



# PSDP—Resources and Tools: Flow of stress through a family

## Introduction

This learning tool provides information about a way of thinking about family life, developed by Carter and McGoldrick (2005), called 'flow of stress through a family'. This model can be used by practice supervisors to prompt discussion and analysis about the experiences of children and families in supervision.

The tool gives you information about the 'flow of stress through family life' and ideas about how you can use this model in supervision to think about a range of factors which might be affecting family life and functioning. Prompt questions are also provided at the end of the tool to help you structure this discussion.

## Thinking about stress as a normal part of family life

Family life is constantly changing in response to normal life events. Extensive literature about families emphasises that stress is an inherent part of family life. All families experience situations which are stressful and which require them to adapt or change. In his seminal work, Hill (1949) identified two crucial factors that affect how families cope with stress:

**the resources available to family members that allow them to cope with it**

**how the family responds to and understands stress.**

From this perspective, family stress arises from an actual or perceived imbalance between the demands of life, and the family's capability in meeting these demands in order to transform them into positive outcomes.

In the above definition, the critical criterion for the impact of stress lies in how it is met. Stress becomes distress when experienced as catastrophic. In contrast, stress can be seen as growth-producing when actively engaged as a challenge.

When stress cannot be successfully addressed with the available or customary coping style, it becomes a crisis. Family crisis occurs in circumstances that require the family to change its basic structure of being and doing in response to stress.

## Introducing the 'flow of stress through family life' model

The 'flow of stress through a family' model helps us to explore the dynamic interaction between the different kinds of factors which may cause stress in a family life cycle. These may include key transition points which mark out the development of a family over a period of time. For example, the birth of new family members or the death of older generations can be predicted. However, families may also experience unpredictable events, such as war, famine, unemployment or sudden ill health.

Carter and McGoldrick (2005) argue that it is important that we broaden our lens when working with families. We need to move away from thinking about individual family experiences to consider how they interact with wider cultural issues and historical factors. The 'flow of stress through family life' diagram, reproduced below, helps us to think about the interaction between all these factors in order to understand their influence on family life. It helps us to think about adverse experiences that have caused the family to struggle but also about experiences that have made them stronger.

Importantly, Carter and McGoldrick (2005 p7) highlight the fact that it's essential to pay attention to the influence of culture when considering any factor or stressor affecting family life given that: 'cultural factors play a major role in how families go through the life cycle'. It is helpful to think about the relevance of the social GRRRAACCEEESSS and how any of these factors impact on family life cycles and stress responses. The GRRRAACCEEESSS are a model which describe aspects of personal and social identity that include gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, education, ethnicity, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation and spirituality (Burnham, 2013).

