

Growing Up In a Dysfunctional Family

“Dysfunctional simply means that it doesn’t work, but it often looks like it does. In contrast to a functional family, it has been **suggested that the dysfunctional family is a dictatorship run by its sickest member**. It is one that does not function in a normal, healthy way. The family members are unable to find stability. **A dysfunctional family is characterized BY LACK OF BOUNDARIES.**

We usually think of alcoholism or drug addiction in the family as the primary cause of the dysfunction, but it can also be caused by a variety of other different problems that families face: a serious illness (such as cancer), a death in the family, or mental illness. It can be caused by either an extramarital affair, religious abuse, or other abuses. It can be caused by anything that rocks or stresses the family. Often dysfunction is intergenerational. (means that families pass on what they learn to the next generation and so on. . .)

The question is no longer, “Did I come from a dysfunctional family?”, but **“To what degree was my family dysfunctional?”**

It is not “How dysfunctional was my family?” but , **“In what ways was it dysfunctional?”**

It is not “Did it affect me to come from this family?” but **“How did it affect me, what roles did I play and what am I left with now?”**

It is not “Do I need to do something about my family of origin and the resulting boundary issues?” but **“What do I do to address the specific issues resulting from my dysfunctional family of origin?”**

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Dysfunctional Family Roles

In an effort to 1) survive and 2) have a sense of stability, the family members will usually develop specific roles. The major roles are listed below. Take the time to read them carefully and decide where your family of origin members might fit.

Typical major dysfunctional roles include the following;

1. The Addict
2. The Chief Enabler
3. The Hero
4. The Lost Child
5. The Mascot
6. The Gooder
7. The Righter
8. The Driver
9. The Controller
10. The Superior
11. The Agginer
12. The Victim
13. The Inadequate
14. The Excitement Seeker

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1. The ADDICT

Anyone can fit this role, but usually the mother or father manifest most clearly. One of the most graphic examples of this role would be a father who is addicted to alcohol and as such is very dependent and has repressed feelings of shame, fear, pain, guilt and anger. He is out of touch with reality and hides behind walls of anger, denial, charm, projection, rigidity, blaming, perfectionism and self righteousness. He then medicates his feelings with some addictive substance. **NOT FEELING IS USUALLY MORE IMPORTANT THAN BEING CLOSE TO SOMEONE.**

2. The CHIEF ENABLER

The chief enabler is usually the mother in the classic model of the alcoholic home. She is codependent, which means that she depends on the addict to justify her need to be caretaker. A good working definition of codependency is, “a codependent person is one who has let another person’s behavior affect him/her and who is obsessed with controlling that person’s behavior.” Characteristically she is super responsible. She wears a masked smile, pretending that everything is fine, yet she has repressed feelings of hurt, anger, emptiness, guilt and inadequacy. She feels stuck, overwhelmed, and powerless. She hides behind walls of martyrdom, seriousness, control, denial, people pleasing, caretaking, protecting, rescuing, over-responsibility, self blaming, hostility, low self worth, physical illness and fragility. **SAVING/ENABLING OTHERS IS USUALLY MORE IMPORTANT THAN BEING CLOSE TO ANYONE.**

Caretaking makes the chief enabler feel important and self righteous. The family benefits because someone is taking responsibility for the structure and activities in the family.

3. The HERO

The family hero is usually the first born child. He/she is usually super responsible and not only takes responsibility off mom’s shoulders, but also does the best to make good grades, make the team, work an extra job, whatever it takes to make the family look good. The hero provides a sense of worth for the family. The hero takes on a lot of the responsibility that the enabler can not fulfill because they are busy taking care of the addict. The hero usually has repressed feelings of guilt, inadequacy, loneliness, confusion, anger and hurt. He hides behind walls of trying to be someone special, people pleasing, helpfulness, approval seeking, over achieving, intellectualizing, being the little parent. He gets a lot of attention and acclaim. He is compulsive and driven and usually becomes a workaholic. It is not uncommon for the hero to become the addict later on in life. **SAVING PEOPLE IS USUALLY MORE IMPORTANT THAN BEING CLOSE TO THEM.**

4. The LOST CHILD

The lost child may be the middle child in the family. She/he is typically sweet, quiet, and shy. She is the child that the family doesn't have to worry about, because she offers the family relief and stability. She won't rock the boat and tends to stay in her own little fantasy world as a result. She can be very manipulative and have trouble making decisions, but can also be very creative. She will have repressed feelings of being ignored, confusion, hurt, inadequacy, unimportance and anger. **HIDING IS USUALLY MORE IMPORTANT THAN BEING CLOSE TO SOMEONE.**

She hides behind walls of being quiet, withdrawn, and invisible; of being a loner, dreamer, and super independent, of avoiding stressful situations, of low achievement and physical problems like asthma, bed wetting, eating disorders, confused sexual identity and sometimes promiscuous behavior.

