Linda Roggli:

It's October, 2020, and even in the midst of a crazy year, it's still ADHD awareness month. And we're still here with TADD talks from ADDA, the Attention Deficit Disorder Association, nine minutes short, pithy soundbites on living with adult ADHD. Stay tuned here it comes.

Miriam Bellamy:

Hello and welcome to TADD talks with the Attention Deficit Disorder Association. I'm Miriam Bellamy, licensed marriage and family therapist, and director of Whole Family Neurofeedback. Today I'd like to share my thoughts about ADHD, the family emotional system and neurofeedback. I don't want to just talk about ADHD today, and I don't want to just talk about neurofeedback. I want to talk about family process and about how that is related to ADHD and neurofeedback. Understanding ADHD has proven difficult for scientists and practitioners and for those diagnosed. Why is it still a controversial diagnosis? Why can't we identify the part of the brain responsible? Why can't we isolate the gene? I think these are complicated questions and I think they are as complicated as ADHD. And I think ADHD is as complicated as the family emotional system.

Miriam Bellamy:

So what do I mean by the family emotional system? Dr. Murray Bowen, a physician and psychiatrist, developed Bowen family systems theory in the 1950s, when he began to think in terms of the family, rather than in terms of the individual. Before Bowen, there was no such thing as couples or family counseling. He was among the first to try to understand human emotional and cognitive problems in a context rather than just in one's head. And he began to see that what was happening between people was much more difficult to see, yet almost more impactful than what was happening between a person's ears. So at the focus in Bowen family systems theory is what's happening between people versus really getting lost and stuck with what's happening between a person's ears. Bowen began to see the family itself as a biological organism that evolved over the millennia, an organism that seems to regulate individuals while the individuals also regulate it.

Miriam Bellamy:

And he observed that some families had more mental and emotional resources than others. And that there were some who were better able to access whatever family resources they had during times of stress and trauma, than others. And what he found was that when family members could access the family as a resource, other family members who were carrying the markers for distress for the family often improved. Bowen saw the family as a resource rather than blaming them for their problems. Remember the schizophrenogenic mother, right, where mothers were blamed for causing schizophrenia in their children. Bowen went a very different direction from his cohort Bowlby who developed that kind of thinking.

Miriam Bellamy:

But when families, even one family member, can begin to think of the family as a resource, oftentimes the families could pull themselves up and they would see improvements in vulnerable family members. What Bowen and family systems contributed to us today is a non blaming understanding of how the family both contributes to and can be a resource for members who are vulnerable to absorbing the family stress. I think part of the reason science has a hard time understanding ADHD is because the questions being asked to understand it are too narrow and too linear. ADHD is a nonlinear process. Coming from a family emotional system's perspective, it's not a condition, it's a process. It's a brain, body, family, cultural multigenerational, socioeconomic, political, educational process. And I believe in particular, a family emotional process.

Miriam Bellamy:

When we can start to think in terms of process, rather than condition, thinking can broaden. Understanding can broaden, and so can one's options. So think about these few examples that I'll share

about family emotional process and the intersection with ADHD. So, at Whole Family Neurofeedback, we worked with a mom in Florida who had a son who was about nine years old, diagnosed with ADHD, and the family and the son were in deep distress. There was violence from the son to the mother, and the son was in danger of being expelled from school. Mom rented our neurofeedback equipment. The son wouldn't do the sessions. So mom and dad did the sessions and the son improved and was able to stay in school. Consider this other family. Grandfather passes away. Within a few months, his adult daughter spends a weekend in jail for drinking and driving. A granddaughter makes a serious suicide attempt and ends up in a coma. And the youngest grandchild begins to display first signs of inattentiveness and anxiety and panic.

Miriam Bellamy:

Within months, she was diagnosed with ADHD and anxiety. Consider another family. Two years after her mother passes away, a wife seeks therapy for the first time in her life, trying to make sense of her marriage. Her husband's ADHD becomes the center of attention by the wife and by the therapist. The husband joins the therapy, and the focus on his problem intensifies. His work performance worsens. The couple divorces. In this case, the wife's mother had also been focused on her own husband shortcomings and her daughter's husband's shortcomings as well. And a final example, a youngest son diagnosed with ADHD, but whose eldest sister was so anxiously focused upon by the parents that he was never given guidance or assistance in his education. He found his own way, ran a successful business until his retirement.

Miriam Bellamy:

If we can just begin to understand ADHD in a context, we might see more than just a diagnosis in one family member, but rather an emotional process that each family member is a part of. And that the family as a whole across generations is a part of, and potentially a resource for. So how does neurofeedback fit in with the family emotional system? Dr. Bowen theorized the concept of differentiation of self. It's a cornerstone concept in Bowen family systems theory, and it wonders and asks and supposes that there are family members who are able to develop the ability to think more clearly and objectively when faced with complex emotional family relationships and problems. When one is more differentiated, one is able to resist the urge to swoop in and fix or help. One is more able to see strength in others. One is able to communicate more openly and honestly without blame or judgment.

Miriam Bellamy:

Bowen believed that when one person could pull themselves up just a bit, it would impact perhaps more powerfully than anything else the functioning of the other family members. And indeed, even when working with psychosis in the family, Bowen regularly saw these markers of family distress dissipate without medication. Nonlinear neurofeedback, that's the kind of neurofeedback that we do, helps this process of differentiation of self, find wings. It helps with a more positive attitude. It helps one communicate more clearly. And yes, that can mean just forming sentences more clearly, as we found in our family. It can promote clearer thinking, calmer thinking. It helps one get the most out of sleep so that you can wake up feeling rested.

Miriam Bellamy:

It helps with motivation to tackle what once felt like insurmountable problems. It helps with creativity, softening and warmth. It helps us be calmer with our kids or our husbands or ourselves with ADHD. And yes, it helps with focus. Either maintaining focus or being able to switch off of an intense focus. Nonlinear neurofeedback is one of a kind neurofeedback. It's not the kind of neurofeedback that looks to fix the problem in the brain. That's the most fascinating part about it. That would be just like in the family emotional system. The more the family tries to fix “the quote problematic family member,” the more the problem in the family persists. So we don't try to find a problem in the brain with nonlinear neurofeedback, we just look for changes. And then we call the brain to awareness of these changes and the brain takes it from there.

Miriam Bellamy:

And just like in the family emotional system, inherent resources are called forth and we can get on with the business of, and even enjoyment of life. So when we recommend neurofeedback, we recommend it for the whole family. If you're exploring neurofeedback for a child or a spouse, for every one session they do, you do two.

Miriam Bellamy:

And that's, today's TADD Talk about ADHD, family emotional process, and neurofeedback. I'm Miriam Bellamy, licensed marriage and family therapist, and director of Whole Family Neurofeedback. It's been great being with you today. If you want more information about me or my work with the family, neurofeedback or ADHD, find me online at wholefamilyneurofeedback.com or email me at miriam@wholefamilyneurofeedback.com. Take care and bye for now.

Linda Roggli:

Okay, that's today's ADHD wisdom. Much more to come. And why not join us for the virtual 2020 international ADHD conference coming up in November? Details at add.org. And while you're at it, why not join ADDA? It's a great investment in your ADHD life.