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Family Challenges in Counselling and Therapy: Some Reflections from a Therapist

The text addresses the family as the subject of counselling and therapeutic interventions. The author aims to provide an inventory of the main areas of challenges experienced by modern families. The questions he asks are: What challenges are faced by modern families at various stages of the family development? Are contemporary families in need of external assistance and if so, what kind of support do they require? For several decades, families have been the subject of psychological and pedagogical support work. The forms of such support are ever changing and are constantly improved so as to align them with specific characteristics of contemporary families and with social and cultural changes that impact them. Such transformations affect all generations and families at every stage of their life-cycle. An increasing willingness of family-community members to receive such help and the resulting expansion of therapeutic culture in contemporary society appear beneficial, as they encourage the use of counselling and family therapy to strengthen this core community. The text draws both on the relevant scholarly literature and the therapeutic and counselling practice.

Keywords: family, counselling, therapy, phases of family life-cycle

Introduction

In the Polish language, the term family (*rodzina*) derives from the ancestral community or lineage. Thus, family is first and foremost a community. The Polish stem *rod* refers to a lineage, a tribe, and the Polish suffix -*ina* can be traced back to the Proto-Indo-European *u̯red*, meaning 'to grow, to expand' (Boryś, 2006). Thus, a family is a lineage, a growing community. The Polish term is also used as an equivalent of "home" (*dom*), hinting at the process of generation denoted by the Sanskrit term *Dem*, from which the Polish word for 'home' is derived, as has been interpreted by some scholars (Cisło, 1983). Thus *dom*-home, also understood as a *rodzina*-family, refers to a generative community, a place of creation.

The family is the most essential social structure, the key community, the place where attitudes and characters are formed—the cultural universal. There is no other

structure quite like it. It holds its own power. Indeed, it is *the* generative space for human beings, because care and upbringing that take place within families shape human beings, determining who and what they are to become. Both in the past and today, families have exhibited a high level of cultural competence (Dyczewski, 2004, p. 80). Indeed, as has been observed, "society is made of families, just as a body is made of cells. If the cells are healthy, the body shall also be healthy. If the family is healthy, society shall also enjoy good health" (Szlendak, 2010, p. 95).

This paper aims to develop an inventory of the fundamental areas of challenges experienced by contemporary families. The questions that drive this inquiry are: What challenges are faced by contemporary families at different stages of their life-cycle? Do contemporary families need external assistance and if so, what kind of assistance is required?

Contemporary families can be explored through the lens of wider cultural phenomena. The 'classic' approach views the family as a social group that is natural, primary, basic and universal, occupying a clearly demarcated space of its own, including a household, providing for a variety of face-to-face, direct and noninstitutional contacts (Dyczewski, 2004, pp. 72–3). The family 'is orientated towards fundamental values. It shapes the image of the world and, above all, the image of the human being and social life, introducing children and adults to the world of meanings. As such, the family has a specific role of a gatekeeper opening paths that lead to the cultural world of a given national or religious group and broader cultural areas,' whereby it also plays 'the role of an interpreter of the outside world' (Dyczewski, 2004, pp. 74–5).

The family can also be interpreted as a system that is based on a range of distinctive mechanisms, including intergenerational transmissions, reflected in permanent, though often unconscious scripts enacted by family members. These are reproduced through language. The stories passed down from generation to generation in families are powerful, as they are told by people who are important, significant others, and are emotionally marked. Additionally, families also include frameworks-boundaries, structures, specific communication patterns, circularity, and the like factors. A family is thus not a mere set of individuals, but rather a system, and as such it involves a fusion of people and processes.

Transformations in families and attempts to describe the family as such are usually related to the emergence of new paradigms of conceptualising this extraordinary community; this involves a redefinition of terms, conceptual expansion and alteration. There is individuation and increasing autonomy; and there is also intimacy. Relationships are based on values and norms that are characteristic of a specific partnership model (Tyszka 1994). Group aspects, including directness and informality, become strengthened. The family becomes a group of emotionally and personally connected individuals, and as personal functions predominate, many issues are democratised and egalitarianism increases. For some time now, families have been founded on love-based marriage (Adamski 2002: 170–172). Despite

'cultural acceleration,' there traditions are still powerful, and families reunite for festive seasons, share meals, cultivate familiarity and closeness and offer mutual support to their members. Blood bonds are considered crucial. Mother and father, sister and brother are important figures within the family community life.

