone's good intentions, differing views and misunderstandings, without anyone being "the villain."

Once the pattern is understood, it can be changed.



The pattern in action: Therapist's questions and family's answers

Context: Dad comes home stressed. Everyone tries to "keep the peace". The house ends up tense & quiet.

Therapist: "Dad, when you walk in after a brutal day, what's the first thing you notice?"

Dad: "It's quiet, like everyone's holding their breath."

T: "When it's quiet like that, what do you assume it means?"

Dad: "That I'm bringing the bad mood in, or they're already annoyed with me."

T: "Mum, when you sense that, what happens for you?"

Mum: "I manage – dinner, chores, careful to keep a calm voice."

T: "Mum, did you know Dad often feels like you're annoyed or he's bringing the bad mood in?"

Mum: "I didn't realise that honestly. I thought I was helping by getting on with things calmly."

T: "Kids, when you notice Mum doing that, what do you do next?"

Son: "I disappear. If I'm not there, I can't trigger anything."

Daughter: "I go super quiet and polite."

T: "What are you protecting when you do that?"

Daughter: "Mum, and Dad too. I don't want him to feel like the bad guy, and I don't want a blow-up."

T: "Dad, did you know your daughter worries about you feeling like the bad guy?"

Dad: "No... I didn't know she carried that."

T: "Dad, when Mum is smoothing and the kids are quiet, how does that land for you?"

Dad: "It feels like I'm being handled. Like I'm the problem. Then I shut down, or I get short."

T to whole family: "When Dad shuts down or gets short, what happens?"

Mum: "I get even more controlled, maybe a bit anxious, and I tell the kids to be quiet."

Son: "Which makes me worried and want to disappear more."

Daughter: "And I tiptoe more."

What could happen next



Therapist Summary for the family: what pattern emerged

“Everyone is trying to help. But ‘keeping the peace’ looks like silence, and Dad experiences that silence as him being ‘the problem’ and shuts down.’ Is that right?”

Where the pattern could change at home - ideas for the family to consider and try

- Dad says the truth of how he’s feeling early and says how much time he needs.
- Mum acknowledges Dad’s truth and checks in if he needs anything right now.
- Son does a 10-second hello.
- Daughter makes a small connection.
- Dad settles in, then checks in with everyone 10-15 minutes later



New conversation after the pattern is named

Dad: “Hey. Brutal day, I’m fried. Give me 15 mins to destress?”

Mum: “Sure! Let me know if I can help.”

Son: “Hi Dad. Wanna catch up on that show later?”

Dad: “Sounds good.”

Daughter: “Hi Dad. That sucks. Hope you’re okay”

Dad: “Yeah, thanks. I’ll be fine. Just need to chill for a bit.”

Notice how the family are expressing connection, while still recognising Dad might need some time. Dad is also communicating that he will connect with everyone a bit later but needs a few minutes to destress



Further reading



Article: Tomm, K. (1988). Interventive interviewing: Part III. Intending to ask lineal, circular, strategic, or reflexive questions? *Family process*, 27(1), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.1988.00001.x>

Why? Gives a clear map of questioning styles and how to use them deliberately

Book: *Working Systemically with Families: Formulation, Intervention and Evaluation* by Rudi Dallos and Arlene Vetere. (2003). Routledge. **Why?** Good skills-oriented intro to systemic practice

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