

The Counseling Center Inc.

OCTOBER, 2006

Newsletter

Welcome

Fall is in the air! The beginning of a new school year marks, for many of us, the start of many things. Changing family activities, a new season of volunteer work, a resurgence of activity at the office, and incredibly enough, planning for the holidays are all part of the fall flurry of activity. At The Counseling Center, things pick up in the fall, as well. On Thursday evening, October 12th, we held our fall fund raising lecture "Finding Meaning in Life's Transitions" featuring one of The Counseling Center's psychotherapists, Dr. Ken Ruge. We have all heard the phrase "the only constant in life is change", but knowing how to navigate the process of these constant changes is the key to continuing our lives in a meaningful way as we face each transition. Dr. Ruge addressed issues such as facing the empty nest, divorce and remarriage, job transitions, ongoing child rearing challenges and losing parents. The main article in this newsletter addresses the issue of "The Second Family" – one of life's transitions faced by so many of our friends and family members. The article was written by another of our Marriage and Family Therapists, Dr. John Hagedorn. We continue to strive to address topics of interest to you and hope that this article will be of help to you or someone you know.

As we plan for new events to reach out to, and become more visible in the community, the question that I am most often asked is "How do the funds raised for The Counseling Center help people to afford counseling services?" The Community Fund of Westchester provides funds to subsidize fees for residents in Bronxville, Eastchester and Tuckahoe. In addition, subsidies for services and operation of the Center depends completely on the generous donations of individuals and the fund-raisers we hold each year. We welcome your involvement through volunteer activities or in attending our fund-raisers!

In addition to the fall lecture, we are planning for our winter luncheon educational series, the 10th Annual Concert Series, and our spring benefit. For more information on any of our events, to enquire about obtaining services, or to find out how you can become a volunteer, please call The Counseling Center office at 914-793-3388. I am, as always, grateful for our talented and dedicated staff, our generous supporters and volunteers, and the enthusiasm of our board in continuing to find new ways to reach out to our community. Our best to all of you!

Dick Shoup
Director

Second Families: *Challenges and Opportunities*

I was talking to a friend last month who had just entered the new world of second families. She had been married for a number of years and has two wonderful young daughters. She had been divorced and had lived for three years as a single parent. Then along came Bill. After months of dating they decided to get married and had a beautiful wedding last fall. Bill had been married before as well and brought his own two sons into the family equation. Now the family is into that time of adjusting, incorporating Bill into their on-going family system and welcoming his two sons when they come to be with them every other weekend. It's a time of change, a time of confusion, and a time for much needed growth.

(Continued on next page)

John Hagedorn, Ph.D.

Dr. Hagedorn is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist who works with individuals, couples and families. He is an ordained Lutheran minister (ELCA) and a Diplomate in the American Association of Pastoral Counselors. His areas of special interest include working with second family systems, with individual identity formation, and with grief and depression. He received his B.A. from the University of Maryland, his M.Div. from the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, and his Ph.D. from Boston University and has studied with Salvador Minuchin, a pioneer in the field of family systems and family therapy.



What do we know about these new family systems?

Since I'm in a second marriage myself I am aware that there are many words that are not helpful when it comes to trying to describe second families. "Step-family" comes from an old English term meaning bereaved or orphaned. Most contemporary second families are not the result of the death of a spouse but the result of the divorcing process. "Step" also has the connotation of a step down from an original family. Both of these meanings are not helpful. "Blended family" gives a false expectation. Most second families are not a blending but a unique structure honoring the original family system while incorporating the additional second family systems. And ask anyone in a second marriage and they will tell you it is not a "re-marriage", it is a brand new entity, not a duplication of the past. I prefer the term second family system because the previous family systems are still present and need to be cared for while the new family system is being developed. Relational language is also more caring in describing the members of the new family system. "This is Luke, my husband's son." "This is Bill, my Mom's husband." "This is Mary, my grandson's mother." There are too many bad images around the terms "Step-mother" and "Step-father".

