Types Of Dysfunctional Families
The following are some examples of patterns that frequently occur in dysfunctional families.

- The Inadequate Parent: Inadequate or deficient parents hurt their children more by omission than by commission. Frequently, 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 quickly learn to ignore their own needs and feelings.

- The Controlling Parent: 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. On the other hand, these children frequently feel resentful, inadequate, and powerless.

- The Addicted Parent: One or both parents have addictions or compulsions (e.g., drugs, alcohol, promiscuity, gambling, overworking, and/or overeating) that have strong influences on family members. Addicted families tend to be chaotic and unpredictable and 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.

- The Verbal Abusive Parent: Whether overly abusive or subtly sarcastic, they demoralize their children with constant put-downs and rob them of their self-confidence.

- The Physically Abusive Parent: They use the threat or application of physical violence as the primary means of control. Children may have to witness violence, may be forced to participate in punishing siblings, or may live in fear of explosive outbursts. As adults they often struggle with how to manage anger or their own deep-seated rage.

- The Sexually Abusive Parent: Whether flagrantly sexual or covertly seductive or inappropriate, they are ultimate betrayers, destroying the very heart of childhood—its innocence.

The “F Word” – FAMILY!
Understanding Complex Family Systems & How They Impact Us Now!

Everyone has had a conflict with their family at some time or another, but for some it is more of a lifetime struggle involving much confusion and emotional pain. Many people hope that once they leave home, they will leave their family and childhood problems behind. However, many find that they experience similar problems, as well as similar feelings and relationship patterns, long after they have left the family environment.

Leaving Home isn’t always as easy as we would like—especially when it comes to “psychologically” leaving home. Growing up in any family can be challenging at times, but there are often special problems and challenges for people who have been born and/or raised in what are called “dysfunctional” families.

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.

A dysfunctional family is a family in which conflict, neglect, misbehavior and even abuse on the part of individual members of the family occur continually. Types of dysfunction include:

- Alcoholism and/or substance abuse issues
- Physical, sexual, emotional and/or verbal abuse
- Parental mental illness
- Frequent chaos and unpredictability
- Lack of clear boundaries
- Role reversals (children become the “parents”, and parents are the “children”)
- High levels of denial
- Extreme rigidity and inflexibility in family rules and expected behavior
- Little, no, or poor communication
- High levels of tension and/or arguing
- Socially isolated families that discourage relationships with outsiders
- Extended periods of silence, blame and avoidance as primary coping mechanisms
- Overall family messages of “don’t feel, don’t talk, don’t trust”

Often, children who grow up in these types of families do not even know that they are abnormal. It is a common and a survival instinct to want to see and interpret our families as “normal.” You may find yourself accommodating to make the past seem normal (e.g., “No, I wasn’t beaten, I was just spanked”; “My mother drank a lot, but she wasn’t an alcoholic”; “My father isn’t violent, it’s just his way”; “I had it coming, I was a rotten kid”).

It may be months, years, or decades after leaving home that we start to question things and see the impact that our familial environment had on us. Later as adults, we may find it difficult to trust the behaviors and words of others, our own judgments and actions, or have a solid sense of self-worth. Not surprisingly, we may experience problems in our academic work, their relationships, and in our very identities.

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Adapted from “Toxic Parents: Overcoming their Hurtful Legacy and Reclaiming Your Life”, by Susan Forward
HOW CHILDREN LIVE & LEARN

- If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn
- If children live with praise, they learn appreciation
- If children live with hostility, they learn to fight
- If children live with kindness & consideration, they learn respect
- If children live with fear, they learn to be apprehensive
- If children live with security, they learn to have faith in themselves and in those about them
- If children live with pity, they learn to feel sorry for themselves
- If children live with encouragement, they learn confidence
- If children live with ridicule, they learn to feel shy
- If children live with approval, they learn to like
- If children live with kindness & consideration, they learn patience
- If children live with sharing, they learn to love
- If children live with fairness, they learn justice
- If children live with friendliness, they learn the world is a nice place in which to live

Dorothy Law Nolte, PhD

The 10 Commandments of Dysfunctional Families

1. Thou shalt ignore, deny and reinterpret reality to preserve the perfect family fantasy.
2. Thou shalt always send unpredictable and mixed messages, especially when it concerns relationships.
3. Thou shalt be an adult always (even when you are a child).
4. Thou shalt keep secrets from others and protect all family secrets.
5. Thou shalt not feel. Anger, sadness, crying, fear, loneliness are not acceptable.
6. Thou shalt allow your boundaries to be violated, especially by those who "love" you.
7. Thou shalt be hyper-vigilant and always on your toes.
8. Thou shalt not let anyone do anything else for you. Do it all yourself.
9. Thou shalt be perfect
10. Thou shalt not forgive yourself or others.

