

Sample Systemic Family Therapy Syllabus With Embedded Deliberate Practice Exercises

This appendix provides a sample one-semester, three-unit course dedicated to teaching systemic family therapy (SFT). This course is appropriate for master's-level graduate students at all levels of training, including first-year students who have not yet worked with clients. We present it as a model that can be adapted to a specific program's contexts and needs. For example, instructors may borrow portions of it to use in other courses, in practica, in didactic training events at externships and internships, in workshops, and in continuing education for postgraduate therapists.

Course Title: Introduction to Systemic Family Therapy

Course Description

The overall purpose of this course is to help students prepare to practice systemic therapy. As part of this, you will be introduced to a number of foundational models. Perhaps even more important, you will learn about and practice—using deliberate practice and role-play—core SFT skills. All of this will prepare you for a capstone project in which you demonstrate your readiness to begin seeing clients next semester.

Course Objectives

Students who complete this course will be able to

1. Describe the core theory and skills of SFT
2. Apply principles of deliberate practice for clinical skill development
3. Demonstrate key SFT skills
4. Begin to identify those therapy models and skills that most align with your personality

Required Texts

Blow, A. J., Seedall, R. B., Miller, D. L., Rousmaniere, T., & Vaz, A. (2022). *Deliberate practice in systemic family therapy*. American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000301-000>

Potential Theory-Based Required Texts

Gehart, D. R. (2015). *Theory and treatment planning in family therapy: A competency-based approach*. Cengage Learning.

Gehart, D. R. (2017). *Mastering competencies in family therapy: A practical approach to theory and clinical case documentation* (3rd ed.). Cengage Learning.

Date	Lecture and Discussion	Skills Lab	Homework Due
Week 1	Introduction to the course Facilitative interpersonal skills	Lecture on principles of deliberate practice; deliberate practice research	Readings to be decided by course instructor
Week 2	Self of the therapist	Exercise 1: Providing a Systemic Rationale for Treatment	Readings to be decided by course instructor
Week 3	Genogram presentations	Exercise 2: Building the Therapeutic Alliance: Establishing Bonds and Joining the System	Readings to be decided by course instructor Genogram presentation Deliberate Practice Diary Form
Week 4	Genogram presentations	Exercise 3: Reframing the Problem	Readings to be decided by course instructor Deliberate Practice Diary Form
Week 5	Theory and conceptualization	Exercise 4: Interactional Structuring: Deescalation	Readings to be decided by course instructor Family systems paper Deliberate Practice Diary Form
Week 6	Intergenerational and psychoanalytic models	Exercise 5: Avoiding Triangulation	Readings to be decided by course instructor Deliberate Practice Diary Form
Week 7	Systemic and strategic models	Exercise 6: Highlighting Boundaries	Readings to be decided by course instructor Worldview of therapy paper Deliberate Practice Diary Form
Week 8	Structural model	Exercise 7: Systemic Questions: Fostering Perspective-Taking	Readings to be decided by course instructor Deliberate Practice Diary Form
Week 9	Safety assessment (suicide)	Exercise 8: Engendering Hope	Readings to be decided by course instructor Healthy family development paper Deliberate Practice Diary Form
Week 10	Experiential and emotion-focused models	Exercise 9: Attention to Diversity	Readings to be decided by course instructor Deliberate Practice Diary Form
Week 11	Solution-focused model	Exercise 10: Building the Therapeutic Alliance: Establishing Therapeutic Goals	Readings to be decided by course instructor Deliberate Practice Diary Form
Week 12	Narrative models	Exercise 11: Tracking the Interactional Cycle	Readings to be decided by course instructor Deliberate Practice Diary Form
Week 13	Subjective, objective, assessment, and plan notes and treatment plans	Exercise 12: Interactional Structuring: Initiating Enactments	Readings to be decided by course instructor Deliberate Practice Diary Form
Week 14	Putting it all together	Transcript Session or Mock Session	Readings to be decided by course instructor Deliberate Practice Diary Form
Week 15	Final paper due, final exam, self-evaluation, skill coaching feedback	Transcript Session or Mock Session	Readings to be decided by course instructor Capstone project Deliberate Practice Diary Form

- Gurman, A. S., Lebow, J. L., & Snyder, D. K. (2015). *The clinical handbook of couple therapy* (5th ed.). Guilford Press.
- Nichols, M. P., & Davis, S. P. (2015). *Family therapy: Concepts and methods* (11th ed.). Allyn & Bacon.
- Nichols, M. P., & Davis, S. P. (2019). *The essentials of family therapy* (7th ed.). Pearson.
- Sexton, T. L., & Lebow, J. L. (2015). *The handbook of family therapy: The science and practice of working with families and couples*. Routledge.

Class Format

Course time is split evenly between learning SFT theory and acquiring SFT skills:

Lecture and Discussion: Each week, there will be one Lecture/Discussion class for 1 to 1.5 hours focusing on SFT theory and related research.

