



## Couples and Family Systems Focus Area Training

**Clinical Training:** The Family Therapy Training Program at the VA Palo Alto Health Care System has an international reputation as a center that has been devoted to the treatment of couples and families, the training of mental health professionals, and the study of family processes. Family-systems theory represents the broad stance from which both clinical data and therapeutic change are considered, and the program's educational curriculum is focused on developing a full range of clinical skills including couples and family assessment, interviewing, intervention, and family-systems consultation.

Psychology postdoctoral fellowship training in the Couples and Family Systems focus area training includes 70% time providing couples and family consultation, assessment, and treatment (including direct service, program evaluation, and needs assessment) in a range of clinical settings at the VAPAHCS, working closely with psychologists, social workers, physicians, and interdisciplinary staff.

### Primary Rotation Site:

#### Family Therapy Training Program, Building 321A (MPD)

**Supervisors: Elisabeth McKenna, Ph.D., Director, Family Therapy Training Program  
Jessica Cuellar, Ph.D., Coordinator, Family Therapy Training Program**

Primary training in the Family Therapy Training Program concentrates first on acquiring and mastering the fundamental systemic assessment and treatment skills that most family therapists draw upon. Our training model comfortably represents differing theoretical orientations that include structural, family systems, integrative behavioral, emotionally focused, and psychoeducational approaches to couples and family treatment.

- 1. Patient population:** Couples and families are directly referred to the Family Therapy Training Program's clinic for consultation and treatment from medical and psychiatric programs within the VA Palo Alto Health Care System and from the community. During his or her rotation, each fellow can expect to see a range of cases, varying across presenting problem, couple and family composition, and family developmental stage.
- 2. Psychology's role in the setting:** Psychologists' roles include direct clinical service, training, and interdisciplinary team functioning.
- 3. Other professionals and trainees in the setting:** Program staff are comprised of two psychologists (one in Polytrauma at Palo Alto and one in Outpatient Mental Health at Menlo Park). In addition to training psychology interns and postdoctoral fellows, the Family Therapy Training Program also provides consultation and teaching to services and interdisciplinary staff throughout the VA Palo Alto Health Care System. Elisabeth McKenna, Ph.D., Family Therapist in Polytrauma, is the director of the Program and serves as the preceptor for the postdoctoral fellow. Additional supervision is provided by Jessica Cuellar, Ph.D., psychologist in the Outpatient Mental Health Clinic, Telemental Health Team.
- 4. Nature of clinical services delivered:** Consistent with the VA's emerging commitment to treating couples and families, the Family Therapy Training Program offers a continuum of services that include, but are not limited to: brief family consultations, couples and family therapy from a structural, integrative behavioral, and emotionally focused perspective, and family psychoeducation. Interested trainees may also have the opportunity of co-lead couples groups and multiple family therapy. Structural, family systems, integrative behavioral, emotionally focused, and psychoeducational approaches, to couple and family treatment, brief family consultation, integrative

behavioral couple therapy, couple therapy for PTSD, behavioral couples treatment for alcohol and substance abuse, behavioral parent training, and family psychoeducation, as well as couples/family groups. These services may be provided in-person or through videoconferencing (Telemental Health).

