

## On Community

Trying to describe and encompass all of “community” is like trying to describe all “air”. Both are the milieu in which humans must exist for their survival. But what is the scope one wishes to describe? Air in this room? The layer of smoke over the city? The atmosphere? Is community the people with whom one interacts? The municipality? The whole of humanity?

I decided to write more than one column on community in the coming year, each one focused on a particular “level” of community relevant to us as family therapists. The overall point is that a systemic approach to helping families and individuals must necessarily extend beyond the family and the therapist into a wider area which is impacting them, both in their problems and the resources that need to be found and activated for their thriving.

Problems that plague our communities are often reflected in the family’s story: Income and food insecurities, housing shortages, drug and alcohol misuse, and hostility toward migrants play out as tensions between family members. Children and adolescents can respond to these elements with a panoply of behaviors that can put the household under the microscope of school and child welfare authorities. Family members may retreat socially, feeling judged and less than. In some cases, social isolation and trouble with the authorities may be a multigenerational story.

Family therapy can introduce ways the same problem-ridden community contains elements which can reduce the isolation of the family. These resources can open up the world for clients. Bringing friends into a session, for example, can have a meaningful impact. Connecting to a sewing circle or a single parent group creates connection that is part of healing. Knowing nonjudgmental clergy of any faith may help a family find a longed-for spiritual community. A job fair may be a way a needed income is found.

The therapist need not know every resource. Rather, the therapist listens carefully to the needs of the family and carefully explores options to help them solve pressing problems but also to create the connection that is part of health.