Skills Lab: Each week there will be one Skills Lab for 1 to 1.5 hours. Skills Labs are for practicing skills using the exercises from *Deliberate Practice in Systemic Family Therapy*. These exercises are intended to

1. Help you operationalize core systemic family therapy skills
2. Give you a concrete opportunity to practice these skills
3. Build your skill and confidence for using these skills
4. Help you discover your own therapeutic style

Learning Activities

1. **Reading and Attendance** (50 points): Reading and attendance in the class are crucial to your learning and also to creating a learning community where you teach each other. As a result, I expect that you should read and participate in class. I will have you rate your performance in reading at the end of the semester. [Insert the instructor's tardy and absence policy here.]
2. **Genogram Presentation** (50 points): It is crucial that you are aware of self-of-the-therapist issues that are potentially most relevant to your therapy. You will create a three-generation genogram and then provide a 30-minute presentation to the class, highlighting relevant relationships, patterns, and dynamics. You will also need to highlight how these things could affect the therapy you provide.
3. **Deliberate Practice Rehearsal** (50 points): This class will give you the opportunity to engage in deliberate practice to learn 12 core family therapy skills: providing a systemic rationale for treatment; establishing bonds as part of the therapeutic alliance; reframing the problem; adding interactional structure through deescalation; avoiding triangulation; highlighting boundaries; asking systemic, perspective-taking questions; engendering hope; attending to diversity; establishing therapeutic goals; tracking the interactional cycle; and decreasing interactional structure through an enactment. You will need to practice each skill (1 hour) and complete the Deliberate Practice Diary Form each week to earn these points.
4. **Family Systems Paper** (50 points): Family systems theory is the foundational model of systemic therapy. For that reason, you need to have a solid understanding of systems theory and how it applies to families. To further solidify your knowledge, you will write a two-page paper where you discuss the core terms of systems theory, how they apply to families, and its overall implications for therapy.

5. **Worldview Paper** (50 points): An important aspect of your development as a therapist is understanding change and developing your own personal theory of change. Part of this is examining your worldview. This class will have you consider aspects of your worldview and support them with scholarly references. The paper will be approximately two pages.
6. **Healthy Family Development Paper** (50 points): An important aspect of your development as a therapist is understanding change and developing your own personal theory of change. Part of this is examining what healthy family development means to you. In other words, what is the foundation for healthy family relationships? You will write an approximately two-page paper on this subject with scholarly resources to strengthen and support your ideas.
7. **Model Presentation** (two at 50 points each): You will have the opportunity to give a 60-minute presentation, with another student, on two of the foundational models of systemic therapy. You will discuss how the model explains problems and change, and you will highlight the core interventions. You will show a 10-minute video of the model in action, and you will also provide a one-page handout outlining the core elements of the model.
8. **Capstone Project** (150 points): For your final project, you will be given the opportunity to demonstrate competency using the core systemic skills (12 deliberate practice skills and others) that we have discussed and practiced this semester and thereby show you are ready to begin seeing clients. More information will be provided regarding this assignment as the semester goes on.

Course Policies

1. **Late Work:** [To be decided by course instructor]
2. **APA Format:** All papers must be written in American Psychological Association (APA) Style (seventh edition) format, including references. Failure to use APA formatting will result in a reduction in your grade for that assignment. You will also be graded on spelling, grammar, sentence structure, and other aspects of writing.
3. **Diversity and Multicultural Orientation:** Issues of diversity, inclusion, and social equity are important in this class. As such, we will strive to develop your multicultural competency, which refers to your "knowledge, skills, and awareness when working with diverse clients" (Owen et al., 2016, p. 30). Overall, I hope to foster a sense of cultural humility in this course that will lead you to develop greater comfort in working with people from diverse backgrounds and ultimately the attunement necessary to identify those "markers or moments in therapy where the therapist and client can engage in purposeful and meaningful dialogue about the clients' cultural identity" (Owen et al., 2016, p. 31). If you wish to further develop your multicultural orientation skills, go to <https://sentio.org/mcoveideos>.
4. **Physical Impairments:** [To be decided by course instructor]
5. **Academic Dishonesty:** [To be decided by course instructor]
 - a. Cheating: [To be decided by course instructor]
 - b. Falsification: [To be decided by course instructor]
 - c. Plagiarism: [To be decided by course instructor]

6. **Self-Disclosure and Confidentiality:** An important element of becoming a therapist and seeing clients is being able to understand how your experiences could potentially influence your interactions with your clients. Although therapist way of being is crucial to who you are (Fife et al., 2014), you must also work to keep your own emotions and experiences from impeding the therapeutic process. For that reason, I hope you will explore and evaluate the self-of-the-therapist issues that we discuss in class. That being said, you are not required to disclose any particular information about you or your past. You choose how much, when, and what to disclose. At the same time, students are expected to keep information that is shared by others in this class confidential.
7. **Grievance Process:** [To be decided by course instructor]