

# Creating Systemic Change for Lasting Success

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**Featured Team Members:** Brian Leidal, MA, LPC

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## A Systemic Approach to Family Therapy

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“...a form of psychotherapy that conceives behavior and especially mental symptoms within the context of the social systems people live in, focusing on interpersonal relations and interactions, social constructions of realities, and the recursive causality between symptoms and interactions.” (Haun, Kordy, Ochs, Zwack, and Schweitzer, 2013)

As you can see, there are many variables to consider when assessing one individual within a family! Family systems theory, introduced by Dr. Murray Bowen, asks us to consider how individual family members are influenced by each other. Behaviors of one family member can be better understood when taken in the context of a family’s history and family members’ interrelatedness.

## Family Systems Approach to Counseling

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### First-Order Change

Often, parents and families attempt to influence change in their loved one in a myriad of ways prior to even considering wilderness therapy. Many of these attempts create *first-order change*. First-order change occurs when a problem is addressed by performing more or less of a given action within the existing system. This is akin to changing your foot’s pressure on the gas pedal in a car with a manual transmission. By changing your foot’s pressure, fuel is added or removed from the system and this affects the speed and RPM’s of your car. The following is an example of first-order change:

- Daughter comes to mom, describing struggle with substances and depression and the resulting bad grades she is earning at school this semester.
- Mom attempts to “rescue” daughter. She signs her up for treatment and calls school administration asking to excuse her absences and grant extensions, due to “family matters” at home.
- Daughter’s substance abuse and depression is addressed temporarily in treatment, but she feels no agency or control over her situation or the treatment selected. She distances herself from mom as a way to gain more autonomy.

### Second-Order Change

First-order change is not as sustainable as *second-order change*, a fundamental rewriting of the system’s underlying rules.

“A system which may run through all its possible internal changes without effecting a systemic change, i.e., second-order change, is said to be caught in a *Game Without End*. It cannot generate from within itself the conditions for its own change; it cannot produce the rules for the change of its own rules.” (Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch, 1974)

Returning to the example of driving a car, second-order change is akin to shifting gears. When we add gas within a particular gear we can achieve a restricted range of speeds and RPMs. After shifting gears we are able to achieve new speeds that were previously not accessible to us or were damaging to the transmission. Here is an example of how the mom in the previous example might initiate second-order change within the family system:

- Daughter comes to mom, describing struggle with substances and depression and the resulting bad grades she is earning this semester at school.
- Mom does a 3-fold breath and is aware of her own desire to “rescue.” Instead, she practices reflective listening and asks daughter what she can do to help. Daughter asks for help in researching treatment options and they select a path forward together.
- Daughter feels more a part of the process, motivating her to take an active role in her recovery and relationship with her mother. She works on the underlying reasons for her depression and substance abuse, builds coping skills, and takes pride in her personal progress.

### **Systemic Second-Order Change is Essential to Individual Growth**

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An incredible opportunity for change is now before you. As the parents and elders of your family, you may be more in tune with the patterns and systems in your family that aren't working. Take an active approach to Open Sky's family-centered treatment to increase your self-awareness, evaluate your patterns that contribute to these old “rules” that aren't working, and initiate healthy second-order change in your family system.

### **References**

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Haun, M. W., Kordy, H., Ochs, M., Zwack, J., & Schweitzer, J. (2013). Family systems psychiatry in an acute inpatient setting: the implementation and sustainability 5 years after its introduction. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 35, 159-175.

Watzlawick, P., Weakland, J. H., Fisch, R. (1974). *Change: Principles of Problem Formation and Problem Resolution*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.