5. The MASCOT

The mascots are usually the youngest in the family. They provide the comic relief from the stress for the family. They learn that things get a little easier around the house when they act cute. They are often immature and are not taken seriously. The family regards them as fragile and in need of protection. Mascots discover that being cute or funny relieves tension around the house and also helps them to get into the spot light occasionally. They have repressed feelings of being crazy, being scared, high anxiety, hurt, loneliness, confusion and pain.

They hide behind walls of providing distraction, being gutsy, feeling special, having pets, seeking attention, and clowning around. They are hyperactive, fragile, compulsive givers and can't handle stress. **BEING FUNNY AND CHARMING IS USUALLY MORE IMPORTANT THAN BEING CLOSE TO SOMEONE.**

6. The GOODER

The gooder must be "gooder" than others so that they may look down on others "less good". Often the gooder comes in the form of moral/religious superiority. Women more often than men occupy this position in our society. **As children gooders often do what they are told and are regarded by parents as ideal children.** They learn very quickly that in order to be ok, they must be better than others, so that they end up constantly comparing themselves with others and looking for the faults in those around them. They will point out, usually quite openly, what is wrong with everyone else. They cover feelings of inadequacy, anger, guilt and being overwhelmed. **BEING MORE "GOOD" THAN OTHERS IS USUALLY MORE IMPORTANT THAN BEING CLOSE TO SOMEONE.**

They are seen by others as "having their stuff together" and make ideal employees. The problems begin when they crank up the "moral high ground" and then those around them realize that they are being put down.

7. The RIGHTER

attempts to exert power over others by always being right. They consistently judge the right and wrong in every situation around themselves. This role is very closely related to the gooder but differs in that the righter is will tell you that you are wrong, and the gooder will tell you that they are “gooder” than you (better). The righter has intense feelings of having to be in control, right, superior and is constantly on guard so that they will never be wrong. In the face of evidence that they are wrong, they will always be able to perform some type of maneuver so that they aren’t wrong. **BEING RIGHT IS USUALLY MORE IMPORTANT THAN BEING CLOSE TO SOMEONE. This role is usually filled by males, often those who are first born, or a later born male that is struggling to “catch up”**. The righter represses feelings of insecurity, insufficiency, a sense of worthlessness and often suffers from the “imposter syndrome”. What you may see on the outside is lots of micro management of others, criticism, suggestions, arrogance, self righteousness, competence at the expense of relationships, having not being, focus on use of knowledge to overpower others rather than to help. Usually this role is highly competitive and has little use for cooperation.

8. The DRIVER

is very active in the pursuit of whatever. Their overambition is a cover for feelings that they are really nothing. They are constantly going, going, going and will work long hours at the expense of themselves and others to reach their goals. The critical point in understanding this role is that there is never an end point. . . the Driver keeps the dynamic going by coming up with more to accomplish, other projects to do, more money to make, etc. A key word in understanding the Driver is “insatiable”. . . and as such “it” is never enough and therefore the Driver only has brief moments of contentment and satisfaction. Usually they are uncomfortable with contentment and need something to be doing to keep away from the feelings that they are nothing. The Driver is actually medicating away from the fear by always being busy. **DOING THINGS IS USUALLY MORE IMPORTANT THAN BEING CLOSE IN A RELATIONSHIP.**

You may see them as always on the go, competent, aloof from being in the trenches in relationships, and often they are seen as industrious and valuing work/projects more than relationships.

9. The CONTROLLER

continues to strive for perfection through orderliness, intellect and or rightness. They don’t like what they can’t manage, such as spontaneity, emotional expression, and surprises. They fear feelings since they may take them out of control. Through logic and the continual application of the scientific method they believe that their reasoning can handle all life’s tasks. They feel powerless in situations where intellectual expression is not the order of the day. They may exert excessive control over themselves, but this role often extends to working hard to control others. **BEING IN CONTROL IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN BEING CLOSE IN A RELATIONSHIP.**

They are usually repressing fears not being in control and inadequacy. Sentences for this role might be; “I’m only ok when things are going exactly the way that I think they should” or “I’m only ok when I am in control of things/people in my life.” Or “People should act the way that I think they should act.”

