

Dysfunctional Families: Recognizing and Overcoming Their Effects

INTRODUCTION

"As a kid I was like a miniature adult. I cooked and cleaned and made sure my little brothers got off to school. My Mom was always depressed and stayed in bed -- she was in the hospital a lot. I guess I never really was a kid. Now, I work hard to get As, take on lots of responsibility, put on this competent front. Inside I still feel really empty."

"My dad's an alcoholic. I was always afraid to invite other kids over because I didn't want them to see what my family was like. I never really got close to people, now I don't seem to know how to let others get close. I really don't know how to have a good relationship. Most of the time I feel pretty alone."

"My parents have always had these big ambitions for me. They tell me what my career should be, who my friends should be, what kind of car I should drive, and who I should date. It's like they expect me to be perfect but don't really believe I can blow my own nose. I feel like I'm suffocating, but if I get the least bit independent they try to control me with money."

When problems and circumstances such as parental alcoholism, mental illness, child abuse, or extreme parental rigidity and control interfere with family functioning, the effects on children can sometimes linger long after these children have grown up and left their problem families. Adults raised in dysfunctional families frequently report difficulties forming and maintaining intimate relationships, maintaining positive self-esteem, and trusting others; they fear a loss of control, and deny their feelings and reality (Vannicelli, 1989).

WHAT IS A DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY?

Family dysfunction can be any condition that interferes with healthy family functioning. Most families have some periods of time where functioning is impaired by stressful circumstances (death in the family, a parent's serious illness, etc.). Healthy families tend to return to normal functioning after the crisis passes. In dysfunctional families, however, problems tend to be chronic and children do not consistently get their needs met. Negative patterns of parental behavior tend to be dominant in their children's lives.

How Do Healthy Families Work?

Healthy families are not perfect; they may have yelling, bickering, misunderstanding, tension, hurt, and anger - but not all the time. In healthy families emotional expression is allowed and accepted. Family members can freely ask for and give attention. Rules tend to be made explicit and remain consistent, but with some flexibility to adapt to individual needs and particular situations. Healthy families allow for individuality; each member is encouraged to pursue his or her own interests, and boundaries between individuals are honored.

Children are consistently treated with respect, and do not fear emotional, verbal, physical, or sexual abuse. Parents can be counted on to provide care for their children. Children are given responsibilities appropriate to their age and are not expected to take on parental responsibilities. Finally, in healthy families everyone makes mistakes; mistakes are allowed. Perfection is unattainable, unrealistic, and potentially dull and sterile.

There are many types of dysfunction in families. Some parents under-function, leaving their children to fend for themselves. Other parents over-function, never allowing their children to grow up and be on their own. Others are inconsistent or violate basic boundaries of appropriate behavior. Below is a brief description of some types of parental dysfunction along with some common problems associated with each.

WHAT GOES WRONG IN DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES?

Deficient Parents

Deficient parents hurt their children more by omission than by commission. Frequently, chronic mental illness or a disabling physical illness contributes to parental inadequacy. Children tend to take on adult responsibilities from a young age in these families. Parental emotional needs tend to take precedence, and children are often asked to be their parents' caretakers. Children are robbed of their own childhood, and they learn to ignore their own needs and feelings. Because these children are simply unable to play an adult role and take care of their parents, they often feel inadequate and guilty. These feelings continue into adulthood. As adults, they very often experience depression.

Controlling Parents

Unlike the deficient parents described above, controlling parents fail to allow their children to assume responsibilities appropriate for their age. These parents continue dominating and making decisions for their children well beyond the age at which this is necessary. Controlling parents are often driven by a fear of becoming unnecessary to their children. This fear leaves them feeling betrayed and abandoned when their children become independent (Forward, 1989). On the other hand, these children frequently feel resentful, inadequate, and powerless. Transitions into adult roles are quite difficult, as these adults frequently have difficulties making decisions independent from their parents. When they act independently these adults feel very guilty, as if growing up were a serious act of disloyalty.

Alcoholic Parents

Alcoholic families tend to be chaotic and unpredictable. Rules that apply one day don't apply the next. Promises are neither kept nor remembered. Expectations vary from one day to the next. Parents may be strict at times and indifferent at others. In addition, emotional expression is frequently forbidden and discussion about the alcohol use or related family problems is usually nonexistent. Family members are usually expected to keep problems a secret, thus preventing anyone from seeking help. All of these factors leave children feeling insecure, frustrated, and angry.

Children often feel there must be something wrong with them which makes their parents behave this way. Mistrust of others, difficulty with emotional expression, and difficulties with intimate

relationships carry over into adulthood. Children of alcoholics are at much higher risk for developing alcoholism than are children of non-alcoholics.

Abusive Parents

Abuse can be verbal, physical, or sexual. Verbal abuse - such as frequent belittling criticism - can have lasting effects, particularly when it comes from those entrusted with the child's care. Criticism can be aimed at the child's looks, intelligence, capabilities, or basic value. Some verbal abusers are very direct, while others use subtle put-downs disguised as humor. Both types are just as damaging.