Families transform and undergo enormous changes. Their transformations are so rapid that theoretical reflection often lags behind. We deal with something that is in the mind, engages the emotional sphere and constitutes what could be called an ocean of media. Recently, mediatisation has been unfolding on a previously unknown scale. Family members tend to be more influenced by technological devices than by their mutual close relationships. Without disparaging the impact of the media (as their advantages are numerous, including cognitive stimulation, entertainment and provision of resources that may facilitate intra-family communication), it is quite obvious that they may also be destructive in separating family members from each other.

We are also faced with an unprecedented medicalisation of families, including increasing recourse to psychiatric and therapeutic interventions. Personally, I am convinced that counselling and psychotherapy are helpful and beneficial, that they facilitate growth, are effective and make sense, and so on. Paradoxically, they may however also become an additional burden for families. Issues that were once resolved by and within the family are now referred to professionals. To my astonishment, what parents quite often want for their children is a diagnosis, instead of than support. Psychiatric drugs are prescribed to remedy behaviours that were previously part and parcel of childhood and indicated good health and energy rather than illness. The boundary between health and illness has become fluid and somewhat fuzzy, not only for individuals, but also for families. In some cases, it may be doubtful whether the diagnosis is really meant to gratify parents and spare them efforts entailed in raising their children.

As far as material aspects are concerned, families' standard of living has been steadily improving. Social programmes have certainly eradicated poverty for a large proportion of families, especially destitute families, and removed the worrying phenomenon of child hunger, which has not been fully noted by society, even though we are talking about the country located at the very heart of Europe. We still have areas of poverty, which especially affects children in dysfunctional families and senior citizens marginalised by families or living outside of families.

What External Support May Be Needed by Families Today?

Viewed from one perspective, the answer to the question whether families need support may be negative. Families are capable of coping because their members, especially parents, are better educated than ever before. The situation is much better than it used to be, because besides mothers and fathers, grandparents also tend

to have much bigger knowledge, to enjoy access to opportunities to learn about care and upbringing, to participate in classes and workshops and to read publications on family life and what conditions it.

Families may not need external support, since children receive not only parental care but also multidimensional assistance from the increasingly long-lived senior generation. Families may do well without support, simply by using the resources available online, including dedicated media, forums, discussion groups, virtual communities and informal counsellors. Although the potential opportunities to obtain support and assistance exist or may exist, this is in fact only a theoretical perspective. In their daily life, families may not actually be able to access such human and technological opportunities or, even if these are used, they may not fully (re)solve the challenges that beset them.

The other perspective assumes that contemporary families need assistance. It may not be because things are particularly bad or more difficult in the first decades of the 21st century, but because institutional assistance may be more needed today. If we were to identify the reasons for this state of affairs, we might point to social transformations, including the depletion of various other forms of support in society and the severance of social bonds resulting in the atomisation of both individuals and families. In the past, many of the tasks of modern counselling and therapy were carried out within extended families, neighbour communities or groups of friends and close acquaintances. With the erosion of these basic human bonds, a social gap has developed. Needs have remained the same, but there is no one around to satisfy them. Metaphorically speaking, people in the modern age have to pay for what has always been provided for free—for friendship and intimacy. Even if people do not spend their money, they often find themselves in the position of having to solicit external help.

In her analysis and assessment of society carried out more than forty years ago, Maria Ziemska (1979, p. 179) noted the need for counselling caused by the emergence of what she called new challenges, previously unknown to the older generations, such as:

- social mobility;
- paid employment of women, including married women, and the resultant changes in the division of roles within families, as both parents performed instrumental functions and took part in child-raising;
- marriages between people from different backgrounds;
- incomplete families;
- rapid changes in the mores.

Ziemska stressed that as families less relied on the patterns of parental behaviour developed by the previous generations, they needed to analyse and reflect on the upbringing of their children. Fundamentally, they needed to work out new patters of child-rearing.

Today, the above list of challenges, which may seem somewhat archaic, has not lost its relevance, but has been extended by new problem fields.

Another reason why counselling and therapy appear to be required is that there are more and more people who do not know how to build relationships with their loved ones, especially with their children. Having no experience of proper care and relationship building, they are not able to forge relationships with their offspring on their own.

