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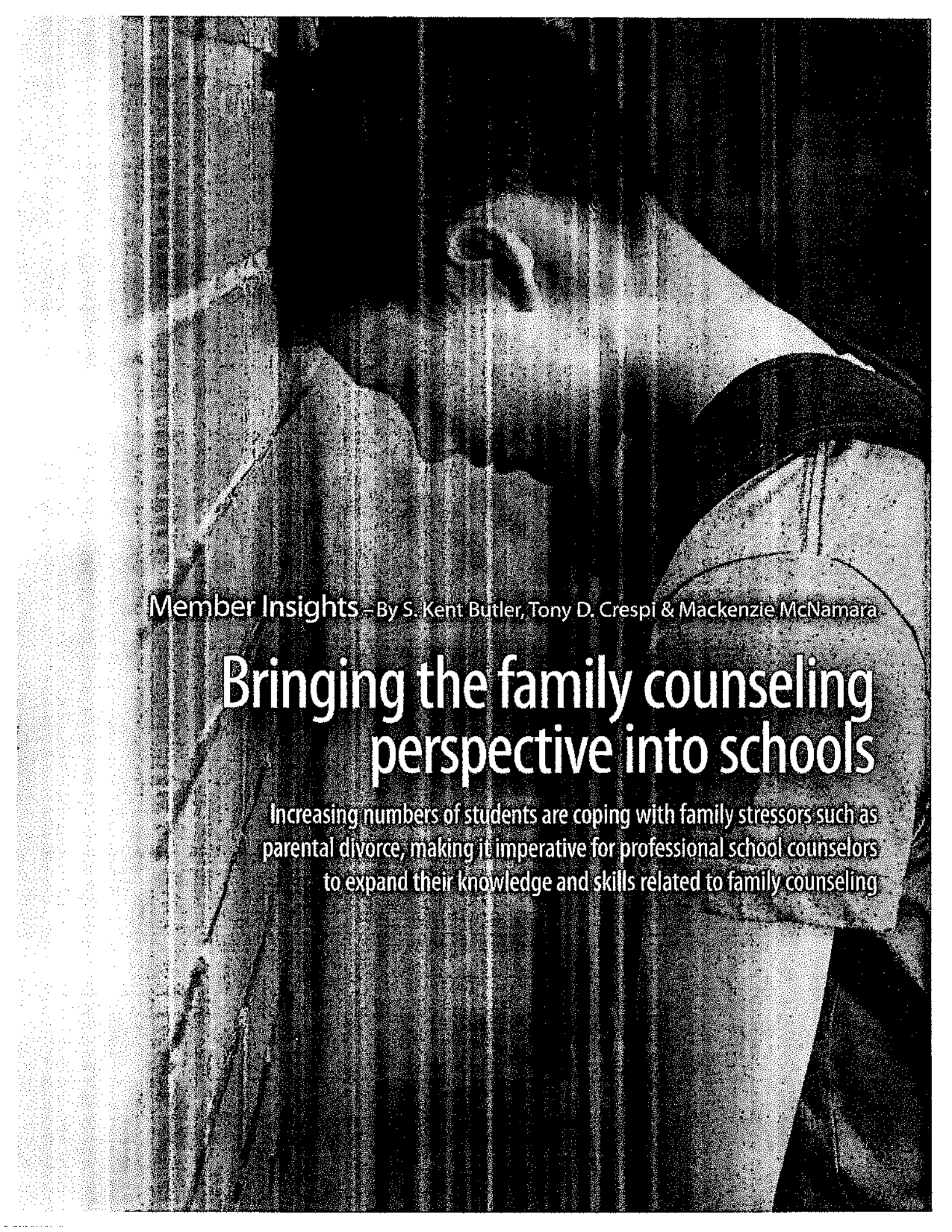
- ❖ **Forgiveness work with clients**
- ❖ **Sleep, pain and weight issues**
- ❖ **The family counseling perspective in schools**
- ❖ **The mental health impact of climate change**

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Member Insights—By S. Kent Butler, Tony D. Crespi & Mackenzie McNamara

Bringing the family counseling perspective into schools

Increasing numbers of students are coping with family stressors such as parental divorce, making it imperative for professional school counselors to expand their knowledge and skills related to family counseling



Children in schools today come from increasingly diverse and complex families. As illustration, more than 1 million families are impacted annually by divorce. In fact, approximately 13.7 million single parents are raising 21.8 million children, and 1 in 3 Americans are stepparents, stepchildren, stepsiblings or part of a stepfamily. Furthermore, according to a 2009 article published in the journal *Family Relations*, it is estimated that only 31 percent of fathers who no longer live with their children maintain weekly contact with those children. It is easy to conclude that the issue of divorce alone has a profound impact on many millions of children in the U.S.

