Two sides of support in crises
Narrative insights into the family experiences of clients

Training and Research Institute for Systemic Psychotherapy www.logopsychis.gr
Athanasopoulou Ioanna, BA psychology, trainee psychotherapist | **Karampasi Maria**, BA psychology, trainee psychotherapist
Kontoni Niki, BA psychology, trainee psychotherapist | **Sarantidis Manos**, BA psychology - education, trainee psychotherapist

Background_The existence of a social network has been associated in the relevant literature with an enhanced ability to cope with personal and social crises (Procidano & Heller, 1983). Further, strong emotional bonds, such as familial, have been linked to network quality (Orford, 2008). According to Velleman, & Sarajane (2010) stressful events cause people with support networks less strain than people who do not have such support networks. Finally, **research has shown that receiving social support acts as an effective buffer to stress and anxiety** (Cohen & Wills, 1985)**. But are social networks always experienced as supportive?**

Aim_In this qualitative study, we attempted to monitor clients' experiences on ways that their social networks have or have not been helpful in times of personal crises.

Method_We used **categorical-content narrative analysis** (Lieblich, Tuval, Maschiach, & Zilber, 1998) to look into 12 autobiographical interviews of clients and triangulated our findings by analyzing their written self-characterizations in addition. We were interested in our interviewees experiences of support of any kind in times of personal or family crisis, and isolated such events and perceptions when analyzing the material. We sought to create **a double parallel list** (see also Stern et al, 1999), which we named **helpful and non-helpful sides of support.**

Summary of findings

HELPFUL SIDE OF SUPPORT	NON HELPFUL SIDE OF SUPPORT
(1a) Any support (emotional, practical) is experienced as helpful when offered within a "healthy family system", which has satisfactory flexibility (organization, roles, rules, negotiations), satisfactory cohesion (emotional bonding), and positive communication skills (Olson, 2011).	**(1b)** Any support (emotional, practical) is experienced as unhelpful when offered within a "non-healthy family system" which has low flexibility (rigid), extreme cohesiveness (enmeshed), and lack of positive communication skills (Olson, 2011).
(2a) Emotional support is felt when most sensitive topics are potentially sayable; permission is given to express and exchange emotions.	**(2b)** Emotional support is not felt when most sensitive topics remain unsaid; no permission is given to express and exchange emotions.
(3a) Emotional support is felt when close relationships are experienced as secure (secure attachment).	**(3b)** Emotional support is not felt when close relationships are experienced as insecure (insecure attachments).
(4a) Practical/tangible help is experienced as support when unconditionally available.	**(4b)** Practical/tangible help is not experienced as support when conditionally available.

Discussion_Our findings support the complexity of supportive/non supportive family experiences. Even persons with rich social networks and extended families may experience a lack of support, emotional and practical, in times of personal or family crises. Family systems that have a satisfactory emotional bonding, organization and positive communication, where emotions can be openly expressed about any topic, and where people feel secure help their members feel supported. Extracts indicate that all the above qualities are interwoven and not easily distinguishable, so that each interview or self-characterization extract may fit with more than one category in our summary of findings. Based on our findings, **we favor a redefinition of the concept of network quality, to include any persons (a selection of familial and others) that comprise a "family of choice"** (Weston, 1991; Androutsopoulou, 2012). The 'family of choice' supports its members with acceptance and regard. One category emphasized that in the mind of participants there is a link between support and secure attachment. A study by Todd, Ognibene, & Collins (1998) indicated that securely attached persons perceived more social support from family and friends and sought more support than insecurely attached persons, who anticipated and used less support or tended to use more avoidance/escape strategies. It is possible that by enhancing secure attachments, therapy encourages the seeking of supportive others with caring voices to form their secure 'family of choice'. Further research is necessary.

" The only thing my sister told me... that many things have happened... they just didn't want to say anything that would make me unhappy, generally they would tell me nothing...Because my mother knew that am very sensitive..."
Tom, male, interview

"Her mother used to tell her, I spit... you have to be back before my spit dries and she did the same to me. I didn't have... I never felt her love, I never felt her caress, she never told me well done my child, you did great! I was afraid of her. I was always afraid of her, even though I loved her deep inside, I was really afraid of her."
Maria, female, interview

"I had panic attacks and phobias. What I was longing for in my family was stability and tenderness and all I got was insecurity... My mother was the most powerless and we protected her. We put the blame on the father... We protected her while keeping alert, but there was not any emotional exchange..."
Manolis, male, interview

