Marriage, Family, and Relationship Pastoral Counseling

The aim is not merely conflict reduction, but covenantal wisdom: truth, safety, repentance, repair, and love-in-action.

ORIENTATION

Course outcomes and hour map

0–8 min	**Pastoral frame**	What is distinctive about relational pastoral care?
8–25 min	**Theories**	Systems, attachment, communication, narrative, solution-focused, contextual
25–45 min	**Practice**	Assessment, session structure, interventions, family work
45–55 min	**Ethics & risk**	Confidentiality, domestic violence, referral, competence
55–60 min	**Integration**	Case formulation and takeaway framework

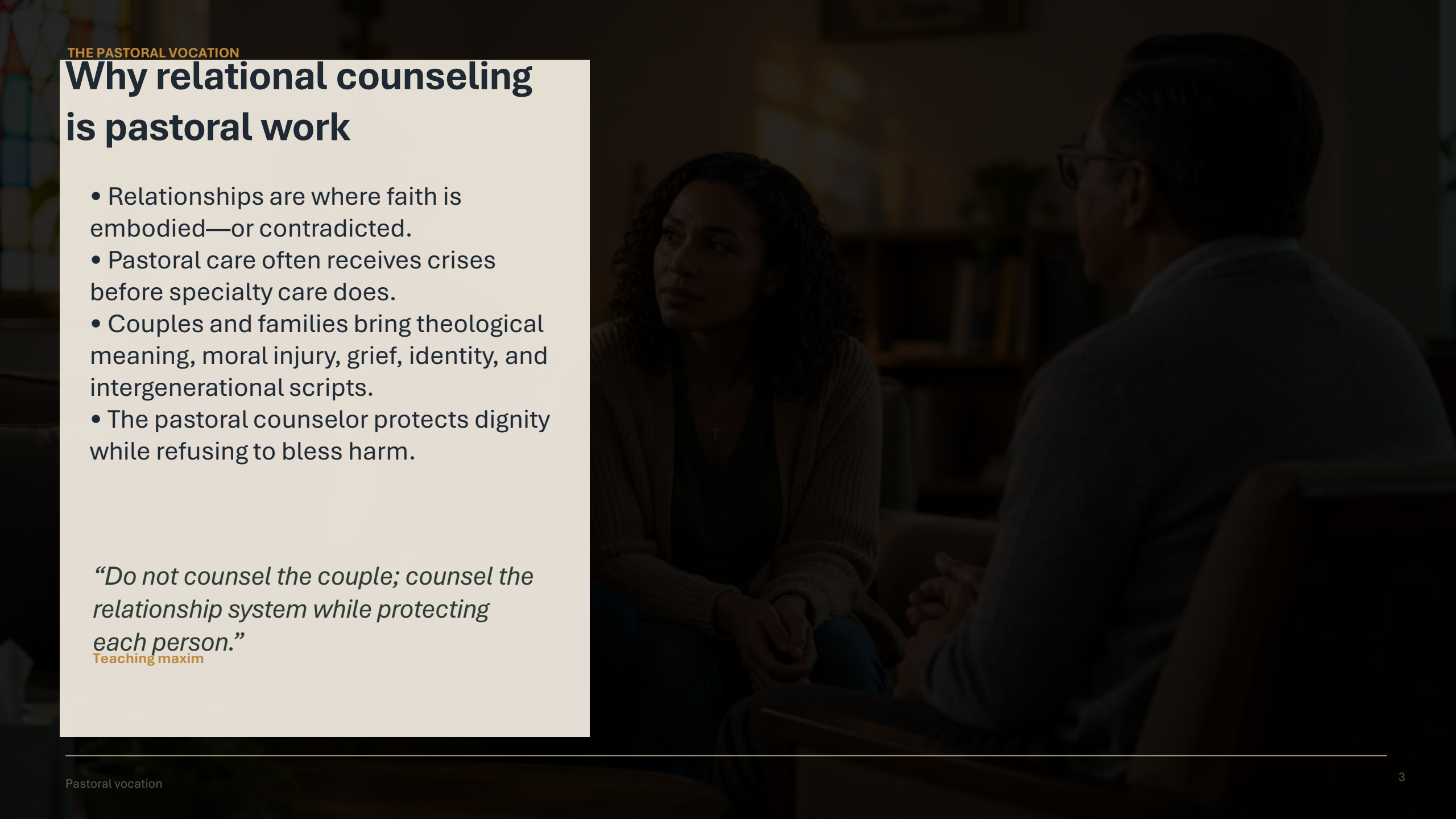
By the end: students can formulate relational distress systemically, intervene pastorally with safety and competence, and know when referral is not optional.

Why relational counseling is pastoral work

- Relationships are where faith is embodied—or contradicted.
- Pastoral care often receives crises before specialty care does.
- Couples and families bring theological meaning, moral injury, grief, identity, and intergenerational scripts.
- The pastoral counselor protects dignity while refusing to bless harm.

“Do not counsel the couple; counsel the relationship system while protecting each person.”

Teaching maxim



A theological-clinical stance

Relational pastoral counseling asks:

What is happening?	Patterns, roles, emotions, symptoms, power, risk
What does it mean?	Vows, identity, shame, forgiveness, family story, calling
What heals?	Safety, truth, attunement, repentance, skill, community, repair
What is mine to do?	Pastoral care, referral, collaboration, mandated reporting, boundaries

Integration is not “adding prayer to therapy.” It is disciplined attention to suffering, meaning, embodiment, morality, culture, and hope.

From “problem person” to relational pattern

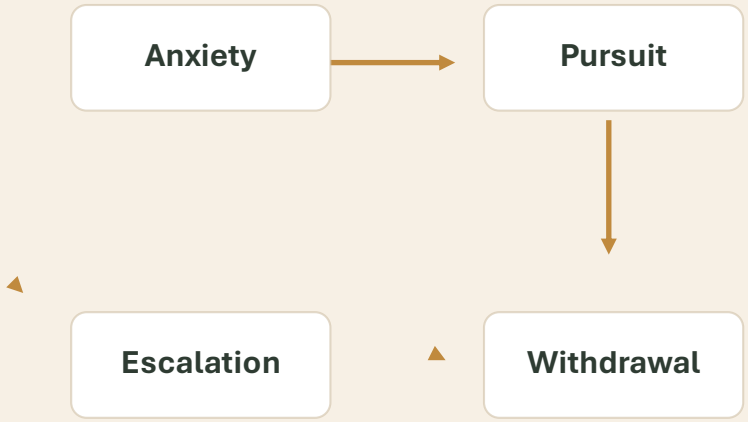
Linear question

Who is the problem?

