

I'm Sorry I Love You: The Impact of Miscommunication on Family Breakdown

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Family conflict presents itself in a myriad of shapes and sizes often resulting in the disconnection of young people from their family group. The source of much of this conflict is recurrent patterns of miscommunication and misinterpretation which in the extreme can be the catalyst that leads to a young person becoming homeless.

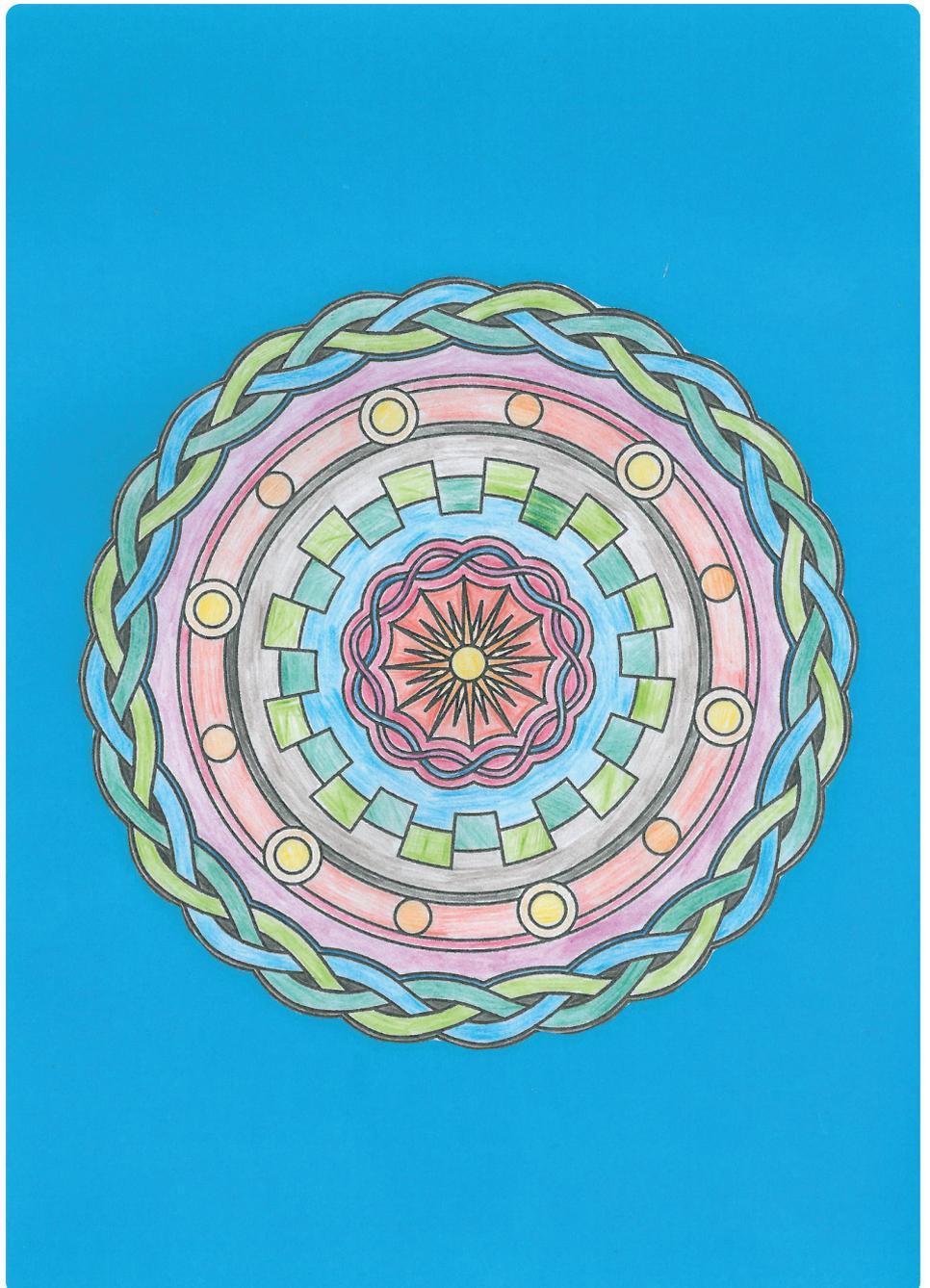
In my role as the Youth Reconciliation Practitioner at Hope Street Youth and Family Services (Hope Street) I am constantly confronted with the life changing and pervasive negativity family disengagement has on a young person's existence. It may seem like a cliché, however this is frequently evidenced when doing one-to-one work with young people, and with the boarder family group through mediation. Most parties are not aware that their communication and learning styles are unique to themselves and often differ from those of others within their family unit. The all too familiar feeling of 'I don't feel understood or heard' or 'my parents don't understand me, they just want me to be the way they want' is more often than not the result of a misunderstood communication and intent.

