



# The Family

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Each and every one of us has a family. However, these families exist in many variations around the world. In this module, we discuss definitions of family, family forms, the developmental trajectory of families, and commonly used theories to understand families. We also cover factors that influence families such as culture and societal expectations while incorporating the latest family relevant statistics.

## Learning Objectives

- Understand the various family forms.
- ~~Describe attachment theory.~~
- Identify different parenting styles.
- ~~Know the typical developmental trajectory of families.~~
- ~~Understand cultural differences in dating, marriage, and divorce.~~
- Explain the influence of children and aging parents on families.
- Know concrete tips for increasing happiness within your family.

## Introduction

It is often said that humans are social creatures. We make friends, live in communities, and connect to acquaintances through shared interests. In recent times, social media has become

a new way for people to connect with childhood peers, friends of friends, and even strangers. Perhaps nothing is more central to the social world than the concept of family. Our families represent our earliest relationships and—often—our most enduring ones. In this module, you will learn about the psychology of families. Our discussion will begin with a basic definition of family and how this has changed across time and place. Next, we move on to a discussion of family roles and how families evolve across the lifespan. Finally, we conclude with issues such as divorce and abuse that are important factors in the psychological health of families.

## What is Family?

In J.K. Rowling's famous Harry Potter novels, the boy magician lives in a cupboard under the stairs. His unfortunate situation is the result of his wizarding parents having been killed in a duel, causing the young Potter to be subsequently shipped off to live with his cruel aunt and uncle. Although family may not be the central theme of these wand and sorcery novels, Harry's example raises a compelling question: what, exactly, counts as family?



A traditional family has a somewhat narrow definition that includes only relationships of blood, marriage, and occasionally adoption. More recently, in many societies, the definition of family has expanded. A modern family may include less traditional variations based on strong commitment and emotional ties. [Image: 10070052 moodboard, <http://goo.gl/2xAZGA>, CC BY 2.0, <http://goo.gl/v4Y0Zv>]

The definition of family changes across time and across culture. **Traditional family** has been defined as two or more people who are related by blood, marriage, and—occasionally—adoption (Murdock, 1949). Historically, the most standard version of the traditional family has been the **two-parent family**. Are there people in your life you consider family who are not necessarily related to you in the traditional sense? Harry Potter would undoubtedly call his schoolmates Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger family, even though they do not fit the traditional definition. Likewise, Harry might consider Hedwig, his snowy owl, a family member, and he would not be alone in doing so. Research from the US (Harris, 2015) and Japan (Veldkamp, 2009) finds that many pet owners consider their pets to be members of the family. Another traditional

form of family is the **joint family**, in which three or more generations of blood relatives live in a single household or compound. Joint families often include cousins, aunts and uncles,

and other relatives from the extended family. Versions of the joint family system exist around the globe including in South Asia, Southern Europe, the South Pacific and other locations.

In more modern times, the traditional definition of family has been criticized as being too narrow. Modern families—especially those in industrialized societies—exist in many forms, including the single parent family, foster families, same-sex couples, childfree families, and many other variations from traditional norms. Common to each of these family forms is commitment, caring, and close emotional ties—which are increasingly the defining characteristics of family (Benokraitis, 2015). The changing definition of family has come about, in part, because of factors such as divorce and re-marriage. In many cases, people do not grow up with their family of orientation, but become part of a stepfamily or blended family. Whether a single-parent, joint, or two-parent family, a person's family of orientation, or the family into which he or she is born, generally acts as the social context for young children learning about relationships.

According to Bowen (1978), each person has a role to play in his or her family, and each role comes with certain rules and expectations. This system of rules and roles is known as family systems theory. The goal for the family is stability: rules and expectations that work for all. When the role of one member of the family changes, so do the rules and expectations. Such changes ripple through the family and cause each member to adjust his or her own role and expectations to compensate for the change.

Take, for example, the classic story of Cinderella. Cinderella's initial role is that of a child. Her parents' expectations of her are what would be expected of a growing and developing child. But, by the time Cinderella reaches her teen years, her role has changed considerably. Both of her biological parents have died and she has ended up living with her stepmother and stepsisters. Cinderella's role shifts from being an adored child to acting as the household servant. The stereotype of stepfamilies as being emotionally toxic is, of course, not true. You might even say there are often-overlooked instructive



There are many variations of modern families, including blended or stepfamilies where two families combine. In a combined family the roles of individuals may be different than in their original family of orientation. [Image: Doc List, <http://goo.gl/5FpSeU>, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0, <http://goo.gl/iF4hmM>]

elements in the Cinderella story: Her role in the family has become not only that of servant but also that of caretaker-- the others expecting her to cook and clean while in return they treat her with spite and cruelty. When Cinderella finds her prince and leaves to start her own family—known as a family of procreation—it is safe to assume that the roles of her stepmother and stepsisters will change—suddenly having to cook and clean for themselves.

Gender has been one factor by which family roles have long been assigned. Traditional roles have historically placed housekeeping and childrearing squarely in the realm of women's responsibilities. Men, by contrast, have been seen as protectors and as providers of resources including money. Increasingly, families are crossing these traditional roles with women working outside the home and men contributing more to domestic and childrearing responsibilities. Despite this shift toward more egalitarian roles, women still tend to do more housekeeping and childrearing tasks than their husbands (known as the second shift) (Hochschild & Machung, 2012).

Interestingly, parental roles have an impact on the ambitions of their children. Croft and her colleagues (2014) examined the beliefs of more than 300 children. The researchers discovered that when fathers endorsed more equal sharing of household duties and when mothers were more workplace oriented it influenced how their daughters thought. In both cases, daughters were more likely to have ambitions toward working outside the home and working in less gender-stereotyped professions.

## How Families Develop

Our families are so familiar to us that we can sometimes take for granted the idea that families develop over time. Nuclear families, those core units of parents and children, do not simply pop into being. The parents meet one another, they court or date one another, and they make the decision to have children. Even then the family does not quit changing. Children grow up and leave home and the roles shift yet again.

## Intimacy

In a psychological sense, families begin with intimacy. The need for intimacy, or close relationships with others, is universal. We seek out close and meaningful relationships over the course of our lives. What our adult intimate relationships look like actually stems from infancy and our relationship with our primary caregiver (historically our mother)—a process of development described by attachment theory. According to attachment theory, different styles of caregiving result in different relationship “attachments.” For example, responsive



According to Attachment Theory, the type of care that we receive as infants can have a significant influence on the intimate relationships that we have as adults. [Image: Muriel HEARD-COLLIER, <http://goo.gl/BK7WUm>, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0, <http://goo.gl/iF4hmM>]

mothers—mothers who soothe their crying infants—produce infants who have **secure attachments** (Ainsworth, 1973; Bowlby, 1969). About 60% of all children are securely attached. As adults, secure individuals rely on their **working models**—concepts of how relationships operate—that were created in infancy, as a result of their interactions with their primary caregiver (mother), to foster happy and healthy adult intimate relationships. Securely attached adults feel comfortable being depended on and depending on others.