Now imagine that a young student and her mother walk into the professional school counselor's office on a Monday morning. Mom explains that she and her husband are pursuing a divorce — he recently told her that he's been having an affair and has decided to move in with his girlfriend. The daughter acknowledges feelings of depression and admits to having angry outbursts at home. Mom says she is concerned because her daughter's grades have been dropping.

Considering the large number of children and adolescents coping with parental divorce, it's not surprising that this fragmented family came to the school counselor's office. In fact, it's a good thing. Both daughter and mother need someone to talk to, and schools are a natural access point for services. However, many professional school counselors are not trained in family dynamics and are not familiar with key tenets that impact family counseling, so they may not know how to proceed.

A sample case

Susie is 15. A high school freshman, she knows only that her father left the house two months ago to move in with his girlfriend. Susie's parents had been together for 16 years, getting married shortly after college.

Susie's father hasn't called since leaving. Susie is unaware that her father told her mother that although he loves Susie and her younger sister, who is in seventh grade, he hasn't missed seeing them in the least. Mom decided not to share this comment with the children, but she does confide this secret to you, the professional school counselor.

Sitting in your office, Susie suddenly looks up and exclaims that she is scared she will have to move and change schools. She also says that she's having a really tough time paying attention in class and explains that her grades are slipping. "I hate my dad for doing this!" she yells.

Suddenly, Susie starts shaking and breaks down in tears. After a few minutes, Susie tells you that she is spending a lot of time with her boyfriend, partly to stay out of her house. She acknowledges feeling depressed. After pausing for a moment, she looks at her mom and states, "I really hate Dad. His girlfriend is so young. She's in her 20s. She's not much older than me!"

Academically, Susie has been an A and B student, but her grades have fallen since her father left. Her mother acknowledges that things are tough at home and reveals that she didn't learn about her husband's affair until the day he moved out. "I really don't know what's going to happen," she tells you. "I know we're getting a divorce, but beyond that I just don't know."

Your school doesn't have a social worker. However, you have a colleague who has been studying family counseling, so you knock on her door to ask for a consultation. After sitting down, you share a few thoughts.

You note that, fundamentally, Susie needs someone to talk to about these issues. Acknowledging that you are speculating, you openly wonder what type of impact the obviously poor communication in Susie's family is having on her. After all, her father has not called in two months, her mother was completely unaware of the affair and her mother is keeping the father's confession of not missing his kids a secret. These facets alone highlight poor family communication. In addition, Susie is scared that she might have to move and change schools. Clearly the issues are widespread.

Risk points

Here are some risk points to consider as you work with Susie:

- ♦ Parenting after a divorce differs significantly from parenting prior to a divorce.

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Relationships in Counseling and the Counselor's Life

Jeffrey A. Kottler and Richard S. Balkin



"Drs. Kottler and Balkin present one of the most comprehensive and readable texts on the power of relationships to connect, heal, and restore people to their best selves. Anyone who is interested in counseling or helping in general needs to read this exquisitely crafted book."

—Paul R. Peluso, PhD
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Part 1 reviews basic assumptions about the nature of helping relationships and examines how and why they can empower client change efforts. Part 2 describes practical approaches to encourage client trust and growth, including chapters on the cultural and environmental context of relationships; the ways in which counseling is used to treat trauma; how exchanging stories solidifies and fortifies counseling relationships; and using creative and innovative techniques to enhance relationships. Part 3 discusses how counselors are influenced by both therapeutic and personal relationships.

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❖ Single-parent families in the United States are increasing.

❖ Children of divorce have more mental health problems in comparison with their peers.

❖ Suicide is the third-leading cause of death among U.S. youth.

❖ Brain regions responsible for decision-making are not fully developed in youth.

❖ Changes in family structure can have an affect on school grades.

❖ Anxiety, depression and behavior problems are elevated after divorce.

❖ Children of divorce often feel a sense of instability.

An understanding of these risk points is essential for moving forward with children and families because the risk points can provide direction for the work that needs to be done. For example, knowing that mental health symptoms are elevated following divorce and impulsive decision-making is greater among youth, you should assess Susie's level of safety. In this case, Susie also makes many "red flag" statements.

These are things that counselors know how to address but might not always consider without an awareness of the data. In addition, parents can become defensive, or they might blame themselves for their children's difficulties. For this reason, it is imperative to educate parents on these risk points. It is also important to realize that family issues may require clinical supervision.

Supervision around work with families

Susie is not alone. As your colleague notes, Susie is one of many children and adolescents who are coping with family stressors. With the prevalence of so many family issues, a growing number of states have enabled licensed marriage and family therapists (LMFTs) to work in the schools. Connecticut, New Mexico, Maine, Texas and Illinois have passed specific laws to allow LMFTs to work in schools, whereas Massachusetts allows LMFTs to work under a general mental health designation.

