



**American Association for
Marriage and Family Therapy**

Advancing the Professional Interests
of Marriage and Family Therapists

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Marriage and Family Therapy Core Competencies©

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The marriage and family therapy (MFT) core competencies were developed through a collaborative effort of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) and interested stakeholders. In addition to defining the domains of knowledge and requisite skills in each domain that comprise the practice of marriage and family therapy, the ultimate goal of the core competencies is to improve the quality of services delivered by marriage and family therapists (MFTs). Consequently, the competencies described herein represent the minimum that MFTs licensed to practice independently must possess.

Creating competencies for MFTs and improving the quality of mental health services was considered in the context of the broader behavioral health system. The AAMFT relied on three important reports to provide the framework within which the competencies would be developed: *Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General*; the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health's *Achieving the Promise: Transforming Mental Health Care in America*; and the Institute of Medicine's *Crossing the Quality Chasm*. The AAMFT mapped the competencies to critical elements of these reports, including IOM's 6 Core Values that are seen as the foundation for a better health care system: 1) Safe, 2) Person-Centered, 3) Efficient, 4) Effective, 5) Timely, and 6) Equitable. The committee also considered how social, political, historical, and economic forces affect individual and relational problems and decisions about seeking and obtaining treatment.

The core competencies were developed for educators, trainers, regulators, researchers, policymakers, and the public. The current version has 128 competencies; however, these are likely to be modified as the field of family therapy develops and as the needs of clients change. The competencies will be reviewed and modified at regular intervals to ensure the competencies are reflective of the current and best practice of MFT.

The core competencies are organized around 6 primary domains and 5 secondary domains. The primary domains are:

- 1) **Admission to Treatment** – All interactions between clients and therapist up to the point when a therapeutic contract is established.
- 2) **Clinical Assessment and Diagnosis** – Activities focused on the identification of the issues to be addressed in therapy.
- 3) **Treatment Planning and Case Management** – All activities focused on directing the course of therapy and extra-therapeutic activities.
- 4) **Therapeutic Interventions** – All activities designed to ameliorate the clinical issues identified.
- 5) **Legal Issues, Ethics, and Standards** – All aspects of therapy that involve statutes, regulations, principles, values, and mores of MFTs.
- 6) **Research and Program Evaluation** – All aspects of therapy that involve the systematic analysis of therapy and how it is conducted effectively.

The subsidiary domains are focused on the types of skills or knowledge that MFTs must develop. These are: a) Conceptual, b) Perceptual, c) Executive, d) Evaluative, and e) Professional.

Although not expressly written for each competency, the stem "Marriage and family therapists..." should begin each. Additionally, the term "client" is used broadly and refers to the therapeutic system of the client/s served, which includes, but is not limited to individuals, couples, families, and others with a vested interest in helping clients change. Similarly, the term "family" is used generically to refer to all people identified by clients as part of their "family system," this would include fictive kin and relationships of choice. Finally, the core competencies encompass behaviors, skills, attitudes, and policies that promote awareness, acceptance, and respect for differences, enhance services that meet the needs of diverse populations, and promote resiliency and recovery.

Domain 1: Admission to Treatment

Num	Subdom	Competence
1.1.1	Conceptu	Understand systems concepts, theories, and techniques that are foundational to the practice of marriage and family therapy
1.1.2	Conceptu	Understand theories and techniques of individual, marital, couple, family, and group psychotherapy
1.1.3	Conceptu	Understand the behavioral health care delivery system, its impact on the services provided, and the barriers and disparities in the system.
1.1.4	Conceptu	Understand the risks and benefits of individual, marital, couple, family, and group psychotherapy.
1.2.1	Perceptu	Recognize contextual and systemic dynamics (e.g., gender, age, socioeconomic status, culture/race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, spirituality, religion, larger systems, social context).
1.2.2	Perceptu	Consider health status, mental status, other therapy, and other systems involved in the clients' lives (e.g., courts, social services).
1.2.3	Perceptu	Recognize issues that might suggest referral for specialized evaluation, assessment, care.
1.3.1	Executiv	Gather and review intake information, giving balanced attention to individual, family, community, cultural, and contextual factors.
1.3.2	Executiv	Determine who should attend therapy and in what configuration (e.g., individual, couple, family, extrafamilial resources).
1.3.3	Executiv	Facilitate therapeutic involvement of all necessary participants in treatment.
1.3.4	Executiv	Explain practice setting rules, fees, rights, and responsibilities of each party, including privacy, confidentiality policies, and duty to care to client or legal guardian.
1.3.5	Executiv	Obtain consent to treatment from all responsible persons.
1.3.6	Executiv	Establish and maintain appropriate and productive therapeutic alliances with the client.
1.3.7	Executiv	Solicit and use client feedback throughout the therapeutic process.
1.3.8	Executiv	Develop and maintain collaborative working relationships with referral resources, other practitioners involved in the clients' care, and payers.
1.3.9	Executiv	Manage session interactions with individuals, couples, families, and groups.
1.4.1	Evaluativ	Evaluate case for appropriateness for treatment within professional scope of practice and competence.
1.5.1	Professio	Understand the legal requirements and limitations for working with vulnerable populations (e.g., minors).
1.5.2	Professio	Complete case documentation in a timely manner and in accordance with relevant law and policies.
1.5.3	Professio	Develop, establish, and maintain policies for fees, payment, record keeping, and confidentiality.

