

IF YOUR FAMILY TREE COULD TALK

Does family history repeat itself?
A fascinating way to map birth, death, love and divorce patterns you "inherit"

BY EMILY MARLIN

Your family—large or small, gregarious or reserved, probably loved and probably more than a little exasperating—is one of the most powerful influences in your life. Like all families, it has ingrained in you its own set of rules about behavior, its own unique standards of success and its own special expectations for relationships. This "script" affects every aspect of your life, from how you handle money and career decisions to how you form intimate partnerships.

Yet few of us know how to read our family scripts, or realize how strongly they may be "directing" us—or question whether the family beliefs and behaviors we learned as children work for us as adults, or if they conflict with the patterns of others in our life. When couples clash, for instance, it's often over whose "script" the two should be following—though few realize that is the basis for their argument.

To track how feelings and attitudes develop in one family and gauge whether they are causing problems now, many family counselors use an exercise called a *genogram*—a sort of family tree that talks. The genogram was developed from research on family systems by Murray Bowen, M.D., and is widely used to help people unravel the relationship patterns of their family members and help pinpoint their talents, strengths and weaknesses.

One of the fascinations of genograms is how often and how clearly they show relationship patterns recurring across generations. A woman with an alcoholic father, for example, may marry a problem drinker herself. She has developed coping skills to deal with the problem that feel familiar to her and can easily be transferred to a new relationship, even though alcoholism continues to be a disruptive and destructive part of her life.

Another cross-generational pattern is the tendency for two-person relationships to be inherently unstable. Where there is conflict or stress, a third person will often be brought in to form a triangle and change the dynamic of the relationship. An extramarital affair is perhaps the classic example of triangling, but there are others. A couple having problems may focus on their child; or one parent may form a bond with the child, against the

other parent. A child who has a distant relationship with one parent may identify strongly with the other. Sometimes the same triangles are repeated through the generations; in other cases, it's just the tendency for conflicts and triangles to form that recurs.

Triangle relationships can be extremely complicated. What's useful for most people is just to understand why they develop and in what situations they're likely to occur, so that other coping strategies can be considered.

Gaining new perspectives

We are all brought up to think mainly in terms of twosomes: parent and child, husband and wife. The genogram encourages you to think more broadly about the way people in your family get along," explains Dorcas H. Cofer, Ph.D., director of family therapy at Beth Israel Medical Center in New York City.

Fortunately, you don't need a Ph.D. to get this broad view of your family. You may not spot and interpret every pattern in your genogram the way a therapist would, but you'll see connections you've never seen before. And those insights will prompt you to explore personal difficulties and relationships in a new way.

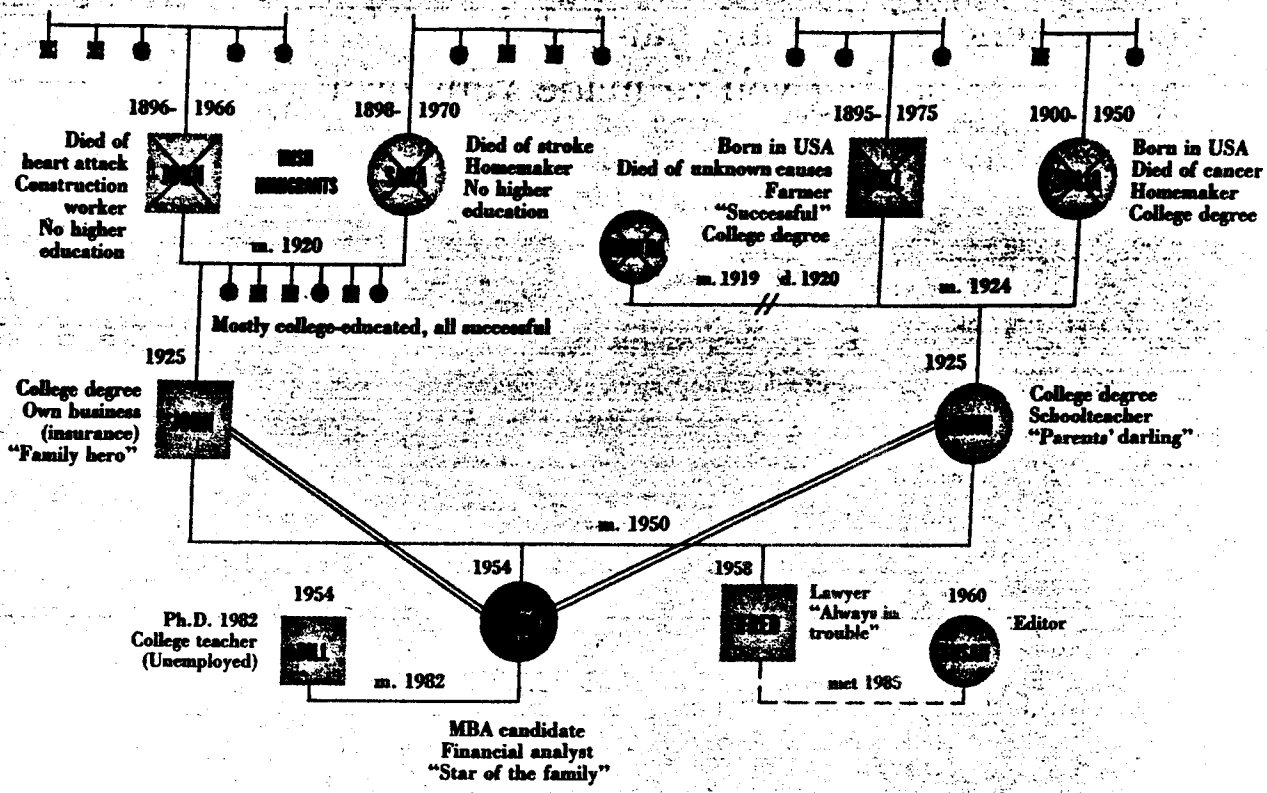
As you create your genogram, go over the key events in your parents' and grandparents' generations—births, weddings, deaths, divorces, household moves, special achievements, financial windfalls or bankruptcies. What important family events did you witness or hear talked about, and what were the reactions to them? How did people cope with life transitions—happy turning points as well as difficult times?