10. The SUPERIOR

manages people and the environment so that they will always be number one. If they can't be number one in socially approved ways, they may become asocial, or the number one worst. Tattling is sometimes a tool for a child to appear superior to siblings. In the interaction with parents, the superior child may know more things, be better at certain activities and at times may correct parents. Usually first born children fit into this category as when extreme they may be hard to be around, boring, threatening and overbearing. They can pay a high price for this thought process and usually have trouble in relationships, due to the need to be superior. Not only is it overwhelming to them, but others around them find that the bid for superiority gets old quickly. There is no safety in interaction with person. **BEING SUPERIOR IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN BEING CLOSE IN A RELATIONSHIP.** When others are around someone who is in this role they generally feel inferior or threatened, as safety is usually minimal or not present to any great degree.

11. The "AGGINER"

is rarely for anything, but they will be consistently against everything. They will be against the beliefs, the actions and values of others. They may be the only one who believes that they have to fight for a place in the family. They are very reactive, NOT PROACTIVE, and spend a lot of time in reaction to others/situations rather than being more individuated and goal oriented. The agginer is very dependent in the sense that the locus of control is external and so the focus will consistently be outward, rather than internally motivated. Another way to view this role is that the internal compass has not been as developed as it might/should be. **BEING AGAINST THINGS AND SPEAKING OUT AGGRESSIVELY IS USUALLY MORE IMPORTANT THAN BEING CLOSE.**

12. The VICTIM

suffers in superior ways and seems to always have something bad/wrong happening to them. They seem to have more problems than others and often spend a lot of time talking about their misfortunes. This role can manifest with physical symptoms, but is not limited to that. You may find victims talking about how put upon they are by being in relationships with people who are "uncaring, superior, etc. . ." They will consistently complain about how bad their plight is. They are slow to respond to opportunities to change or heal and at some level reinforce where they are at. Somewhat hard to deal with because we tend to feel sorry for them and not want to burden them with our feelings, the truth or responsibilities.

BEING DOWN AND OUT IS USUALLY MORE IMPORTANT THAN BEING CLOSE. THIS IS HOW THEY GET CLOSE, but it overall it doesn't work well. Others tend to get "sucked" in and feel pity at first and then get exasperated at how much work a victim is.

13. The INADEQUATE

spends lots of time showing you that they can't do things. . . avoids responsibilities by displaying inability through clumsiness, bungling, awkwardness, and failure. Exerts power over others when they step in and rescue them or take over the responsibilities that they are avoiding. Can be very aggravating or "works" when with an enabler. Being around this role can be particularly annoying if you are not a hero or enabler. This role **USES THEIR INABILITY TO PERFORM LIFE'S TASKS AS A WAY TO STAY AWAY FROM INTIMACY**. Being inadequate allows them all kinds of connections with others, as others may step in and "help" them, get angry with them, encourage them etc. . . but all of those interactions reinforce the basic dynamic of HOW this role "hooks" others and stays "safe".

14. The EXCITEMENT SEEKER

pursues the novel, chaotic, and adventurous life and avoids the responsibilities of the daily routine. This can be done with other excitement seekers or alone, but the goal is always the same, to shun the dull and grasp the stimulating. The form can be fun, entertainment, fears, worry or danger. This person **USES EXCITEMENT TO DISTANCE FROM THE DAY TO DAY MAINTAINANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS**. We can end up feeling worried about them or inadequate in ourselves as we respond to the chaos and excitement in their life. This role is usually one that scares others and unless you are doing the chaos/activities with the person, they may seem distant or aloof.

Study Guide for Roles

Roles can combine and often do. . . as an example you might want to consider what a SUPERIOR – EXCITEMENT seeker would "look" like. They would be into the chaos and activities, but with a superior twist. Not only would they hike K2, they would do it without oxygen. . . not only would they scuba, they would go deeper than they are rated, etc.

Some questions that may help you;

1. List all your siblings and then one at a time consider what roles they each played. Look for specific examples that would support your conclusions.
2. Ask yourself how each of the roles was used? Why did they develop the way that they did? How useful were they in CONTINUING THE STATUS QUO in the family interaction?
3. What is your primary role? Do you have more than one? How did you use it? How did it serve you? How was it reinforced? How does it cost you now? How does it benefit you now?
4. What roles do your children fill now? How have you contributed to that? How effective are they in everyday functioning?
5. What role does your spouse/lover tend to seem to fit? How does that mesh with you? What kinds of advantages do you have with how those roles fit?
6. What roles do you think that your parents each played? How did that affect your role choice?
7. Why might it be important to understand your role(s) and how it impacts others? What things would you like to change about your role? How would you go about doing that