5. **Fellow's role in the setting:** Psychology postdoctoral fellows are valued team members and are typically assigned to the Family Therapy Training Program for either six months or a full year as a half-time rotation that can be combined with other half-time rotations offered by the psychology postdoctoral program. The professional identities of psychologists with a family-systems perspective may combine both clinical and research interests.
6. **Amount/type of supervision:** The primary format for supervision is group consultation, where fellows present couples or families for live and videotaped consultation. In this context, fellows have the opportunity to observe each other and work together as a clinical team. From a teaching point of view, careful attention is paid to case formulation, the identification and resolution of clinical impasses, and development of the therapist's use of self in therapy. In addition, a range of supervision and consultative models are explored. The clinic presently has two studios equipped with one-way mirrors and phone hook-up, and sessions are routinely videotaped. Direct observation of therapy sessions conducted by fellows is a common aspect of training within clinic. In addition to group supervision, fellows receive at least 1 hour of individual supervision per week with a program supervisor to discuss current cases and a wide-range of professional development topics. Additional supervision is provided through other training rotations/sites.
7. **Didactics:** Didactics are woven into the training during the Wednesday morning live-supervision clinic. In addition, the fellows is provided with comprehensive readings in couples and family therapy that provide a solid conceptual, practical, and intensive introduction to couples and family therapy. Monthly conference with family therapy staff from programs throughout the VA Palo Alto Health Care System will be complemented by a new didactic program developed jointly with other VA psychology postdoctoral programs for fellows and faculty with couples/family interests. Finally, the fellow will attend a weekly postdoctoral fellows' seminar series focusing on professional development and supervision.
8. **Pace:** The usual caseload for the Couples and Family Systems Postdoctoral Fellow is five to seven couples or families in the Family Therapy Training Program.

**Additional Rotation Sites:** In addition to the primary rotation in the Family Therapy Training Program, the fellow will select additional couples and family-centered experiences from the following sites, with exposure to mental health, medical, and specialty populations in both outpatient and inpatient settings:

**Addiction Consultation & Treatment (ACT), Addiction Treatment Services (520, PAD)**

**Supervisors: Kimberly Brodsky, Ph.D.  
Melissa Mendoza, Psy.D.**

See description in Substance Abuse/Homeless Rehabilitation focus area section.

**Behavioral Medicine Program (Building MB3, PAD)**

**Supervisors: Stacy Dodd, Ph.D.  
Jessica Lohnberg, Ph.D.  
Priti Parekh, Ph.D.**

See description in Behavioral Medicine focus area section, with particular attention to the Andrology Clinic.

**First Step Program, Domiciliary Service (347-A, MPD)**

**Supervisors: Timothy Ramsey, Ph.D.  
TBD**

See description in Substance Abuse /Homeless Rehabilitation focus area section.

**Hospice and Palliative Care Center (Building 100, 4A, PAD; Palliative Care Consult Service)**

See description in Hospice/Palliative Care focus area section.

**Men's and Women's Trauma Recovery Program (Buildings 350, 351 and 352, MPD)**

**Supervisor: Hana Shin, Ph.D.  
TBD**

See descriptions in PTSD focus area section.

**Mental Health Clinic, Menlo Park (Outpatient MHC, Building 321)**

**Supervisors: Jessica Cuellar, Ph.D. (Telemental Health)  
Daniel Gutkind, Ph.D.  
Bruce Linenberg, Ph.D.  
Erin Sakai, Ph.D.**

See description in Psychosocial Rehabilitation focus area section.

**Women's Counseling Center (Building 350, MPD)**

**Supervisor: Trisha Vinatieri, Psy.D.**

See description in PTSD focus area section.

**Women's Health Psychology Clinic (Building 5, PAD)**

**Supervisor: Veronica Reis, Ph.D.**

See description under Psychological services for Medically-based Populations section in the internship brochure.

**Summary:** Specialized family therapy skills are highly valued in VA and academic medical centers, academic departments, and community-based mental health clinics throughout the country. Although we are supportive of trainees' efforts to continue their training in family therapy and family research, interns participating in the program need not plan to spend the majority of their professional time specializing in this area. At the completion of the rotation, however, we do expect that fellows will leave the program with greater proficiency in engaging couples and families, family assessment and consultation, formulating and executing systemic interventions, evaluating treatment progress, and planning termination. In addition, we hope that the training experience in the Family Therapy Training Program will stimulate fellows' creativity, intelligence, and resourcefulness in their ongoing development as mental health professionals.

*Reviewed by:* Elisabeth McKenna, Ph.D.; Jessica Cuellar, Ph.D.; Jeanette Hsu, Ph.D.

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