Systemic question

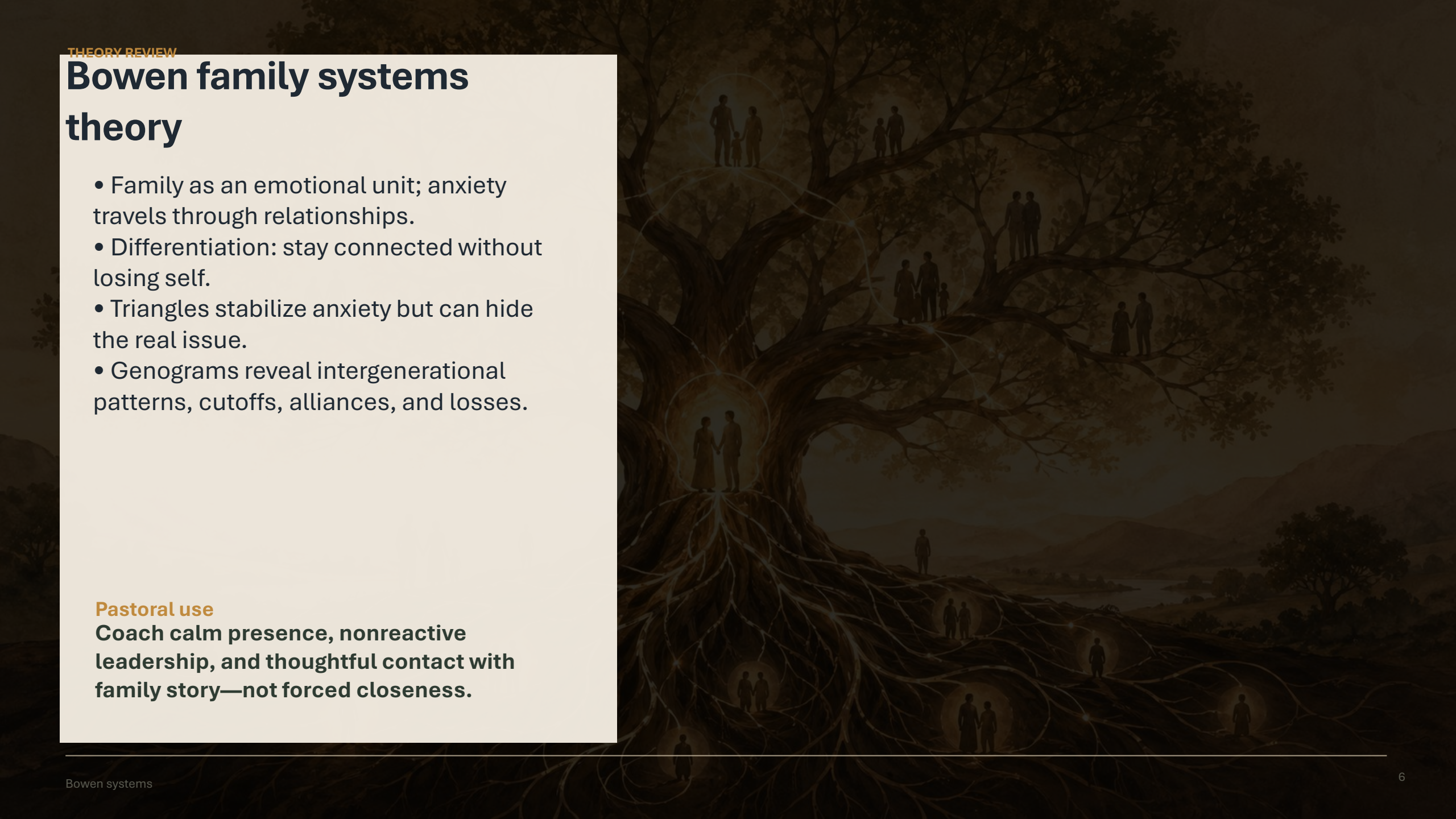
What pattern keeps repeating?

- Symptoms often make sense inside a system.
- Change one move in the dance; the dance changes.
- Avoid triangulating with one partner against another.
- Look for protective intent beneath poor strategies.



Bowen family systems theory

- Family as an emotional unit; anxiety travels through relationships.
- Differentiation: stay connected without losing self.
- Triangles stabilize anxiety but can hide the real issue.
- Genograms reveal intergenerational patterns, cutoffs, alliances, and losses.

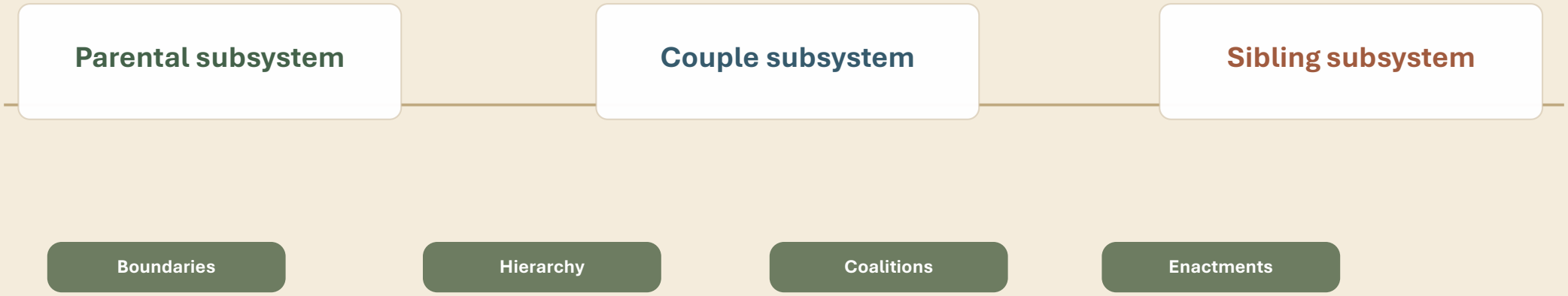


Pastoral use

Coach calm presence, nonreactive leadership, and thoughtful contact with family story—not forced closeness.

