

The "20 Questions" to Ask About Your Family

1. In what ways did the birth order of the persons in your family affect relationships and functioning?
 - a. Describe how your birth order in your family of origin affected your place in the family and the ways you related to your family members.
 - b. How did the birth order of your parents affect the way they related to each other and to the children in their family?
 - c. How did the birth orders of your siblings affect the ways they functioned in your family? How do you see their birth order affect their own nuclear families now if they are married and have their own children?
 - d. How does birth order affect you and your spouse and the way you relate to your own children?
2. What was your role in the family system?
 - a. Identify your role in your family of origin. What purpose or function did it serve for your larger family? Do you play the same role in other relationship systems in your life?
 - b. What were the roles of the other persons in your family of origin? How did their role affect the family? Did it affect you?
3. Who carried the legacy in the family system? Who is the standard bearer?
 - a. Using your genogram identify the standard bearers in your family system. Are you one of the standard bearers? If not, why not?
 - b. Were you named after someone in your extended family? Who? What was the reason the you received that person's name? What does it mean to you?
4. What assumptions of gender did your family of origin have?
 - a. What were the expectations or beliefs about males in your family of origin?
 - b. What were the expectations about females in your family?
 - c. Have these expectations, values and beliefs changed for you? In what ways? How did that come about?
5. Does your family system have an illness of choice? What is it?
 - a. Is there an illness of choice in your family system? Is it genetic? Is it the result of emotional process or psychological factors?
 - b. How has this illness of choice affected individual family members?
 - c. How has the illness of choice affected the multigenerational family system? In what ways does the illness of choice show up as a pattern?

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6. Choose a family theme or motto that comes closest to describing your family of origin. If none match, then name one.
 - a. Share a few stories or recall some incidents that illustrate your family theme.
 - b. Does your family theme or motto continue in your life? In your current family? In what ways? Give an example.
7. How was anger expressed in your family of origin?
 - a. Who in your family made you most angry or upset? How did you cope with your anger?
 - b. Did anger in your family lead to a cut-off, depression or violence? Give an example.
8. How was love expressed and communicated in your family?
 - a. Plot your family of origin’s way of expressing love on the continuum below, then share a story or incident that illustrates why you plotted your family so.
Intimate-----Distant
 - b. Plot your family of origins way of communicating love on the continuum below. Give a few examples of how your family communicated “I love you”.
Intimate-----Distant
 - c. How do you communicate and demonstrate love in your own family? In your relationships? Have you learned to do so differently over the years? From whom did you learn this?
9. What were you like in your family of origin when you were around 10 years old?
 - a. What was your relationship to each of your parents when you were 10 years old? Describe it.
 - b. What major family events can you recall when you were about 10 years old? How did your family handle these events? How do you remember feeling about them?
 - c. If you could go back in time and visit yourself, what would you like to tell yourself as a 10 year old?
10. What was your perception of your parents’ relationship when you were growing up?
 - a. What was your parents relationship like? Intimate? Conflictual? Distant? Affectionate?
 - b. Was one of your parents the leader in the home? Which one? Describe how that worked in the family?
 - c. Growing up, what was the relationship like between your parents and your siblings? Did your parents favor one sibling over the other? Did they overfocus on one?

