

Roles of the Dysfunctional Family (adapted from the book Conquering Codependency)

Members in families naturally take on different roles. In a healthy situation, these roles are flexible and change as they need to and are appropriate for the situation. In unhealthy situations, these become fixed or rigid. The dysfunctional family organizes itself around some problem. The problem shapes the way the family interacts, while family members deny that the problem exists. The common element in all of these roles is the desire to escape pain, gain self-worth, and avoid reality. As children, these roles were our coping mechanisms. Today, our marriages and other relationships suffer because we have carried these dysfunctional childhood roles into our current situations.

Listed below are some of the dysfunctional roles that develop. As you read these, many of you will identify with the fact that you have played more than one role.

The Enabler (Various members of the family often share the role of enabler)

The enabler keeps the family unit together no matter the cost. The enabler vows to keep the family secret in order to keep peace. They constantly bail others out of trouble, which keeps others from experiencing the consequences of their behavior. They exert much energy trying to fix the family. They confuse love with pity. The wife of an addicted person traditionally becomes an enabler. The underlying emotion that fuels this unhealthy behavior is the fear of being abandoned.

The Hero

This is usually, but not always, the first-born child. The hero is the overachiever. Their achievement takes the focus off the family's problem. The hero bases their value on performance. Hero's are often forced to become little adults and are expected to take care of other siblings. They become caregivers. The dysfunctional parent may even look to this child for advice instead of getting their needs met by another adult. The hero has an overdeveloped sense of responsibility. The hero makes the family proud but at the expense of having his/her own needs neglected. The hero's unhealthy guilt and need to be accepted keeps him/her going.

Celebrate Recovery

The Scapegoat

This is the child who “takes the heat” or gets blamed for the family’s problems. The scapegoat will almost always rebel and seek attention in unhealthy ways. The scapegoat gets attention by getting into trouble. It may not be healthy attention, but attention none the less. The scapegoat usually resorts to such things as drugs, sex, alcohol or stealing. Their behavior takes the focus off the family’s “problem”. It is common to hear such things as “If little brother was not in so much trouble, we would be a healthy family.” The cost to the scapegoat is obvious.

The Lost Child

The lost child deals with the family’s problems by denying they exist. They will spend a lot of time away from the family. Others may not even notice them missing. The lost child will never want to do anything to draw attention to themselves. This is the one who spends a lot of time locked in their room, or off somewhere playing by themselves. The lost child becomes a master of blending into their surroundings, unnoticed. Other may think that the family’s problems don’t even affect this child because of their quiet nature. The lost child feels an overwhelming sense of loneliness, a need to be loved, and to belong.

The Mascot

The mascot may be referred to as the family clown. This is often the younger child. The mascot will attempt to keep the peace and diffuse painful situations by telling jokes or performing humorous stunts. Comedy becomes a means of coping with pain. Their playfulness and silliness brings the family a “distorted” kind of joy. They are the life of the party. The mascot is very in tune with how others are feeling. The cost to the mascot is that his or her true feelings of pain and isolation are never expressed and therefore they develop “frozen feelings.”