Domain 2: Clinical Assessment and Diagnosis

Num	Subdom	Competence
2.1.1	Conceptu	Understand principles of human development; human sexuality; gender development; psychopathology; psychopharmacology; couple processes; and family development and processes (e.g., family, relational, and system dynamics).
2.1.2	Conceptu	Understand the major behavioral health disorders, including the epidemiology, etiology, phenomenology, effective treatments, course, and prognosis.
2.1.3	Conceptu	Understand the clinical needs and implications of persons with comorbid disorders (e.g., substance abuse and mental health; heart disease and depression).
2.1.4	Conceptu	Comprehend individual, marital, couple and family assessment instruments appropriate

Num	Subdom	Competence
		to presenting problem, practice setting, and cultural context.
2.1.5	Conceptu	Understand the current models for assessment and diagnosis of mental health disorders, substance use disorders, and relational functioning.
2.1.6	Conceptu	Understand the strengths and limitations of the models of assessment and diagnosis, especially as they relate to different cultural, economic, and ethnic groups.
2.1.7	Conceptu	Understand the concepts of reliability and validity, their relationship to assessment instruments, and how they influence therapeutic decision making.
2.2.1	Perceptu	Assess each clients' engagement in the change process.
2.2.2	Perceptu	Systematically integrate client reports, observations of client behaviors, client relationship patterns, reports from other professionals, results from testing procedures and interactions with client to guide the assessment process.
2.2.3	Perceptu	Develop hypotheses regarding relationship patterns, their bearing on the presenting problem, and the influence of extra-therapeutic factors on client systems.
2.2.4	Perceptu	Consider the influence of treatment on extra-therapeutic relationships.
2.2.5	Perceptu	Consider physical/organic problems that can cause or exacerbate emotional/interpersonal symptoms.
2.3.1	Executive	Diagnose and assess client behavioral and relational health problems systemically and contextually.
2.3.2	Executive	Provide assessments and deliver developmentally appropriate services to clients, such as children, adolescents, elders, and persons with special needs.
2.3.3	Executive	Apply effective and systemic interviewing techniques and strategies.
2.3.4	Executive	Administer and interpret results of assessment instruments.
2.3.5	Executive	Screen and develop adequate safety plans for substance abuse, child and elder maltreatment, domestic violence, physical violence, suicide potential, and dangerousness to self and others.
2.3.6	Executive	Assess family history and dynamics using a genogram or other assessment instrument.
2.3.7	Executive	Elicit a relevant and accurate biopsychosocial history to understand the context of the clients' problems.
2.3.8	Executive	Identify clients' strengths, resilience, and resources.
2.3.9	Executive	Elucidate presenting problem from the perspective of each member of the therapeutic system.
2.4.1	Evaluativ	Evaluate assessment methods for relevance to clients' needs.
2.4.2	Evaluativ	Assess ability to view issues and therapeutic processes systemically.
2.4.3	Evaluativ	Evaluate the accuracy and cultural relevance of behavioral health and relational diagnoses.
2.4.4	Evaluativ	Assess the therapist-client agreement of therapeutic goals and diagnosis.
2.5.1	Professio	Utilize consultation and supervision effectively.