Many areas of life are now subject to increasing specialisation, which also applies to family life. Parents are becoming alarmingly dependent on external 'experts.' Such helpers may fail to foster parental autonomy and empowerment. The family's sense of competence may slip away, quite imperceptibly, too. Or, it may never have been there in the first place. A mother confessed during a pre-therapy consultation: 'I am confused and no longer know whether it is me who is the mother or my teenage child is a parent here.' Weak role models, the lack of resources and the deficit of social support incapacitate parents as they make efforts to provide care and raise their children.

However, the need for assistance may also be interpreted in a positive way. Family members may feel that external intervention is necessary; they may be familiar with various forms of such interventions and be prepared to use them. It may actually be evidence of a growing therapeutic culture. After all, the point is not to live one's life so as to completely ignore counselling or therapy; the point is to be open and ready to make use of the available support, should such a need arise.

A Classification of Challenges to Family Based on the Family-Community Transitions

Several families need counselling or therapy when they find themselves in particular life situations. We know that families have two types of goals: satisfying the needs of individual family members and fulfilling social tasks, which include the generation and education of offspring, the transmission of cultural models, and the like (Czabała, 2002, p 50). Challenges that require counselling or therapeutic support may occur throughout the family development cycle. This happens when the family community are stuck at a certain developmental stage and find themselves unable to move on. Usually, short-term or long-term help, emotional support, knowledge provision or development of basic caring and parenting skills, in a word, counselling is sufficient. Psychological education is an essential element. Still, there are cases where therapy may prove necessary as well.

When we think about families in conjunction with counselling or therapeutic work, we should bear in mind that the family is always an important context of such interventions. Problems or symptoms that an individual experiences may be interpreted not as a disease affecting this person alone, but as a manifestation of

dysfunctions or imbalance within the family system (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2006, p. 19).

In the following sections, I will seek to identify the main areas that lead family communities to look for help through counselling or therapy. I will present in the order aligned with the stages of family life-cycle, from the formation of a couple, to the marital relationship and the family with children, up to the 'empty nest phase.' Throughout these stages, three types of disorders are usually encountered that affect, respectively, the family structure, family communication modes and the principles that govern the family as a system (Czabała, 2002, pp. 51–3).

A *Dyad* in the Making

Couples who have not previously used counselling or therapy are increasingly seeking such types of intervention. During the romantic *dyad* period, the couple are often hindered from getting married by separation challenges, which are perhaps more evident today than they were in the past. The young generation are more and more reluctant to form permanent relationships, and these tend to be established at later stages in people's lives. Engagements of unlimited duration are not uncommon. Young people often live as a couple following an official and often elaborate engagement ceremony, but they are unable to decide on their own to move on to the next step in their relationship. They cohabit, but the idea of formalising their relationship breeds anxiety. There may be fear of repeating the 'original family failures.' Bartosz Zalewski and Hanna Pinkowska-Zielińska (2021, pp. 24–5)have noted how difficult it is for young couples to separate from their original families. During therapeutic conversations such couples tend to mention their parental figures quite early, and one of them often gives the impression of having already separated from their original family and expects the same from their partner. In fact, this usually proves not to have been a separation, but rather cutting oneself off from the family, meaning a physical and emotional severance of ties with members of the original family.

The young are troubled by the dilemma of cohabitation vs. marriage that they face. Cohabitation has become not only a pre-conjugal stage (premarital cohabitation), but also an alternative to a law-recognised relationship. Modern marriage is a relationship that is both demanding and insecure at the same time. It is demanding because there is no longer any social pressure to be bound in matrimony. Couples can give up on a formal relationship, for a variety of reasons, without facing social disapproval or ostracism. Motivations behind choosing an informal relationship are interesting: both pre-marital and post-marital cohabitation are perceived as manifestations of 'freedom,' a doctrine of not committing to any kind of, no matter how insignificant, formal bonds. Apart from a liberal approach to attachments, concerns arising from transgenerational experiences may also have a part in such choices. Nevertheless, many patients, when talking about their partner, refer to them as wife or husband. Sometimes, we may choose to look into that aspect in

our work with couples. Personally, I feel that there may be a desire to build a deep understanding and permanence, also in the sense of the irrevocability of decision to live together. Young people still tend to associate these attributes with marriage.

The Married Couple

Bartosz Zalewski and Hanna Pinkowska-Zielińska (2021, p. 3) have drawn on the work of American practitioners and scholars to list the most common reasons why couples seek help. These are

- disillusionment with the relationship and the desire to improve it;
- arguments and communication issues;
- unhappiness in the relationship and withdrawal of commitment;
- issues with intimacy and sexuality.

