



B12 The Six Reasons Why Your Families Are Stuck

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The 6 Reasons You're Stuck

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Take Home Points

While not a comprehensive list, if you're having trouble getting any movement from a family or individual you work with, it's likely that a review of the following points will yield opportunity to get things moving

1. They Don't Feel Heard

- a. People need to feel like you understand where they are coming from.
- b. This is different than whether or not you actually understand them
- c. This needs to happen before they are willing to hear you.
- d. Active listening is the most useful therapeutic skill by a wide margin.

2. Fear is in the Way

- a. Humans have a sense of fear that evolved for a world where threats to survival occurred on a daily basis but we have built ourselves a world where true threats are much less common.
- b. As a result fear itself is often much more of a problem than the thing we are fearing
- c. In American culture there is a lot of pressure, particularly on men, to not be tough and not afraid of anything
- d. This leads to a tendency to ignore, rationalize, or explain away fears but these strategies don't make the underlying fear go away
- e. Take a step back from difficult cases and ask "what is this person afraid of"
 - i. Often the answer will bring lots of hard to understand behavior into focus
- f. One very common fear is *fear of the unknown*.
 - i. Many people will express unhappiness with their present situation yet resist all attempts to change the current situation because humans will frequently choose the familiar over a situation that looks much better but is unfamiliar.
 - ii. When you identify this as an issue, call it out, normalize it, and search for a path of "baby steps" to help them build up comfort with the possibility of a better future

3. You're Working on the Wrong Thing

- a. Goal's need to come from the family

- i. It doesn't matter what you think the family needs (even if you're right) they will only be motivated by what they think they need (often they are right)
 - 1. If you and the family disagree you either need to start with their plan and see if it works or genuinely convince them to try your plan
- b. If no progress is being made on the goals they have identified then it may be time to consider that those aren't the right goals
- c. Example: the goal is substance abuse reduction for the youth but, despite what he says, the youth has no actual interest in reducing his substance abuse.

4. "Bad Guying"

- a. Any Problem can be pinned on a "bad guy"
- b. The bad guy is almost always out of the room
- c. Bring the bad guy into the room and pretty soon he's just a guy
- d. There are no bad people, only people. Hurt people, hurt other people.

5. Information is Missing

- a. When behaviors don't seem to make sense it's likely that a critical piece of information is missing
- b. Everyone maintains secrets and attempts to put forth a certain image for certain people
- c. When information is being revealed that someone does not want to be revealed they can become extremely agitated and erratic
- d. It's important to be extremely respectful and supportive when family secrets are coming out and being shared with you
- e. You may not need to know the details of a secret, just knowing that it exists allows a tremendous amount of understanding about how the family system is functioning

6. Every Action has an Equal and Opposite Reaction

- a. Humans can be very contrary, when we feel someone is trying to control us we will often do the opposite regardless of which is the better choice
- b. The hard work of helpers may disincentivise the family to do it themselves
- c. If what you are doing hasn't worked, consider doing the opposite
- d. Predict that an intervention will fail or tell the family not to do something you are trying to get them to do

Bonus Reason You're Stuck!:

7. You're Missing a Cultural Piece

- a. It's critical that we understand the family culture in order to identify what strategies are likely to work

- b. example: if dad is the decision maker in the family, you won't make much progress if he's not in your meetings