Domain 3: Treatment Planning and Case Management

Num	Subdom	Competence
3.1.1	Conceptu	Know which models, modalities, and/or techniques are most effective for presenting problems.
3.1.2	Conceptu	Understand the liabilities incurred when billing third parties, the codes necessary for reimbursement, and how to use them correctly.
3.1.3	Conceptu	Understand the effects that psychotropic and other medications have on clients and the treatment process.
3.1.4	Conceptu	Understand recovery-oriented behavioral health services (e.g., self-help groups, 12-st

Num	Subdom	Competence
		programs, peer-to-peer services, supported employment).
3.2.1	Perceptu	Integrate client feedback, assessment, contextual information, and diagnosis with treatment goals and plan.
3.3.1	Executiv	Develop, with client input, measurable outcomes, treatment goals, treatment plans, and after-care plans with clients utilizing a systemic perspective.
3.3.2	Executiv	Prioritize treatment goals.
3.3.3	Executiv	Develop a clear plan of how sessions will be conducted.
3.3.4	Executiv	Structure treatment to meet clients' needs and to facilitate systemic change.
3.3.5	Executiv	Manage progression of therapy toward treatment goals.
3.3.6	Executiv	Manage risks, crises, and emergencies.
3.3.7	Executiv	Work collaboratively with other stakeholders, including family members, other significant persons, and professionals not present.
3.3.8	Executiv	Assist clients in obtaining needed care while navigating complex systems of care.
3.3.9	Executiv	Develop termination and aftercare plans.
3.4.1	Evaluativ	Evaluate progress of sessions toward treatment goals.
3.4.2	Evaluativ	Recognize when treatment goals and plan require modification.
3.4.3	Evaluativ	Evaluate level of risks, management of risks, crises, and emergencies.
3.4.4	Evaluativ	Assess session process for compliance with policies and procedures of practice setting.
3.4.5	Professio	Monitor personal reactions to clients and treatment process, especially in terms of therapeutic behavior, relationship with clients, process for explaining procedures, and outcomes.
3.5.1	Professio	Advocate with clients in obtaining quality care, appropriate resources, and services in their community.
3.5.2	Professio	Participate in case-related forensic and legal processes.
3.5.3	Professio	Write plans and complete other case documentation in accordance with practice setting policies, professional standards, and state/provincial laws.
3.5.4	Professio	Utilize time management skills in therapy sessions and other professional meetings.

Domain 4: Therapeutic Interventions

Num	Subdom	Competence
4.1.1	Conceptu	Comprehend a variety of individual and systemic therapeutic models and their application, including evidence-based therapies and culturally sensitive approaches.
4.1.2	Conceptu	Recognize strengths, limitations, and contraindications of specific therapy models, including the risk of harm associated with models that incorporate assumptions of family dysfunction, pathogenesis, or cultural deficit.
4.2.1	Perceptu	Recognize how different techniques may impact the treatment process.
4.2.2	Perceptu	Distinguish differences between content and process issues, their role in therapy, and their potential impact on therapeutic outcomes.
4.3.1	Executiv	Match treatment modalities and techniques to clients' needs, goals, and values.
4.3.2	Executiv	Deliver interventions in a way that is sensitive to special needs of clients (e.g., gender, age, socioeconomic status, culture/race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, personal history, larger systems issues of the client).
4.3.3	Executiv	Reframe problems and recursive interaction patterns.
4.3.4	Executiv	Generate relational questions and reflexive comments in the therapy room.
4.3.5	Executiv	Engage each family member in the treatment process as appropriate.
4.3.6	Executiv	Facilitate clients developing and integrating solutions to problems.