As you might imagine, inconsistent or dismissive parents also impact the attachment style of their infants (Ainsworth, 1973), but in a different direction. In early studies on attachment style, infants were

observed interacting with their caregivers, followed by being separated from them, then finally reunited. About 20% of the observed children were “resistant,” meaning they were anxious

### Early Attachment and Adult Intimacy

#### Secure:

“I find it relatively easy to get close to others and am comfortable depending on them and having them depend on me. I don’t often worry about being abandoned or about someone getting too close to me.”

#### Anxious-avoidant:

“I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others; I find it difficult to trust them completely, difficult to allow myself to depend on them. I am nervous when anyone gets too close, and often, love partners want me to be more intimate than I feel comfortable being.”

#### Anxious-resistant:

“I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I often worry that my partner doesn’t really love me or won’t want to stay with me. I want to merge completely with another person, and this desire sometimes scares people away.”

Table 1: Early attachment and adult intimacy



even before, and especially during, the separation; and 20% were “avoidant,” meaning they actively avoided their caregiver after separation (i.e., ignoring the mother when they were reunited). These early attachment patterns can affect the way people relate to one another in adulthood. Anxious-resistant adults worry that others don’t love them, and they often become frustrated or angry when their needs go unmet. Anxious avoidant adults will appear not to care much about their intimate relationships, and are uncomfortable being depended on or depending on others themselves.

The good news is that our attachment can be changed. It isn’t easy, but it is possible for anyone to “recover” a secure attachment. The process often requires the help of a supportive and dependable other, and for the insecure person to achieve coherence—the realization that his or her upbringing is not a permanent reflection of character or a reflection of the world at large, nor does it bar him or her from being worthy of love or others of being trustworthy (Trebourg, Crowell, & Waters, 2004).

## Dating, Courtship, and Cohabitation

Over time, the process of finding a mate has changed dramatically. In Victorian England, for instance, young women in high society trained for years in the arts—to sing, play music, dance, compose verse, etc. These skills were thought to be vital to the courtship ritual—a demonstration of feminine worthiness. Once a woman was of marriageable age, she would attend dances and other public events as a means of displaying her availability. A young couple interested in one another would find opportunities to spend time together, such as taking a walk. That era had very different dating practices from today, in which teenagers have more freedom, more privacy, and can date more people.

One major difference in the way people find a mate these days is the way we use technology to both expand and restrict the marriage market—the process by which potential mates compare assets and liabilities of available prospects and choose the best option (Benokraitis, 2015). Comparing marriage to a market might sound unromantic, but think of it as a way to illustrate how people seek out attractive qualities in a mate. Modern technology has allowed us to expand our “market” by allowing us to search for potential partners all over the world—as opposed to the days when people mostly relied on local dating pools. Technology also allows us to filter out undesirable (albeit available) prospects at the outset, based on factors such as shared interests, age, and other features.

The use of filters to find the most desirable partner is a common practice, resulting in people marrying others very similar to themselves—a concept called homogamy; the opposite is

known as heterogamy (Burgess & Wallin, 1943). In his comparison of educational homogamy in 55 countries, Smits (2003) found strong support for higher educated people marrying other highly educated people. As such, education appears to be a strong filter people use to help them select a mate. The most common filters we use—or, put another way, the characteristics we focus on most in potential mates—are age, race, social status, and religion (Regan, 2008). Other filters we use include compatibility, physical attractiveness (we tend to pick people who are as attractive as we are), and proximity (for practical reasons, we often pick people close to us) (Klenke Hamel & Janda, 1980).

In many countries, technology is increasingly used to help single people find each other, and this may be especially true of older adults who are divorced or widowed, as there are few societally structured activities for older singles. For example, younger people in school are usually surrounded with many potential dating partners of a similar age and background. As we get older, this is less true, as we focus on our careers and find ourselves surrounded by co-workers of various ages, marital statuses, and backgrounds.



In some countries, many people are coupled and committed to marriage through arrangements made by parents or professional marriage brokers. [Image: Ananabanana, <http://goo.gl/gzCR0x>, CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0, <http://goo.gl/iF4hmM>]

young people.

In some cultures, however, it is not uncommon for the families of young people to do the work of finding a mate for them. For example, the Shanghai Marriage Market refers to the People's Park in Shanghai, China—a place where parents of unmarried adults meet on weekends to trade information about their children in attempts to find suitable spouses for them (Bolsover, 2011). In India, the marriage market refers to the use of marriage brokers or marriage bureaus to pair eligible singles together (Trivedi, 2013). To many Westerners, the idea of arranged marriage can seem puzzling. It can appear to take the romance out of the equation and violate values about personal freedom. On the other hand, some people in favor of arranged marriage argue that parents are able to make more mature decisions than

While such intrusions may seem inappropriate based on your upbringing, for many people

of the world such help is expected, even appreciated. In India for example, “parental arranged marriages are largely preferred to other forms of marital choices” (Ramsheena & Gundemeda, 2015, p. 138). Of course, one’s religious and social caste plays a role in determining how involved family may be.

In terms of other notable shifts in attitude seen around the world, an increase in cohabitation has been documented. Cohabitation is defined as an arrangement in which two people who are romantically live together even though they are not married (Prinz, 1995). Cohabitation is common in many countries, with the Scandinavian nations of Iceland, Sweden, and Norway reporting the highest percentages, and more traditional countries like India, China, and Japan reporting low percentages (DeRose, 2011). In countries where cohabitation is increasingly common, there has been speculation as to whether or not cohabitation is now part of the natural developmental progression of romantic relationships: dating and courtship, then cohabitation, engagement, and finally marriage. Though, while many cohabitating arrangements ultimately lead to marriage, many do not.

## Engagement and Marriage

Most people will marry in their lifetime. In the majority of countries, 80% of men and women have been married by the age of 49 (United Nations, 2013). Despite how common marriage remains, it has undergone some interesting shifts in recent times. Around the world, people are tending to get married later in life or, increasingly, not at all. People in more developed countries (e.g., Nordic and Western Europe), for instance, marry later in life—at an average age of 30 years. This is very different than, for example, the economically developing country of Afghanistan, which has one of the lowest average age statistics for marriage—at 20.2 years (United Nations, 2013). Another shift seen around the world is a gender gap in terms of age when people get married. In every country, men marry later than



While marriage is common across cultures, the details such as “How” and “When” are often quite different. Now the “Who” of marriage is experiencing an important change as laws are updated in a growing number of countries and states to give same-sex couples the same rights and benefits through marriage as heterosexual couples. [Image: Bart Vis, <http://goo.gl/liSy9P>, CC BY 2.0, <http://goo.gl/T4qgSp>]



women. Since the 1970's, the average age of marriage for women has increased from 21.8 to 24.7 years. Men have seen a similar increase in age at first marriage.