Schools clearly represent an important access point for mental health professionals. But with only six states utilizing LMFTs in schools, it is extremely important for professional school counselors and their supervisors to know how to manage these situations with families.

As you ponder your next meeting with Susie, you need information. Direct supervisors are often part of the structure of many agencies, but professional school counselors might need to seek support from a colleague with training in family counseling. Such supervision might come from a guidance director, a school psychologist, a consulting psychologist, a marriage and family counselor, or a local family agency.

Two popular family therapy models that might help Susie are presented below.

Symbolic-experiential family therapy

This model, derived from the work of Carl Whitaker, addresses both individual and relational patterns. It is focused on both personal growth and family relations.

Fundamentally, the therapist helps dislodge rigid patterns and stimulates flexibility using a family's natural pull toward growth. Focusing on the present, the therapist helps people recognize their real feelings, express those feelings and move forward, individually and as a family. Key points follow.

- ♦ The "battle for structure" involves clients (a family) "sizing up" a therapist. There is no "identified patient"; rather, the family is the therapy unit. In this model, the therapist must win the battle and control therapy. For instance, if the therapist invites the entire family and one member does not show up to the session, the therapist may refuse to meet until everyone attends. In the case with Susie, you might note that you, Susie, her mother and Susie's sister must all attend.

- ♦ The family must win the "battle for initiative"; this involves their decision to take charge of their lives and decisions. Is Susie committed to resolving her feelings? Will she commit to six counseling sessions? Is she willing to confront her father about calling his children? Is she motivated to initiate change?

Therapy progresses through stages:

- 1) Engagement: This is the "meet and greet" phase. You have already started this stage with Susie and her mom.

- 2) Middle phase: Families are encouraged to change through confrontations, encouragement and interventions. Can Susie's family meet to start this process?

- 3) Late phase: Increased flexibility is a



With so many students in the schools coping with changing family structures, it is vital that we expand our skill sets as school counselors.



focus for the family. Can Susie's family talk through how the divorce will change their life?

- 4) Separation: As the therapist separates, the family takes responsibility.

Symbolic-experiential family therapy often advocates the use of co-therapy, making it a great model to use with a more "senior" therapist. In this fashion, supervision can be active and ongoing as you acquire firsthand skills in family counseling.

Structural family therapy

The structural approach, typically associated with Salvador Minuchin, views problems as being rooted in family interactions. Fundamentally, if we can help change the family's organization (structure), its members typically find that they feel better and their symptoms are often relieved. Key points follow.

- ♦ Enmeshment or disengagement: Family members may range from those who are overly connected to those who are disengaged. Enmeshment tends to prevent growing maturity, whereas disengagement may lead a child to feel abandoned. Most families are not one or the other but have subsystems that reflect their tendencies. For example, a disengaged father who is overly involved at work may neglect the family. In response, the mother may compensate by becoming overly involved. Is Dad really connected? What is the structure?

- ♦ Boundaries: Are parental boundaries rigid or flexible? Are grandparents a resource? Can a child visit Dad at work, or does the family maintain a rigid rule against it? Can Susie ask Dad questions?

What are the boundaries? What is spoken? What is unspoken?

- ♦ Alignments: Who joins together? Are children aligned against the parents? Did a parent resent and refuse to attend a child's sporting activities? Did a parent require everyone to attend? What are the alignments?

- ♦ Triangulation: The permutations of triangulation in families can be abundant. A child and parent may triangulate against another parent. A parent having an affair can create a triangle with the other spouse. Will Susie triangulate with Mom against Dad? What triangles exit?

The structural model also features several stages:

- 1) Joining and accommodating
- 2) Assessing family interactions
- 3) Monitoring dysfunction
- 4) Restructuring patterns

Summary and considerations

When a student walks into a professional school counselor's office, we are presented with a rare opportunity. When a student and parent walk in together, we are handed an even rarer opportunity.

Family counseling offers unique and engaging ways of reframing problems. Rather than blaming an individual for a particular problem, family counselors look at the family system. Perhaps a child's acting-out behaviors allow parents to avoid looking at their relational problems. Perhaps a child's failing grades reflect more on family anxiety and stress than on individual issues. Fundamentally, family counseling takes a larger, more systemic perspective of presenting issues.

Professional school counselors possess wonderful skill sets. They understand rapport building. They understand relational dynamics. They understand problem assessment and the utility of interventions. The connection between families and school adjustment is undeniable. At the same time, school counselors will likely find continuing education and supervision indispensable in helping families.

In our experience, students and families can often benefit from a family counseling perspective. With so many students in the schools coping with changing family structures, it is vital that we expand our skill sets. Fortunately, there are multiple platforms through which we can provide