Structural family therapy

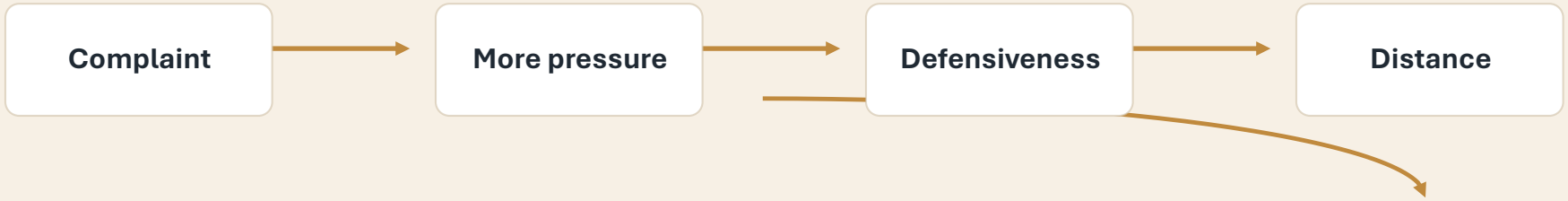
Core question: “How is this family organized, and is the structure supporting healthy development?”



- Map boundaries: enmeshed, rigid, or clear.
- Strengthen appropriate parental leadership.
- Ask the family to enact a stuck interaction in-session.
- Reframe behavior as an attempted solution within structure.

Strategic and communication approaches

The pattern is maintained by attempted solutions.



- Clarify the sequence before giving advice.
- Interrupt the cycle with a specific, observable new behavior.
- Use directives carefully; never manipulate or shame.
- Teach meta-communication: “How are we talking about what hurts?”

THEORY REVIEW

Attachment and Emotionally Focused Therapy

Distressed couples are often fighting about connection while arguing about content.

1 Identify the negative cycle

"This is the enemy, not your partner."

2 Access primary emotion

Fear, shame, longing, loneliness beneath anger

3 Restructure bonding moves

Reach, respond, repair, and risk secure contact

"EFT is a humanistic, evidence-based approach drawing from attachment theory."

ICEEFT summary

Gottman-informed pastoral practice

Observe conflict behavior. Build friendship. Teach repair.

Criticism	→	Gentle start-up
Contempt	→	Culture of appreciation
Defensiveness	→	Take responsibility
Stonewalling	→	Self-soothe then return

Pastoral application: bless repair attempts, practice softened speech, normalize time-outs, and build rituals of connection.

Narrative and solution-focused approaches

Narrative

- Externalize the problem: “the resentment” rather than “you are resentful.”
- Thicken preferred stories of faithfulness, survival, courage, and agency.
- Ask who benefits from the current story and whose voice is missing.

Solution-focused

- Define a preferred future in observable terms.
- Use scaling and exception questions.
- Amplify what already works, even if it is small.
- Assign experiments, not moralistic homework.

“Ask questions that open agency rather than deliver sermons that close it.”

Pastoral practice principle

Contextual and relational ethics

Families carry ledgers: loyalty, fairness, legacy, obligation, injury, repair.

Loyalty

What must I honor?

Justice

What has been unfair?

Responsibility

What is mine to repair?

Legacy

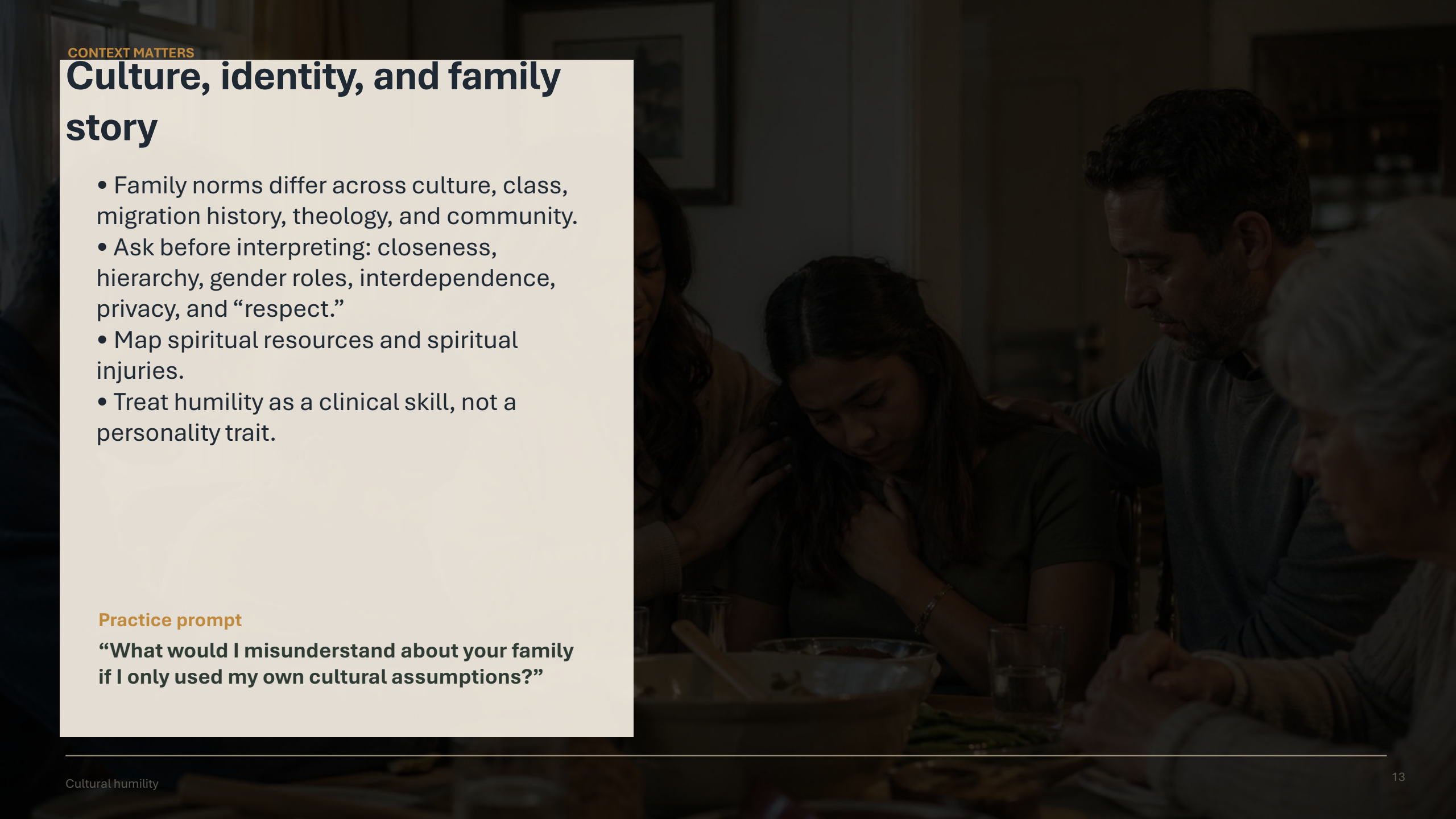
What will we pass on?

