

## **The Effect of Family Dysfunction on Adult Relationships**

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 (e.g., a 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 behaviour tend to be dominant in their children's lives.

### **How Healthy Families Work**

Healthy families are not perfect. There may be some bickering, misunderstandings, 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 honoured.

In healthy families, 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. In healthy families, everyone makes mistakes, and mistakes are allowed.

### **What Goes Wrong in Dysfunctional Families**

There are many types of dysfunction in families. Some parents under-function, leaving their children to fend for themselves or be caretakers of the adults or younger children in the household. Other parents over-function, never allowing their children to grow up and be on their own – sometimes because they seek a sense of power by dominating or controlling the child, and in other cases because they fear losing the roles their children play in their emotional lives. Other parents are inconsistent or violate basic boundaries of appropriate behaviour.

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.

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 humour. Both types are just as damaging, and can lead children to carry feelings of self-loathing, shame, and worthlessness that damage their future relationships.

Physically abusive parents can create an environment of terror for the child, particularly since violence is often random and unpredictable. Children of abusive parents have tremendous difficulties developing feelings of trust and safety even in their adult lives.

Demonstrations of affection – such as hugging or stroking a child's hair – that can be done openly are acceptable and beneficial. When physical contact is shrouded in secrecy then it is most likely inappropriate. 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 often have considerable difficulties with relationships and with sexuality.

### **Effects on Adult Relationships**

When children are raised inside dysfunctional families, it can impact their adult relationships. The following questions may help you assess your own situation. Most people can likely identify with some of the following questions. If you answer "Yes" to over half of these questions, it may indicate that your experiences as a child in a dysfunctional family is having negative effects on your adult relationships.

1. Do you need 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 a perfectionist?  
Yes\_\_\_ No\_\_\_
4. 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. Is it difficult for you 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 the needs and feelings of others 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 have difficulty with authority figures (whether or not they are treating you fairly)?  
Yes\_\_\_ No\_\_\_

### **Overcoming the Effects of a Dysfunctional Family**

The first thing to remember is that you have survived – and you have likely developed a number of valuable skills to get you through tough circumstances. So it's important to step back and take stock. You may find that much of what you learned in your family is valuable, and that many of the skills you developed to survive are actually your best assets. 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 also necessary! Growing up in a dysfunctional family created survival behaviours that are helpful to a child, but which may be problematic in your adult life. You spent years learning and practicing your old survival skills, so it may take awhile to learn and practice new behaviours.

## **Here Are Some Things You Can Do To Help Yourself**

### **1. Get Help**

In most dysfunctional families, children learn to doubt their own feelings and emotional reactions. Outside support provides an objective perspective and much-needed affirmation of your experiences, which will help you learn to trust your feelings. Help or support can take many forms:

- individual counselling
- group work such as healing circles, talking circles, or community art projects
- speaking to a trusted elder or spiritual leader

### **2. Learn to Identify and Express Emotions**

Growing up in a dysfunctional family often results in an exaggerated attention to the feelings of other people 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.

Here are some things you can do to learn how to pay attention to yourself, and how to move from triggered emotional reactions to chosen emotional responses:

- Stop each day and identify the emotions you are or have been experiencing. What triggered them? How might you affirm or respond to them?
- Try keeping a daily feelings journal. Write about the feelings you had during the day, what emotions you carry as a result, and how you might move through those emotions in order to arrive at a better place. (Check the Self-Care Assessment on this webpage if you need help with this.)
- 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 their reaction. If the responses seem supportive and affirming, then try taking some larger risks. If the person/people you are communicating with are not supportive and affirming, then you may want to set a new boundary for your interactions.

### **3. Allow Yourself to Feel Angry or Sad About What Happened**

Forgiveness is a reasonable last step in recovering from childhood trauma, but it is a horrible first step. Children need to believe in and trust their parents. When parents behave badly, children tend to blame themselves and feel responsible for their parents' mistakes. These faulty conclusions are carried into adulthood, leaving survivors with 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 – with the adults who were around you – 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' or siblings' 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**

Survivors of dysfunctional families often 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. (Check the Self-Care Assessment on this webpage if you need help with this.) Work on balancing the things you *should* do with the things you *want* to do. Balance is a key word for people who have grown up in dysfunctional families. Identify areas you tend to approach compulsively, such as drinking, eating, shopping, working, or exercising. Ask yourself 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. Eat a healthy, balanced diet that is low in processed foods and high in whole foods such as vegetables, fruits, and whole grains. Get regular exercise by walking, swimming, cycling, or running. Cleaning the house and working in the garden is exercise, too!

#### **6. Change Your Relationship to Your Family**

Keep the focus on yourself and your behaviour and reactions. Remember, you cannot change others, but you can change yourself. Work on becoming detached from the drama

and avoiding entanglements in your family's problems. You may want to seek counselling or support when trying to change family relationships. You are fighting a lifetime of training in getting hooked into their problems, and it may take time to change your reactions to responses. 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 behaviour. While most families can be workable, there are some families who are far too dangerous or abusive to risk further contact.

### **7. Read (or Listen to an Audiobook)**

Many books provide helpful information about dysfunctional families and strategies for recovering from their effects. Kansas State University Counselling Services recommends:

- *Toxic Parents: Overcoming Their Hurtful Legacy and Reclaiming Your Life*, by Susan Forward
- *Recovery: A Guide for Adult Children of Alcoholics*, by Herbert L. Gravitz and Julie D. Bowden
- *Outgrowing the Pain: A Book For and About Adults Abused as Children*, by Eliana Gil
- *The Courage to Heal: A Guide For Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*, by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis
- *The Courage to Heal Workbook: For Women and Men Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*, by Laura Davis

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