

Family Genogram

A genogram is a way to draw your family tree that records information about the different members and their relationships to you over at least three generations. Family diagrams which map relationships and patterns of your family or others who are important to you and may help you see the events and relationships in your life and how these patterns are related to your illness and behaviors.*

Family patterns tend to repeat over generations. What happens in one generation will often repeat itself in the next. For example, the same problems and successes can be played out from generation to generation, though the actual behavior may take a variety of forms.

Creating a genogram involves at least three different types of information:

- 1. Identification of family members and/ or significant others.* Your genogram can also include friends, significant others, and people who are supportive of you, other than your biological family members.*
- 2. Telling how each family member is related to you*
- 3. Showing how your relationships with these members REALLY are*

** Include both your biological family and, significant others are both important. Please feel free to include both.*

Questions to consider about your various family members and your relationship with these people:

The purpose of these questions is to review your personal history and people, existing support systems, or events that may influence you, whether environmentally, physically, emotionally, or biologically. You may need to use additional paper.

1. Are there any family members who have had a mental illness of any kind? Who are they and how are they related to you? What kind of treatment was helpful for them or available to them?
2. Are there any family members who are very close? Friends who are close? Who are they?
3. Which members help out when you need them?
4. Who does everyone in the family go to when they need help or someone to talk to?
5. How do you get along with each member of your house? Of your family?
6. Whom do you see as the “strong one?” The weak one? The one with all of the problems?
7. Has anyone in your family had serious medical problems? Who and what did they have?
8. What significant information about your family can you think of that is important to your recovery or to the risk of interfering with your recovery?

It may also be helpful to complete the following lists:

1. Make a list of the family members that live in your house and how they are related to you.
2. Make a list of your family members that do not live with you (alive and dead), and how they are related to you.
3. Make a list of your friends and other people who are supportive of you, and what they do to show they care about you.
4. Make a list of family members that you wish were not related to you in any way and why you feel this way.
5. Make a list of family members that you are glad to have as family, and why you are glad they are.

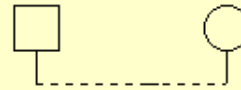
Basic Genogram Components¹

A genogram is drawn using various symbols, lines, and words. Below you will find a list of words, and the symbols which you will use to show each of your significant others and your relationship by birth, and also by actual relationship.

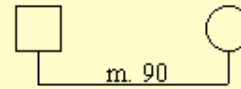
Although there is general agreement on the basic genogram structure, and codes, there are some variations on how to depict certain family situations, such as cutoffs, adoptions etc. (Bowen, 1980; Kramer, 1985; McGoldrick, Gerson, & Shellenberger, 1999). The following are the symbols to use:

¹ Galvin, Kathleen (2000). Creating your own genogram (Searle Center for Teaching Excellence at Northwestern University). Retrieved May 21,2002, from <http://faculty-web.at.nwu.edu/commstud/galvin/Genograms/Creating%2>.

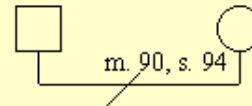
Liasons or a couple living together are displayed similar to marriage, but with a dotted line.



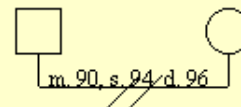
Marriage dates are recorded above the line connecting husband and wife.



A **separation** of a couple is marked with one slashed line. The date is also usually recorded.



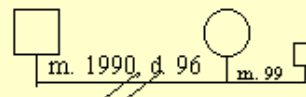
A **divorce** of a couple is marked with two slashed line. The date is also usually recorded.



The **death** of a person is indicated by an "x" through the shape. The birth and death dates are also usually recorded.



A **remarriage** (or former marriage) is shown to the side with a smaller shape. The focus couple is the one in the middle with the larger shapes. *Note: If there has been more than one remarriage, the marriages are usually placed from left to right with the most recent marriage coming last.*



Closeness of relationship: You can also depict the type of relationship of two family members with lines connecting those persons. For example, two people with a normal relationship would have one line drawn between them. Those with a close relationship would have two lines drawn between them. Those with a fused (extremely close) relationship would have three lines drawn between them.

Depictions of other types of relationships can also be shown. A dotted line² between two people indicates a distant relationship (This is different than the dotted line showing a romantic relationship or the dotted line showing a foster or adopted child.) A jagged line shows a hostile relationship. A jagged line with two straight lines shows a close, hostile relationship, and a jagged line with three straight lines shows a tightly knit, hostile relationship.

Family relationships that are stressful: You can depict some additional, dysfunctional relationships with genograms, also. Sexual abuse is shown by a large jagged line with an arrow from the abuser to the abused.

² Galvin, Kathleen (2000). Creating your own genogram (Searle Center for Teaching Excellence at Northwestern University). Retrieved May 21, 2002, from <http://faculty-web.at.nwu.edu/commstud/galvin/Genograms/Creating%2>.

Physical abuse is shown by a small jagged line and an arrow from the abuser to the abused. A relationship where one member is focused unhealthily on another member is depicted by a straight line with an arrow from the focused member to the member being focused upon. A relationship that is cutoff, where the two family members do not have contact, is shown with two short perpendicular lines that break up the relationship line.

Triangles: Another pattern in family relationships is the triangle. In a family system, a triangle represents the coalition of two family members against another family member (McGoldrick, Gerson, & Shellenberger, 1999) and can be represented on a genogram. Triangles are often seen among two parents and one child, where one of the parents creates an alliance with the child against the other parent. Another classic triangle involves a son, his wife and his mother. Such a triangle may play out in a variety of ways. For example, the wife may blame her mother-in-law for her frustrations with her husband, while the mother-in-law blames the wife for taking her son away (McGoldrick et al., 1999). When you are interpreting genograms or creating your own, look for possibilities of triangles in relationships.