Definitions of physical abuse vary widely. Many parents, at one time or another, have felt the urge to strike their child. With physically abusive parents, however, the urge is frequent and little effort is made to control this impulse. The Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act defines physical abuse as "the infliction of physical injuries such as bruises, burns, welts, cuts, bone or skull fractures; these are caused by kicking, punching, biting, beating, knifing, strapping, paddling, etc."

Striking a child has much to do with meeting the parent's emotional needs and nothing to do with concern for the child; parents often erroneously justify the abuse as "discipline" intended to "help" the child. Physically abusive parents can create an environment of terror for the child, particularly since violence is often random and unpredictable. Abused children often feel anger. Children of abusive parents have tremendous difficulties developing feelings of trust and safety even in their adult lives.

While parents may justify or rationalize verbal or physical abuse as discipline aimed at somehow helping the child, there is no rationalization for sexual abuse. Sexual abuse is the most blatant example of an adult abusing a child purely for that adult's own gratification.

Sexual abuse can be any physical contact between an adult and child where that contact must be kept secret. Demonstrations of affection -- such as hugging, kissing, or stroking a child's hair -- that can be done openly are quite acceptable and even beneficial. When physical contact is shrouded in secrecy then it is most likely inappropriate.

Sexual abuse happens to both boys and girls. It is perpetrated by both men and women. It cuts across lines of race, socioeconomic level, education level, and religious affiliation. In most cases, sexual abuse is part of an overall family pattern of dysfunction, disorganization, and inappropriate role boundaries.

Responsibility for sexual abuse in all cases rests entirely with the adult. No child is responsible for being abused. Most sexually abused children are too frightened of the consequences for themselves and their families to risk telling another adult what is happening. As a result they grow into adulthood carrying feelings of self-loathing, shame, and worthlessness. They tend to be self-punishing and have considerable difficulties with relationships and with sexuality.

Regardless of the kind of dysfunction or abuse, effects vary widely across individuals. Support from other healthy adults, success in other areas, or positive changes in the family can help prevent or minimize negative effects. The following questions may help you identify how you may have been or continue to be affected.

HOW MIGHT I BE AFFECTED?

Adults raised with family dysfunction report a variety of long-term effects. The following questions may help you assess your own situation. Answering "Yes" to these may indicate some effects from family dysfunction. Most people could likely identify with some of them. If you find yourself answering "Yes" to over half of them, you likely have some long-term effects of living in a dysfunctional family. If you find yourself answering "Yes" to the majority of them you might consider seeking some additional help.

1. Do you find yourself needing approval from others to feel good about yourself? Yes____ No____
2. Do you agree to do more for others than you can comfortably accomplish? Yes____ No____
3. Are you perfectionistic? Yes____ No____
4. Or do you tend to avoid or ignore responsibilities? Yes____ No____
5. Do you find it difficult to identify what you're feeling? Yes____ No____
6. Do you find it difficult to express feelings? Yes____ No____
7. Do you tend to think in all-or-nothing terms? Yes____ No____
8. Do you often feel lonely even in the presence of others? Yes____ No____
9. Is it difficult for you to ask for what you need from others? Yes____ No____
10. Is it difficult for you to maintain intimate relationships? Yes____ No____
11. Do you find it difficult to trust others? Yes____ No____
12. Do you tend to hang on to hurtful or destructive relationships? Yes____ No____
13. Are you more aware of others' needs and feelings than your own? Yes____ No____
14. Do you find it particularly difficult to deal with anger or criticism? Yes____ No____
15. Is it hard for you to relax and enjoy yourself? Yes____ No____
16. Do you find yourself feeling like a "fake" in your academic or professional life? Yes____ No____
17. Do you find yourself waiting for disaster to strike even when things are going well in your life?
Yes____ No____
18. Do you find yourself having difficulty with authority figures? Yes____ No____

HOW CAN SOMEONE OVERCOME THE EFFECTS OF A DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY?

Regardless of the source of dysfunction, you have survived. You have likely developed a number of valuable skills to get you through tough circumstances.

Consequently, it is important to first stop and take stock. You may find that much of what you learned in your family is valuable.

Many of the survival behaviors you developed are your best assets. For example, people who grow up in dysfunctional families often have finely tuned empathy for others; they are often very achievement-oriented and highly successful in some areas of their lives; they are often resilient to stress and adaptive to change. In examining changes you may want to make in yourself, it is important not to lose sight of your good qualities.

Patience is necessary! Negative effects from growing up in dysfunctional families often stem from survival behaviors that were very helpful when you were growing up, but may become problematic in your adult life. Remember that you spent years learning and practicing your old survival skills, so it may take awhile to learn and practice new behaviors.