Children-related problems are ranked lower in this list, which is contrary to popular belief. In fact such issues are not the most significant factor in seeking external support.

Unlike in the past, today's spouses enter into a relationship with high expectations, while the marital relations are under threat because they have never been as fragile as they are today. The title of Augustus Napier's book, *The Fragile Bond: In Search of an Equal, Intimate and Enduring Marriage* (1990), is perhaps symptomatic of this phenomenon. In the event of a break-up, being single is both feasible and socially acceptable. Additionally, divorce is seen as a valid way of putting an end to a relationship crisis. Sometimes, there is a strong tendency to abandon the existing relationship and build a new one with someone else, and less inclination to 'fix' the marriage. Therefore, it is important for couples to seek counselling or family therapy if in crisis. Based on the resources available to the couple, it is worthwhile to explore possibilities of restoring the well-being of the couple, without resorting to emotional and spatial separation or divorce. It is always important to establish what has happened to couple's vitality, which is usually present at the beginning of courtship between a woman and a man.

A marriage succeeds when the couple manage to turn hatred into love or, in other words, enmity into friendship, and then to nurture the latter. How can this be achieved? John Gottman (2014) believes that spouses need to keep mapping each other's worlds, nurture affection and admiration, reach for each other, follow each other, solve problems that can be solved, overcome the paralysing conflict and find the sense of togetherness.

Modern Women in Families

The situation of women in families has been changing. Their attempts to fulfil multiple, demanding roles poses new great challenges that are difficult to face on one's own. In the past, '[i]t was taken for granted that a woman always wants to get

married and that by marrying she gains prestige, recognition and position, while a man loses his freedom' (Duch-Krzysztoszek, 2003, p. 557). In her examination of women's preferred life roles, Anna Titkow (2007, pp. 133–39) has noted a clear split into three categories:

- wife and mother – a woman as a homemaker (27.6 per cent, including 15.3 per cent of women with university-level education);
- a perfect woman, a super-woman – balancing family responsibilities and professional work (68.5%); and
- a successful woman – working and successful in her job (3.9%).

Women now long for a 'new gender contract' that redraws roles and redefines the status of women and men (Fuszara, 2002, p. 9). As a result, they find themselves striving to combine multiple roles in order to be perfect women: employees in the morning, homemakers in the afternoon and desirable partners in the evening. This means taking up and fulfilling three major roles, each of which has its own requirements and limitations. It produces the necessity to secure material resources and manage the household. In addition, it further intensifies the need to take care of oneself. As a result, '[w]omen place extremely high demands on themselves; they are prepared to combine family and professional roles, and they additionally feel responsible for the quality of relationships, emotions and the atmosphere in the family' (Willan-Horla, 2008, p. 143).

Personally, I believe that modern women have increasing desires. They want to develop and do so with passion. In recent years, I have noticed a new emancipation emerging as a phenomenon. Women make swift progress and expect their partners to do the same. Their partners, however, often do not understand women's needs. A young humanities graduate marrying a man with a degree in technological sciences has said: 'I know I cannot count on having the kind of conversations, with the kind of depth, that I would like to have.' Women may have to endure the impossibility to satisfy their wishes, if their partners do not learn. Women appear to be more adept in using various personal development opportunities and therapy. Once they have benefited from such opportunities, they expect their companions to recognise such interventions as valuable, which happens sometimes, but unfortunately, men more often view such interventions as a 'female fad.' Contemporary women in their forties do not wish to live with men who have 'stopped developing.' The slogan may mean many things, but it is mainly about men's awkwardness in relationships, which are deficiencies that originate from their upbringing in their original families or failing communication skills. When accepting or initiating the break-up of a relationship, women think that they will still 'meet someone.' Among my friends and colleagues, divorced women tend to be well educated and independent; some of them are therapists equipped with expert knowledge of relationships. I may myself have contributed to the emancipation of several women in therapy. In the course of long-term work with couples, I have seen women who started as

emotionally and economically dependent become stronger and more independent over time, growing convinced that they could manage without a man who did not meet their (perhaps, occasionally too steep?) expectations.

