

Genogram Guide: How to Make a Family Network Tree

Taken (with slight editing) from the book *Holodynamics* by V. Vernon Woolf (pgs. 203-208)

The genogram allows you and your family to see your family tree in a helpful, creative light. It is an excellent tool... [...] ...you can identify inherited family diseases, as well as critical emotional and relationship patterns, personality characteristics, and family beliefs which are passed on from generation to generation. This will help the next generation in overcoming family diseases, and *all* family members in handling family problems, improving family relationships, and cultivating family strengths.

When making your genogram, try to be as detailed and comprehensive as possible. Include both negative and positive emotional patterns, all significant details of medical histories, and so on.

Also remember that, while climbing family trees can be enjoyable, it is often exhausting and sometimes threatening. Encourage all family members to contribute their best to the construction of the genogram. Usually, the more help you get, the better your genogram will be.

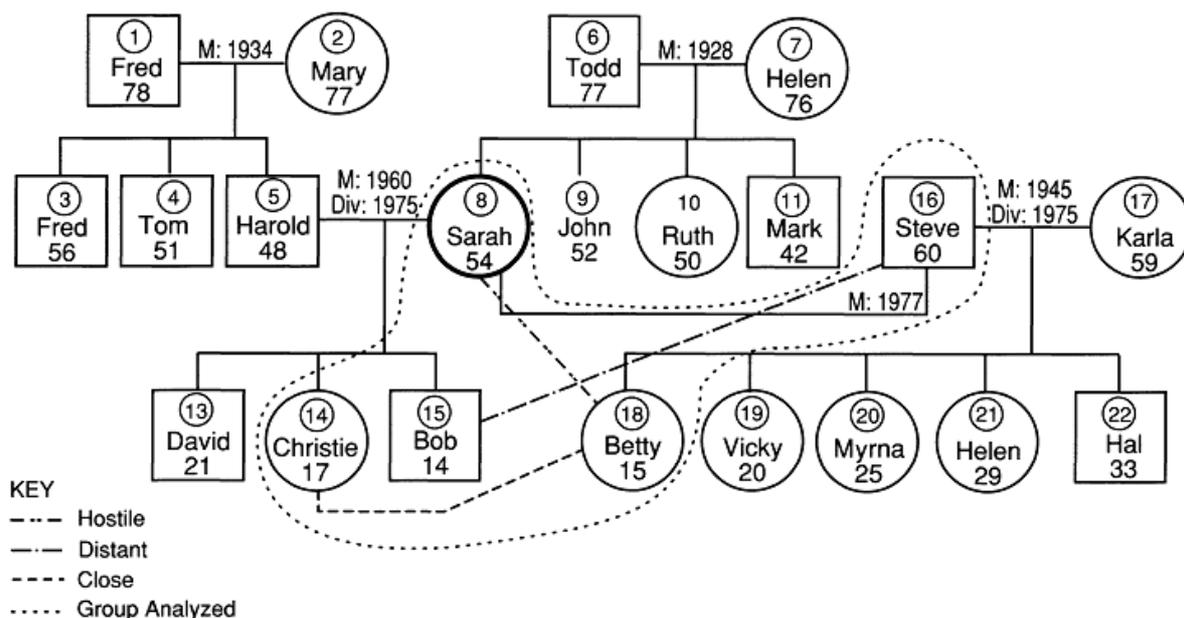
THE SEVEN DIMENSIONS OF YOUR GENOGRAM

Your genogram has seven basic parts, each of which will prove helpful in its own way. Try to complete as much of each part as you can.

1. The Family Tree

Begin with a diagram of your family tree. Use a circle for each woman and a square for each man. Draw your own position, then your spouse's and your children's, as shown [on the example chart below]. This is called your "nuclear family," and it is the center or "trunk" of your family tree.

SAMPLE GENOGRAM



Now extend your diagram to include the various branches of your family tree. Keep expanding until you have your parents and all their children, your grandparents and their children, and if possible, your great-grandparents and as many of their children as you can get onto the chart. Don't worry if you can't complete all the details. Just draw circles and squares for as many family members as you can.

Next, number your circles and squares and fill in first names and ages, again as in [the chart above]. In this way, you will be able to refer to each person by number, name, or both. And, finally, add the dates of each marriage (M) and divorce (Div.).