1. Get Help.

In most dysfunctional families children tend to learn to doubt their own intuition and emotional reactions. Often outside support provides an objective perspective and much-needed affirmation which will help you learn to trust your own reactions. Help or support can take many forms: individual counseling, therapy groups such as Survivors of Incest or Adult Children of Dysfunctional Families (ACODF), and self-help groups such as Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOA), Alanon, or Codependents Anonymous (CODA). Texas Woman's University offers a variety of therapy groups each semester.

2. Learn to Identify and Express Emotions.

Growing up in a dysfunctional family often results in an exaggerated attention to others' feelings and a denial of your own feelings and experiences. While this often results in very good sensitivity to others, you may have neglected sensitivity to yourself. Stop each day and identify emotions you are or have been experiencing. What triggered them? How might you affirm or respond to them? Try keeping a daily feelings journal.

Be selective in sharing your feelings with others. You may not find it helpful to share all of your feelings. In sharing your feelings with others take small risks first, then wait for a reaction. If the responses seem supportive and affirming try taking some larger risks.

3. Allow Yourself to Feel Angry About What Happened.

Forgiveness is a very reasonable last step in recovery, but it is a horrible first step. Children need to believe in and trust their parents; therefore, when parents behave badly, children tend to blame themselves and feel responsible for their parents' mistakes. These faulty conclusions are carried into adulthood, often leaving guilt, shame, and low self-esteem. When you begin with trying to forgive your parents you will likely continue to feel very badly about yourself.

Placing the responsibility for what happened during your childhood where it belongs, i.e., with the responsible adults, allows you to feel less guilt and shame and more nurturance and acceptance toward yourself.

It is usually helpful to find productive ways to vent your anger. This can be done in support groups or with good friends. Try writing a letter to one or both of your parents and then burning the letter. You may want to talk with your parents directly about what happened.

If you decide to do this it is important to keep your goal clear. Do you want to encourage change and work for a better relationship, or are you trying to get even or hurt them back? Pursuing revenge frequently results in more guilt and shame in the long run. Holding on to anger and resentment indefinitely is also problematic and self-defeating. Focusing on old resentments can prevent growth and change.

4. Begin the Work of Learning to Trust Others.

Take small risks at first in letting others know you. Slowly build up to taking bigger risks. Learning who to trust and how much to trust is a lengthy process. Adult children from dysfunctional families tend to approach relationships in an all-or-nothing manner. Either they become very intimate and dependent in a relationship, or they insist on nearly complete self-sufficiency, taking few interpersonal risks. Both of these patterns tend to be self-defeating.

Frequently, children of dysfunctional families continue to seek approval and acceptance from their parents and families. If these people could not meet your needs when you were a child, they are unlikely to meet your needs now. Recognize your parents' limitations while still accepting whatever support they can offer. Seek your support from other adults. Practice saying how you feel and asking for what you need. Don't expect people to guess -- tell them. This step will likely require much effort.

5. Practice Taking Good Care of Yourself.

Frequently, survivors of dysfunctional families have an exaggerated sense of responsibility. They tend to overwork and forget to take care of themselves. Try identifying the things you really enjoy doing, then give yourself permission to do at least one of these per day. Work on balancing the things you should do with the things you want to do. Balance is a key word for people who've grown up in dysfunctional families.

Identify areas you tend to approach compulsively: Drinking? Eating? Shopping? Working? Exercising? How might you approach this in a more balanced fashion? One of the best things you can do for your mental and emotional well being is to take good physical care of yourself. Do you eat a good healthy balanced diet? Do you get regular exercise?

6. Begin to Change Your Relationships with Your Family.

Keep the focus on yourself and your behavior and reactions. Remember, you cannot change others, but you can change yourself. Work on avoiding entanglements in your family's problems. Al-anon calls this "detachment." Counseling or support is usually crucial when trying to change family relationships. You are fighting a lifetime of training in getting hooked into their problems, usually including large doses of guilt.

It is also important to be patient with your family. They may find it difficult to understand and accept the changes they see in your behavior. While most families can be workable, undoubtedly there are some rare families who are far too dangerous or abusive to risk further contact.

7. Read.

Many books provide helpful information about dysfunctional families and strategies for recovering from their effects. Here is a short list of some we recommend:

Forward, S. (1989). *Toxic parents: Overcoming their hurtful legacy and reclaiming your life*. New York: Bantam Books.

Gravitz, H.L. and Bowden, J.L. (1985). *Guide to recovery: A book for adult children of alcoholics*. Holmes Beach, FL: Learning Publications.

Beattie, M. (1987). *Codependent no more: How to stop controlling others and start caring for yourself*. New York: Harper and Row.

Gil, E. (1983) *Outgrowing the pain: A book for and about adults abused as children*. San Francisco: Launch Press.

Bass, E. and Davis, L. (1988). *The courage to heal: A guide for women survivors of child sexual abuse*. New York: Harper & Row.

Vannicelli, M. (1989). *Group psychotherapy with adult children of alcoholics: treatment techniques and countertransference*. New York: Guilford Press.

Forward, S. (1989). *Toxic parents: Overcoming their hurtful legacy and reclaiming your life*. New York: Bantam Books.