Thomas F. Fischer, M.Div

HOW WAS I AFFECTED?

There is a great deal of variability in how often dysfunctional interactions and behaviors occur in families, and in the kinds and the severity of their dysfunction. However, when dysfunctional patterns are the norm rather than the exception, they systematically foster abuse and/or neglect. Abuse and neglect inhibit the development of children’s trust in the world, in others, and in themselves. Later as adults, these people may find it difficult to trust the behaviors and words of others, their own judgments and actions, or their own senses of self-worth. Not surprisingly, they may experience problems in their academic work, their relationships, and in their very identities.

Adults raised with family dysfunction report a variety of long-term effects. The following questions may help you assess your own situation.

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. Do you tend to be overly responsible, or overly irresponsible? Yes__No__
5. Do you find it difficult to identify and/or express what you're feeling? Yes__No__
6. Do you have to guess at what "normal" is? 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. Do you judge yourself (or others) without mercy? 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 hard to express anger constructively (angry outbursts, repressed anger)? Yes__No__
15. Is it hard for you to relax and enjoy yourself? Yes__No__
16. Do you feel like "an imposter" or a "fake" in life and fear that others will "find out"? Yes__No__
17. Do you find yourself waiting for disaster to strike even when things good? Yes__No__
18. Do you find yourself having difficulty with authority figures? Yes__No__
19. Do you have difficulty expressing yourself (expressing your needs or desires)? Yes__No__
20. Do you feel rejection and/or abandonment, yet often reject others? Yes__No__
21. Do you have intense feeling of self-blame, guilt, shame, unworthiness? Yes__No__
22. Do you end to not know how to deal with life unless it is crazy, chaotic, or in crisis? Yes__No__
23. Do you have difficulty balancing levels of intimacy (excessive avoidance or excessive dependence)? Yes__No__
24. Do you have difficulty following projects through from beginning to end? Yes__No__
25. Are you extremely loyal, even in the face of evidence that loyalty is not deserved? Yes__No__

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.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FAMILY ROLE</th>
<th>FAMILY HERO</th>
<th>SCAPEGOAT</th>
<th>LOST CHILD</th>
<th>MASCOT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHARACTERISTIC AGES</td>
<td>Oldest child</td>
<td>May be second child</td>
<td>May be third child</td>
<td>May be youngest child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS</td>
<td>Makes good grades</td>
<td>Fails in school</td>
<td>Quiet, shy, often goes unnoticed</td>
<td>Class “cut up”; class clown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OUTER CHARACTERISTICS (How looks on outside)</td>
<td>The Hero is the one who needs to make the family, and role players, look good. They ignore the problem and present things in a positive manner as if the roles within the family did not exist.</td>
<td>The Scapegoat often acts out in front of others. They will rebel, make noise, and cover up or divert attention away from the real problem.</td>
<td>The “Lost Child” is the silent, “out of the way” family member, and will never mention alcohol or recovery. They are quiet and reserved, careful to not make problems. The Lost Child gives up self needs and makes efforts to avoid any conversation regarding the underlying roles.</td>
<td>The Mascot’s role is that of the jester or clown. They will often make inappropriate jokes about the family and those involved. Though they do bring humor to the family roles, it is often harmful humor, and they sometimes hinder family members from seeing the problems.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• A leader</td>
<td>• Rebellious</td>
<td>• Loner</td>
<td>• Happy-go-lucky</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Seems to:</td>
<td>• A “screw up”</td>
<td>• Ill at ease with others</td>
<td>• Disruptive</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Have it made”</td>
<td>• Angry</td>
<td>• May read, listen to music or look at TV a lot</td>
<td>• Hyper-energetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Have it all together”</td>
<td>• May try to compete with the hero but loses out</td>
<td>• Trials not to be a bother</td>
<td>• Family regards as fragile - in need of protection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Relatives dote on</td>
<td>• Stops trying to please family, may withdraw</td>
<td>• Strong attachment to animals</td>
<td>• Keeps focus on self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Helpful at home</td>
<td>• Compared to older brother or sister</td>
<td>• No close friends</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Successful away from home</td>
<td>• Puts on “tough act”</td>
<td>• Early chemical use</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Girl may get pregnant</td>
<td>• Girl may get pregnant</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Runs with peers who are like him</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Resulting Strengths:</td>
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<td>Resulting Strengths:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• responsible</td>
<td>• good observation skills</td>
<td>• good sense of humor</td>
<td>• Fearful - anxious (sees something is wrong but no one acknowledges it)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• achieves</td>
<td>• good listener</td>
<td>• makes friends easily</td>
<td>• Confused - in the dark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• independent</td>
<td>• autonomy</td>
<td>• ability to defuse stressful situations</td>
<td>• May feel crazy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• leader</td>
<td>• not demanding of others</td>
<td>• good social skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• organized</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INSIDE CHARACTERISTICS (How feels on inside)</td>
<td>Inadequate - Never Good enough</td>
<td>Feels left out in family</td>
<td>Feels different</td>
<td>Fearful - anxious (sees something is wrong but no one acknowledges it)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Scared, guilty, lonely</td>
<td>Feels like misfit;</td>
<td>Feels like an outsider</td>
<td>Confused - in the dark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>feelings of low self-worth</td>
<td>Needs attention but can’t ask for it</td>
<td>Low self worth</td>
<td>May feel crazy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lonely, guilty, hurt</td>
<td>Feels forgotten</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Resulting Problems:</td>
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<td>Resulting Problems:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• perfectionist</td>
<td>• demanding</td>
<td>• denies own feelings</td>
<td>• attention seeker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ignores own needs, wants</td>
<td>• personality problems</td>
<td>• detached</td>
<td>• denies reality of own feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• has fear of rejection</td>
<td>• substance abuse</td>
<td>• unable to develop close relationships</td>
<td>• feelings of unworthiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• difficulty in establishing intimate relationships</td>
<td>• acts out inappropriately</td>
<td>• depression</td>
<td>• can be superficial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• accepts displaced blame for family problems</td>
<td>• eating disorders</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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. Final mistakes are allowed and accepted.