You can do this yourself, or delve more deeply by getting together with other family members to share reminiscences and perspectives (see box, page 91). However much time you spend, you'll have a unique opportunity to unlock—and perhaps re-write—the script you're following now.

How to know where you're coming from

To draw your basic genogram, follow one of the examples. Your family chart should include the following information about you, your parents and your grandparents:

- Name, birthdate and, if deceased, year and cause of death.
 - Education and occupation.
 - Siblings in each generation. Especially significant: birth order (list oldest to youngest, left to right).
- (Continued on page 91)



K E Y

- male
- female
- × died
- // divorced
- ==== close bond
- ~~~~ conflict
- ... distant relationship
- unmarried couple

Can a fast-tracker be happy with a free spirit

This genogram pinpoints why one couple—Sara and her husband of five years, Bill—clashed so loudly on money and career issues. At the time, Bill was in his sixth month of looking for a position as a college professor. Sara wanted to be supportive but was becoming increasingly resentful that she was working hard at a full-time job and studying for her MBA while Bill wasn't terribly concerned about his no-job status.

Sara's family history revealed why she was so angry and fearful: Her father's parents were immigrants who raised seven children on her grandfather's meager wages as a seasonal construction worker. Determined to change their children's fate, her grandparents' goal was to send each of them to college. Sara's father, the oldest, was the family "hero" and the most financially successful, eventually becoming president of his own insurance company.

Sara's mother also came from a family with a strong work ethic. Except for the few years when her children were very young, she worked continuously as a school-

teacher. Sara's brother was highly motivated in his law career, and Sara was a financial analyst working toward a career in investment banking. In reviewing her family's job history, she realized that none of them had ever been out of work and that their identities were very much tied to what they did for a living.

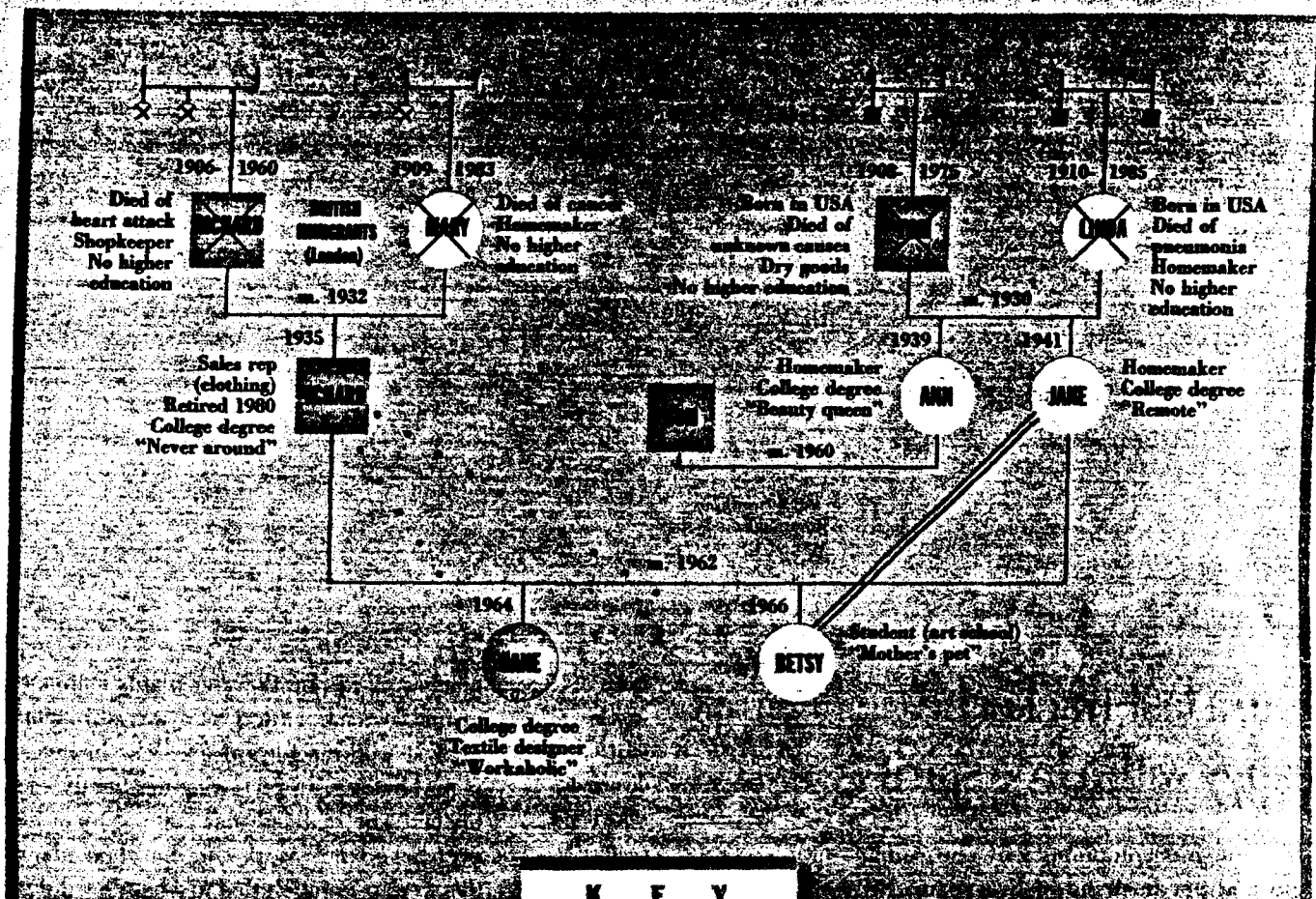
Bill, on the other hand, came from a family in which both parents were artists, accustomed to taking months off to paint

and getting by on very little dependable income. Bill wanted to wait for the right job and live off his savings, in many ways following the pattern he had learned from his parents, while Sara felt that Bill's unemployment was a personal failure for them both. At this point, she thought, he should take *any* job he was offered.

When Sara saw how their backgrounds had given them such different takes on the situation, a compromise was worked out. They agreed that Bill could continue to job hunt in his own way until his savings hit a specific point they set together. If that happened before the "right" job was offered, he would take the next best thing. Once Sara worked out a budget and realized they were far from broke, she relaxed a little and became more patient with Bill's search.

Peter Muller

Look for patterns across the generations— “coincidences” that are handed down, family ways of coping you’ve made your own



Alone again, naturally?

When Jane charted her family's genogram to look for possible clues to her sense of feeling alone, she discovered her father's on-the-road job was a major factor in the family's emotional dynamics. Jane's grandparents on both sides married young and raised small families. Her father was an only child and her mother had one older sister. Soon after Jane's younger sister was born, her mother's parents moved to Florida, leaving her mother without the support system she had depended on. On top of that, Jane's father was a salesman for a fashion designer who traveled four days a week.