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- d. What did you learn about parenting and/or relationships with others?
11. Where do you see the major triangles in your family of origin?
 - a. Who were the players and what was the triangle about?
 - b. What triangles were you a part of in your family of origin? What triangles are currently a part of your family?
 - c. Often, there exists a major triangle in the family system. These major triangles tend to be the origin of interlocking triangles. Can you identify the major triangle in your genogram?
 12. Can you identify cutoffs in your family genogram?
 - a. Is cutoff a pattern in your own family for how people deal with poor relationships? With stress or anxiety? With crisis?
 - b. Who paid the price for cutoffs in your family system? Was that price paid willingly or unwillingly?
 - c. Was the cutoff a blessing or a curse?
 13. In what ways do you see learned patterns of behavior in your family system playing out in your work system?
 - a. How are the ways in which you functioned in your family system playing out now in your relationship with friends, groups or your work system?
 - b. In what ways has your family system shaped you to do the work you've chosen? Or, do you feel that, given your family background, you've missed your calling?
 14. What is the ethnic background or heritage of your family of origin?
 - a. Can you identify the ways your ethnic heritage affects how your family members relate to each other? Describe the ways.
 - b. Are there particular and distinct family values associated with your ethnic heritage that continue to influence your family and its members?
 - c. Are there distinct cultural practices and customs that your family continues to observe? Are there some that your family has ceased to observe? Tell about those.
 15. Can you identify an overfunction/underfunction reciprocity dynamic in your family of origin? In your current family?
 - a. Can you identify any overfunctioners in your family? Who are they? In what ways do they overfunction?
 - b. Who are the underfunctioners in the family? Describe the ways they underfunction. Who reciprocates by overfunctioning for them? How?

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- c. Are you an under/overfunctioner? In what areas? Describe how you feel when you do either. Who in your family reciprocates?
16. How did your family handle crises?
 - a. Can you remember a time when your family had to deal with a crisis? Describe how your family dealt with it. Were the members highly reactive or did they cope well? Was the primary posture “fight” or “flight”?
 - b. Who are the members of your family that responded to crisis well? What strengths do they possess that allowed a positive response from them? Do you see patterns in your genogram that tend to identify this type of person?
 - c. Who are the members that respond to crisis poorly? Why do you think they responded this way? Do you see patterns in your genogram that tend to identify this type of person?
 - d. Can you identify the things or issues that tend to throw your family into crisis mode or make them anxious? Money issues? Health issues? Children’s behaviors? Religion? Alcohol or drug abuse? A parent’s behavior?
 - e. When a crisis happens in your family what triangles get formed? Are roles assigned?
17. What is the role and function of spirituality faith or religion in your family?
 - a. My family then...
 - i. What is your memory of your family’s religious practices when you were growing up? Did you have unique cultural observances? Did you observe a religious family tradition? Do you remember a family devotional experience that was very meaningful to you?
 - ii. Describe your memories about your family church or faith community experience when you were about 10 yrs old.
 - iii. On your genogram, identify the most religious person in your family system. Who were the saints and who were the sinners in your family system?
 - b. My family now...
 - i. Describe the religious and devotional practices that your family currently observes. Are there some that individual family members observe as a whole? Explain those.
 - ii. Name some “religious artifacts” that you have at home. Are these merely decorative objects or do they have a meaning for you and your family? For an individual family member?
18. At what point in your family’s lifecycle were you born? At what point did you leave home?

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- a. Can you identify the point in your family's life cycle you were born into?
 - b. Growing up, what life cycle stage do you most remember of your family? At what family stage did you "come of age" (ages 10-13)?
 - c. At what life cycle stage did you leave your family? What was the occasion of your leaving? Natural and developmental, like going off to college? A cutoff?
 - d. Were any of your siblings born into the family at a different life cycle stage than you? How did their experience of the family differ from yours?
 - e. Does your genogram reveal any patterns related to a particular life cycle? For example, do the oldest children seem to leave home in a cut-off fashion? With a blessing? Do marriages seem to have trouble during the empty nest stage? Do divorces happen early in the marriage?
19. How did your family handle losses?
- a. How did your family express mourning for a loss? Tell a story that illustrates how your family, or individuals in your family mourned the loss of a person either through death or another kind of loss.
 - b. How did your family members handle grief? Sometimes individuals in the same family handle grief differently. Was that true of your own family?
 - c. What were the most significant deaths in your family? How did the death of that person affect the family? Was there a conflict? Was there a shift in family responsibilities as a result?
 - d. Looking at your genogram, do you see a shift in functioning for certain family members as a result of a loss?
20. Does your family have a skeleton in the closet?
- a. In studying your genogram do you notice any gaps in information? Are there things your family does not talk about?
 - b. Are you a family member "in the know" regarding a family secret? What is the secret? Why are you in the loop? Why are others not in the loop?