2. Medical Histories:

Tracing back the histories of family diseases and ailments can be very helpful if you know what to look for. Diabetes, alcoholism, disorders of the heart, pancreas, and liver are sometimes transmitted genetically. Arthritis, multiple sclerosis, stress reactions, and emotional disorders, such as obsessions, compulsions, aversions, and excessive guilt or sensitivity, are likely to be more significant than broken legs (unless, of course, your family has a *preponderance* of broken legs!). The idea is to keep an eye out for *recurring* diseases, conditions, or ailments in your family tree.

3. Emotional Patterns:

Look at how each person in your family feels about himself or herself, about others, about life. Some family members may be open, accepting, cheerful, easygoing, or optimistic. Others may suffer from depression, phobias of various kinds, severe temper, spitefulness, jealousy, or negativism. You can usually spot these patterns if you ask questions like "What are the first five words you can think of which best describe Grandpa?" Then compare how you see Grandpa with how others see him.

One family member might say, "Grandpa was grumpy 90% of the time," and another might chime in, "Yeah, and he was miserable the other 10%!" Knowing that Grandpa was always grumpy can help children realize how Dad developed some of his negative emotional habits. It can also help the present generation overcome these "inherited" patterns.

4. Relationship Dynamics:

Look at how the members of your family relate to one another. You might, for example, ask, "What kind of relationship did Mom and Dad have?" "How did Grandma handle Grandpa's grumpiness?" See whether family relationships are open or closed, blaming or exploratory, manipulative or negotiating. Discover how your family members handle crisis, who wields the power, who makes the big decisions, and who makes the small.

Label each relationship between family members, or between groups of family members, with the quality that characterizes it (distant, hostile, close), and relationships which stand out as special with capital letters (A, B, C), so you can describe them more fully on a separate page.

5. The Family System:

You will also find it helpful to look at how the various parts of your family system work together, or fail to. Are there any coalitions (special groups that keep together and keep others out), or special roles assigned to certain family members or parts of the family? Are there any fractures (divorces, separations, feuds), black sheep, or "problem" people? Can you see how the way your family system works gets passed on from one generation to the next? You may wish to use colored

pens to circle special parts of the family network, so you can describe them in detail according to their color.

6. Family Beliefs:

Family members pass on to you their beliefs about every phase of family life: how to raise children, how to deal with adolescents, when and whom to marry, how many children to have, how to earn a living, what kind of work is best, how to measure success, how to handle crisis, loss, trauma, and tragedy, how to grow old, how to face death.

Pay special attention to your family beliefs: they are most likely what *you* believe, consciously or subconsciously, about how to survive and how to live. If they are immature, fractured, or dysfunctional, they can limit your thinking, block your growth, and keep you from fulfilling your potential. Exploring such beliefs is the beginning of aligning them with your fullest potential.

7. Society and Your Family:

Finally, step back and look at the way your family sees itself, as a unit, in the larger context of society. How does your family, as a whole, represent itself to society? With what other systems does your family identify? And how does society generally respond to your family?

In putting together your genogram, try to answer the following questions as accurately and completely as you can:

GENOGRAM QUESTIONS

1. What major illnesses (physical) are there in your family?
2. What emotional illnesses? (alcoholism, drugs, mental illnesses)
3. What deaths, and what are the causes of death?
4. What divorces or separations, affairs, secret involvements?
5. How would you best describe the personality of each family member?
6. How do family members express love and affection? How do they know when love and affection are expressed?
7. How do family members argue? How do they express anger? How do you know when they are angry?
8. Who was/is an extrovert, an introvert, non-verbal?
9. Who was/is the major provider, the main nurturer?
10. What alliances, coalitions, and subsystems are there in your family? What are their rules and boundaries?
11. What are your family's myths? What are its secrets?
12. How do family members communicate? (words, gestures, expressions, body language)
13. What are your primary values? What are your family's?
14. How is masculinity/femininity expressed in your family?
15. What are your family's "do's" and "don'ts," "shoulds" and "shouldn'ts"?
16. How are feelings acknowledged, communicated, or avoided in your family?
17. How are decisions made in your family? Who makes them? Who is involved?
18. How do family members behave and relate in public, as compared to private (at home)?