Although Jane's mother had been tagged "remote" by her own family, Jane saw how a quiet, stoic facade had helped her mother get by virtually as a single parent

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while Jane and her sister were growing up. Jane also understood for the first time how isolated her father must have felt as well, separated from the family most of the week. Despite the fact that she had never been close with her father and, in fact, had never had much of an opportunity to be, Jane somehow had caught her father's enthusiasm for the fashion industry and had started a career as a textile designer. She decided to use this mutual interest to improve communication with him.

Jane also came to appreciate how much of a loner she herself had become. Like her parents, she had "learned" to be most comfortable alone. Working at home, she spent days without seeing anyone. She decided to break out of the pattern of isolation that had run throughout her family by sharing a large workspace with several other designers.

Note whether there was a big gap—six years or more—between siblings. Also chart when any deaths, including miscarriages or infant deaths, occurred. (Not all siblings' birth and death dates are shown on the examples, for space reasons.)

● Marital history, including years of marriages, divorces, deaths of spouses and remarriages. Add anything significant about premarital history (long or broken engagements and long-term and/or live-in relationships, with the year the couple met or started living together if possible).

● Health or psychological problems—chronic illness, heart disease, cancer, alcohol or drug abuse, eating disorders, depression.

Think back to which family members had especially close distant or difficult relationships, and chart these connections as indicated on the keys to the sample genograms. (Remember that a relationship can be close *and* difficult at the same time.)

You might also want to make "summing up" notes about personalities or interactions—"hardworking immigrants," for example, or "Mom did all the work in the marriage."

Now you're ready to "read" your genogram.

"Typecasting" family-style

Many family therapists feel that birth order—where and how we fit into the family with respect to our siblings—helps set the stage for the role we'll play within the family and the kinds of relationships we'll have with our partner and children. "We continue to interact with others in the ways that are most familiar to us," says Barbara H. Morrison, marriage and family therapist at the Washington Square Institute for Psychotherapy and Mental Health in New York City.

An oldest child, for example, frequently becomes "the responsible, conscientious one" as parents increasingly depend on her for help. She may also feel the call to carry on family traditions most strongly. The youngest is more likely to be freewheeling and indulged. Middle children may lean toward either or both ends of the spectrum. Often, too, they have to try harder for attention. As might be expected, only children are much like firstborns, though they tend to be even more independent and grown-up, and are sometimes more anxious and overprotected.

Of course, as with any genogram data, it's important not to infer too much from isolated facts or characteristics. Many other factors go into shaping family interactions. But it's true that couples who complement each other in birth order (a youngest paired with an oldest; both growing up with an opposite-sex sibling in families of similar sizes) often have a bit of an edge on successfully adjusting to married life.