Now you know the important components of genogram construction and are ready to move on to learning more about understanding the relationships and patterns that are seen in genograms.

**Please note: Due to some technical difficulties in importing the genograms into ³the website, the lines that are supposed to be dotted lines (denoting foster children, adopted children, romantic liaisons and distant relationships) sometimes show up here on the website as heavy, dark lines. We have noted, where possible, what these lines are actually representing.*

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Now that you know how Genograms work, drawing the following Genograms might help you as you plan your recovery:

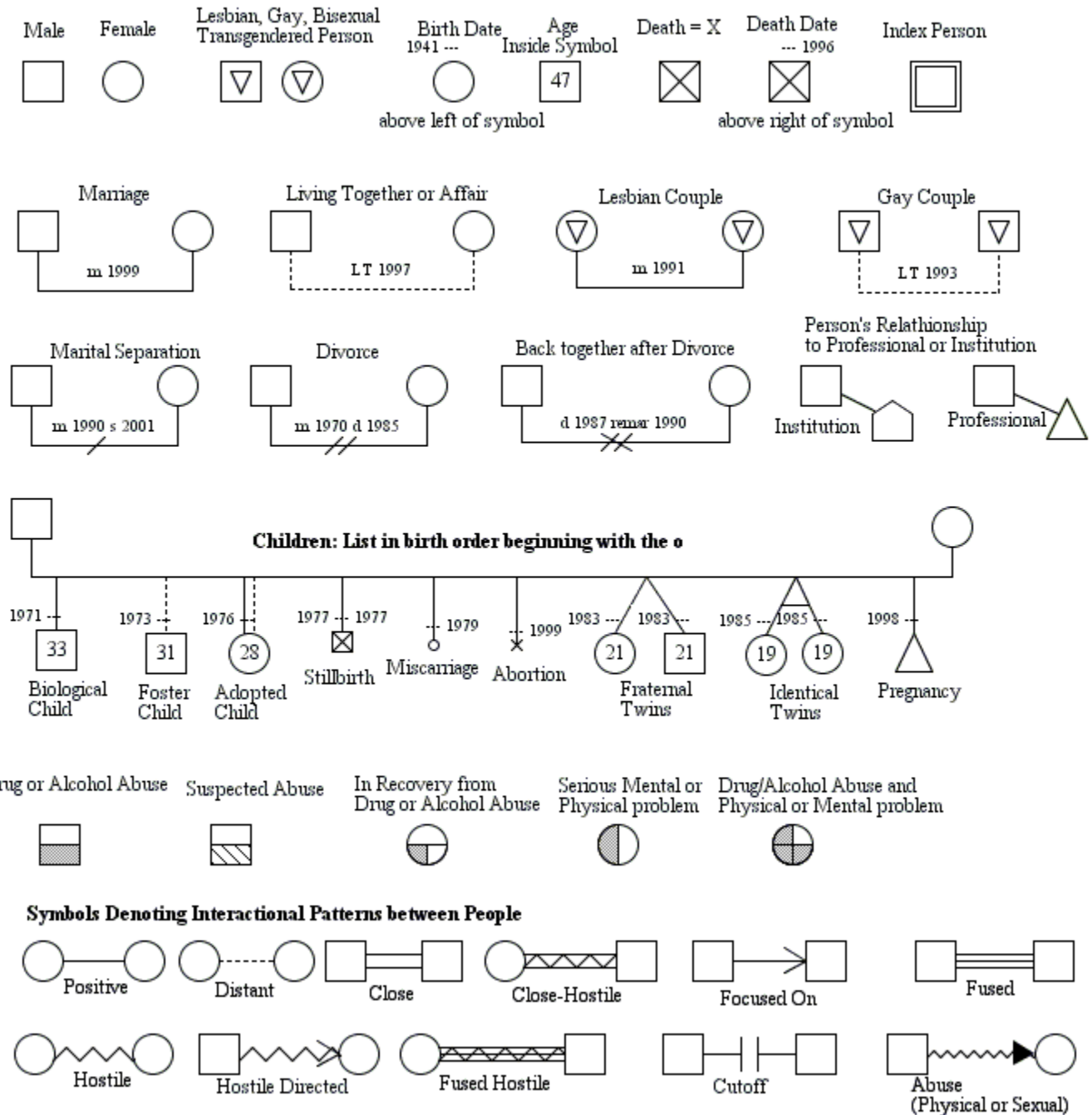
1. My Genogram as it looks with everyone who I am related to.
2. My Genogram with all the people who are supportive of me.
3. My Genogram with all the people who are not supportive of me.
4. If my family relationships were perfect and how I want it to be, this is how my genogram would look (include all family, friends, and significant others.)

³ Galvin, Kathleen (2000). Creating your own genogram (Searle Center for Teaching Excellence at Northwestern University). Retrieved May 21,2002, from <http://faculty-web.at.nwu.edu/commstud/galvin/Genograms/Creating%2>.

<http://www.genopro.com/genogram/symbols/>

http://www.hhs.state.ne.us/Children_Family_Services/safety_rfb/a1FGenSym.pdf

Standard Symbols for Genograms



<http://courses.wcupa.edu/ttreadwe/courses/02courses/standardsymbols.htm>

Genograms are a visual diagram of the psychosocial issues in your family tree.

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