

Dysfunctional Families

The problem behind the problem

T*This four-part series of publications addresses many of the underlying issues involved in alcohol or drug abuse, or any other kind of compulsive or obsessive behavior. Professionals in the area of substance abuse recovery and counseling contend that addiction is much more involved than the mere act of taking a drink of alcohol or swallowing pills. Like many other kinds of human behavior, compulsive or obsessive behavior is very complex. A variety of elements contribute to the motivation and implementation of behavior. The surface problem is the compulsive behavior; deeper problems or issues are the driving forces behind the behavior. There are problems behind the problem.*

Newspaper headlines grab our attention with reports of spouse beatings, child abuse, sexual abuse, murder, drug-related crimes, and alcohol-related accidents. Many of these behaviors occur within the four walls of a family's home. Even when criminal behavior is absent, alcoholism and other obsessive and compulsive disorders dominate the emotional climate in millions of American families. Millions more experience constant arguing, divorce, runaway children, or emotional cutoff between family members.

Why are so many families in turmoil? Why is there so much unhappiness and dissatisfaction expressed? Why do so many try to escape their life situation through compulsive behaviors of various kinds? We will probably never know the complete answer to such questions. We can find at least part of the answer, however, by understanding how different families relate to their individual members. We can better understand how they work or function.

We all grew up in some kind of family. In that family, we learned how to relate to our larger world by relating to family members. Every member of our family had an impact on who we are today and on how we relate to other people. Families are a lot like mobiles hanging from the ceiling. When

one part of the mobile moves, all the other parts move because all the parts connect to one another. The individual parts may move in different directions according to their size and shape and location, but they all move. Mobiles move very slowly and gently unless something disturbs them. Families seem to work in a similar way.

Often, the disturbance that upsets the balance of a family occurs within the family system itself. The presence of an alcoholic, for example, produces change in the behavior patterns of the other family members. The focus of the family becomes the alcoholism. The presence of other types of compulsive behavior can similarly affect families. A family member experiencing a chronic illness or a mental health problem can also throw a family out of balance. Such unbalanced families do not function well; they are dysfunctional.

Rules of Dysfunctional Families

While all families change over time, unbalanced families remain dysfunctional unless they recognize the source of disturbance and learn to deal with it. A family is

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dysfunctional to the extent that it does not provide a healthy environment for its members. Such families have a rigid system of rules, often unspoken, that are not helpful to the health of its members. Some of these rules include:

1. It's not okay to talk about or express our feelings openly.
2. Don't address issues or relationships directly.
3. Always be strong, always be good, always be perfect.
4. Don't be selfish.
5. Do as I say. . .not as I do.
6. It's not okay to play.
7. Don't rock the boat.
8. Don't talk about sex.

Rules such as these hurt individuals and families in several ways. They discourage open and honest communication between family members. Since communication is the life-blood of relationships, these family members often relate ineffectively with one another. They also have trouble relating to people outside their family.

Such rules also squelch an individual's feelings. Family members get the message that some feelings are bad, and they cannot express or even tolerate these feelings. When a "bad" feeling occurs, such as anger, a person is also likely to feel guilt and shame. In many families, sexual feelings and needs are also considered unacceptable, in and of themselves. The result of having normal sexual feelings is even more shame and guilt.

Such rules also teach family members that being perfect is more important than being real. When they make natural human mistakes, they experience more guilt and shame. Their real self, or true self, is no longer acceptable because it is less than perfect. Gradually, they deny their real selves and develop false selves to try to deal with the guilt.

Finally, the rules of dysfunctional families do not allow members to take care of themselves. They sacrifice personal needs for the needs of others or for the needs of the family system. Others may consider it selfish to concentrate on personal wants and needs. And, of course, they see selfishness as negative.

These rules are hurtful primarily because family members have a difficult time knowing the difference between unacceptable behavior and being unacceptable themselves. The messages they hear are not, "You are behaving badly." Rather they hear, "You are bad because you behave in bad ways." Persons who see themselves as bad or defective develop a low self-worth. This process usually begins early in childhood and follows them into adulthood. A poor self-image affects the way people act, think, feel, and relate to others.