As illustrated, the courtship process can vary greatly around the world. So too can an engagement—a formal agreement to get married. Some of these differences are small, such as on which hand an engagement ring is worn. In many countries it is worn on the left, but in Russia, Germany, Norway, and India, women wear their ring on their right. There are also more overt differences, such as who makes the proposal. In India and Pakistan, it is not uncommon for the family of the groom to propose to the family of the bride, with little to no involvement from the bride and groom themselves. In most Western industrialized countries, it is traditional for the male to propose to the female. What types of engagement traditions, practices, and rituals are common where you are from? How are they changing?

## Children?

Do you want children? Do you already have children? Increasingly, families are postponing or not having children. Families that choose to forego having children are known as childfree families, while families that want but are unable to conceive are referred to as childless families. As more young people pursue their education and careers, age at first marriage has increased; similarly, so has the age at which people become parents. The average age for first-time mothers is 25 in the United States (up from 21 in 1970), 29.4 in Switzerland, and 29.2 in Japan (Matthews & Hamilton, 2014).

The decision to become a parent should not be taken lightly. There are positives and negatives associated with parenting that should be considered. Many parents report that having children increases their well-being (White & Dolan, 2009). Researchers have also found that parents, compared to their non-parent peers, are more positive about their lives (Nelson, Kushlev, English, Dunn, & Lyubomirsky, 2013). On the other hand, researchers have also found that parents, compared to non-parents, are more likely to be depressed, report lower levels of marital quality, and feel like their relationship with their partner is more businesslike than intimate (Walker, 2011).

If you do become a parent, your parenting style will impact your child's future success in romantic and parenting relationships. Authoritative parenting, arguably the best parenting style, is both demanding and supportive of the child (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Support refers to the amount of affection, acceptance, and warmth a parent provides. Demandingness refers to the degree a parent controls his/her child's behavior. Children who have authoritative parents are generally happy, capable, and successful (Maccoby, 1992).

		<b>Support</b>	
		<b>Low</b>	<b>High</b>
<b>Demandingness</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b><u>Uninvolved</u></b>	<b><u>Permissive</u></b>
	<b>High</b>	<b><u>Authoritarian</u></b>	<b><u>Authoritative</u></b>

Table 2: Four parenting styles

Other, less advantageous parenting styles include authoritarian (in contrast to authoritative), permissive, and uninvolved (Tavassolie, Dudding, Madigan, Thorvardarson, & Winsler, 2016). **Authoritarian** parents are low in support and high in demandingness. Arguably, this is the parenting style used by Harry Potter's harsh aunt and uncle, and Cinderella's vindictive stepmother. Children who receive authoritarian parenting are more likely to be obedient and proficient, but score lower in happiness, social competence, and self-esteem. **Permissive** parents are high in support and low in demandingness. Their children rank low in happiness and self-regulation, and are more likely to have problems with authority. **Uninvolved** parents are low in both support and demandingness. Children of these parents tend to rank lowest across all life domains, lack self-control, have low self-esteem, and are less competent than their peers.

Support for the benefits of authoritative parenting has been found in countries as diverse as the Czech Republic (Dmitrieva, Chen, Greenberger, & Gil-Rivas, 2004), India (Carson, Chowdhury, Perry, & Pati, 1999), China (Pilgrim, Luo, Urberg, & Fang, 1999), Israel (Mayseless, Scharf, & Sholt, 2003), and Palestine (Punamaki, Qouta, & Sarraj, 1997). In fact, authoritative parenting appears to be superior in Western, individualistic societies—so much so that some people have argued that there is no longer a need to study it (Steinberg, 2001). Other researchers are less certain about the superiority of authoritative parenting and point to differences in cultural values and beliefs. For example, while many European-American children do poorly with too much strictness (*authoritarian* parenting), Chinese children often

do well, especially academically. The reason for this likely stems from Chinese culture viewing strictness in parenting as related to training, which is not central to American parenting (Chao, 1994).

## Parenting in Later Life

Just because children grow up does not mean their family stops being a family. The concept of family persists across the entire lifespan, but the specific roles and expectations of its members change over time. One major change comes when a child reaches adulthood and moves away. When exactly children leave home varies greatly depending on societal norms and expectations, as well as on economic conditions such as employment opportunities and affordable housing options. Some parents may experience sadness when their adult children leave the home—a situation known as Empty Nest.



When one's children reach adulthood it doesn't mean that parenting stops. Boomerang kids and multigenerational households that include aging parents are increasingly common. [Image: davidmulder61, <http://goo.gl/eGPT5i>, CC BY-SA 2.0, <http://goo.gl/S6i0RI>]

Many parents are also finding that their grown children are struggling to launch into independence. It's an increasingly common story: a child goes off to college and, upon graduation, is unable to find steady employment. In such instances, a frequent outcome is for the child to return home, becoming a "boomerang kid." The boomerang generation, as the phenomenon has come to be known, refers to young adults, mostly between the ages of 25 and 34, who return home to live with their parents while they strive for stability in their lives—often in terms of finances, living arrangements, and sometimes romantic relationships. These boomerang kids can be both good and bad for families. Within American families, 48% of boomerang kids report having paid rent to their parents, and 89% say they help out

with household expenses—a win for everyone (Parker, 2012). On the other hand, 24% of boomerang kids report that returning home hurts their relationship with their parents (Parker, 2012). For better or for worse, the number of children returning home has been increasing around the world.

In addition to middle-aged parents spending more time, money, and energy taking care of their adult children, they are also increasingly taking care of their own aging and ailing parents. Middle-aged people in this set of circumstances are commonly referred to as the sandwich generation (Dukhovnov & Zagheni, 2015). Of course, cultural norms and practices again come into play. In some Asian and Hispanic cultures, the expectation is that adult children are supposed to take care of aging parents and parents-in-law. In other Western cultures—cultures that emphasize individuality and self-sustainability—the expectation has historically been that elders either age in place, modifying their home and receiving services to allow them to continue to live independently, or enter long-term care facilities. However, given financial constraints, many families find themselves taking in and caring for their aging parents, increasing the number of multigenerational homes around the world.