" Manolis is a difficult person but maybe too easy as well... His passion for life, for every minute of it, especially when there 's a purpose and exactly the opposite, when negative thoughts outplay [he's] lost in them..."
Manolis, male, self description

[About his father] "My father had a heart attack. It was into us not to make him angry because something bad will happen to him."
[About his wife] "I was angry and though it was unthinkable to call her, I was worried that the anger I expressed to her ... might hurt her."
[About his children] "I can't even express anger at my children, because I'm afraid that something will happen to them... they won't be psychologically well."
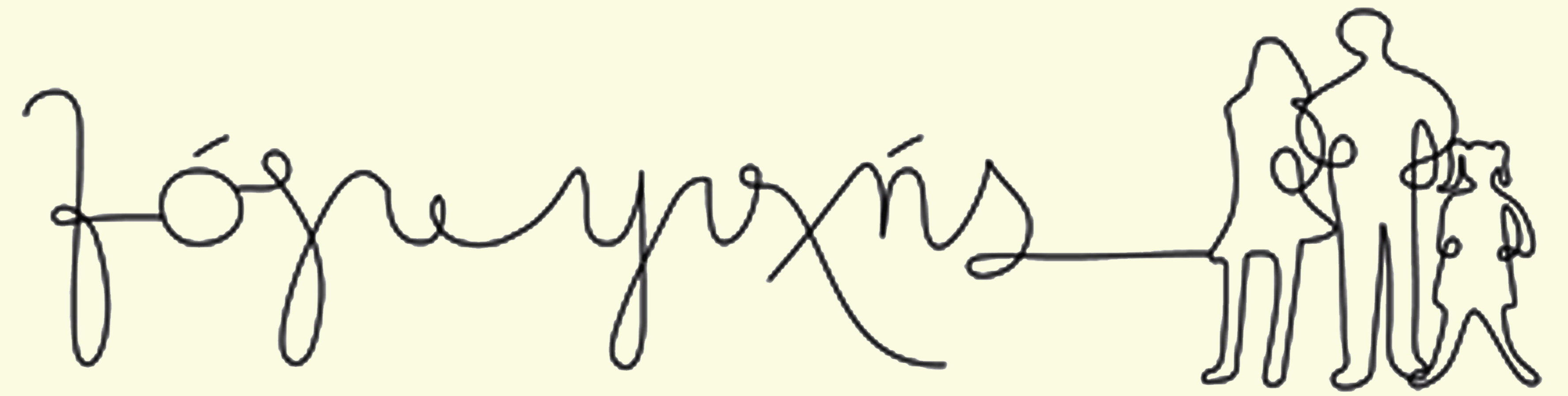**Fotis, male, interview**

"Fotis gives a sense of stability to the others, he guides them with tenderness and a sense of responsibility."
Fotis, male, self description

Bibliography
Androutsopoulou, A. (2012). Panic attacks in times of crises: Creating an alliance with supportive and caring 'voices'. Working paper series of the Training and Research Institute for Systemic Psychotherapy, Athens, Greece, 2012.
Cohen, S., &Wills, T. A. (1985). Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis.
Psychological Bulletin, 98, 310-357
Lieblich, A., Tuval, Maschiach, R. & Zilber, T. (1998). Narrative research: Reading, analysis and interpretation. Thousand Oaks: Sage
Olson, D. (2011). FACES IV and the Circumplex model: Validation study. Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 37, 64-80.
Orford, J. (2008) Community Psychology: Challenges, controversies and
emerging consensus. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
Procidano, M.E., & Heller, K. (1983). Measures of perceived social support from friends and from family: Three validation studies. American Journal of Community Psychology, 11, 1-24.
Riessman, C. K. (2008). Narrative methods for the human sciences. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
Stern, S. et al (1999). Disruption and reconstruction: Narrative insights into the experience of family members caring for a relative diagnosed with serious mental illness. Family Process, 38, 353-369.
Todd C. Ognibene, T. C., & Collins, N.L. (1998). Adult Attachment Styles, Perceived Social Support and Coping Strategies. Journal of Social and Personal Relationships 15, 323-345
Velleman, R. & Sarajane, A. (2010). Counseling and helping. London: BPS/Blackwell
Weston, K. (1991). Families we choose: Lesbians, gays, Kinship. New York: Columbia University Press

Training and Research Institute for Systemic Psychotherapy