What Is a Genogram & How to Make One

A practical guide to mapping family relationships,
medical history, and multigenerational patterns.

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What Is a Genogram?

A genogram is a graphic representation of a family system that goes far beyond a traditional family tree. Developed by Monica McGoldrick and Randy Gerson in the 1980s, genograms use standardized symbols to map not only *who* is in a family, but how family members relate emotionally, what health conditions run in the family, and what behavioral patterns repeat across generations.

> *A family tree tells you **who**. A genogram tells you **who**, **how**, and **why**.*

Genograms are widely used in clinical therapy, social work, genetic counseling, medical intake, and academic research. A typical genogram includes three or more generations and displays:

- **Family structure** — marriages, divorces, separations, adoptions, blended families
- **Emotional relationships** — closeness, conflict, distance, enmeshment, cutoffs
- **Medical history** — heart disease, cancer, diabetes, genetic conditions
- **Mental health** — depression, anxiety, substance abuse, trauma, recovery
- **Cultural factors** — heritage, religion, migration history, traditions
- **Life events** — deaths, traumas, major transitions, occupations

Genogram vs. Family Tree

Many people hear "genogram" and think "family tree." While they share a foundation, they serve very different purposes.

ASPECT	FAMILY TREE	GENOGRAM
Focus	Biological lineage and ancestry	Relationships, health, and behavior
Depth	Names, dates, births, deaths	Emotional bonds, medical history, cultural factors
Symbols	Basic boxes and lines	Standardized clinical notation (50+ types)
Purpose	Genealogy and heritage	Clinical assessment and pattern recognition
Users	Hobbyists, historians	Therapists, doctors, social workers, researchers

A family tree answers: "Who are my ancestors?"
A genogram answers: "What patterns have shaped my family across generations?"

Who Uses Genograms and Why

Marriage & Family Therapists

Genograms reveal intergenerational patterns that influence a couple's dynamic—attachment styles, conflict patterns, and family-of-origin issues that neither partner may be consciously aware of.

Social Workers

Case managers and child welfare professionals use genograms to map family systems, identify support networks, and document complex household structures for court reports and service planning.

Genetic Counselors

Medical genograms track hereditary conditions across generations, helping counselors assess genetic risk factors for conditions like breast cancer, heart disease, and Huntington's disease.

Medical Professionals

Physicians and nurses use genograms during intake to quickly visualize a patient's family medical history—far more effective than a written list.

Students

Genograms are a core assignment in graduate programs for family therapy, social work, psychology, and nursing. They help students understand systems thinking.

Researchers

Academic researchers use genograms to study intergenerational transmission of trauma, addiction, resilience, and other behavioral patterns across populations.

Individuals & Families

You don't need to be a clinician to benefit. Many people create genograms to understand their own family dynamics or explore inherited health risks.

Essential Genogram Symbols

Genograms use standardized symbols based on the McGoldrick-Gerson notation system.

Person Symbols

☐	**Male** Square	○	**Female** Circle
◇	**Unknown / Non-binary** Diamond	⊠	**Deceased Male** Square + X
⊗	**Deceased Female** Circle + X	△	**Pregnancy** Triangle

Relationship Lines

———	Marriage	—\—	Divorce
═══	Close Bond	≡≡≡	Fused / Enmeshed
- - - -	Distant	∿∿∿	Conflict / Hostile
∧∧∧	Close & Hostile	—✕—	Cutoff

> **TIP**
>
> Children hang below the couple line, oldest left to youngest right. Adopted children use a dashed line. Twins converge to a single point.

How to Make a Genogram in 5 Steps

1 Gather Family Information

Before drawing, collect: names, birth/death dates, marriages, divorces, children (biological, adopted, foster), medical conditions, mental health diagnoses, substance use, life events, occupations, cultural background.

> **TIP**
>
> Gaps in knowledge are themselves meaningful — they often indicate cutoffs, secrecy, or unresolved grief.

2 Start with the Index Person

The **index person** ("proband") is the central figure — usually yourself or the client. Place them center-page with a double outline.

3 Add Family Members & Structure

Work outward: add spouse on the same line, children below (oldest left), then parents above, siblings on the same row, grandparents one level up. Males go left; females right. Each generation gets its own horizontal row.

4 Add Emotional Relationships

Draw relationship lines between any two people. Ask: How would they describe their relationship? Is there unresolved conflict? Who doesn't speak to whom? Who is overly close or dependent?

5 Add Medical, Cultural & Contextual Info

Layer in: **medical conditions** (shade/color symbols), **mental health** (note diagnoses), **substance use**, **occupations**, **cultural heritage**, and **key dates** (births, deaths, marriages, major events).

> **TIME ESTIMATE**
> By hand: **30–60 min**. With AI tools: **5–10 min**.

Reading & Interpreting Your Genogram

A completed genogram is a rich visual document. Interpretation happens at four levels:

01
Structural

How many generations? Nuclear, blended, single-parent? Many divorces? Early deaths?

02
Relational

Where are close bonds, conflicts, cutoffs? Are there triangles — two bonding against a third?

03
Functional

Who overfunctions? Who underfunctions? How does anxiety flow through the system?

04
Multigenerational

What patterns repeat? Caretaker roles, addiction, cutoffs recurring across generations?

SYSTEMATIC CHECKLIST

For each level, ask: What stands out? What's missing? What would the family say about this? Where are the resources and strengths? What patterns might connect to the presenting problem?

Common Patterns to Look For

Repetitive Relationship Structures

Same dynamic repeating across generations — oldest children as caretakers, middle as peacemakers, youngest as the "problem child."

Anniversary Reactions

Events mirroring previous generations — death at the same age a grandparent died, symptoms emerging at the age a parent experienced trauma.

Symptom Concentration

One person per generation carries the family's dysfunction — the "identified patient." This often indicates a systemic issue, not an individual one.

Complementary Couple Patterns

Partners who fit like puzzle pieces — pursuer + distancer, overfunctioner + underfunctioner. These often mirror family-of-origin dynamics.

Loss & Replacement

A child born shortly after a family death, named after the deceased. Quick remarriage after a spouse's death. These patterns carry unresolved grief into the next generation.

Cutoff Chains

Estrangement that repeats — a father-son cutoff in one generation leads to another in the next. The pattern perpetuates because the conflict is never processed.

CLINICAL NOTE

When presenting patterns to clients, use collaborative language: "What stands out to you?" and "Here's something I notice…" Let clients discover patterns themselves.

Glossary of Key Terms

Index Person (Proband)

The central person around whom the genogram is constructed.

Identified Patient (IP)

Family member labeled as "the problem" — symptoms often reflect a larger family dynamic.

Nuclear Family

Parents and their children.

Family of Origin

The family in which a person grew up.

Enmeshment (Fusion)

Blurred boundaries where individual identity is lost in the relationship.

Cutoff

Complete severing of contact between family members.

Triangulation

Three-person dynamic where two manage anxiety by involving a third.

Multigenerational Transmission

Emotional patterns and dynamics passing from one generation to the next.

Transgenerational Trauma

Trauma affecting descendants through behavioral, emotional, and epigenetic mechanisms.

Differentiation

Maintaining identity while staying connected to the family system. Key concept in Bowen theory.

REFERENCE

Based on the McGoldrick-Gerson-Petry notation in *Genograms: Assessment and Treatment* (4th Ed., 2020).

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