## Family Issues and Considerations

### Divorce

Divorce refers to the legal dissolution of a marriage. Depending on societal factors, divorce may be more or less of an option for married couples. Despite popular belief, divorce rates in the United States actually declined for many years during the 1980s and 1990s, and only just recently started to climb back up—landing at just below 50% of marriages ending in divorce today (Marriage & Divorce, 2016); however, it should be noted that divorce rates increase for each subsequent marriage, and there is considerable debate about the exact divorce rate. Are there specific factors that can predict divorce? Are certain types of people or certain types of relationships more or less at risk for breaking up? Indeed, there are several factors that appear to be either risk factors or protective factors.

Pursuing education decreases the risk of divorce. So too does waiting until we are older to marry. Likewise, if our parents are still married we are less likely to divorce. Factors that increase our risk of divorce include having a child before marriage and living with multiple partners before marriage, known as serial cohabitation (cohabitation with one's expected marital partner does not appear to have the same effect). And, of course, societal and religious attitudes must also be taken into account. In societies that are more accepting of divorce, divorce rates tend to be higher. Likewise, in religions that are less accepting of divorce, divorce rates tend to be lower. See Lyngstad & Jalovaara (2010) for a more thorough discussion of divorce risk.

If a couple does divorce, there are specific considerations they should take into account to help their children cope. Parents should reassure their children that both parents will continue



Divorce Factors	
Protective Factors	Risk Factors
• Higher-levels of education	• Children before marriage
• Marrying at older age	• Co-habitation
• Parents remain married	• Live in a society accepting of divorce
• Member of religious group less accepting of divorce	

Table 3: Divorce Factors

to love them and that the divorce is in no way the children's fault. Parents should also encourage open communication with their children and be careful not to bias them against their "ex" or use them as a means of hurting their "ex" (Denham, 2013; Harvey & Fine, 2004; Pescosoido, 2013).

## Abuse

Abuse can occur in multiple forms and across all family relationships. Breiding, Basile, Smith, Black, & Mahendra (2015) define the forms of abuse as:

- **Physical abuse**, the use of intentional physical force to cause harm. Scratching, pushing, shoving, throwing, grabbing, biting, choking, shaking, slapping, punching, and hitting are common forms of physical abuse;
- **Sexual abuse**, the act of forcing someone to participate in a sex act against his or her will. Such abuse is often referred to as sexual assault or rape. A marital relationship does not grant anyone the right to demand sex or sexual activity from anyone, even a spouse;
- **Psychological abuse**, aggressive behavior that is intended to control someone else. Such abuse can include threats of physical or sexual abuse, manipulation, bullying, and stalking.

Abuse between partners is referred to as **intimate partner violence**; however, such abuse can also occur between a parent and child (**child abuse**), adult children and their aging parents

(elder abuse), and even between siblings.

The most common form of abuse between parents and children is actually that of neglect. Neglect refers to a family's failure to provide for a child's basic physical, emotional, medical, or educational needs (DePanfilis, 2006). Harry Potter's aunt and uncle, as well as Cinderella's stepmother, could all be prosecuted for neglect in the real world.

Abuse is a complex issue, especially within families. There are many reasons people become abusers: poverty, stress, and substance abuse are common characteristics shared by abusers, although abuse can happen in any family. There are also many reasons adults stay in abusive relationships: (a) learned helplessness (the abused person believing he or she has no control over the situation); (b) the belief that the abuser can/will change; (c) shame, guilt, self-blame, and/or fear; and (d) economic dependence. All of these factors can play a role.

Children who experience abuse may "act out" or otherwise respond in a variety of unhealthful ways. These include acts of self-destruction, withdrawal, and aggression, as well as struggles with depression, anxiety, and academic performance. Researchers have found that abused children's brains may produce higher levels of stress hormones. These hormones can lead to decreased brain development, lower stress thresholds, suppressed immune responses, and lifelong difficulties with learning and memory (Middlebrooks & Audage, 2008).

## Adoption

Divorce and abuse are important concerns, but not all family hurdles are negative. One example of a positive family issue is adoption. Adoption has long historical roots (it is even mentioned in the Bible) and involves taking in and raising someone else's child legally as one's own. Becoming a parent is one of the most fulfilling things a person can do (Gallup & Newport, 1990), but even with modern reproductive technologies, not all couples who would like to have children (which is still most) are able to. For these families, adoption often allows them to feel whole—by completing their family.

In 2013, in the United States, there were over 100,000 children in foster care (where children go when their biological families are unable to adequately care for them) available for adoption (Soronen, 2013). In total, about 2% of the U.S. child population is adopted, either through foster care or through private domestic or international adoption (Adopted Children, 2012). Adopting a child from the foster care system is relatively inexpensive, costing \$0-\$2,500, with many families qualifying for state-subsidized support (Soronen, 2013).



Adoption is an important option for creating or expanding a family. Foster care adoptions and international adoptions are both common. Regardless of why a family chooses to adopt and from where, traits such as patience, flexibility and strong problem-solving skills are desirable for adoptive parents. [Image: Steven Depolo, <https://goo.gl/ElGvwe>, CC BY 2.0, <https://goo.gl/BRvSA7>]

For years, international adoptions have been popular. In the United States, between 1999 and 2014, 256,132 international adoptions occurred, with the largest number of children coming from China (73,672) and Russia (46,113) (Intercountry Adoption, 2016). People in the United States, Spain, France, Italy, and Canada adopt the largest numbers of children (Selman, 2009). More recently, however, international adoptions have begun to decrease. One significant complication is that each country has its own set of requirements for adoption, as does each country from which an adopted child originates. As such, the adoption process can vary greatly, especially in terms of cost, and countries are able to police who adopts their children. For example, single, obese, or over-50 individuals are not allowed to adopt a child from China (Bartholet, 2007).

Regardless of why a family chooses to adopt, traits such as flexibility, patience, strong problem-solving skills, and a willingness to identify local community resources are highly favorable for the prospective parents to possess. Additionally, it may be helpful for adoptive parents to recognize that they do not have to be “perfect” parents as long as they are loving and willing to meet the unique challenges their adopted child may pose.

## Happy Healthy Families

Our families play a crucial role in our overall development and happiness. They can support and validate us, but they can also criticize and burden us. For better or worse, we all have a family. In closing, here are strategies you can use to increase the happiness of your family:

- Teach morality—fostering a sense of moral development in children can promote well-being (Damon, 2004).
- Savor the good—celebrate each other’s successes (Gable, Gonzaga & Strachman, 2006).
- Use the extended family network—family members of all ages, including older siblings and

grandparents, who can act as caregivers can promote family well-being (Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitch & Ungar, 2005).