- Use moral language carefully: accountability without condemnation.
- Differentiate forgiveness, reconciliation, trust, and consequence.
- Seek repair that is concrete, behavioral, and sustained.
- Attend to power: the injured person must not carry the work of repair alone.

CONTEXT MATTERS

Culture, identity, and family story

- Family norms differ across culture, class, migration history, theology, and community.
- Ask before interpreting: closeness, hierarchy, gender roles, interdependence, privacy, and “respect.”
- Map spiritual resources and spiritual injuries.
- Treat humility as a clinical skill, not a personality trait.



Practice prompt

“What would I misunderstand about your family if I only used my own cultural assumptions?”

PRINCIPLES

The pastoral counselor’s stance

Presence	Regulate yourself before guiding others.
Curiosity	Ask before advising.
Neutrality + justice	Be fair to people, not neutral about harm.
Hope	Name possibility without minimizing pain.
Humility	Know the limits of your role and competence.

A trusted pastoral presence can calm a room—but trust becomes dangerous when competence and boundaries are weak.

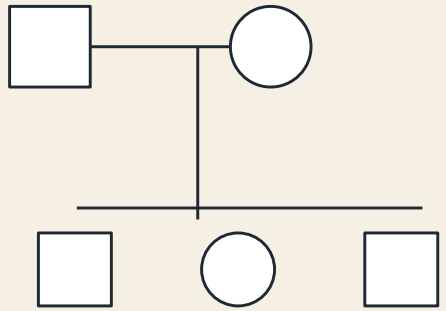
Intake and assessment process

1. Fit & consent	Clarify role, confidentiality, fees/records, goals, spiritual integration.
2. Safety screen	IPV, coercion, suicidality, child/elder abuse, weapons, substances.
3. Relational map	Who is involved, alliances, family-of-origin, community supports.
4. Presenting cycle	Triggers, moves, meanings, consequences, attempted solutions.
5. Treatment/referral plan	Pastoral care, psychoeducation, therapy referral, medical/legal/social support.

Graduate habit: assessment is intervention. What you ask teaches the family what matters.

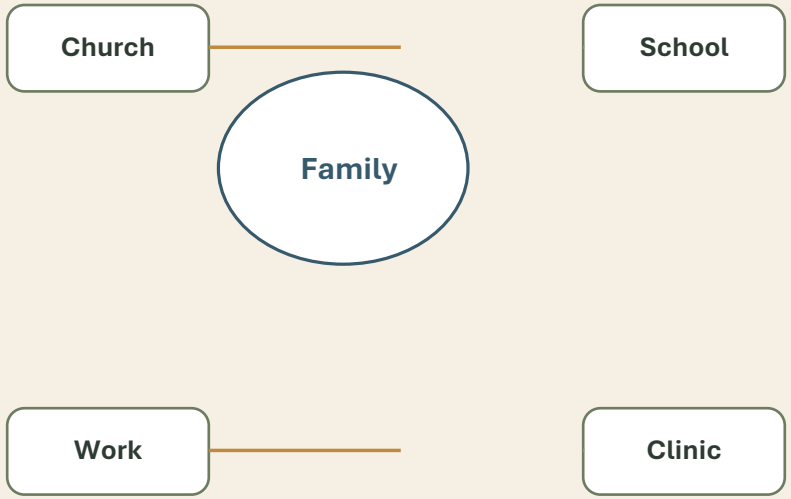
Genogram and ecomap: two maps, two kinds of wisdom

Genogram



- Patterns across generations
- Triangles, cutoffs, losses
- Legacies of faith and harm

Ecomap



- Stressors and supports
- Congregational resources
- Social determinants and access

A formulation matrix for relational care

Area	Guiding question	Pastoral use
Cycle	What repeats when distress rises?	Name the dance and slow it down.
Meaning	What story or theology is attached?	Expose shame, vows, grief, fear, hope.
Power	Who can say no, leave, spend, speak?	Protect agency; screen coercion.
Resources	What already supports repair?	Mobilize rituals, kin, community, skills.
Risk	What requires urgent action/referral?	Safety plan, report, coordinate care.

PRACTICE SKILLS

Core micro-skills for relational sessions

Track

Follow process, not just content.

Translate

Move from accusation to need.

Reframe

Name protective intent without excusing harm.

Balance

Attend to each person and the relationship.

Interrupt

Stop contempt, escalation, or unsafe disclosure.

Anchor

Return to agreed goals, values, and safety.

Skill test: Can your intervention lower arousal, increase honesty, and preserve dignity?

APPLICATION

A practical couple-session structure

Open	Consent, agenda, safety check, prayer only if invited and clinically appropriate.
Hear	Each partner gives 2–3 minutes; counselor reflects without adjudicating.
Map	Name the cycle: trigger → move → meaning → response → cost.
Practice	One skill: soft start-up, emotion naming, repair, time-out, appreciation.
Assign	Small behavioral experiment and feedback plan.

Rule of thumb: structure the room more tightly when anxiety, contempt, or shutdown is high.

APPLICATION

A practical family-session structure

Family sessions require choreography.

✓	**Set rules**	No humiliation, no threats, everyone can pass.
✓	**Observe enactment**	Let them show the pattern; stop before damage.
✓	**Strengthen hierarchy**	Parents/adults lead with clarity and warmth.
✓	**Protect voices**	Bring in quiet, young, marginalized, or scapegoated members.
✓	**Practice a new exchange**	Slow, specific, embodied, repeatable.

