

IV. Conflict-Reduction: Interactional Skills

The War Against the Blob

It is easy to fall prey to the idea that anger originates somewhere within a person--in the amygdala of the brain, for instance. In reality, anger is a transactional phenomenon, happening in the space between people. It is a contagious, sticky stuff which descends unexpectedly on a relationship--a family, an intimate relationship, a work-team. If I am calm and you enter the room angry, I might quickly find myself getting angry, too.

The movie *The Blob* was made first in the early 1960s, then re-made during the 1980s. The story line in both is pretty much the same. A mysterious meteorite lands near a town, and an old man discovers a red, glutinous substance and touches it with a stick. It quickly crawls up the stick onto his hand, envelops him and grows. It finds its way into houses--under the door, through the ventilation shaft--and devours everyone within. The Blob travels towards town and engulfs every human in its path. The townspeople band together, study it, then finally manage to kill it with ice.

Anger is like this Blob: it is an alien substance--malevolent, infectious, and deeply disturbing. It can descend on a home in a number of ways: Mom or Dad can bring home stress from work, a son or daughter may bring in an attitude, and so on. However it enters, it spreads quickly, and before long it can swallow everyone in the family. It is quite difficult to kill, and teamwork and careful study are required to do this.

If we were part of a scientific team whose goal was to kill the Blob, we would study it first before beginning our attack. We

would need to know its preferred food, its habits, its means of attack, its possible weaknesses. The Blob of conflict feeds on certain types of words and acts, and we need to observe this data carefully with the other team members.

Exercise: Blobbing the Family. *The following are questions to discuss together with family members, or with an intimate partner.*

1. How Does it Get In?

- *“Who brings the Blob in most often? Second most often?” etc. I find it helpful to break the answers down into percentages, such as the one below. Another way of rating this, especially if there are family members who have difficulty with percentages, is simply to give a numerical order 1-4 for each family member.*

	<i>Dad</i>	<i>Mom</i>	<i>Son</i>	<i>Daughter</i>
<i>Dad</i>	10	20	50	20
<i>Mom</i>	25	20	30	25
<i>Son</i>	80	3	3	14
<i>Daughter</i>	30	30	30	10

- *Fill in the names of your own family members in the chart below in a similar way, and ask each person to estimate the percentage of times (or cardinal order) each person brings the Blob into the household:*

1. _____				
2. _____				
3. _____				
4. _____				

- *Draw conclusions from this: is there only one route in for the Blob, or several? Is there any family member that everyone agrees is 100% immune from bringing in this sticky substance of conflict?*

2. How does it spread? *Questions to ask with the family or intimate partner:*

- *When the Blob does get in, does it spread slowly or quickly?*
- *When Dad brings the Blob in, who does it spread to first? Who second?*
- *Do people feel the need to jump in the middle of the Blob right away, or do you hold back and decide on just the right time to jump in?*
- *Does it live in the house all the time, or does it take vacations?*

3. Effect of the Blob on the Family/ Relationship

- *Some families like arguing and fighting—it's like a game that the family or couple plays together like monopoly or something. What's the payoff? Is the family enjoying this or getting some reward? Is the Blob helping or hindering the family?*
- *If the Blob continues its work in the family without opposition, what will the family look like in three years?*

4. Blob-Enhancing Acts or Words: What Feeds the Blob?

- *I'm not suggesting anyone would do this on purpose, because I don't think they do. But if you decided one day you were going to try to make the Blob bigger—more destructive, more*

full of stress and arguing—what would you do or say? If you wanted to feed the Blob, what would you do?” Again, take turns, asking individuals first for a single example of a Blob-enhancing act.

- *About other family members: If you were his or her consultant, and your job was to recommend something that would be guaranteed to make the Blob bigger and stronger, what would you recommend that she do?*

5. Blob-Reducing Acts or Words: What Diminishes the Blob?

- *Suggest one thing you could do or say that might diminish the size and strength of the Blob. Let each family member answer this question without suggestions from the rest of the family.*
- *Note: There may be several attempts at Blob-reduction going on right now, but sometimes actions or words which are attempts to make the Blob smaller actually end up making it bigger. E. g., Dad saying, “Just knock it off right now! Why do you always have to talk back like a jerk?” may be aimed at Blob-reduction, but the result is Blob-enhancement.*
- *Would the family notice if all of you did these Blob-reducing acts between now and next session? Which actions do you think would be noticed most? Which acts would contribute more quietly to Blob-reduction?*
- *If the family members each made a quiet commitment to slip in one of these Blob-reducing acts the next time the Blob made its ugly appearance, do you think it might have an effect on how big the Blob gets, or how fast it grows?*

6. Blob-Detector

- *It is often helpful for the family to keep a log-book of Blob-sightings, where any member can make an entry, with an estimate of its size, strength, and whom it swallowed or nearly swallowed.*
- *It is sometimes helpful for family members to take turns playing the role of on-the-spot reporter of Blob-sightings: for example, “This is Sherri, and I am speaking to you from the living room of the Manley household. The Blob has just made an appearance, and is now stuck to two... check that... three members of the Manley family. Details at 11:00.”*