- Create family identity—share inside jokes, fond memories, and frame the story of the family (McAdams, 1993).
- Forgive—Don't hold grudges against one another (McCullough, Worthington & Rachal, 1997).





# Love, Friendship, and Social Support

Debi Brannan & Cynthia D. Mohr

Friendship and love, and more broadly, the relationships that people cultivate in their lives, are some of the most valuable treasures a person can own. This module explores ways in which we try to understand how friendships form, what attracts one person to another, and how love develops. It also explores how the Internet influences how we meet people and develop deep relationships. Finally, this module will examine social support and how this can help many through the hardest times and help make the best times even better.

## Learning Objectives

- ~~Understand what attracts us to others.~~
- Review research that suggests that friendships are important for our health and well-being.
- Examine the influence of the Internet on friendship and developing relationships.
- ~~Understand what happens to our brains when we are in love.~~
- ~~Consider the complexity of love.~~
- Examine the construct and components of social support.

## Introduction

The importance of relationships has been examined by researchers for decades. Many researchers point to sociologist Émile Durkheim's classic study of suicide and social ties (1951)



Interpersonal relationships are vital to our physiological and psychological health. [CC0 Public Domain, <https://goo.gl/m25gce>]

as a starting point for this work. Durkheim argued that being socially connected is imperative to achieving personal well-being. In fact, he argued that a person who has no close relationships is likely a person who is at risk for suicide. It is those relationships that give a person meaning in their life. In other words, suicide tends to be higher among those who become disconnected from society. What is interesting about that notion is when people are asked to describe the basic necessities for life—people will most often say food, water, and shelter, but seldom do people list “close relationships” in the top three. Yet time and time again, research

has demonstrated that we are social creatures and we need others to survive and thrive. Another way of thinking about it is that close relationships are the psychological equivalent of food and water; in other words, these relationships are necessary for survival. Baumeister and Leary (1995) maintain that humans have basic needs and one of them is the need to belong; these needs are what makes us human and give a sense of purpose and identity to our lives (Brissette, Cohen, & Seeman, 2000; Ryff, 1989).

Given that close relationships are so vital to well-being, it is important to ask how interpersonal relationships begin. What makes us like or love one person but not another? Why is it that when bad things happen, we frequently want to talk to our friends or family about the situation? Though these are difficult questions to answer because relationships are complicated and unique, this module will examine how relationships begin; the impact of technology on relationships; and why coworkers, acquaintances, friends, family, and intimate partners are so important in our lives.

## **Attraction: The Start of Friendship and Love**

~~Why do some people hit it off immediately? Or decide that the friend of a friend was not likable? Using scientific methods, psychologists have investigated factors influencing attraction and have identified a number of variables, such as similarity, proximity (physical or functional), familiarity, and reciprocity, that influence with whom we develop relationships.~~

## Proximity

Often we “stumble upon” friends or romantic partners; this happens partly due to how close in proximity we are to those people. Specifically, **proximity** or *physical nearness* has been found to be a significant factor in the development of relationships. For example, when college students go away to a new school, they will make friends consisting of classmates, roommates, and teammates (i.e., people close in proximity). Proximity allows people the opportunity to get to know one other and discover their similarities—all of which can result in a friendship or intimate relationship. Proximity is not just about geographic distance, but rather **functional distance**, or the frequency with which we cross paths with others. For example, college students are more likely to become closer and develop relationships with people on their dorm-room floors because they see them (i.e., cross paths)

more often than they see people on a different floor. How does the notion of proximity apply in terms of online relationships? Deb Levine (2000) argues that in terms of developing online relationships and attraction, functional distance refers to being at the same place at the same time in a virtual world (i.e., a chat room or Internet forum)—crossing virtual paths.



Great and important relationships can develop by chance and physical proximity helps. For example, seeing someone regularly on your daily bus commute to work or school may be all that's necessary to spark a genuine friendship. [Image: Cheri Lucas Rowlands, <https://goo.gl/crCc0Q>, CC BY-SA 2.0, <https://goo.gl/rxiUsF>]

## Familiarity

One of the reasons why proximity matters to attraction is that it breeds *familiarity*; people are more attracted to that which is familiar. Just being around someone or being repeatedly exposed to them increases the likelihood that we will be attracted to them. We also tend to feel safe with familiar people, as it is likely we know what to expect from them. Dr. Robert Zajonc (1968) labeled this phenomenon the **mere exposure effect**. More specifically, he argued that the more often we are exposed to a stimulus (e.g., sound, person) the more likely we are to view that stimulus positively. Moreland and Beach (1992) demonstrated this by

exposing a college class to four women (similar in appearance and age) who attended different numbers of classes, revealing that the more classes a woman attended, the more familiar, similar, and attractive she was considered by the other students.

There is a certain comfort in knowing what to expect from others; consequently research suggests that we like what is familiar. While this is often on a subconscious level, research has found this to be one of the most basic principles of attraction (Zajonc, 1980). For example, a young man growing up with an overbearing mother may be attracted to other overbearing women *not* because he likes being dominated but rather because it is what he considers normal (i.e., familiar).

## Similarity

When you hear about couples such as Sandra Bullock and Jesse James, or Kim Kardashian and Kanye West, do you shake your head thinking “this won’t last”? It is probably because they seem so different. While many make the argument that opposites attract, research has found that is generally not true; *similarity* is key. Sure, there are times when couples can appear fairly different, but overall we like others who are like us. Ingram and Morris (2007) examined this phenomenon by inviting business executives to a cocktail mixer, 95% of whom reported that they wanted to meet new people. Using electronic name tag tracking, researchers revealed that the executives did not mingle or meet new people; instead, they only spoke with those they already knew well (i.e., people who were similar).

When it comes to marriage, research has found that couples tend to be very similar, particularly when it comes to age, social class, race, education, physical attractiveness, values, and attitudes (McCann Hamilton, 2007; Taylor, Fiore, Mendelsohn, & Cheshire, 2011). This phenomenon is known as the *matching hypothesis* (Feingold, 1988; Mckillip & Redel, 1983). We like others who validate our points of view and who are similar in thoughts, desires, and attitudes.

## Reciprocity

Another key component in attraction is *reciprocity*; this principle is based on the notion that we are more likely to like someone if they feel the same way toward us. In other words, it is hard to be friends with someone who is not friendly in return. Another way to think of it is that relationships are built on give and take; if one side is not reciprocating, then the relationship is doomed. Basically, we feel obliged to give what we get and to maintain equity in relationships. Researchers have found that this is true across cultures (Gouldner, 1960).



