

Psychology of dysfunctional family

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Abstract: Dysfunctional family a family in which relationships or communication are impaired and members are unable to attain closeness and self-expression. Members of a dysfunctional family often develop symptomatic behaviors, and often one individual in the family presents as the identified patient.

Key words: distressed or abusive environments, substance abuse, mental illness, chronic physical illness, and poor communication.

The main part: Dysfunctional families are caused by – and are the responsibility of – the parents, because they are the ones that hold the power and authority within the family. While this can sometimes be due to toxic parenting, sometimes the cause is more complicated and nuanced. Here are several signs of a dysfunctional family: Addiction is when a person struggles with alcohol or drug use. Addiction increases the chances of abuse, neglect, intimate partner violence, among other problematic interactions. Due to shame, stigma, functional impairment, or legal ramifications, this can create an environment of secrecy to cover up for the addict, which is a core component of dysfunctional families. Abusive relationships are common in dysfunctional families. Abuse can look like one person intentionally harming another person, and neglect is when a person fails to adequately meet the needs of someone in their care. Similar to addiction, the shame, stigma, and legal ramifications of abuse also create an atmosphere of secrecy to keep this contained within the family.

Personality disorders are severe and long-term mental health diagnoses that impact behavior and functioning. This could include narcissistic parents, borderline parents, and OCPD parents, among others. The family system will tend to try to compensate for the negative impacts of the disorder, which often leads to dysfunctional family dynamics. Emotional incest is when a parent heavily relies on a child for their emotional support, which is too large of a burden for a child to bear. This extreme dependence from the parent impacts all family members negatively, and the family will either stay in this place of being negatively affected or attempt to shift things to compensate – which often ends up being dysfunctional in a different way. Toxic parenting can include various aspects, including unhealthy discipline, relational dynamics, and lack of clear parent-child boundaries. Because parents hold the authority and power within the family, toxic parenting can play a major contributing role in the development of dysfunctional family dynamics. A high-conflict home environment includes frequent and intense arguments between parents or children, which may or may not include physical violence. This dynamic is dysfunctional within its own right. However, this tension can create a

different form of dysfunction when a family replaces the fighting with dysfunctional dynamics instead. Families operate like a system or a machine, which means that each family member plays a specific role that keeps the machine running. All of the roles have their own “script” to follow, and people adhering to these roles end up continuing the dysfunctional patterns. Here are the most common roles that people can fall into in a dysfunctional family:

- Role 1, The Scapegoat: The person in the “scapegoat” role is the identified “problem” and is usually blamed for all the family’s issues, whether they are actually the problem or not. This role is typically (although not always) held by one of the children.
- Role 2, The Hero: This person is high-functioning enough that the family uses them to convince themselves there is “no issue” within the family. This person justifies the presence of “the scapegoat”, and carries the burden of presenting the facade of the family being functional.
- Role 3, The Mascot: This person plays the role of emotional “referee” by stepping in with humor and positivity to diffuse or distract from serious issues.
- Role 4, The Caretaker: This individual attempts to keep everyone in the family as calm and happy as possible, even if it covers up deeper issues and dysfunction. While this helps the family to operate on a daily basis, it ends up preventing the family from healing and functioning in a healthier way.
- Role 5, The Lost Child: This family member tries to “blend into the background” in order to avoid being involved in or creating conflict. This person is usually more of a “loner” and usually struggles with self-esteem.
- Role 6, The Golden Child: This is the child that the parent(s) project all of their positive qualities onto, which often makes this child the “favorite.” This child also adopts and lives out the parents’ moral codes.

Remember that you are one member within your family who was playing a certain role before you were aware of it. You can now choose to disengage from that role, which will impact everyone in the family (hopefully in a positive way). Focus on how to direct all your individual relationships with family members to being more healthy relationships, including focusing on good communication, having fun shared experiences, and being authentic with each other. While these are good reminders, sometimes it isn’t realistic or healthy to try to change the dynamic within a family. If there was dysfunction due to a past issue that has now corrected itself, acknowledgement and healing might be what is needed to change the dynamic. If the root source of the dysfunction is still active and present (such as ongoing chronic mental health concerns, ongoing emotional and physical safety concerns), changing the family dynamic will be hard, if not impossible.

If the dynamic within the family is not fixable and it is impacting you negatively, it could be time to consider leaving the family dynamic altogether. There are many options with this, including cutting off communication with your entire family, deciding to spend time one-on-one with family members you feel safe and comfortable with, and introducing limiting factors of spending time with family (such as having your own transportation to leave situations, limiting time spent, etc.). Regardless of the level of interaction you choose, it’s important to remember that you are only one person within the family and you are not responsible for the dynamics of the whole – be gentle with yourself as much as possible. The first step in breaking the cycle is to educate yourself on the signs and roles to look out for in dysfunctional families. The second step is holding yourself accountable to showing up differently than your parents and family. Knowing the signs, being completely honest with yourself when you’re seeing them, and holding yourself accountable to addressing them when/if they come up

are critical pieces in ensuring that you don't end up making your own family dysfunctional.

Conclusion

If you are currently in a dysfunctional family dynamic, it can be helpful to go to [family therapy](#) to change the dynamics within the family. A majority of family therapy includes all the members of the family, so that the therapist can address these interactions and help correct them in real time. If you grew up in a dysfunctional family and are wanting to make sure that those dynamics are no longer impacting your own functioning or your own family, it can also be helpful to go to individual therapy. You and your therapist will talk through these dynamics, process your memories and your understandings of family relationships. You will then work to "re-write" these understandings into something that is more helpful and healthy. [Therapy works](#)— whether it's in an individual or in a family-setting. To find a therapist and get started, check out our [therapist directory](#) to find the right therapist for you. It can be difficult to realize that you have grown up in a dysfunctional family, or that you are currently in one now. Remember that this cycle of dysfunction can be broken by becoming aware of the problem, working to address the dysfunction with professional help, and by taking time to heal.

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