FOR COUNSELOR USE · ADOLESCENTS AND ADULTS

Roots & Messages: Facilitator Guide

A lighter, visual take on the genogram. Instead of mapping every fact, the client maps who shaped them, how close they feel, and the messages passed down, then chooses what to carry, rewrite, or leave. A conversation, not an assessment.

Suggested flow (35 to 45 minutes, or across two sessions)

1. Invite 3 min	“Would you like to try drawing a simple map of your family? You decide who's on it, and you can leave anything blank.” Mention it may bring up feelings and that you can pause anytime.
2. Place people 8 min	Names under circles (Halmeoni, Umma, an aunt who raised them, chosen family). The "other" circles are for aunts, uncles, family friends, mentors, or anyone else who shaped their upbringing. Not every circle needs filling; extra people can go in the margins.
3. Bring them to life 7 min	A color, a symbol, and one word for each person. Offer colored pencils. Stay curious rather than interpreting.
4. Draw how close 5 min	Lines from “me” to each person using the legend. Ask about the relationship as it is now, or as it was if they've passed.
5. Messages 10 to 12 min	Page 2: what was said, shown, or simply understood. Who did it come from? Culture can be the source too.
6. Choose 5 to 7 min	Carry, rewrite, or leave for each message. Write one rewrite together in the “My version” box.
7. Close 3 min	Name one strength in the family line. “What are you taking with you from today?”

Questions by part

People	“Who was hard to decide about including? Who's on the map that others might not expect?”
Symbols & words	“Tell me about the symbol you chose for her. When did you first see her that way?”
Lines	“Which line has changed the most over the years? What would it take to soften a tense one, or would you rather not?”
Messages	“How did you learn this one? Was it said, or did you just know? What did it protect your family from?”
Carry / rewrite / leave	“What did this message give you? What has it cost you? What would a version that fits your life now sound like?”
Strengths	“What got your family through? Where do you see that same strength in you?”

Continued on page 2: patterns to listen for, cultural considerations, safety, and variations.

Deepening the conversation

What to listen for

Messages that repeat across generations, and where the client is the first to question one.

Triangles: a tense line between two people with the client in the middle, often as peacekeeper or translator.

Survival messages (“Don't trust outsiders,” “Save, don't waste”) that made sense in a past context and now feel heavy.

Loyalty binds: guilt or fear of betrayal at the idea of rewriting a message.

Missing people or empty circles: absence, loss, secrets, or simply not knowing.

Cultural and bicultural considerations

For immigrant and bicultural clients, many messages carried sacrifice and love (“Education is everything”). Honor both the gift and the cost before inviting a rewrite.

Rewriting is not rejecting. A rewrite can keep the value and change the rule: “Work hard, and rest without guilt.”

Let clients use their own words and languages for people and messages; ask what is lost in translation.

Safety and pacing

Family maps can surface grief, estrangement, and trauma. Go at the client's pace; it's fine to map only one side, or only the people who felt safe.

Don't ask clients to record diagnoses, abuse, or other sensitive details on the page. Keep sensitive history in your clinical record, not on the worksheet.

If distress rises, shift to strengths or grounding before closing.

Variations

Digital first: clients can start the free interactive version between sessions (wooheekwak.me/tools/roots-and-messages.html) and bring or email the summary.

Two sessions: map and lines in one, messages and rewrites in the next.

Couples: each partner maps their own family, then compares messages about conflict, money, and love.

Groups: share one message and its rewrite only; keep maps private.

Do not interpret symbols or colors for the client. This is not a clinical genogram and is not a diagnostic or assessment tool.

Inspired by the genogram (Monica McGoldrick, Randy Gerson, and colleagues) and Bowen family systems thinking, with narrative re-authoring of family messages. Original worksheet and guide by Woohee (Elise) Kwak.