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Healthy Families are able to:

1. Communicate, listen, and value time to talk together.
2. Affirm and support one another.
3. Develop trust among family members and take care and time to mend breaches of trust.
4. Have a sense of play and humor. They share leisure time together.
5. Exhibit a sense of shared responsibility.
6. Teach a sense of right and wrong.
7. Value and practice service to others.
8. Share a spiritual/religious belief that is passed on in positive and meaningful ways.
9. Respect the privacy of one another's confidences.
10. Mutually negotiate rules and compromises, and individuals let go of a position when it is for the family's greater good.
11. View problems as a normal part of life, develop problem-solving techniques, and seek help when necessary.

Source: Adapted from a presentation by Linda Yellin, MSW, ACSW, a therapist based in Farmington Hill, Michigan.

Suggested Readings:
Many books provide helpful information about dysfunctional families and strategies for recovering from their effects.

- **Bradshaw On: The Family**, by John Bradshaw
- **Healing the Shame That Binds You**, by John Bradshaw
- **Toxic parents: Overcoming their hurtful legacy and reclaiming your life**, by Susan Forward
- **Adult Children: The Secrets of Dysfunctional Families**, by John & Linda Friel
- **Codependent no more: How to stop controlling others and start caring for yourself**, by Melanie Beattie
- **Outgrowing the pain: A book for and about adults abused as children**, by Eliana Gil
- **Forgiving Our Parents Forgiving Ourselves: Healing Adult Children of Dysfunctional Families**, by David Stroop
- **Learning to Say No: Establishing Healthy Boundaries**, by Carla Wills-Brandon

OK - WHAT NOW???

Regardless of the source of dysfunction, you have survived and it is not all bad!!! You have likely developed a number of valuable skills to get you through tough circumstances. Patience is important, remember – 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 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, and self-help groups. As SMU check out: [www.samuelmerritt.edu/student_counseling](http://www.samuelmerritt.edu/student_counseling)
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?
3. **Allow Yourself to Feel Angry About What Happened.** Forgive yourself a very reasonable last step in recovery, but it is a horrible first step. You shouldn't just “forgive and forget”. 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. Placing the responsibility for what happened during your childhood where it belongs (with the responsible adults)!
4. **Begin the Work of Learning to Trust Others.** Take small risks at first in letting others know you and 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.
5. **Practice Taking Good Care of Yourself.** Identify areas you tend to approach compulsively: Drinking? Eating? Shopping? Sex? Relationships? 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 your partner. Do you eat a healthy balanced diet? Do you get regular exercise?
6. **READ!** Knowledge is power. See the book examples to the left.

Source: Kansas State University Counseling Services