“Do not let the most powerful person define the family’s truth.”

Best-practice warning

INTERVENTION SET

Conflict de-escalation and repair

- Slow physiology first: breath, pause, lower volume, sit down.
- Ban contempt and character attacks in-session.
- Move from blame to impact: “When X happened, I felt Y and needed Z.”
- Require return after time-out: distance without return becomes abandonment.

Repair sequence

1. **Name**
2. **Own**
3. **Empathize**
4. **Amend**
5. **Rebuild**

Repair is not a speech; it is a changed pattern over time.

SENSITIVE PRACTICE

Sexuality, intimacy, and embodied care

- Discuss intimacy directly and respectfully; silence can deepen shame.
- Differentiate desire discrepancy, pain, trauma, performance anxiety, medical issues, faith-based guilt, betrayal, and coercion.
- Never spiritualize sexual obligation or minimize marital rape.
- Refer when trauma, sexual pain, compulsivity, abuse, or medical issues exceed competence.

Pastoral question set

- What does intimacy mean in your relationship?
- Where do you feel safe, desired, pressured, or unseen?
- What teachings have helped or harmed you?
- What needs referral or medical care?

Parenting and co-parenting

The aim is not perfect children; it is emotionally safe, developmentally wise, spiritually grounded caregiving.

Warmth

Attachment, delight, comfort

Structure

Limits, routines, consequences

Repair

Apology, reconnection, modeling

- Coach parents to align privately and lead publicly.
- Do not invite children into adult disputes.
- Co-parenting after separation requires boundaries, predictability, and child-centered communication.
- When parenting norms differ culturally, ask how respect, attachment, and responsibility are understood.

DEVELOPMENTAL LENS

Life cycle, blended families, and transition stress

Premarital/commitment	Expectations, money, sex, faith, kinship
Early marriage/partnership	Rituals, conflict habits, boundaries with families
Children/adolescence	Parenting, identity, fatigue, role renegotiation
Midlife/caregiving	Aging parents, career strain, grief, health
Later life	Legacy, retirement, sexuality, loss, adult children

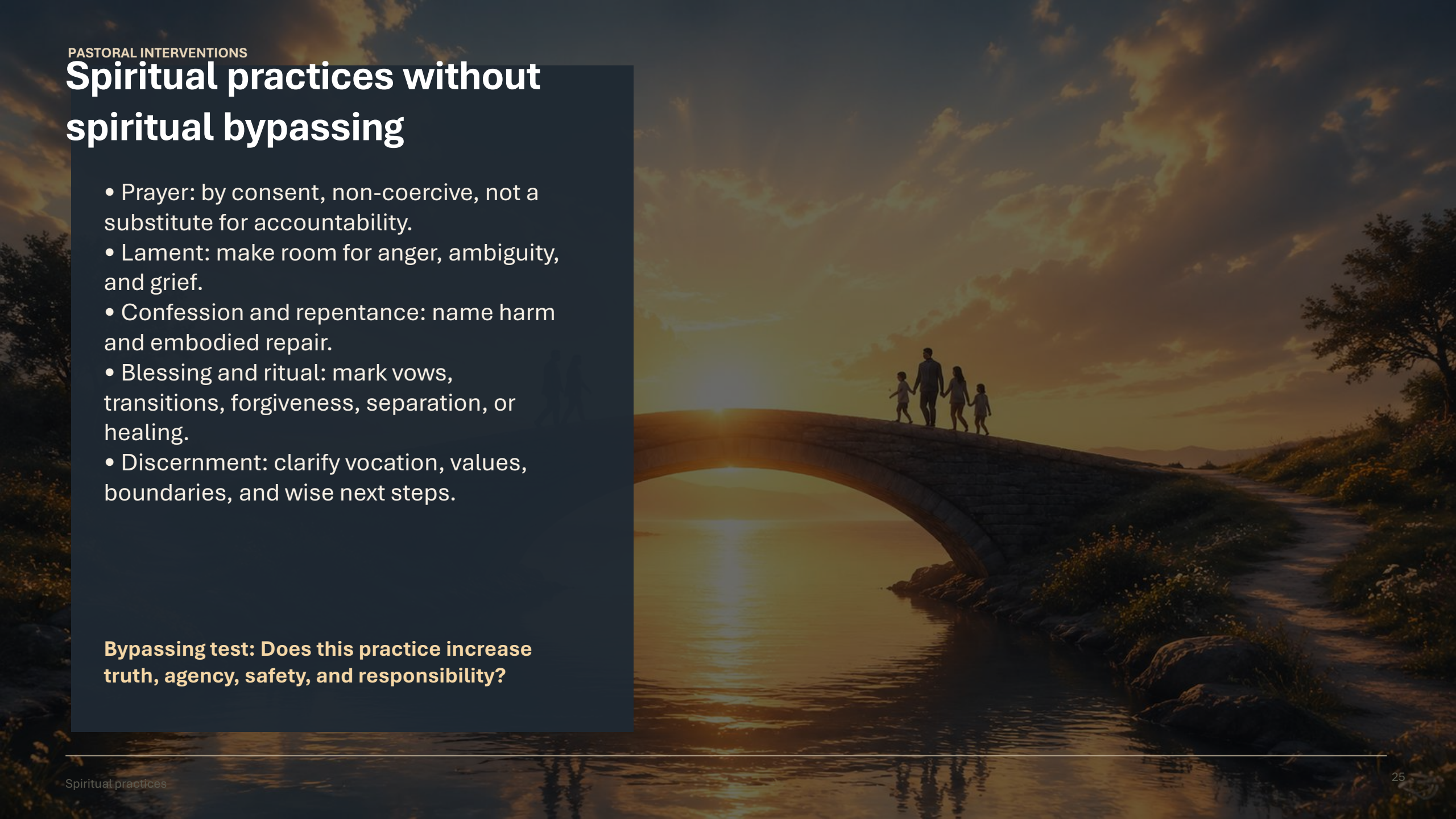
Blended-family maxim: attachment takes time; step-parents earn influence through trust before authority.

PASTORAL INTERVENTIONS

Spiritual practices without spiritual bypassing

- Prayer: by consent, non-coercive, not a substitute for accountability.
- Lament: make room for anger, ambiguity, and grief.
- Confession and repentance: name harm and embodied repair.
- Blessing and ritual: mark vows, transitions, forgiveness, separation, or healing.
- Discernment: clarify vocation, values, boundaries, and wise next steps.

