The Genogram

The genogram is a symbol picture of an extended family for several generations. It allows one to clearly diagram the general and complex information about a family. It is organized to illustrate the basic relationships among family members, their names, important dates and chosen characteristics (personality, health, vocation, etc.) of individual family members. (see McGoldrick, M., Gerson, R., and Shellenberger, S. (1999). Genograms: Assessment and Intervention (2nd Ed.). New York: W. W. Norton; and Pendagast, E. G., and Sherman, C. O. (1976). A guide to the genogram family systems training, The Family, vol. 5, No. 1.)

Use of the genogram in family study and family therapy is based on the assumption that some basic patterns between mother, father and children are replicas of past generations and may well be repeated in future generations. These repeated patterns may include relationship factors, personality characteristics, specific illnesses, etc. For example, one family may be typified by female headed households over several generations. Another family may have many members with exceptional musical talent. A third family may have a history of diabetes. Such pieces of information are easily and simply illustrated in genograms.

By creating a careful history with knowledge of the details of the present generation, it is possible to reconstruct many important aspects of the way the family process operated in past generations and predict possible functioning in future generations. (Bowen, M., (1978). Family therapy in clinical practice, N.Y.: Jason Aaronson, 376.)

Uses of the genogram. 1. Help the family see itself as a group of individuals who are connected to each other in important ways. There is an interdependence among family members. What occurs with one family member effects the other members of the family. 2. Help the individual members of the family see commonalities and uniqueness with other family members. This can facilitate the development of a sense of identity. 3. Clarify available options for change in the family. For example, a given family may come to see itself as too enmeshed now that the children are teen-agers or young adults and desire to create a little more separateness. 4. Prevent the isolation of one member of the family as the "scape goat" or person "with the problem" independent of the total family structure. 5. Provide both simple information (dates, births, marriages, deaths) and complex information (triangles, power, family issues, scripts) for making decisions and seeing what needs to be further clarified. 6. Therapists may better understand their own strengths and weaknesses and how these may effect the alliance they form with individual, couple or family clients.

Typically the genogram is drawn on a single piece of paper. A large piece of poster board is often desirable. Earlier generations are pictured at the top of the paper and the present generation is at the bottom. The husband or father's family is usually to the left and the wife or mother's family to the right. Individuals of the same generation are depicted on the same horizontal. Where siblings are illustrated, the oldest sibling is to the left, then moving chronologically from oldest to youngest and from left to right with the youngest sibling pictured at the far right. Below is a simple genogram depicting some of the major common symbols used in a genogram.

The use of creative symbols and color can greatly enhance the ability of the genogram to illustrate the family story. One key to an effective genogram is how well it illustrates simply and clearly the major issues and processes in the family.
Below is a list of appropriate information which may be included on a genogram. Symbols might be used to identify some of the information. A key should be placed in the bottom of the sheet which identifies the meaning of each symbol.

1. Names, nicknames, family titles for each person.
2. Dates of birth, death, severe illness, marriages, separations, divorces, other rites of passage.
3. Physical locations and dates of important moves.
4. Frequency of contact between members of the extended family or strength and type of relationship. Double lines may illustrate frequent contact and close relationships. Dashed lines may illustrate distant relationships and infrequent contact. Lines with slashes may illustrate conflict ridden relationships.
5. Emotional cutoffs. What was the issue or event? When?
6. Ethnicity, occupation, socioeconomic level, religious affiliation and participation.
7. Triangles, power struggles, alcohol and/or drugs problems.
8. Important health and personality characteristics.