

# FAMILY THERAPY USING THE SATIR PROCESS

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*This article illuminates the contributions of Virginia Satir to the field of family therapy both in terms of theory and practice. She pioneered the concept of viewing the family as a system as well as choosing to focus on the family member's inner resources rather than their symptoms and pathology. She termed her model, the "Growth Model" versus the "Medical Model".*

*Satir's therapeutic process is described by the author as having six phases: Making Contact, Validating, Facilitating Awareness, Promoting Acceptance, Eliciting Positive Choices and Changes and Reinforcing them. These phases are described along with examples of how Satir applied them in her work with families.*

**Keywords:** social work with families, Satir therapeutic process, family therapy in social work practice.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the founders of family therapy was Virginia Satir (1916-1988). She began her career as a social worker at the Illinois State Psychiatric Hospital in Chicago, Illinois, and was assigned to work with a woman who was diagnosed with "ambulatory schizophrenia". Initially she worked with her individually but decided to be innovative and bring in her whole family and it was in that work that she began to see the impact of family systems and the power of working with the family as a unit.

Her success caught the attention of the department of psychiatry and so she was asked to teach the residents training to be psychiatrists about family systems and how to treat them. Her lectures were so well

received that she was encouraged to publish them and that became the basis of her first book, *Conjoint Family Therapy* (Satir, 1964), which has become a classic in the field.

Word of her effectiveness began to spread and she was invited to join the prestigious Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto, California where she developed a training program for those wishing to learn how to work with families.

In addition to being one of the pioneers in viewing families as systems, she was a pioneer in her theoretical framework, which she termed, "The Growth Model", where the focus was on helping people access their inner resources as opposed to, "The Medical Model", where the emphasis was on pathology and symptom reduction.

With a "Growth Model" framework, Satir likened the role of a family therapist to that of a gardener in that people are like seeds, they carry all the resources they need for growth if nurtured and protected from blocks to their growth. She believed that the key resource for each person was their Unique Spirit from which emanated other resources such as: self-awareness, self-acceptance, change, choice, compassion, curiosity, determination, hope, love and wisdom. Here is what she wrote about the resource of Spirit:

*The question for me was never whether (people) had spirits, but how I could contact them. ..It was as though I saw through to the inner core of each being, seeing the shining light of the spirit trapped in a thick black cylinder of limitation and self-rejection. My effort was to enable the person to see what I saw; then, together, we could turn the dark cylinder into a large, lighted screen and build new possibilities" (Satir, 1988, p. 340–341)*

With this conceptual framework, her goals for family therapy included helping the individual members increase their sense of worth and value by accessing their inner resources and by decreasing any emotional blocks. And for the family as a whole, she saw the goal as being to increase congruent communication and heart connections.

As Satir worked with families from around the world, she began to observe that there were some universal unspoken rules that blocked the

individual members from functioning at full capacity and also hindered the connections between members. These were:

- *It's not okay to see what is going on in the family.*
- *It's not okay to feel what you feel.*
- *It's not okay to talk about what you see and feel.*
- *It's not okay to ask for what you want.*
- *It's not okay to take risks.*

As a family therapist, she would observe the family members and their interaction and if she detected any of these rules in the family, she would help them break them by asking questions such as:

- *"What do you see going on between your husband and your son?"*
- *"What are you aware of feeling at this moment?"*
- *"Can you tell your wife what you are feeling?"*
- *"Can you ask your husband for what you want?"*
- *"I invite you to use your courage and say what you see happening in your family."*

In addition to helping family members free themselves from restrictive rules, she also helped them to make better connections with each other by decreasing their defensiveness. Satir identified the primary defensive stances as blaming, placating, distracting and being super-reasonable. The author of this article conceptualizes the defensive stances as falling under the categories of fight or flight.

#### Forms of Fight

Blaming—*This is your all your fault.*

Generalizing—*You always think you are right.*

Labeling—*You are so stupid.*

Threatening—*You better shape up or else.*

Physically Attacking the Other

#### Forms of Flight

Placating—*Do what you wish, my needs don't matter.*

Being Super-Reasonable—*I don't care what you feel, just give me the facts.*

Emotionally Withdrawing—Physically present but not emotionally present.