Bypassing test: Does this practice increase truth, agency, safety, and responsibility?



Ethics: boundaries, competence, and consent

Do

- ✓ Written informed consent when possible
- ✓ Clear role: pastoral care, counseling, spiritual direction, or therapy referral
- ✓ Limits of confidentiality explained at the start
- ✓ Documentation of sessions, referrals, safety concerns, and consultation
- ✓ Regular supervision/consultation

Do not

- × Secret-keeping without policy
- × Counseling outside competence because “they trust me”
- × Dual relationships that impair judgment
- × Private texting that becomes counseling without structure
- × Reconciliation pressure where harm is active

Confidentiality in couple and family work

Confidentiality is more complex when the “client” is a relationship system.

Define the client	Individual, couple, family, or congregation-related role?
Create a secrets policy	Will individual disclosures be held, shared, or redirected?
Clarify records	Who can access notes? What is documented?
Name limits	Abuse, imminent risk, court orders, mandated reporting, supervision/consultation.
Revisit consent	Do this when membership, goals, or setting changes.

“No one should discover the rules after a painful disclosure.”

Practice standard

SAFETY FIRST

Domestic violence, coercive control, and referral

Couples counseling is contraindicated when coercive control or active violence makes open disclosure unsafe.

Screen for:

- × Fear of partner or retaliation
- × Isolation from friends/family/resources
- × Control of money, phone, transportation, immigration documents
- × Sexual coercion or reproductive control
- × Threats, stalking, weapons, strangulation, escalating violence

Pastoral response:

• Believe and validate without pressuring decisions.
• Do not confront the abusive partner with disclosures.
• Create a private safety plan and connect to specialized advocacy.
• Report when legally required; consult immediately.

National Domestic Violence Hotline (U.S.): thehotline.org / 1-800-799-SAFE

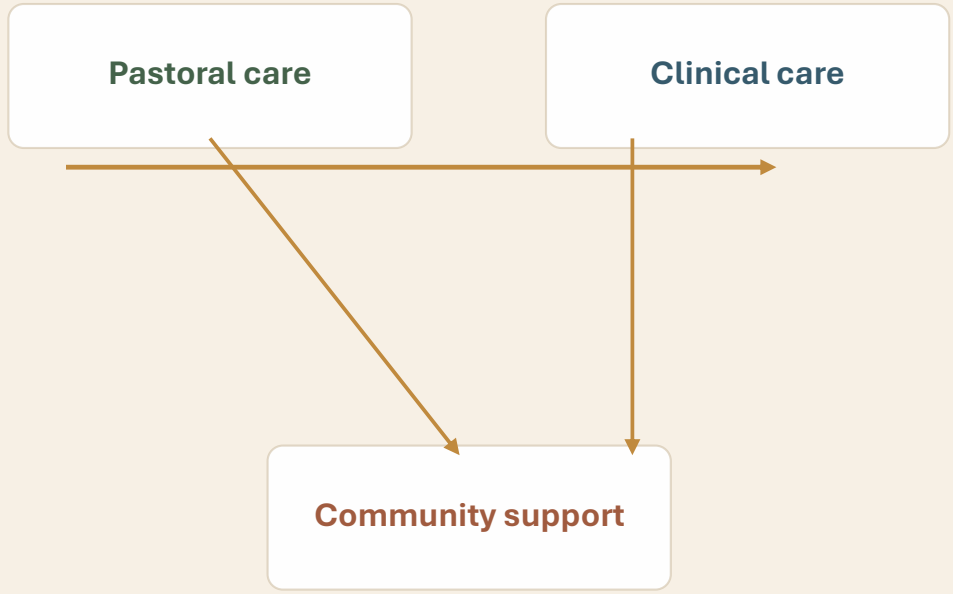
Affairs, betrayal, and trust repair

Stabilize	Stop ongoing betrayal, assess safety, contain trauma symptoms.
Disclose wisely	Truth-telling without voyeurism; avoid drip disclosure.
Grieve	Honor impact, anger, shame, and attachment injury.
Accountability	Transparency, remorse, boundaries, restitution.
Rebuild or discern	Repair the relationship or separate with integrity and support.

Pastoral care must distinguish confession from disclosure management, forgiveness from trust, and reconciliation from pressure.

When mental health or addiction shapes the system

- Screen for depression, suicidality, trauma, substance use, psychosis, eating disorders, neurodivergence, and medical contributors.
- Ask how symptoms organize the family: rescuing, secrecy, resentment, overfunctioning, avoidance.
- Avoid making the relationship carry a treatable clinical condition alone.
- Collaborate with licensed clinicians, physicians, recovery programs, and pastoral support networks.



Trauma-informed relational counseling

A trauma-informed approach asks “What happened to you—and what helps you feel safe enough to choose?”

- Safety
- Trustworthiness
- Peer/community support
- Collaboration
- Empowerment, voice, choice
- Cultural, historical, gender awareness

- Avoid forced disclosure or public reconciliation rituals.
- Attend to nervous-system activation and dissociation.
- Protect client choice, especially when faith communities have shamed or silenced.

Outcome factors: what actually improves care?

Exceptional outcomes are built through a disciplined feedback loop.

Alliance
Do they experience you as fair, safe, and useful?

Goals
Do they agree on what change means?

Method
Are interventions matched to the case and culture?

Feedback
Are you asking what is helping, harming, or missing?

Ask at the end of each session: “What should I keep doing, stop doing, and ask next time?”

Best practices for exceptional outcomes

Start with safety	Screen privately; do not use couple/family work to manage abuse.
Formulate systemically	Cycle + meaning + power + resources + risk.
Use one model intentionally	Integrate, but do not improvise chaotically.
Practice, don’t preach	Rehearse new moves in the room.
Document and consult	Especially with risk, minors, secrets, or dual relationships.
Build referral pathways	Licensed MFTs, DV advocates, physicians, recovery programs, legal aid.

“A mature pastoral counselor knows when to speak, when to structure, when to refer, and when to stop.”

Course thesis

CASE EXERCISE 1

Case formulation: the conflict loop

Case: Married partners report weekly fights about money. One demands transparency; the other hides purchases and avoids conversations.