Men in Contemporary Families

The old 'faults' affecting couples' life together still tend to haunt men. The pressure of the labour market and the need to succeed may push them to work overtime and become excessively involved in job-related matters. This is especially the case in Poland, where society aspire to catch up with the 'old Europeans' in terms of the standard of living. The pursuit of material status is sometimes combined with other activities. A man who exercises twice a week in the company of socially competent friends, mainly members of the intelligentsia: lawyers, teachers, artists, and entrepreneurs, has commented: 'My friends live to pursue their interests. Most of them are keen sailors. A few of them even have their own boats. They sail together.' Some enjoy sailing with their wives and partners, but some live in families from which they have emotionally 'sailed away.'

Over-commitment causes stress and tension, which is sometimes relieved through stimulants: alcohol and, recently more and more often, drugs. I was not fully aware of the scale of the problem until quite recently. Over the last few years, the stories of several of my patients I have heard in couples' sessions have made me realise the sheer volume of damage caused by the use of such substances, initially for 'recreation and partying' and later increasingly as a destructive element in everyday life. Men who are in the habit of using them are unable to get by without cannabis and other even more harmful drugs, which cause acute psychological damage, emotional disorders, loss of control and changes in the brain. Over time, they try to withdraw from the circle of addiction in attempts that are as a rule initiated by women—wives or partners. If this does not work, the relationships formed under constant influence of hallucinogens are at risk. The situation becomes even more complicated for men and consequently for entire families.

Computer games and modern pornography may also be a trap for men, making them disappear from family life, fail in their professional duties and lose contact with their children. Many of my patients, both in couples' sessions and in one-on-one sessions, try to deal with the challenges posed by pornography, which distances partners from each other, introduces forms of intimacy that are often unacceptable to women, discourages men from real relationships and teaches them to satisfy their needs without direct physical contact or through cybersex in virtual settings.

At the same time, men also need to take care of themselves, look after their partners and be the adult partners and caregivers for their children. One man, who was having difficulties relating to his own children, was told by his young child, who was doing homework on his own, that he did not need help from his father, but the kid immediately went on to add: 'Daddy, I still want you to be there for me.'

It is a poignant phrase, stressing the importance of an active presence of the modern man at the side of his partner and his children.

Challenges Related to Children in Families

When parents report to support agencies, challenges posed by children are among the most common problems discussed by parents in sessions. These are issues that adult family members find easiest to articulate. What they say about their children is usually true. Sometimes, however, their statements may be (greatly) exaggerated. In some cases, the story about the child reflects the truth, but the challenge represented by the child's symptoms is far less significant than the actual pain felt within the family, often coming from a source other than the child. In such cases, counselling or therapeutic sessions, though initiated and sometimes even contracted as an intervention for a child who is regarded as 'difficult' or experiencing some aggravated symptom, actually enable the parents to work on what lies at the root of the issue. Often, these are partnership/marital difficulties: 'Families come, concerned about their child, its development, disobedience, unacceptable behaviour, school difficulties, and also issues related to self-aggression, self-harm attempts, eating disorders, suicide attempts' (Ładyżyński, 2002, pp. 35–6).

In modern families, children are cared for and looked after, probably to an extent that is quite unprecedented in history. Children's psychological situation varies due to the number and configuration of siblings. There are usually few children in a family. Families raising only one child predominate, and all parental attention is thus focused on one individual. If most children today are raised as an only child, they will have the best chance to establish a good partnership with individuals who are the eldest or youngest siblings in their families. However, in childhood, such children tend to be deprived of the only opportunity to participate in long-term social learning: being pushy and pushed, being in conflict and repeatedly reconciling with siblings, obtaining support, comfort, and help.

Quite a few family-communities experience serious difficulties. Children are brought to professionals because adults are not able to help them, the traditional methods fail to meet expectations, parents feel powerless and helpless, while educators in childcare centres and schools complain about students' inappropriate behaviour (Kozłowska, 2005, p. 7).

Pre-schoolers are versed in using touchscreens. However, they may lack other simple manual skills. There are homes where children are more proficient in handing electronic devices than adults. At the same time, isolation is spreading, not only in the aftermath of the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions but also as a result of changing habits. Rapid access to personal media alters children's lives and attitudes. Driven home from a kindergarten, a child says to their parent: 'Give me the phone' and usually gets the smartphone for the duration of the ride. In primary school, second- and third-graders (eight to nine-year-olds) already have personal

smartphones and soon are given personal computers. The media have an impact on the world of values and on the formation of young people's characters. The impact is not always positive.