## Friendship

"In poverty and other misfortunes of life, true friends are a sure refuge. They keep the young out of mischief; they comfort and aid the old in their weakness, and they incite those in the prime of life to noble deeds."—Aristotle

Research has found that close friendships can protect our mental and physical health when times get tough. For example, Adams, Santo, and Bukowski (2011) asked fifth- and sixth-graders to record their experiences and self-worth, and to provide saliva samples for 4 days. Children whose best friend was present during or shortly after a negative experience had significantly lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol in their saliva compared to those who did not have a best friend present. Having a best friend also seemed to protect their feelings of self-worth. Children who did not identify a best friend or did not have an available best friend during distress experienced a drop in self-esteem over the course of the study.



Having best friends make us feel better about ourselves and buffers us from stress. [Image: CC0 Public Domain, <https://goo.gl/m25gce>]

## Workplace friendships

Friendships often take root in the workplace, due to the fact that people are spending as much, or more, time at work than they are with their family and friends (Kaufman & Hotchkiss, 2003). Often, it is through these relationships that people receive mentoring and obtain social support and resources, but they can also experience conflicts and the potential for misinterpretation when sexual attraction is an issue. Indeed, Elsesser and Peplau (2006) found that many workers reported that friendships grew out of collaborative work projects, and these friendships made their days more pleasant.

In addition to those benefits, Riordan and Griffeth (1995) found that people who worked in an environment where friendships could develop and be maintained were more likely to

report higher levels of job satisfaction, job involvement, and organizational commitment, and they were less likely to leave that job. Similarly, a Gallup poll revealed that employees who had “close friends” at work were almost 50% more satisfied with their jobs than those who did not (Armour, 2007).

## Internet friendships

What influence does the Internet have on friendships? It is not surprising that people use the Internet with the goal of meeting and making new friends (Fehr, 2008; McKenna, 2008). Researchers have wondered if the issue of not being face-to-face reduces the authenticity of relationships, or if the Internet really allows people to develop deep, meaningful connections. Interestingly, research has demonstrated that virtual relationships are often as intimate as in-person relationships; in fact, Bargh and colleagues found that online relationships are sometimes more intimate (Bargh et al., 2002). This can be especially true for those individuals who are more socially anxious and lonely—such individuals who are more likely to turn to the Internet to find new and meaningful relationships (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). McKenna et al. (2002) suggest that for people who have a hard time meeting and maintaining relationships, due to shyness, anxiety, or lack of face-to-face social skills, the Internet provides a safe, nonthreatening place to develop and maintain relationships. Similarly, Penny Benford

(2008) found that for high-functioning autistic individuals, the Internet facilitated communication and relationship development with others, which would have been more difficult in face-to-face contexts, leading to the conclusion that Internet communication could be empowering for those who feel frustrated when communicating face to face.



Romantic relationships are so central to psychological health that most people in the world are or will be in a romantic relationship in their lifetime. [Image: CC0 Public Domain, <https://goo.gl/m25gce>]

## Love

Is all love the same? Are there different types of love? Examining these questions more closely, Robert Sternberg's (2004; 2007) work has focused on the notion that all types of love are comprised of three distinct areas: intimacy, passion, and commitment. Intimacy includes caring,

closeness, and emotional support. The passion component of love is comprised of physiological and emotional arousal; these can include physical attraction, emotional responses that promote physiological changes, and sexual arousal. Lastly, commitment refers to the cognitive process and decision to commit to love another person and the willingness to work to keep that love over the course of your life. The elements involved in intimacy (caring, closeness, and emotional support) are generally found in all types of close relationships—for example, a mother's love for a child or the love that friends share. Interestingly, this is not true for passion. Passion is unique to romantic love, differentiating friends from lovers. In sum, depending on the type of love and the stage of the relationship (i.e., newly in love), different combinations of these elements are present.

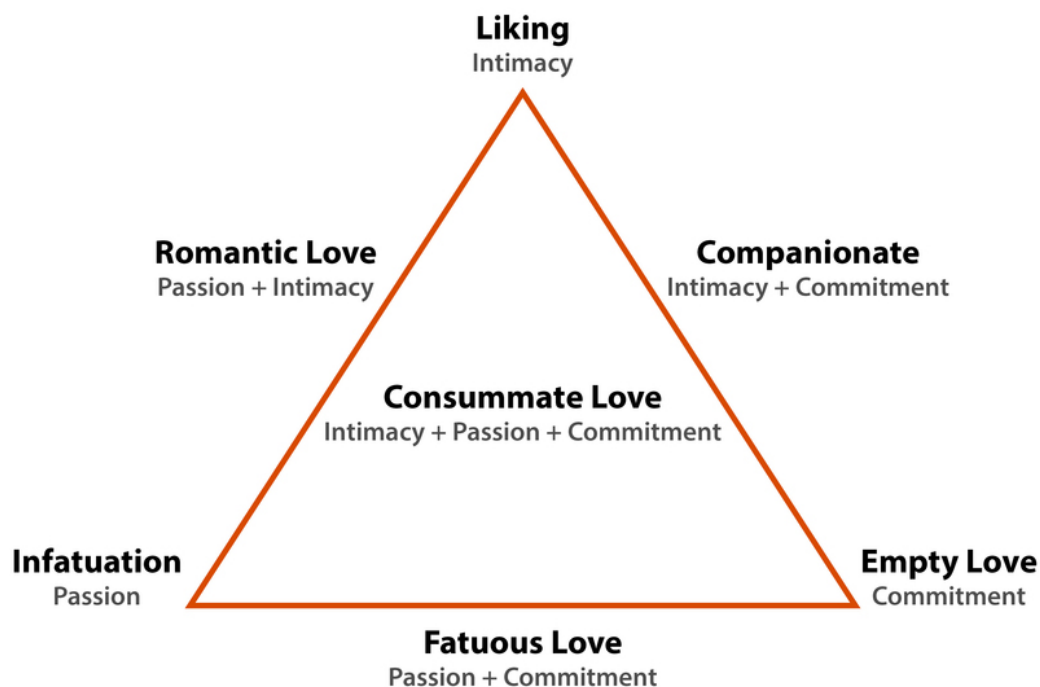


Figure 1: Triangular Theory of Love. Adapted from Wikipedia Creative Commons, 2013