Trigger
Bill arrives

Move A
Demand / accuse

Meaning A
“I am alone and unsafe”

Move B
Withdraw / hide

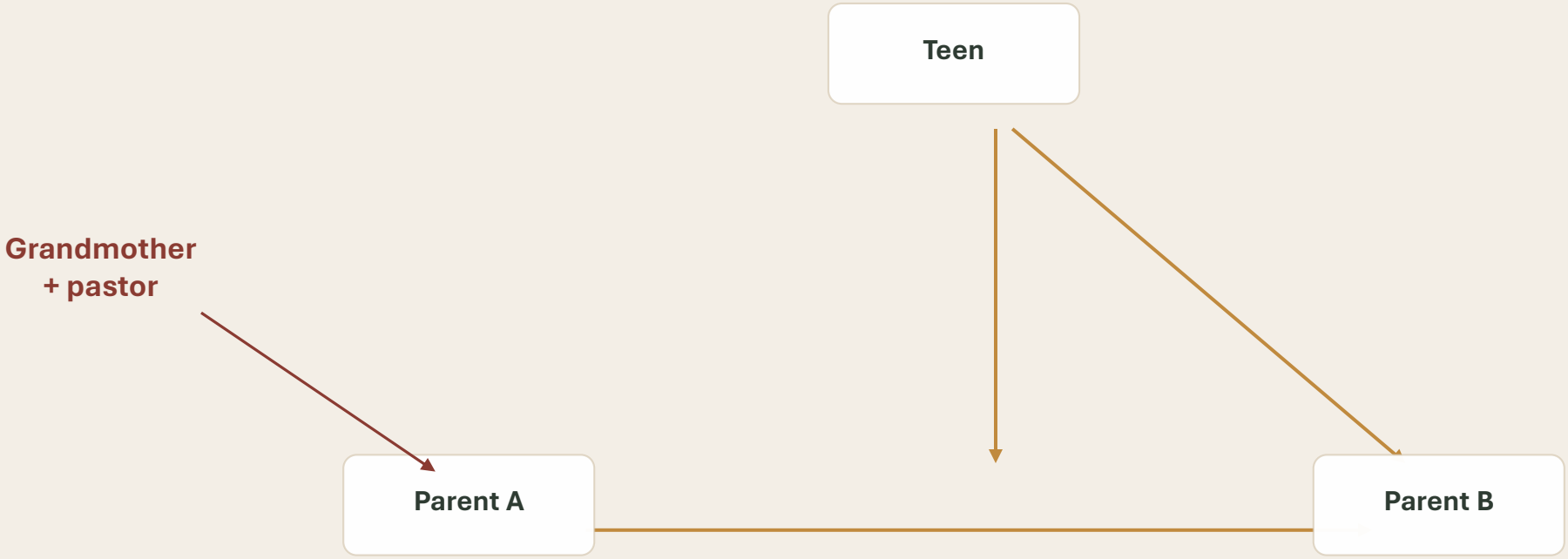
Meaning B
“I am controlled and ashamed”

Cost
Debt, distrust, prayer becomes weaponized

Discussion: What theory would you use first? What safety or ethics questions are missing?

Case formulation: family triangulation

Case: A teen refuses church and school. Parents blame each other. Grandmother calls the pastor weekly asking for intervention.



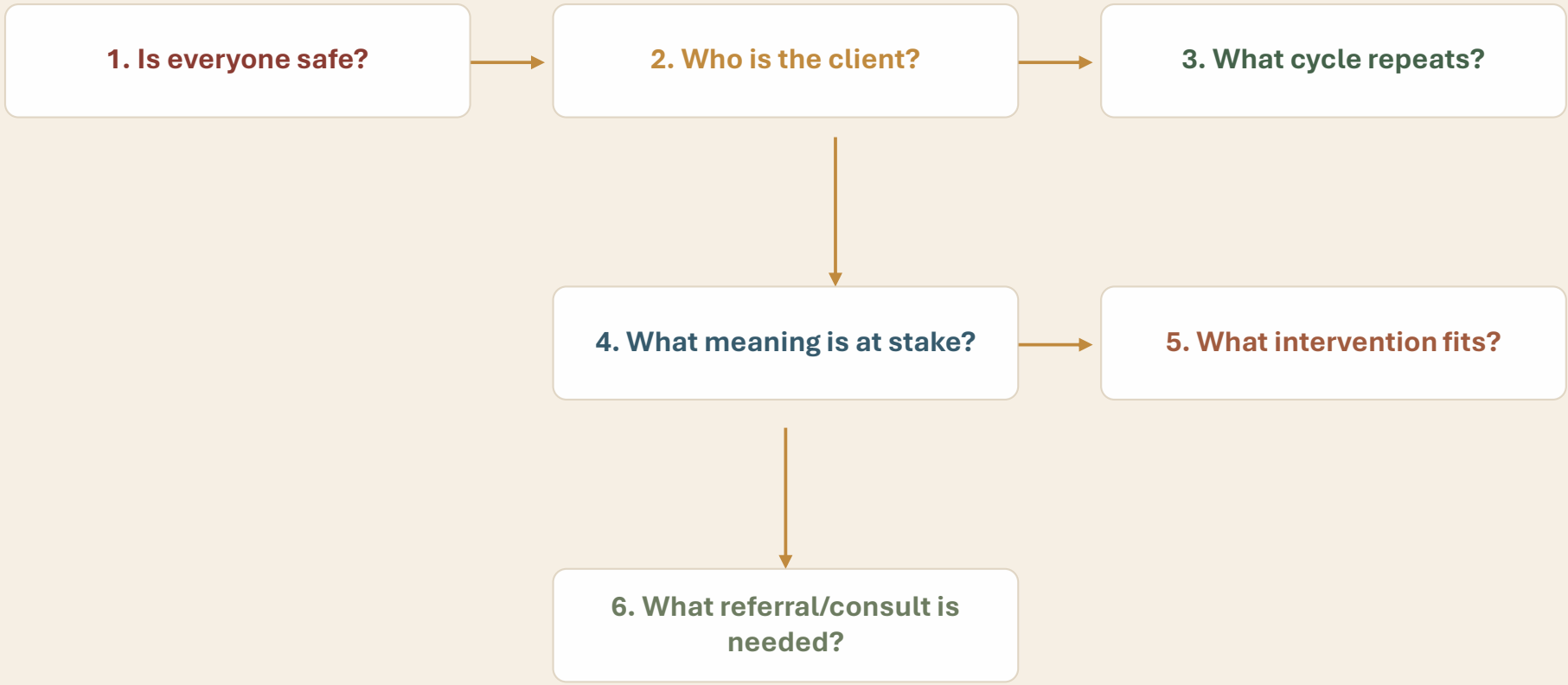
- What triangle is forming around the pastor?
- What should be strengthened before confronting the teen?
- How would you protect the teen from becoming the “identified problem”?