Today's parents are very ambitious in terms of their children's achievements. Even good students hear that they are lazy and face excessive parental expectations. One father, who was doing well in the educational aspect of his relationship with his children, told me during our session: 'They have no responsibilities. They have a lab-like learning environment, and they don't learn anyway.' Interestingly, his children had really good learning outcomes, while the father himself had never achieved such results. A couple in a parental consultation talked about the 'low demands' they had towards their teenage children: 'All we care about is that they pass from one grade to another.' After a while they added: 'Of course, we motivate them to learn foreign languages and to think of getting a degree from a good foreign university.'

Over the past dozen years or so, I have studied one of the Scout organisations. Children would start their scouting adventure only to 'disappear' from the meetings and give up scouting altogether. Initially, I thought that it was the decision of children who did not wish to come or wanted to leave. This was sometimes the case, but over time, I realised that often it was parents who made their children leave on order to take additional language or tutoring sessions or to help clean the house on Saturday, instead of learning the Morse code, flag signalling, tying knots or pitching a tent on a platform between trees.

Most children do not go out alone to play with their peers. There is an accelerated adolescence, time spent in the virtual world—a quick foray into the world of media and games—and the loneliness of children whose needs are overlooked by their overworked parents. Children who are often enrolled in schools outside their neighbourhood can no longer enjoy the local camaraderie forged though meetups and shared walks home from school.

It is difficult to draw a single picture of the entire child population. This is because the lives of rural children differ from those of urban kids. Within these groups, there is also considerable, and ever greater, stratification in terms of income, family aspirations, lifestyles and pastimes. Nevertheless, children's loneliness seems to be the common denominator and a major problem for adolescents and, consequently, for entire families. It is yet another reason why contemporary families seek counselling and therapy interventions.

Families and Teenagers

Adolescents very often prove the cause of consultation, and this is true in both counselling and therapeutic work. The adolescent phase as such is a great challenge to young people themselves and to their families. If this natural, though often turbulent, parting from childhood and a prolonged transition into adulthood is

compounded by one or more factors that destabilise a teenager's emotions, difficulties in functioning within the family, school and/or social environment follow and produce the need for external support.

Today, super-isolation, social media involvement and computer games circumscribe adolescents' lives and become their second nature. During the COVID-19 pandemic, parents feared for their children and kept adolescents at home. Schools switched to remote learning, did not always implement full classes and effectively encouraged the young to rely on the world of media. This produced a paradox. Heavily criticised before, modern communication inventions were reassessed as liberating tools. However, experts agree that their prior effect on young people had been adverse. Since spring 2020, the media have been integrated as part of educational tools and not only recognised, but also touted as 'noble.' This ennoblement has not subsided and is likely to continue for a long time, for there is no reason to believe that we will be able to control all the mutating variants of viruses any time soon. Consequently, no change in the attitudes of those who manage the our functioning in virtual reality is to be expected.

While offering plentiful advantages, the cyber-world has many drawbacks. Teenagers create fictitious identities of older people for themselves and enter virtual and sometimes non-virtual relationships. Thirteen- to fourteen-year-old girls pretend to be adults and expose themselves to psychological or physical abuse. Adolescents also easily access pornography or cybersex, which is a problem and an area for counselling and therapy. On entering a house where adolescents live, one can no longer expect to be always greeted by them. As a rule, they do not say goodbye, either. Parents' customary comment is: 'S/he is in his/her room.' This means that the teenage child is at home and is safe. The point is, however, that adolescents do not leave their rooms because they cannot interrupt, because they are in the middle of it, because they are playing. If they continue to play in teams (which I think may not be the case anymore), establishing relationships and having a kind of social or relational interactions, this is not bad. If they are all alone, the situation is far worse. They may play for days and nights on end and skip their night-time rest. They curb their sleeping time, which impacts their development and mental functioning. Adolescents in families with whom I have worked were terrified of contact with their peer group, played most of their days, skipped school and swapped night for day. They threatened that as soon as they turned eighteen, they would... Then, they would reach the age of majority and, generally, nothing changed. They continued to neglect their basic duties and failed to take responsibility for their own lives.