Second families have a history and a process of development that distinguishes them from an original nuclear family. An initial family begins with a couple having time, without the presence of children, to develop a foundation of bonds, habits, expectations and values. Children are then born into this already developed system that continues to grow and change over time. Second marriages with children do not follow this linear process. When a divorce takes place the whole system is rearranged. Two independent single parent families are created that then develop their own concepts and ways of being. When a second marriage occurs the process is again changed. Now there is a new second family incorporating the new spouse and perhaps members of the initial family of that new spouse. And of course the other single parent family created by the divorce remains and connections must be continued there as well. A second family begins with children already in place and no special time for the couple to develop the needed marital bonds. One theorist talks about the different architectures of the family as it moves through the stages of initial family, single parent family, and second family system.

There are significant notable aspects to living in a second family that are quite different from living in an original family.

+ Boundary lines are often more flexible and less well defined in a second family. Children are often members of two families and it helps to have clear lines as they move back and forth from one family to the other. Communication is always required between the former spouses to keep the systems running smoothly. But we

must remember that the children have to be protected from the disagreements that might occur and not brought into the middle. Children need to feel that they "live" in two separate homes and are not seen as "visitors" in the family where they don't primarily reside.

+ All second families have pre-existing interpersonal bounds that predate the establishment of the second family. Spouse-former spouse bonds and parent-child bonds live on within the new configurations of the second family. Often the new member of the family, especially the new spouse, feels a sense of being an outsider because of these pre-existing relationships and can experience the distance of rejection, the awkwardness of being invisible, and the internal rage of jealousy. The new spouse must realize that the wedding ceremony established a new couple, but did not remove these pre-existent relationships and did not automatically create him or her as a new parent in the second family system.

+ Grief and loss are often present in the formation of a second family. The adults carry the loss of the original dream of a marriage that would have lasted forever and of their guilt and pain over its demise. The children carry the loss of the dream that their parents will get back together again. Often the new marriage ends the hope of reunion. Another commonly used word that is not helpful is a "broken" family. A divorce does not "break" a family. After a divorce new family systems develop and the family moves on. To refer to such families as "broken families" adds more pain and grief for all the members.

+ At times issues of loyalty surface in the second family. When parents argue, which parent do the children support? When house rules and discipline differ, which home gets the most support? When a new spouse alters the special relationship between a parent and a child where does the loyalty go? What happens when other children enter the system, either from the new spouse's former marriage or from a new baby born of the new union?

These differences do not mean second families should be avoided. What they mean is that the formation of a second family takes time, patience, concern and care.

The new couple has to work to create time to form the relational foundation required in the establishment of any new couple/family system. The new spouse can help by creating a bond of friendship with the children he or she has inherited through the new family system. Once friendship has been established the child often allows the new spouse to take on a level of parenting authority.

Decisions concerning discipline quickly come up leading to discussions between the new spouses, but the biological parent should have the final say, inform the child, and be in charge of activating the new rules and behaviors. Loyalty bonds slowly get normalized and loosened so that deeper relationships can develop in the new family system. Civility often precedes love. Change comes slowly and

requires patience to build new connections and to introduce new expectations and behaviors.

When the biological parent remains the one in charge, leading the family in a kind but firm manner, it allows the new spouse to be the one expressing understanding, empathy, caring and love. The pairing of the insider with power and the outsider with supportive listening creates a process that will slowly bring the “outsider” into a new position of “intimate outsider”. Discussion and negotiation become the standard operating procedures of all second families and family meetings become the arenas for open communication and growth.

If you're in a second family here are some things you can do to help yourself. Do some self education. Read as much as you can about the process of forming a second family so you can know what to expect. I would suggest Patricia Papernow's book *Becoming a Stepfamily: Patterns of Development in Remarried Families*. I like her concepts even though I don't like her use of those troubling words!

