

Changing the Impact of Family Rules

by Kathylyne Maki-Banmen

Our family-of-origin is the most important place of learning about ourselves and the world before the age of 18. From our families, we learn what we should hold as important and how we should behave.

We learn values from our families. These are things which our families teach us are very important and which raise our self-esteem as they resonate with our inner Self. An example of a family value might be an appreciation for the beauty of nature; this resonates with our connection to the universe. Another family value might be an appreciation for humanitarianism which resonates with our connection to others through our universal Life Force. A value for learning might resonate with our curiosity and creativity. These values allow us to expand our definition of ourselves in positive ways.

Some of what we learn from our families limits our sense of Self. We refer to the lessons we learn about how to behave in the world as family rules. These can be learned through explicit teaching. An example of an explicitly learned family rule might be when your mother told you, "Never talk back to your father". We can also learn family rules implicitly from the way that people respond to what goes on. For example, if your mother becomes upset and has trouble coping whenever you are sad, you might learn, "Never make mother sad". Nobody told you this rule, but you picked it up implicitly. Family rules are often couched in the absolute terms of "never" and "always". They often have a "should" attached to them.

Rules can be specific to different people in the family. For example, father might have the rule that you must be the best at whatever you do, while mother might have the rule that you must be modest and never look better than others. This can create tremendous inner conflict as the individual tries to follow both rules. Parents learn rules from their own families-of-origin and may pass these down to their own children. The family might also take on a cultural or religious rule and include it in the family's expectations. An example might be, "God will punish you if you lie". The result of trying to follow family rules is diminished self-esteem. There is a part of the person which must be discounted in order to follow the family rule.

When our parents teach us these family rules, they have a positive intention of trying to help us in some way to survive in the world. For example, the rule "Never hurt anyone's feelings" has the intention of teaching us to accept and honor other people's experiences, to be compassionate and kind. However, the result of following such a rule results in the person having to discount his or her own feelings in order to make others feel good about themselves. This results in lowered self-esteem as the person either

feels unworthy of having his or her own feelings or resentful that his or her feelings are not acknowledged and appreciated. We usually cope with family rules by either following them, or by rebelling against them. Both methods of coping are costly to self-esteem.

We often carry our family rules into our adult lives without even realizing it and use them in our adult relationships. For example, the rule, “Never talk back to authority figures” might become problematic in the workplace in interactions with superiors.

When we look at the impact of family rules, we see that they impact every level of internal experience. We can explore a family rule through the Iceberg Metaphor to see what impact it has had on the person. People are often unaware that they are following a family rule and that it has a negative impact on them. They are also often unaware that the rule may not fit for their present adult life.

If we take the rule, “Never get angry” and put it through the Iceberg Metaphor, it might look like this:

Behaviour: Either smoothing things over when the person is able to stuff his or her anger, or, if he or she is not able to stuff it, then almost out of control yelling and crying.

Coping:		Placating or blaming
Feelings:		Angry, hurt, scared, sad
Feelings about Feelings:		Shame, embarrassment, guilt, resentment
Perceptions:	Of Self:	Out of control, bad, crazy, victim
	Of Other:	More important than me, unreasonable, wrong
	Of the World:	Unfair, unsafe
Expectations:	Of Self:	Should be able to control my anger. Should be more accepting of others. Should be more kind and calm.
	Of Others:	Should be more accepting of me. Should see my side of the story. Should tell me I’m OK to have anger.
	Other of me:	I should stuff my anger. I should be in control of myself. I should take care of them
Yearnings:		To be loved, accepted, validated, respected.

Self:

Out of touch with my inner Self.
Low Self –Esteem

To help people change the impact of the family rule, the therapist must first help them explore the impact of the rule through the Iceberg, then have them accept that this is how they now experience themselves when they follow this rule. The work does not focus on the rule, but rather on the person and the **impact** the rule has had on them. If the therapy is done experientially, the therapist can help the client to transform his/her experience of the family rule.

Sometimes people cannot initially see that the rule has a negative impact on their self-esteem. They may say, “This is just the kind of person I am”. The therapist may have to help the client de-enmesh him/herself from the rule and help him/her to see that he/she is not the rule; it was just something that was taught to him/her. The therapist might help the client to get in touch with his/her deeper Self and help him/her to empower him/herself by accepting his/her uniqueness and inner resources. The client may also need to find a way to fulfill some of the yearnings, which have been turned into expectations. This might mean helping the client find ways to love and accept him/herself more and take better self-care of his/her inner world.

In looking at the impact of the rule, the therapist may assist the client to look at the costs and payoffs of the rule. While doing this, the therapist will keep the focus on the client’s experience and growth. It is easy for clients to focus on the experience of others rather than on themselves. The therapist might ask questions to open new awarenesses and experiences such as, “While you are busy taking care of his feelings, who’s taking care of yours?” When this is done experientially, it helps people to come up against the emotional costs of the negative experience and make new decisions for change.

In order to help them change the impact, the therapist may need to help clients change their expectations, as family rules are usually framed in the form of an expectation and, certainly, family rules trigger peoples’ expectations of themselves and others. The therapist might assist the client to let go of, change, or otherwise resolve an expectation, which would allow the client to see new possibilities and choices for him/herself. The client might also work on reframing perceptions and letting go of reactive feeling such as anger, hurt, fear, guilt and shame. He/she will also need to work on taking responsibility for being more in charge of his/her inner experience, especially his/her feelings.

The client may also have to do some work with letting go of his/her need to obey or be “loyal” to his/her parents who taught him/her this rule. This can be done with an empty chair or visualization where the client appreciates the positive intention of his or her parent, gives back the rule to the parent and lets his or her parent know that he/she

will now make his/her own decisions for his/her life. He/she will then tell the parent what new decisions he/she has made and how it will impact his/her life differently.

The therapist will want to anchor the transformation through every level of the Iceberg by asking the client how they now experience their feelings, how they see themselves now, how they see the other person now, what they have done with the expectation they used to have, how they are now loving and accepting themselves, etc.

To anchor the changes in life, the therapist will have the person imagine themselves in specific situation and report on what will now be different. For example, "How will this impact your relationship with your boss? How will you be different with her? What will you do differently?"

The end result of changing the impact of family rules is that the individual has choice and can decide for themselves how they will behave in specific situations. He or she may still decide to repress his/her anger, but will do it with an understanding that it does not mean that the anger is not valid. The person may put the anger aside for the moment and then deal with it later in a more appropriate setting or manner. The four goals of therapy have been addressed and improved when the impact of the rule has been dealt with:

1. Self-esteem has been raised.
2. The person is now taking responsibility for his/her inner experience and his/her behaviour.
3. The person is now capable of making choices in specific situations.
4. The person is more congruent and more in charge of him/herself.