Num	Subdom	Competence
4.3.7	Executive	Defuse intense and chaotic situations to enhance the safety of all participants.
4.3.8	Executive	Empower clients and their relational systems to establish effective relationships with each other and larger systems.
4.3.9	Executive	Provide psychoeducation to families whose members have serious mental illness or other disorders.
4.3.1	Executive	Modify interventions that are not working to better fit treatment goals.
4.3.1	Executive	Move to constructive termination when treatment goals have been accomplished.
4.3.1	Executive	Integrate supervisor/team communications into treatment.
4.4.1	Evaluativ	Evaluate interventions for consistency, congruency with model of therapy and theory of change, cultural and contextual relevance, and goals of the treatment plan.
4.4.2	Evaluativ	Evaluate ability to deliver interventions effectively.
4.4.3	Evaluativ	Evaluate treatment outcomes as treatment progresses.
4.4.4	Evaluativ	Evaluate clients' reactions or responses to interventions.
4.4.5	Evaluativ	Evaluate clients' outcomes for the need to continue, refer, or terminate therapy.
4.4.6	Evaluativ	Evaluate reactions to the treatment process (e.g., transference, family of origin, current stress level, current life situation, cultural context) and their impact on effective intervention and clinical outcomes.
4.5.1	Professio	Respect multiple perspectives (e.g., clients, team, supervisor, practitioners from other disciplines who are involved in the case).
4.5.2	Professio	Set appropriate boundaries, manage issues of triangulation, and develop collaborative working relationships.
4.5.3	Professio	Articulate rationales for interventions related to treatment goals and plan, assessment information, and systemic understanding of clients' context and dynamics.

Domain 5: Legal Issues, Ethics, and Standards

Num	Subdom	Competence
5.1.1	Conceptu	Know state, federal, and provincial laws and regulations that apply to the practice of marriage and family therapy.
5.1.2	Conceptu	Know professional ethics and standards of practice that apply to the practice of marriage and family therapy.
5.1.3	Conceptu	Know policies and procedures of the practice setting.
5.1.4	Conceptu	Understand the process of making an ethical decision.
5.2.1	Perceptu	Recognize situations in which ethics, laws, professional liability, and standards of practice apply.
5.2.2	Perceptu	Recognize ethical dilemmas in practice setting.
5.2.3	Perceptu	Recognize when a legal consultation is necessary.
5.2.4	Perceptu	Recognize when clinical supervision or consultation is necessary.
5.3.1	Executive	Monitor issues related to ethics, laws, regulations, and professional standards.
5.3.2	Executive	Develop and assess policies, procedures, and forms for consistency with standards of practice to protect client confidentiality and to comply with relevant laws and regulations.
5.3.3	Executive	Inform clients and legal guardian of limitations to confidentiality and parameters of mandatory reporting.
5.3.4	Executive	Develop safety plans for clients who present with potential self-harm, suicide, abuse, or violence.
5.3.5	Executive	Take appropriate action when ethical and legal dilemmas emerge.
5.3.6	Executive	Report information to appropriate authorities as required by law.

Num	Subdom	Competence
5.3.7	Executive	Practice within defined scope of practice and competence.
5.3.8	Executive	Obtain knowledge of advances and theory regarding effective clinical practice.
5.3.9	Executive	Obtain license(s) and specialty credentials.
5.3.1	Executive	Implement a personal program to maintain professional competence.
5.4.1	Evaluativ	Evaluate activities related to ethics, legal issues, and practice standards.
5.4.2	Evaluativ	Monitor attitudes, personal well-being, personal issues, and personal problems to insu they do not impact the therapy process adversely or create vulnerability for misconduct
5.5.1	Professio	Maintain client records with timely and accurate notes.
5.5.2	Professio	Consult with peers and/or supervisors if personal issues, attitudes, or beliefs threaten adversely impact clinical work.
5.5.3	Professio	Pursue professional development through self-supervision, collegial consultation, professional reading, and continuing educational activities.
5.5.4	Professio	Bill clients and third-party payers in accordance with professional ethics, relevant laws and polices, and seek reimbursement only for covered services.

Domain 6: Research and Program Evaluation

Num	Subdom	Competence
6.1.1	Conceptu	Know the extant MFT literature, research, and evidence-based practice.
6.1.2	Conceptu	Understand research and program evaluation methodologies, both quantitative and qualitative, relevant to MFT and mental health services.
6.1.3	Conceptu	Understand the legal, ethical, and contextual issues involved in the conduct of clinical research and program evaluation.
6.2.1	Perceptu	Recognize opportunities for therapists and clients to participate in clinical research.
6.3.1	Executive	Read current MFT and other professional literature.
6.3.2	Executive	Use current MFT and other research to inform clinical practice.
6.3.3	Executive	Critique professional research and assess the quality of research studies and program evaluation in the literature.
6.3.4	Executive	Determine the effectiveness of clinical practice and techniques.
6.4.1	Evaluativ	Evaluate knowledge of current clinical literature and its application.
6.5.1	Professio	Contribute to the development of new knowledge.