As Fredrich Nietzsche once said 'You have your way. I have my way. As for the right way, the correct way, and the only way, it does not exist'. This quote encapsulates my professional observations and has enabled me to implement new tools for working with young people and their families enabling them to move from the old paradigm of win-lose conflict outcomes, to win-win solutions and gain a better understanding of varying view points. An example of some of the theoretical tools I find useful when exploring different

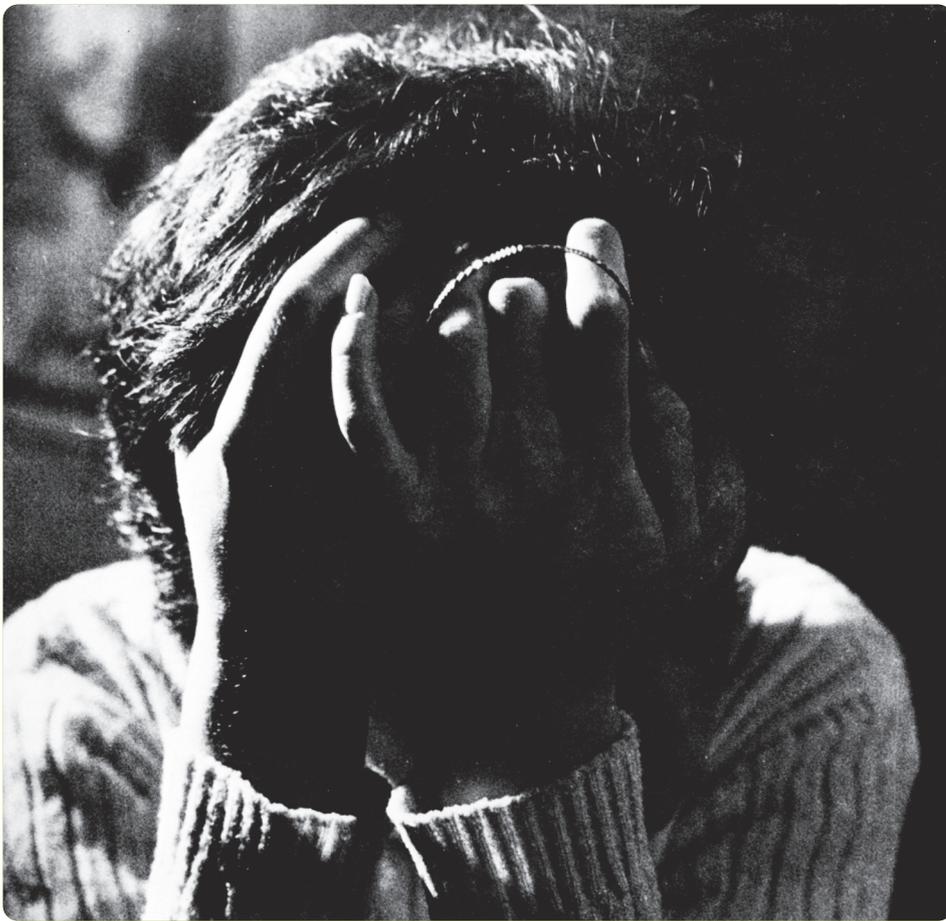
communication styles are Dr Gary Chapman's Apology and Love Language profiles.^{1,2}

Apology languages (expressing regret; accepting responsibility;

making restitution; genuinely repenting; and requesting forgiveness) relate to what and how you need to receive and accept an apology when you feel you have been wronged. While love languages



A mandala by a Hope Street young person



(gift; physical touch; acts of service; words of affirmation; and quality time) explore the optimum way a person receives communication of love and appreciation within both personal and plutonic relationships.

I continually observe positive growth in individuals, and within families, once communication styles have been explored, differing interpretations have been acknowledged and supportive tools have been utilised to highlight existing variances. Although young people often do not immediately return to the family home, they are able to further conversations and address situations that have previously been flashpoints for conflict. Even young people who do not have the capacity to connect with their families still experience positive growth through their ability to better understand themselves and the importance of appreciating the distinctions between communication styles. Young people who have been supported to explore their own communication profiles and reflect on these within social interactions, report that they have better relationships within their social circles, enabling them to feel more supported and connected to their peers and wider community.

During family mediation sessions the young person is given the opportunity, within a safe space, to focus on issues they wish to discuss and work upon. Families are often hesitant and sceptical to participate in family mediation; as one parent recently commented 'why would this be different from everything else we have done?' This is a great question, especially considering a family may have had numerous services engaged over a number of years. Family members are usually willing to do whatever they can to enable their family to function more harmoniously however enter into family mediation with a significant degree of caution. Allowing family members to focus on how they personally deliver and receive information while providing them with an opportunity to explore naturally occurring communication style variances, shifts an individual's attention from a blaming perspective of conflict to an appreciation of differing viewpoints.

At a recent mediation session a family sat around in a relaxed atmosphere and shared pizza while I explained how the session would run. The young person discussed their first issue, which was based on them needing to understand why they had

been punished for seemingly doing nothing wrong. The parent's instant response was that they had been apologising for over 10 years 'we are sorry!' This provided a tangible example for exploring the differing apology language profiles of each family member. Through the utilisation of simple practical profiling tools the family were able to approach this issue from a fresh positive angle which highlighted individual perspectives and enabled them to progress to a collective understanding.

Similarly, the issue of the young person's feeling of never being supported by their mother stating that she always sided with the step-father was explored from the perspective of misunderstood communication. Although this issue became instantaneously conflictual the family's willingness and ability to shift focus to how they communicate provided the mother an opportunity to express her difficulties in trying to satisfy all family members. She was able to articulate her frustrations regarding her inability to effect any change and had found it easier to accept the path of least resistance. This admission was a significant step forward in the family's healing, and has since enabled them to communicate more transparently and harmoniously. Providing the young person and their family an opportunity to explore and share their different language profiles allowed them to move beyond their points of conflict, with the young person now regularly engaged in family activities.

Assisting young people and, where possible, their families to understand and reflect upon their own communication needs and styles, while relating these to existing patterns of behaviour can provide opportunities for honest communication without the need for victory. The simple realisation that we all uniquely process and communicate information can in itself be the gateway through which divergent paths reconnect.

Endnotes

1. Chapman G 2010, *The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love That Lasts*, Northfield Press
2. Chapman G, Thomas J 2013, *When Sorry Isn't Enough*, Northfield Press