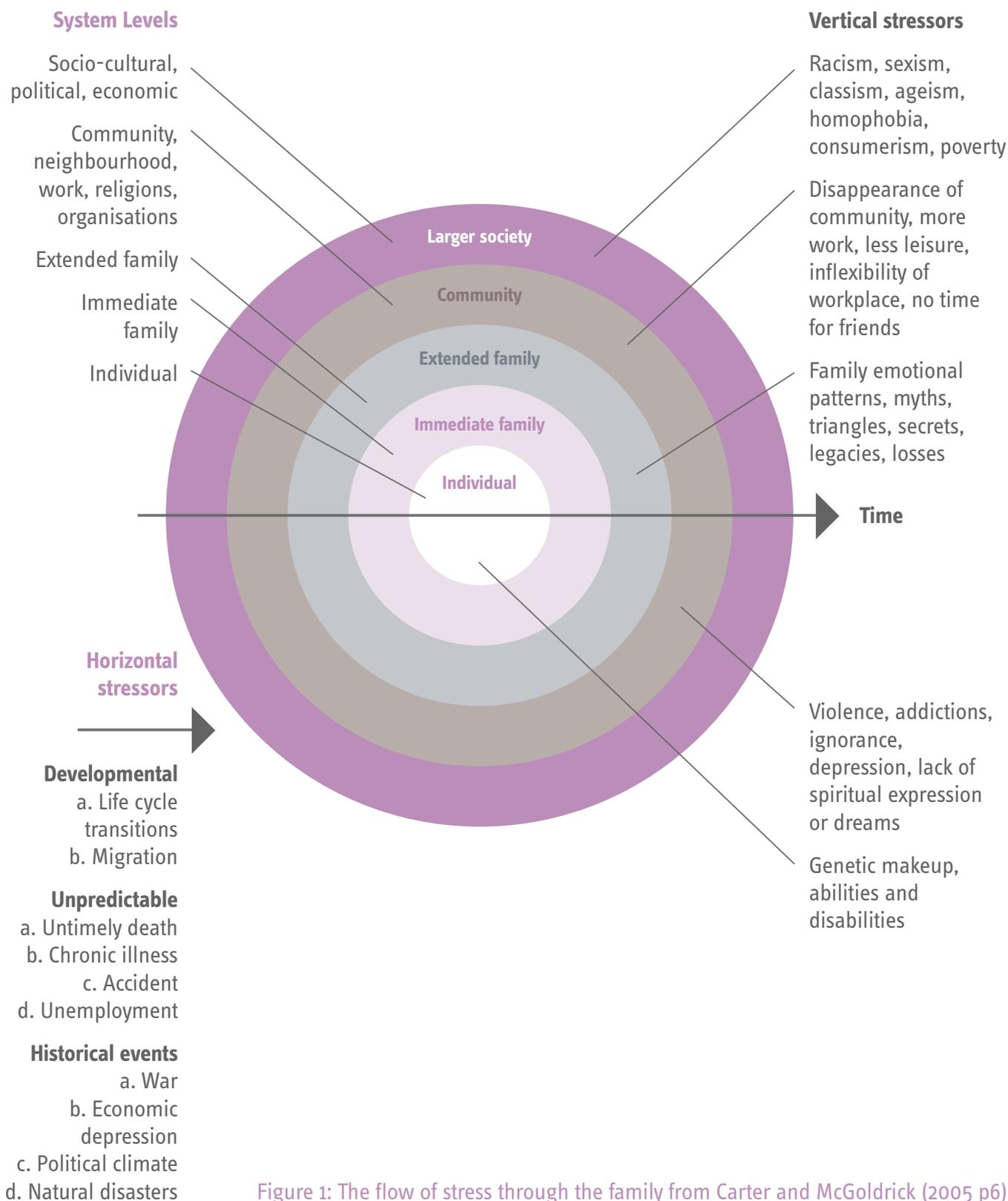


Figure 1: The flow of stress through the family from Carter and McGoldrick (2005 p6)

The model shows both vertical and horizontal stressors affecting family life.

### 1. Vertical stressors

These include intergenerational 'vertical' influences and stressors such as patterns of family relationships, family myths, and stories about the family or family members.

### 2. Horizontal stressors

These include predictable developmental stresses (births and deaths, acquiring new family members through marriage or relationships, etc.) and unpredictable events and stressors (such as chronic illness, accident or unemployment).

You will see if you look at the model that each of the stressors can include internal and external factors:

#### Internal stressors

Internal stressors refer to stresses which relate to factors that influence how individual family members interact with each other. For example, family emotional patterns, triangles and secrets. Triangulation is a systemic concept that describes how two family members might form a partnership with or reject a third family member (Good Therapy, 2016).

#### External stressors

External stressors are connected with place (where the family live or have lived) and time (the particular point in history we are focusing on). For example, families may be affected by national or international issues such as war, economic depression or natural disasters. Societal expectations and discourses about family life can change over time and affect family functions. For example, the changing patterns which we have seen in England in relation to the involvement of men in the care of children and the increasing number of mothers who are in employment since the 1950s illustrates the powerful ways in which our understanding of family roles and behaviour change throughout the years.

Thinking about families in this way helps us to understand that they are dynamic systems that move through time. The 'flow of stress through family life' model usefully locates the family as a psycho-social system embedded within wider social systems that function through transactional patterns.

## Using the ‘flow of stress through a family’ model in supervision

The ‘flow of stress through a family’ is a helpful model to use in supervision. In order to get started, you need to explain what it is and give examples of stressors at different levels that might affect family life. It is helpful to use figure 1 as a visual prompt when you do so.

As you do so, ask your supervisee to think about the family like a set of Russian babushka dolls embedded within wider systems, the internal and external stressors on the family system in each nested level, and how they are all affected.

You can then invite your supervisee to talk about their work with a family and, in doing so, think about how any vertical or horizontal, internal or external stressors affect how they interact with each other. This should prompt you to consider:

Factors for the family:			
How do the ideas of external and internal stressors fit with this particular child and family?	Where are the stressors in the family? Who is affected most? Why?	What do the other family members think about the stress they are experiencing? Is this something they think they can resolve?	Have they been able to resolve other stressors in the past?
What might they have learnt from such experiences which can help them here?	What have you learnt about cultural influences and power differentials and their impact on family life?	What can you learn by thinking about the social GRRRAACCEEESSS in relation to individual family members, and the family as a whole?	
How do any stressors affect the family’s hopes and dreams as a whole and as individual members?			

## Factors for the worker:

How do you think where you are in your own life cycle with your family of origin and / or family of choice, and the stressors around for you at the moment, affect how you work with this family?

What transitions are you currently navigating?

How might what you are experiencing now influence your work with this child and family?

What are the opportunities and constraints of any similarities or differences you have with this family?

How might your own experience of the social GRRRAACCEEESSS impact on how you view the family's situation, and your relationship with individual family members?

## Reviewing the discussion

It is helpful to leave time at the end of the discussion to return to figure 1 and ask your supervisee to reflect on whether any new insights, learning or ideas about conversations it would be helpful to have with the family have emerged.

### Using the 'flow of stress through a family' model with families

Following this discussion, you might also want to encourage your supervisee to talk through the 'flow of stress through a family' model directly with a family to share ideas and, most importantly, to hear their feedback.

Doing so can help a worker and family move away from a deficit to a strengths-based approach. This can arise because this social ecological theory of family invites the question: 'Given enough stress on either or both axis surely any individual family will appear dysfunctional?' This normalising approach can provide a non-blaming lens that makes the family feel they are not deficient in some way. This can be helpful to take conversations in a new direction.

## Other ways you can use this tool

You can use this model in group supervision to see what a whole team can contribute to thinking about working with an individual family in this way, and what patterns or connections might strike them about working with other families as a result.



**We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.**

## References

Burnham J (2013) 'Developments in Social GRRRAACCEEESSS: visible-invisible, voiced-unvoiced' in Krause I (ed.) *Cultural Reflexivity*. London: Karnac.

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