Characteristics of Dysfunctional Families

Many families are unhealthy or dysfunctional because of alcoholism or drug abuse. This is not always the case, however. Some counseling professionals have identified at least four different kinds of dysfunctional family systems. These include:

1. The alcoholic and chemically dependent family.
2. The emotionally or psychologically disturbed family.
3. The physically abusive or sexually abusive family.
4. The fundamentalistic or rigidly dogmatic family.

All four types of families have rigid rules. The members of these families usually have poor communication patterns, low-self image, and loss of identity. They very often will behave in self-destructive ways.

Because of the family rules, dysfunctional families are characterized by one or more of the following:

- Keeping the family "secrets."
 - Being unable to identify and express feelings.
 - Playing one family member against the other.
 - Perfectionism.
 - The inability to play, have fun, and be spontaneous.
 - Double messages.
 - A high tolerance for inappropriate behavior.
 - Having identities of individuals overlapping with others.
- The degree of dysfunction depends on how many of these traits exist in a family and how often they occur.

Along with the family characteristics, individual personality traits develop among family members. Persons from dysfunctional families often:

- Experience loneliness, even in a crowd.
- Need the approval of others; are people pleasers.
- Are inconsistent in their behavior.
- Have a need to control or to be controlled.
- Lead a very rigid, structured lifestyle.
- Have a fear of failure.

In addition, children from dysfunctional families are more likely than others to have low self-esteem. They often experience emotional instability, depression, and anxiety. They have difficulties with peers. They are more likely to develop anorexia nervosa or bulimia. They are prone toward alcohol or chemical dependence. And they are more likely to attempt suicide.

How Dysfunctional Families Contribute to Compulsive Behaviors

A dysfunctional family can exist without the presence of alcoholism or other substance abuse. The risk for such obsessions increases, however, due to the operating and communication style of the family. Dysfunctional families are shame-based systems characterized by chaos, inconsistency, and unpredictability. They live in denial of their problems, and they lack emotional support from their members.

Such a family system does not nurture a child in his or her tasks of developing trust, individuality, and self-control. Children are unable to establish themselves as persons separate and apart from other family members. They become increasingly dependent on others for a sense of self-worth. They want others to make them happy.

Persons who are most dependent on others are also those persons most likely to become dependent on alcohol, drugs, or compulsive behaviors. They experience an emotional emptiness, which other persons are unable to fill. In desperation, they try to fill that emptiness with something that will help kill their emotional pain. In the long run, however, compulsive behaviors or substance abuse only increase the pain.

Taking Care of Yourself

Do not despair if you came from a family with many problems and are experiencing some of the feelings or behaviors just discussed. To fill emotional emptiness, you need to reclaim your true self. You must try to establish your own identity as a worthwhile person. You can do this by starting to take care of yourself. Learn to identify your needs and wants. Try to do something every day to help fulfill those needs.

Learn to accept your feelings without self judgment. Feelings are neither good nor bad. Feelings are just feelings. How you express those feelings may be helpful or hurtful, but the feelings themselves are okay to have. Some feelings are painful, but it is not necessary to cover them up. It is okay to feel the pain; you won't die from the feeling. Other feelings are pleasant; allow yourself the pleasure of such feelings.

Take positive steps to improve your self-image. Learn a new skill. Take a class. Improve your physical appearance in some way. Spend some time and some money on YOU! You are worth it! Take pride in your accomplishments, even the small ones. Take time to be alone and engage in your favorite activities. Learn to see yourself as unique and special.

Begin setting personal limits. Learn to say NO! Help others to understand that you care about them, but you also care about yourself. Refuse to accept the false guilt that you are being selfish. Taking care of yourself by setting limits allows you to be of genuine help to others.

Join a support group. There is strength in numbers. Groups like Codependents Anonymous, Al-Anon, and Adult Children of Alcoholics consist of people who come from dysfunctional families. You can share in their experience, strength, and hope. As part of such a group, you can learn to live life free from obsessions and compulsive behaviors. You can learn to quit controlling others or being controlled by them. You can learn to take good care of yourself.

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Suggested Reading List

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