Physically Withdrawing—Leaving the room or hanging up on someone.

Cutting-off—Refusing to talk to the other for days or longer.

Within a family system, these defenses can be played out in interactional patterns such as:

Blame—Blame	Blame—Placate
Blame—Withdraw	Blame—Distract
Placate—Placate	Withdraw—Withdraw

With this understanding of dysfunctional interactions, Satir developed a process for helping people change and become more connected as is described in *The Satir Process* (Loeschen, 2009). Her process can be described as having six phases: Making Contact, Validating, Facilitating Awareness, Promoting Acceptance, Eliciting Positive Choices and Changes and Reinforcing Changes.

### Phase 1—Making Contact

Satir would reach out using her body position, eye contact and facial expression to make contact with each member. She would also consciously work to connect from her Spirit to theirs.

### Phase 2—Validating

Satir worked to help people feel validated in many ways such as reflecting their feelings, affirming their values and highlighting their inner resources. Examples of these might be:

*“You feel scared because your son got suspended from school.”*

*“You value education.”*

*“You are courageous to seek help.”*

### Phase 3—Facilitating Awareness

Satir had many different ways that she would attempt to bring awareness to a family about their defensive patterns in a non-blaming way. One method she developed was what she termed “sculpting” whereby she placed the members in body positions to give them a picture of their defensive behavior. For example, for the blaming stance, she would position the person leaning toward another and pointing at them and for the placating stance, she would position the person down on one knee with their head down and their hand up in a pleading position.

Satir would also bring awareness to members by exploring their inner experiences. She used the metaphor of an iceberg to help the family therapist conceptualize the inner levels of experience driving defensive behaviors. Above the water line and visible were the coping behaviors and below the water line were the inner levels of experience such as feelings, perceptions, expectations, beliefs, and yearnings. Here are two examples of how she would explore these levels with a mother and daughter who are in conflict. In the first example, she is exploring the daughter’s inner experience and the second she is exploring the mother’s inner experience.

With the daughter:

Satir: *What are you feeling?*

Daughter: *Hurt.*

Satir: *What meaning are you giving to what your mother said that is causing you to feel hurt?*

Daughter: *That she doesn’t care about my feelings, just my brother’s.*

Satir: *You believe your mother favors your brother.*

Daughter: *Yes.*

Satir: *You yearn to know that your feelings matter to your mother.*

Daughter: *Yes.*

With the mother:

Satir: *What are you feeling right now?*

Mother: *Very sad.*

Satir: *What meaning did you give to what your daughter said?*

Mother: *That she doesn't know how much I love her. I have failed her.*

Satir: *What comes up for you as you say that?*

Mother: *I am a failure.*

Satir: *Is that a familiar place for you to go when someone is disappointed in you?*

Mother: *Yes, I guess I take myself all the way down to the basement.*

Satir: *What is it you yearn for in relation to your daughter?*

Mother: *That I could convey my love for her in a way that she would feel it.*

#### Phase 4—Promoting Acceptance

One of the ways that Satir promoted acceptance was through “normalizing”, that is, reassuring the family member that what they were experiencing was normal. Examples might be:

To a teenage boy: *“It’s normal to want some independence.”*

To the boy’s father: *“It’s normal to struggle with how much freedom your teen is ready to handle.”*

Another way that she promoted acceptance was by “bridging” between conflicting parties. An example of bridging a father to a son might look like this:

*“I am hearing that it is not easy for your son at 15, I would be interested to know how life was for you when you were his age?”*

#### Phase 5—Eliciting Positive Choices and Changes

Once Satir observed that the family members were aware of and accepting of their unhelpful patterns, she would lead them into seeing new possibilities for their interactions. An example might be that after sculpting the father as blaming and the mother as placating, she would ask them each to stand in a balanced way and look at each other. She would then guide them in a dialogue helping them to express themselves in non-defensive ways. Other times she would simply have them sit face to face and she would guide the dialogue between them. Here’s an example of what guiding a dialogue might look like between a husband and a wife:

Satir to Husband: *What happens for you when your wife says you choose your work over your family?*

Husband: *I get angry. I do it for the family. I don't know what she wants from me.*

Satir: *You feel unappreciated.*

Husband: *Yes.*

Satir to Wife: *Did you know that your husband felt unappreciated?*

Wife: *No, he doesn't share much with me.*

Satir: *What happened for you when you heard him express his pain?*

Wife: *I felt sad that he feels that way. But I also feel angry because I think he would rather stay at his office and work than come home and be with me.*

Satir: *You long to be more connected with him. You miss him.*

Wife: *Yes, very much.*

Satir to Husband: *How do you feel to hear how much your wife misses you?*

Husband: *I feel bad. I love her, I am not avoiding her. I just am so afraid I will lose my job if I don't stay and do extra work.*

Satir to Wife: *Hearing his fear of losing his job, how are you feeling toward your husband at this moment?*

Wife: *I didn't know how scared he was. I feel bad for him. I really love him.*

### Phase 6—Reinforcing Change

Satir would often combine verbal responses with some supportive touch to reinforce a positive shift. In the scenario above, she might have said, "Wonderful!", and touched them in some loving way. Or she might have reinforced the change by saying to the wife, "Is there any way that you would like to show your husband how you are feeling at this moment? Most of the time, a hug would follow.

For those wishing to work with families, using the process described above can be effective, however, to have the most impact, the therapist also needs to work on their own personal growth. This is true for working with individuals but it is even more true when working with families as the chances of being triggered by your own family experience are even greater.

As Satir used to say, “*You are the most important instrument in the room!*”

## REFERENCES

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## ŠEIMOS TERAPIJA TAIKANT SATIR MODELĮ

### SANTRAUKA

Šis straipsnis atskleidžia šeimos terapijos pradininkės Virginijos Satir (1916–1988) indėlį į šeimos terapijos teoriją ir praktinį pritaikymą. Satir viena pirmųjų pradėjo taikyti koncepciją žvelgti į šeimą kaip į sistemą ir dirbant su šeima sutelkti dėmesį į vidinius šeimos nario išteklius, o ne į jų simptomus ir patologiją. Ji tikėjo, kad kiekvienas žmogus turi gausius išteklius, tokius kaip savimonė, savęs priėmimas, gebėjimas keistis, pasirinkimas, atjauta, smalsumas, ryžtas, viltis, meilė ir išmintis. Savo modelį ji pavadino „Augimo modeliu“, priešpastatydama jį „Medicininiam modeliui“. Remiantis šia konceptualia sistema, Satir šeimos terapija buvo siekiama padėti atskiriems nariams padidinti savo vertę ir savigarbos jausmą pasinaudojant vidiniais ištekliais ir mažinti emocinius blokus. Dirbdama su visa šeima kaip sistema ji siekė stiprinti kongruentų šeimos narių tarpusavio bendravimą ir šiltus emocinius ryšius. Remdamasi ilgamete socialinio darbo ir terapijos patirtimi su šeimomis Satir pastebėjo, kad egzistuoja tam tikros universalios neįvardytos taisyklės šeimose (negerai matyti, kas vyksta šeimoje; negerai jausti tai, ką jauti; nedera kalbėti apie tai, ką matai ir jauti; nedera prašyti to, ko nori; neverta rizikuoti), kurios stabdo individualių šeimos narių funkcionavimą

ir trukdo ryšiams tarp narių vystytis. Dėl šios priežasties dirbant su šeima būtina stebėti jos narius ir tarpusavio ryšius, siekiant juos atpažinti, o vėliau padėti keisti. Straipsnyje pristatomi ir aptariami Satir terapinio proceso šeši etapai: kontakto užmezgimas, validavimas, supratimo didinimas, priėmimo skatinimas, teigiami pasirinkimai ir pokyčių skatinimas bei sustiprinimas. Visi proceso etapai aprašyti pateikiant autentiškų pavyzdžių, kaip Satir juos pritaikė darbe su šeimomis.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** socialinis darbas su šeima, Satir terapinis procesas, šeimos terapija socialinio darbo praktikoje.