However, I cannot and do not wish to put all teenagers in one category of media 'addicts.' There are quite a few adolescents who are engaged, creative, proactive and adeptly handling interpersonal relationships. Among my patients, an adolescent whom his parents suspected and accused of media addiction, learned a foreign language on-line, won a grant to study at a university abroad and went away. Another young man with relational difficulties, depressed, with no life energy left

in him, lay literally incapacitated in bed for several years. In that time, however, he used the Internet, which was his only sustained form of activity. He arose from his 'bed of pain' a few weeks before his final high school exams. He passed his exams and found a job at a multinational corporation based in another city. He left home, much to the astonishment of his parents, who were convinced that their teenage son was permanently incapable of taking on developmental challenges Without the online network and the ability to navigate it, the young man would not have been able to achieve this. It does not mean that all his difficulties are over now, but it also shows the potential of young people's media embeddedness and their involvement in the virtual sphere, if it is constructively used.

Families in Their 'Empty Nest' Stage

The 'empty nest phase' is regarded as an important time in the conceptualisations of family development. While it is a 'normative' stage, it is also difficult both for the parents, who have to rearrange their lives as a couple without children and for the young adults, who try to leave the family home without severing ties it. Clearly, more and more adult children tend to stay in the family home. This complex and dynamic phenomenon is referred to as incomplete separation or as 'boomerang children.' Both young people and their parents can contribute to the overall reluctance to leave home and hold back the process of adult children becoming independent. The task for the parents is to construct a new model of their life together as dissociated from the role they have played so far (Ładyżyński, 2020, p. 140). This can be particularly difficult for women who have been 'designated' to take care their children before. Social well-being may be more difficult to achieve for mothers without partners or living outside stable relationships (Wojciechowska, 2008, p. 212). On the other hand, contemporary women have ample opportunities to engage in a variety of (new) social roles in late adulthood. Men who have been 'steeped in' external activity turn inside, towards the family, and the female partner's engagement in pursuits outside the home is experienced as abandonment (Zalewski & Pinkowska-Zielińska, 2021, pp. 30–2). The phase is sometimes referred to as contraction, a stage of shrinking (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2006, p. 41). Counselling and therapy in this phase of the cycle can support both the young adults in exiting the parental home and the parents in preparations for the role of grandparents (Ostoja-Zawadzka, 1999, p. 28).

Conclusion and Recommendations for Support Practices in Family-Related Matters

Outlined in the introduction, the questions about the challenging areas faced by contemporary families at different stages of their development lead us to realise that such areas have long been recognised and are not new, even though some novel

challenges are inevitably emerging. The latter include, in particular, a very specific involvement of overworked parents and the pervasive influence of the media, which tend to separate family members from each other. Reflecting on whether and what kind of external assistance may be required by modern families, we can conclude that, on the one hand, there is no clear rationale to offer such assistance on a mass scale. After all, not every family is in need of psychotherapy. On the other hand, modern families are certainly the subject of particular concern, support and therapeutic work. Despite the increasing knowledge on relationships available to family members, better education across society and enhanced access to relevant publications, both printed and digital, families need more support than ever before as a result of civilisational changes. The development and improvement of therapeutic culture creates opportunities for families who can benefit from counselling and therapy without facing the stigma of dysfunction or suspicion that they lack some elementary relationship skills. In this context, it is crucial to mobilise family resources in both counselling and therapy, facilitating the ability to take initiative, to initiate conflict, self-sacrifice and mourning and to face reality (Stierlin et al., 1999, pp. 18–19).

Family-focused psychological, educational and therapeutic support is used by family-communities across developmental phases. At each stage, families may face challenges. The *dyads* of young people face the dilemma of whether to formally marry or continue cohabitation. Married couples form relationships with high mutual expectations. Women in the family strive for personal development by combining multiple roles, and men are committed to areas of professional activity to their 'last drop of sweat.' Children in such communities are less socialised as a result of the shrinking space for social interaction, while teenagers live in their media bubbles, isolated from peers and often from other family members as well. At all the stages of their life-cycle, families exhibit an ever-increasing willingness and capacity to work through their issues and present clearly delineated areas where they might need external help, resulting from both their natural development and unexpected impediments to their daily functioning.

Given this, it appears urgent to establish support institutions where families can easily access them. In this respect, the situation in urban areas is much better, especially in big cities, where specialised support is offered not only at private facilities, but also in counselling centres and facilities funded by church organisation, municipal programmes and the National Health Fund. The major challenge lies in making such support available in smaller towns, rural areas and regions removed from large urban hubs, which have so far been largely deprived of such kind of resources.

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