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., Co-Director, Family Therapy Training Program
Jessica Cuellar, Ph.D., Co-Director, 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.

Patient population: Couples and families are 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. Each fellow can expect to see a range of cases, varying across presenting problem, couple and family composition, and family developmental stage.

Psychology’s role in the setting: Psychologists’ roles include direct clinical service, training, and interdisciplinary team functioning.

Other professionals and trainees in the setting: Program staff are comprised of two psychologists, co-directors for the Program. Elisabeth McKenna, Ph.D., is the Family Therapist in Polytrauma and also serves as the preceptor for the postdoctoral fellow. Jessica Cuellar, Ph.D., is a psychologist in the Outpatient Mental Health Clinic, Telemental Health Team. In addition to training postdoctoral fellows and psychology interns, the Family Therapy Training Program also provides consultation and teaching to services and interdisciplinary staff throughout the VA Palo Alto Health Care System.

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 and family psychoeducation. The Family Therapy Training Program takes an integrative and evidence-based approach to treatment in order to tailor and ensure best quality of care to each couple and family it serves. Assessment and treatment conceptualization frequently incorporates structural, integrative behavioral, and emotionally focused perspectives. Specific evidence-based treatments utilized include: Integrative Behavioral Couple Therapy (IBCT), Cognitive-Behavioral Couple Therapy (CBCT), Behavioral Parent Training, Behavioral Couple Therapy for Substance Use Disorder (BCT-SUD), and Cognitive Behavioral Conjoint Therapy for
PTSD (CBCT-P). Interested trainees may also have the opportunity to co-lead couples and multiple family therapy groups. These services may be provided in-person or through Telemental Health (video).

**Fellow’s role in the setting:** Psychology postdoctoral fellows are valued team members and work within the Family Therapy Training Program during the full training year. The half-time rotation within the Family Therapy Training Program is complemented by other half-time rotations offered by the psychology postdoctoral program. These rotations are selected based on the postdoctoral fellow’s interests (please see below for information about available rotations). Postdoctoral fellows also have the opportunity to assist in the supervision of other psychology trainees participating in the Family Therapy Training Program, as well as offer supervision to practicum students within the Mental Health Clinic who are providing individual therapy. The professional identities of psychologists with a family-systems perspective may combine both clinical and research interests.

**Amount/type of supervision:** The primary format for supervision is individual and group consultation. During group consultation, fellows present couples or families for live and videotaped consultation with program supervisors and other trainees. In this context, trainees 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. 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 2 hours of individual supervision per week with program supervisors to discuss current cases and a wide-range of professional development topics. Additional supervision is provided through other training rotations/sites as well.

**Didactics:** Didactics are woven into the training during the Friday morning live-supervision clinic, as well as individually scheduled times with program supervisors. The fellow is also provided with comprehensive readings in couples and family therapy that provide a solid conceptual, practical, and intensive introduction to couples and family therapy. A didactic conference with other VA psychology postdoctoral programs for fellows and faculty with couples/family interests is also offered on a monthly basis. Finally, the fellow will attend a weekly postdoctoral fellows’ seminar series focusing on professional development and supervision.

**Use of Digital Mental Health tools:** Postdoctoral fellows will have the opportunity to provide clinical services via videoconferencing (Telemental Health), under the supervision of program co-director, Jessica Cuellar, PhD. Fellows may also have the opportunity to participate in ongoing projects examining the use of technology to enhance engagement and effectiveness of couple/family-based treatment.

**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:

**Addiction Consultation & Treatment (ACT), Addiction Treatment Services (Building 520, PAD)**
**Supervisors:** Kimberly Brodsky, Ph.D.
Joshua Zeier, Ph.D.
Melissa Mendoza, Psy.D.

See description in Continuum of Care for Addictive Behaviors, Trauma, and Co-Occurring Disorders 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 focus on the Andrology Clinic.
First Step Program/Homeless Veterans Recovery Program, Domiciliary Service (Building 347-A, MPD)
Supervisors: Timothy Ramsey, Ph.D.
            Leighna Harrison, Ph.D.
See description in Continuum of Care for Addictive Behaviors, Trauma, and Co-Occurring Disorders focus area section.

Hospice and Palliative Care Center (Building 100, 4A, PAD; Palliative Care Consult Service)
Supervisor: Kimberly Hiroto, Ph.D.
See description in Hospice/Palliative Care focus area section.

Trauma Recovery Services (Buildings 350, 351, and 352, MPD)
  • Residential Men’s Trauma Recovery Program
  • Residential Women’s Trauma Recovery Program
  • PTSD-Substance Use Disorder, Intensive Outpatient Program
Supervisors: Jean Cooney, Ph.D.
            Robert Jenkins, Ph.D.
            Jaclyn Kraemer, Ph.D.
            Dorene Loew, Ph.D.
            Mary Marsiglio, Ph.D.
            Hana Shin, Ph.D.
See descriptions in PTSD focus area section.

Mental Health Clinic, Menlo Park (Outpatient MHC, Building 321)
Supervisors: Jessica Cuellar, Ph.D. (Telemental Health)
            Bruce Linenberg, Ph.D.
            Erin Sakai, Ph.D.
            Eliza Weitbrecht, Ph.D.
See description in Psychosocial Rehabilitation focus area section.

Women’s Counseling Center (Building 350, MPD)
Supervisor: To be Determined
See description in PTSD focus area section.

Women’s Health Psychology Clinic (Building 5, PAD)
Supervisor: Veronica Reis, Ph.D.
See description in the Behavioral Medicine focus area section.

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