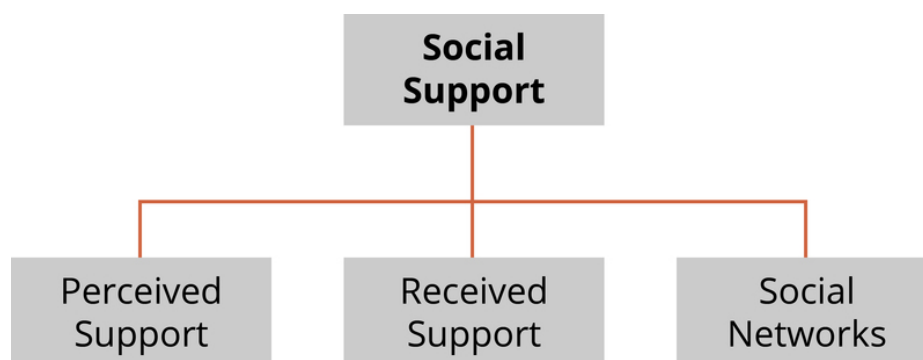
Taking this theory a step further, anthropologist Helen Fisher explained that she scanned the brains (using fMRI) of people who had just fallen in love and observed that their brain chemistry was “going crazy,” similar to the brain of an addict on a drug high (Cohen, 2007). Specifically, serotonin production increased by as much as 40% in newly in love individuals. Further, those newly in love tended to show obsessive-compulsive tendencies. Conversely, when a person experiences a breakup, the brain processes it in a similar way to quitting a heroin habit (Fisher, Brown, Aron, Strong, & Mashek, 2009). Thus, those who believe that breakups are physically painful are correct! Another interesting point is that long-term love and sexual desire activate different areas of the brain. More specifically, sexual needs activate the part of the brain that

is particularly sensitive to innately pleasurable things such as food, sex, and drugs (i.e., the striatum—a rather simplistic reward system), whereas love requires conditioning—it is more like a habit. When sexual needs are rewarded consistently, then love can develop. In other words, love grows out of positive rewards, expectancies, and habit (Cacioppo, Bianchi-Demicheli, Hatfield & Rapson, 2012).

## Love and the Internet

The ways people are finding love has changed with the advent of the Internet. In a poll, 49% of all American adults reported that either themselves or someone they knew had dated a person they met online (Madden & Lenhart, 2006). As Finkel and colleagues (2007) found, social networking sites, and the Internet generally, perform three important tasks. Specifically, sites provide individuals with access to a database of other individuals who are interested in meeting someone. Dating sites generally reduce issues of proximity, as individuals do not have to be close in proximity to meet. Also, they provide a medium in which individuals can communicate with others. Finally, some Internet dating websites advertise special matching strategies, based on factors such as personality, hobbies, and interests, to identify the “perfect match” for people looking for love online. In general, scientific questions about the effectiveness of Internet matching or online dating compared to face-to-face dating remain to be answered.

It is important to note that social networking sites have opened the doors for many to meet people that they might not have ever had the opportunity to meet; unfortunately, it now appears that the social networking sites can be forums for unsuspecting people to be duped. In 2010 a documentary, *Catfish*, focused on the personal experience of a man who met a woman online and carried on an emotional relationship with this person for months. As he later came to discover, though, the person he thought he was talking and writing with did not exist. As Dr. Aaron Ben-Zeév stated, online relationships leave room for deception; thus, people have to be cautious.





## Social Support

When bad things happen, it is important for people to know that others care about them and can help them out. Unsurprisingly, research has found that this is a common thread across cultures (Markus & Kitayma, 1991; Triandis, 1995) and over time (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000); in other words, social support is the active ingredient that makes our relationships particularly beneficial. But what *is* social support? One way of thinking about social support is that it consists of three discrete conceptual components.

### Perceived Social Support

Have you ever thought that when things go wrong, you know you have friends/family members that are there to help you? This is what psychologists call **perceived social support** or “a psychological sense of support” (Gottlieb, 1985). How powerful is this belief that others will be available in times of need? To examine this question, Dr. Arnberg and colleagues asked 4,600 survivors of the tragic 2004 Indian Ocean (or Boxing Day) Tsunami about their perception of social support provided by friends and family after the event. Those who experienced the most amount of stress found the most benefit from just knowing others were available if they needed anything (i.e., perceived support). In other words, the magnitude of the benefits depended on the extent of the stress, but the bottom line was that for these survivors, knowing that they had people around to support them if they needed it helped them all to some degree.

Perceived support has also been linked to well-being. Brannan and colleagues (2012) found that perceived support predicted each component of well-being (high positive affect, low negative affect, high satisfaction with life) among college students in Iran, Jordan, and the United States. Similarly, Cohen and McKay (1984) found that a high level of perceived support can serve as a buffer against stress. Interestingly enough, Dr. Cohen found that those with higher levels of social support were less likely to catch the common cold. The research is clear—perceived social support increases happiness and well-being and makes our lives better in general (Diener & Seligman, 2002; Emmons & Colby, 1995).

### Received Social Support

**Received support** is the actual receipt of support or helping behaviors from others (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Interestingly, unlike perceived support, the benefits of *received* support have been beset with mixed findings (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1996). Similar to perceived support, receiving support can buffer people from stress and positively influence some individuals—however,



Social support is one of the ways people maintain healthy communities. [Image: Fort Belvoir Community Hospital, <https://goo.gl/9f1c9N>, CC BY-NC 2.0, <https://goo.gl/VnKlK8>]

perceived as very positive—the teachers said that their family members cared enough to ask about their jobs and told them how proud they were. Conversely, received mentor support did not meet teachers' needs, instead making them feel afraid and embarrassed to receive mentor support.

others might not want support or think they need it. For example, dating advice from a friend may be considered more helpful than such advice from your mom! Interestingly, research has indicated that regardless of the support-provider's intentions, the support may not be considered as helpful to the person receiving the support if it is unwanted (Dunkel-Schetter, Blasband, Feinstein, & Herbert, 1992; Cutrona, 1986). Indeed, mentor support was viewed negatively by novice ESOL teachers (those teaching English as a second language in other countries; Brannan & Bleistein, 2012). Yet received support from family was

## Quality or Quantity?

With so many mixed findings, psychologists have asked whether it is the quality of social support that matters or the quantity (e.g., more people in my **support network**). Interestingly, research by Friedman and Martin (2011) examining 1,500 Californians over 8 decades found that while quality does matter, individuals with larger social networks lived significantly longer than those with smaller networks. This research suggests we should count the number of our friends / family members—the more, the better, right? Not necessarily: Dunbar (1992; 1993) argued that we have a cognitive limit with regard to how many people with whom we can maintain social relationships. The general consensus is about 150—we can only “really” know (maintain contact and relate to) about 150 people. Finally, research shows that diversity also matters in terms of one's network, such that individuals with more diverse social networks (i.e., different types of relationships including friends, parents, neighbors, and classmates) were less likely to get the common cold compared to those with fewer and less diverse networks (Cohen, Doyle, Turner, Alper, & Skoner, 2003). In sum, it is important to have quality relationships as well as quantity—and as the Beatles said, “all you need is love—love is all you need.”