Practice lab: 12-minute role-play

Pastoral counselor	Track cycle, slow escalation, ask one safety question, translate one accusation.
Partner/family member A	Bring anxiety, demand, or pursuit.
Partner/family member B	Bring withdrawal, defensiveness, or counterattack.
Observer	Track exact counselor moves and missed opportunities.

Debrief: What lowered arousal? What created fairness? What risk was not assessed?

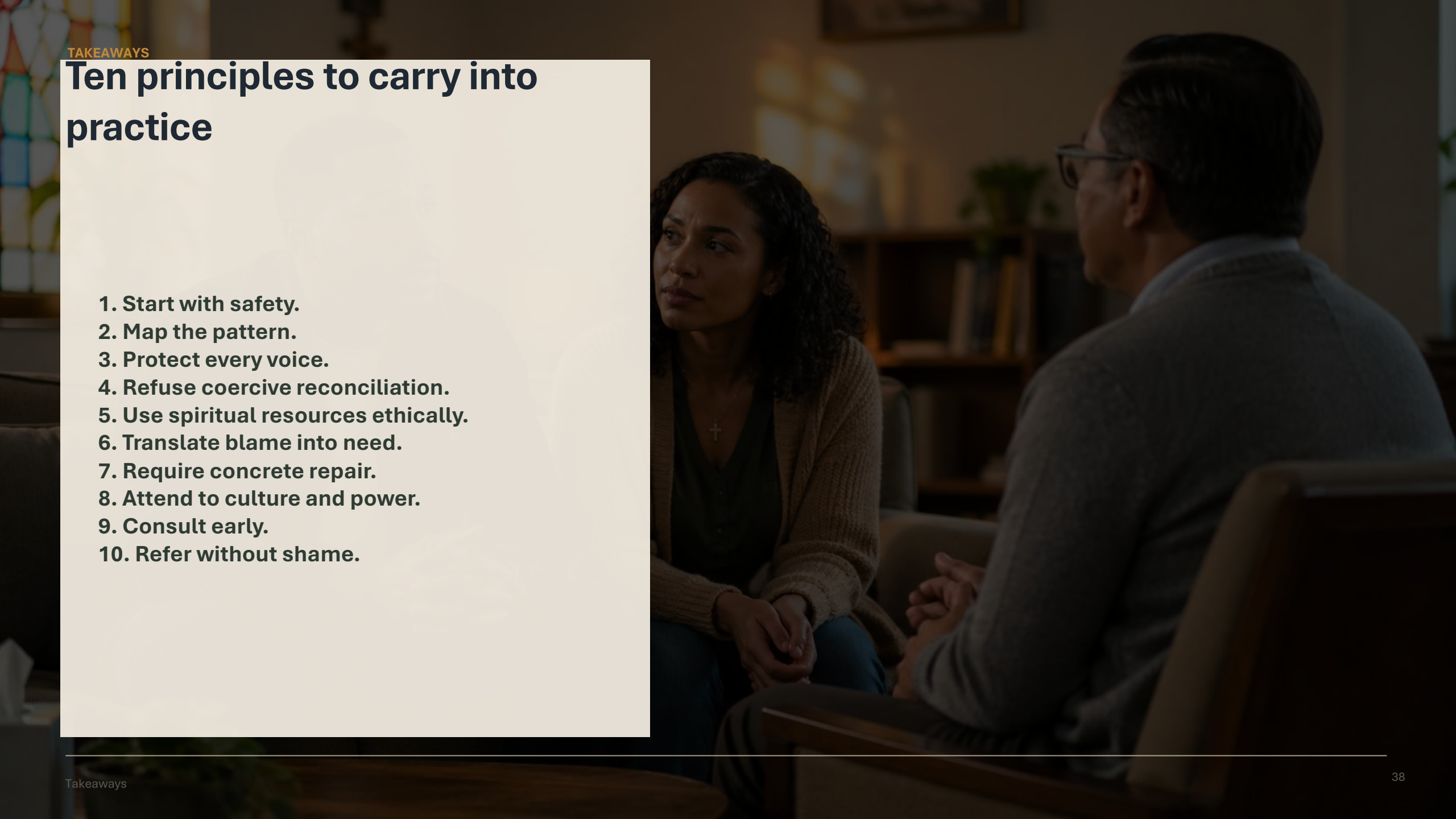
An integrated decision tree



Use the tree before every significant pastoral intervention.

Ten principles to carry into practice

1. Start with safety.
2. Map the pattern.
3. Protect every voice.
4. Refuse coercive reconciliation.
5. Use spiritual resources ethically.
6. Translate blame into need.
7. Require concrete repair.
8. Attend to culture and power.
9. Consult early.
10. Refer without shame.



FOR FURTHER STUDY

Selected references and resources

- American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. Code of Ethics. aamft.org
- Bowen Center for the Study of the Family. Introduction to the Eight Concepts; Triangles. thebowencenter.org
- CDC. Intimate Partner Violence Prevention Resource for Action; Preventing IPV. cdc.gov
- Gottman Institute. The Four Horsemen and The Antidotes. gottman.com
- International Centre for Excellence in Emotionally Focused Therapy. What is EFT? iceeft.com
- SAMHSA. Trauma-Informed Approaches and 6 Guiding Principles. samhsa.gov
- Minuchin, S. Families and Family Therapy. Harvard University Press.
- Nichols, M. & Davis, S. Family Therapy: Concepts and Methods. Pearson.
- White, M. & Epston, D. Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends. Norton.
- de Shazer, S. & Dolan, Y. More Than Miracles: The State of the Art of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy. Routledge.

Note: This deck is for graduate education in pastoral care. It does not authorize practice beyond licensure, supervision, law, or institutional policy.