The timing of each birth affects roles. For example, the youngest of four who was born ten years after his closest sibling may have been raised in effect like an only child. And the juxtaposition of births and other family events can sometimes illuminate relationship patterns that are otherwise baffling and frustrating. One woman had never realized that her younger sister was born shortly after her maternal grandmother's death until she traced the chronology of family events. Now she understands the close bond that formed between her mother and sister, a relationship she had spent years resenting. Think, too, about who in your family was named after whom. What expectations might have been involved there?

Families also tend to *assign* certain roles or labels to its members. Was there someone in your family who was known as the "strong one"? The "weak one"? The "helper"? The "success"? Sometimes these labels contribute to family myths. One woman's mother had always been considered the family grouch, strict and no-nonsense. A genogram revealed that the mother had

been the oldest child in a large family and that *her* mother had been chronically ill. Therefore, the woman's mother must have dealt with a lot of responsibility at an early age and had little opportunity to take things lightly.

Once you know the family history, you can see how easily certain family myths and even secrets are developed.

Reading the future in the past

In addition to looking for the cross-generational patterns (such as triangles) mentioned earlier, check for other potential sources of relationship trouble you might not have considered before: Did any of your family members marry especially late or early? Were the partners at very different life stages? Also check your family history for "coincidences" between events and behavior. Was there a period of prolonged ill health or marital or work stress? How did people adapt? For how these patterns and reactions can affect you, see "Jane's" genogram, *opposite*.

Doing your genogram is bound to get you thinking about family life in new ways. We've all "inherited" talents, values, ways of coping that saw our parents (and their parents) through crises. And it's good to be reminded that where problem relationships do exist, the past doesn't have to be prologue. With insight and understanding, you *can* change the course of family history.

Researching your own family "roots"

Talking to other family members about their lives—perhaps interviewing them and taping their responses—yields quite different perspectives of some family attitudes and events that can be incorporated into your genogram. The tapes themselves may become a cherished family document. You will probably also feel closer to the people you interview.

It's important to set a comfortable tone. Always tell the person in advance what you'd like to accomplish—for example, "I've been doing a lot of thinking about our family lately and I'd like to learn more. Because you know much more family history than I do, I'd like to ask you some questions."

A group interview can be fun, too. One person's reminiscences will usually jog someone else's memory of the same event. Family anecdotes and jokes get mixed into memories of grandparents, weddings, birthdays, other family events.

Here are some questions to get you started:

1. How did you like school and what was your fondest school memory? Your most terrible school memory?
2. What kinds of relationships did you have with family members when you were growing up? What about now?
3. How would you describe yourself at age six? 13? 21?
4. What kinds of work have you done in your life?
5. What was the most valuable thing your parents taught you?
6. When were you married? What was the courtship like?
7. What was the hardest thing you ever had to do?
8. What was the happiest period in your life? What was the most difficult?

Since interviews may stray into sensitive areas, you'll probably want to save more personal questions and those about family relationships for individual talks. Of course, these questions go far beyond what you need to complete your genogram. But if you're interested in learning more, they can lead you to untapped sources of family lore. □

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