## Outside Resources

**Article: Social Trends Institute: The Sustainable Demographic Dividend**

<http://sustaindemographicdividend.org/articles/international-family-indicators/global-family-culture>

**Video: TED Talk: What Makes a Good Life? Lessons from the Longest Study on Happiness**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8KkKuTCFvzI>

**Web: Child Trends and Social Trends Institute: Mapping Family Change and Well-Being Outcomes**

<http://worldfamilymap.ifstudies.org/2015/>

**Web: Pew Research Center: Family and Relationships**

<http://www.pewresearch.org/topics/family-and-relationships/>

**Web: PSYCHALIVE: Psychology for Everyday Life: Relationships**

<http://www.psychalive.org/category/alive-to-intimacy/>

**Web: United States Census Bureau: Families and Living Arrangements**

<http://www.census.gov/topics/families.html>

## Discussion Questions

1. Throughout this module many 'shifts' are mentioned—shifts in division of labor, family roles, marital expectations, divorce, and societal and cultural norms, among others, were discussed. What shift do you find most interesting and why? What types of shifts do you think we might see in the future?
2. In the reading we discuss different parenting practices. Much of the literature suggests that authoritative parenting is best. Do you agree? Why or why not? Are there times when you think another parenting style would be better?
3. The section on divorce discusses specific factors that increase or decrease the chances of divorce. Based on your background, are you more or less at risk for divorce? Consider things about your family of orientation, culture, religious practices and beliefs, age, and educational goals. How does this risk make you feel?
4. The module ends with some tips for happy, healthy families. Are there specific things you could be doing in your own life to make for a happier, healthier family? What are some

concrete things you could start doing immediately to increase happiness in your family?

## Outside Resources

**Movie: Official Website of Catfish the Movie**

<http://www.iamrogue.com/catfish>

**Video: Ted Talk from Helen Fisher on the brain in love**

[http://www.ted.com/talks/helen\\_fisher\\_studies\\_the\\_brain\\_in\\_love.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/helen_fisher_studies_the_brain_in_love.html)

**Video: The Science of Heartbreak**

<https://youtu.be/lGglw8eAikY>

**Web: Groundbreaking longitudinal study on longevity from Howard S. Friedman and Leslie R. Martin**

<http://www.howardsfriedman.com/longevityproject/>

## Discussion Questions

1. What is more important—perceived social support or received social support? Why?
2. We understand how the Internet has changed the dating scene—how might it further change how we become romantically involved?
3. Can you love someone whom you have never met?
4. Do you think it is the quality or quantity of your relationships that really matters most?



## Vocabulary

### **Adoption**

To take in and raise a child of other parents legally as one's own.

### **Age in place**

The trend toward making accommodations to ensure that aging people can stay in their homes and live independently.

### **Anxious-avoidant**

Attachment style that involves suppressing one's own feelings and desires, and a difficulty depending on others.

### **Anxious-resistant**

Attachment style that is self-critical, insecure, and fearful of rejection.

### **Attachment theory**

Theory that describes the enduring patterns of relationships from birth to death.

### **Authoritarian parenting**

Parenting style that is high in demandingness and low in support.

### **Authoritative parenting**

A parenting style that is high in demandingness and high in support.

### **Blended family**

A family consisting of an adult couple and their children from previous relationships.

### **Boomerang generation**

Term used to describe young adults, primarily between the ages of 25 and 34, who return home after previously living on their own.

### **Child abuse**

Injury, death, or emotional harm to a child caused by a parent or caregiver, either intentionally or unintentionally.

### **Childfree**

Term used to describe people who purposefully choose not to have children.

**Childless**

Term used to describe people who would like to have children but are unable to conceive.

**Cohabitation**

Arrangement where two unmarried adults live together.

**Coherence**

Within attachment theory, the gaining of insight into and reconciling one's childhood experiences.

**Elder abuse**

Any form of mistreatment that results in harm to an elder person, often caused by his/her adult child.

**Empty Nest**

Feelings of sadness and loneliness that parents may feel when their adult children leave the home for the first time.

**Engagement**

Formal agreement to get married.

**Family of orientation**

The family one is born into.

**Family of procreation**

The family one creates, usually through marriage.

**Family systems theory**

Theory that says a person cannot be understood on their own, but as a member of a unit.

**Foster care**

Care provided by alternative families to children whose families of orientation cannot adequately care for them; often arranged through the government or a social service agency.

**Heterogamy**

Partnering with someone who is unlike you in a meaningful way.

**Homogamy**

Partnering with someone who is like you in a meaningful way.

**Intimate partner violence**

Physical, sexual, or psychological abuse inflicted by a partner.

**Joint family**

A family comprised of at least three generations living together. Joint families often include many members of the extended family.

**Learned helplessness**

The belief, as someone who is abused, that one has no control over his or her situation.

**Marriage market**

The process through which prospective spouses compare assets and liabilities of available partners and choose the best available mate.

**Modern family**

A family based on commitment, caring, and close emotional ties.

**Multigenerational homes**

Homes with more than one adult generation.

**Neglect**

Failure to care for someone properly.

**Nuclear families**

A core family unit comprised of only the parents and children.

**Permissive parenting**

Parenting that is low in demandingness and high in support.

**Physical abuse**

The use of intentional physical force to cause harm.

**Psychological abuse**

Aggressive behavior intended to control a partner.

**Sandwich generation**

Generation of people responsible for taking care of their own children as well as their aging parents.

**Second shift**

Term used to describe the unpaid work a parent, usually a mother, does in the home in terms of housekeeping and childrearing.

**Secure attachments**

Attachment style that involves being comfortable with depending on your partner and having your partner depend on you.

**Sexual abuse**

The act of forcing a partner to take part in a sex act against his or her will.

**Single parent family**

An individual parent raising a child or children.

**Stepfamily**

A family formed, after divorce or widowhood, through remarriage.

**Traditional family**

Two or more people related by blood, marriage, and—occasionally-- by adoption.

**Two-parent family**

A family consisting of two parents—typical both of the biological parents-- and their children.

**Uninvolved parenting**

Parenting that is low in demandingness and low in support.

**Working models**

An understanding of how relationships operate; viewing oneself as worthy of love and others as trustworthy.

## Vocabulary

### **Functional distance**

The frequency with which we cross paths with others.

### **Mere-exposure effect**

The notion that people like people/places/things merely because they are familiar with them.

### **Perceived social support**

A person's perception that others are there to help them in times of need.

### **Proximity**

Physical nearness.

### **Received social support**

The actual act of receiving support (e.g., informational, functional).

### **Support support network**

The people who care about and support a person.



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