Get yourself and the members of your family into some training to develop the interpersonal skills required to create a second family. The new second family will have to learn to work together, empathize with each other, develop ways of being clear, and keep calm as the process of growth happens. If you or another member of the new family realize that you are personally challenged by the process and that things from your history or psychological makeup are getting in the way, please consider giving yourself the gift of personal therapy. We all need to know that we are not in this process alone!

John Hagedorn, Ph.D.

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Q & A

Question: I just married for a second time and my new wife has three adorable children from her first marriage. I know that raising three children is hard enough, but now my own two children have entered the family twice a month. How can I best be a parent to all five of these children?

Answer: Thanks for taking the process of developing a new family system seriously. You have a number of tasks before you. First of all maintain a good relationship with your own two children even though you don't get to be with them as much as you would like. Arrange to call or e-mail them on a consistent basis, welcome them into their new “home” when they come. Create a space in your new home that they can call their own so they feel that they live with you and your new wife as well as live at their other home with their mother. Realize that your first major work with your new wife's three children is to become their friend. Listen to them, love them to the degree they allow you to enter their lives, support their mother in her current rules and styles of discipline. As the marriage strengthens have discussions with your new wife around parenting issues that are raising concerns for you. Always realize that she is their parent and their history together supersedes your involvement. When the children understand that you are not out to replace their father, are supportive of their mother, and are deeply concerned about their welfare, they will slowly let you become a “new parent” in the system. Good luck!

John Hagedorn, Ph.D.

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Raising a Joyful Sound...

Help us Celebrate
Our 10th Anniversary!

This year The Counseling Center will celebrate the 10th Anniversary Season of our popular Sunday Chamber Music Series at Christ Church, Bronxville. Please join us on February 18th, March 18th and April 15th. Musicians with national and international reputations, including members of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, will perform works by Mozart, Brahms, Dvorak, Tchaikowsky, Rachmaninoff and others. Funds raised subsidize those individuals and families who cannot afford the full cost of our services. Watch for a complete program in the mail. If you, or a corporate friend, would like to sponsor a concert or become a donor, please call The Counseling Center office at 914-793-3388 for more information.

What's Happening.....

The 10th Annual Chamber Music Series – Held at Christ Church, 17 Sagamore Road in Bronxville on three Sunday afternoons: **February 18, March 18 and April 15**. Enjoy some wonderful music and quiet time for yourself or with your family. Support for this concert series is provided through subscriptions – call Catherine Nicholas at The Counseling Center (914-793-3388) for more information. Individual tickets at the door \$25/\$15 for seniors and students.

The Counseling Center Educational Luncheon Series – Will continue in February, 2007. The specific topic is to be determined. This on-going series provides opportunities for community members to learn more about issues relevant to psychological well-being in a small group setting that we hope encourages discussion. If you are interested in attending one of these meetings in the future, please call The Counseling Center office at 914-793-3388.

The Annual Spring Benefit – Look for more information in our winter newsletter about this annual event. If you are

interested in joining the Benefit Committee please call The Counseling Center office at 914-793-3388.

Fall Fund Raising Lecture – On **Thursday evening, October 12**, a reception and lecture was held at the home of Richard and Mary Thaler in Bronxville to raise funds for The Counseling Center. Dr. Ken Ruge, a psychotherapist at The Counseling Center, popular workshop leader and author of *Where Do I Go From Here? An Inspirational Guide to Making Authentic Career and Life Choices* (McGraw-Hill, 1998) and *Soul Mapping*, coauthored with Nina Frost and Richard Shoup (Marlowe Press, 2001), spoke on “Finding Meaning in Life’s Transitions”. Guests, board members and professional staff from The Counseling Center enjoyed the lecture, a thoughtful discussion and reception in a comfortable and welcoming setting. Thanks to all who attended and made for a wonderful evening! Special thanks to our friends Richard and Mary Thaler for their ongoing generous support. If you are interested in attending one of these meetings in the future, please call The Counseling Center office at 914-793-3388

The Counseling Center Inc.

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