

# **DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES WHAT EXACTLY DOES THAT MEAN?**

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The term "dysfunctional families" is used and abused so much that over the years it has become hard to define. In order to define a dysfunctional family, one must first know what a functional or healthy family is. While there is a lot of difference in what is normal for families, there are some common traits found in families that are considered to be healthy, and other traits found in families experiencing excessive stress that can lead to "dysfunctional" behavior. Without taking cultural, economic, or social consideration into account, the following information highlights some common traits of healthy families and warning signs that a family may be under too much stress and in danger of becoming "dysfunctional."

## **Characteristics of Healthy Families**

- The family is open to others from outside of the immediate family system.
- They allow outsiders to enter the system and members are allowed to go outside of the system for help when needed.
- Parents set clear generational boundaries. Parents assume the role of primary caregivers and children are secure in their role as siblings, children and individuals.
- The family recognizes that stressful situations are inevitable and temporary. They recognize that stress can be positive if handled appropriately.
- The family works together to minimize stress. They focus on their strengths as a family and as individuals.
- The family works together to find solutions to problems. Their energy is focused on solutions, not blame.
- Family members focus on what is controllable. They make the best of situations over which they have little or no control.
- The family develops and revises rules to deal effectively with day to day life. When they are under stress they work together to revise existing rules and evaluate the results.
- Family members recognize that decisions and routines are flexible. Rigid rules and expectations are challenged as a family.
- Family members feel empowered as a result of effectively dealing with stress. They see challenges as opportunities rather than roadblocks.

- Family members recognize the difference between the symptoms of stress and the sources of the stress. They address the source of the stress.

### **Areas of Stress for Healthy Families**

- Finances
- Dealing with children's behavior
- Insufficient couple time
- Lack of shared responsibility for household upkeep
- Communicating with children
- Insufficient time for self
- Guilt for not accomplishing more
- Couple/relationship issues
- Insufficient family play time
- Over-scheduled family calendar

### **Other Stressors in Dysfunctional Families**

- Parent/Child role reversal
- Resentment toward the person with the problem
- Blame primary caregiver for staying in the situation
- Individuals may be prone to depression
- Develop fear of becoming close to others
- Fear of losing the primary caregiver
- Learn to discount feelings and needs
- Irrational belief systems
- Multiple unresolved losses (real, symbolic or perceived)

### **Stages of Stress**

- "I can do and be everything." Built in failure and guilt
- "I can't do and be everything." Self Acceptance
- "I don't want to do and be everything." Choice
- "I don't want to do anything." Burnout

### **Symptoms of Families under Excessive Stress**

- Constant sense of urgency and hurry
- Sense of tension underlying sharp words and misunderstandings
- Mania to escape to your room, car, office, or anywhere
- Feelings of frustration for not getting things done or caught up
- Feeling that time is passing too quickly
- Frequent desire to return to a simpler time of life

- Little me or couple time
- Pervasive sense of guilt for not being and doing everything to and for the people in your life

## **Transitions and Dynamics That Can Lead To Excessive Stress**

One or More Persons in the Family Has Any of the Following or Has a Family History Of:

- A Mental Illness
- An Addiction To Legal or Illegal Drugs
- Overly Rigid Religious Beliefs
- An Abusive Spouse
- An Abusive Parent
- A Physical Disability
- An Emotional or Behavioral Problem
- Responsibility For an Aging Parent
- An Infant/toddler
- An Adolescent
- An Adult Children Living at Home

Some of these situations may be temporary, yet without proper preparation, clear guidelines and teamwork can lead to severe strain on the primary caregiver, thus placing the family at risk for malfunctioning.

Now that we have an idea of what constitutes a healthy family and some common stressors for families, we can look at ways to prevent a family from becoming "dysfunctional" during times of change and stress. Since families are made up of individuals we have to take into account ways for individuals to take care of their own emotional needs. One basic truth most people in 12 step programs come to terms with pretty early in their recovery is that we can only control and change our own behavior. If we could control or change the behavior of others, our efforts to stop loved ones from drinking, using drugs, gambling would have worked long ago. I tell people that if I could control what others do or think, everyone would be happy, healthy and financially secure. Unfortunately, I do not have that kind of control over anyone but myself.

First we need to identify the basic needs of human beings so we can understand what drives us to do the things we do. Our basic needs are:

## **1. To be capable and successful at something.**

People who are not succeeding in at least one area of their lives often feel hopeless. Those who are resilient and have adequate support can move on from failure and keep trying. However, those who have a history of repeated failures may give up, which can lead to depression and despondency. This pattern may begin at an early age, especially in children who do not do well in school or who receive other negative messages about their worth as human beings, such as verbal, emotional and physical abuse. Some may channel their talents in alternate ways that are illegal or socially unacceptable, yet that give them a feeling of success. One thing you can do for yourself, and your children, is to find something at which you excel and do it! Doing so builds self esteem, increases competence and can give you the courage to take on bigger challenges. Set up ways to succeed in life by doing what you do well.

## **2. To feel cared for and belong to a group.**

Everyone needs to care for and be cared for by others. This need never leaves us. Many people do not get their need for belonging met through their immediate families, because the people in their families are not capable of caring for them. Longing to be cared for by our parents and immediate family may never go away completely, and is a loss that we may spend a lifetime trying to fill. That void is sometimes filled with unhealthy habits and relationships. It is a loss that must be grieved, people that must be forgiven and hurts that must be healed to enable us to live a healthy life. As we mature, we have more control over who we care for, and where we get our needs for belonging met. We can choose our own network of friends and family members, and choose to care for and be cared for by people who are more capable of giving and receiving love. Many people, who are not yet skilled at caring for other people, have learned to care for themselves and others by caring for pets.

## **3. To have power and control.**

All of us have a need for power and control over our lives, minds and bodies. We exercise this need in highly individual ways. Some openly try to meet this need by bossing others around. Others are more subtle and meet their needs in a passive manner, by acting helpless and needy. Some ask for what they need, i.e. "I need a hug, will you hold me?" This is the middle ground that we should strive for and it

takes the three steps of identifying our needs, making them known, and asking for what we want.

Doing this can be difficult because we risk rejection. It may help to realize that the person you approach also has needs, and a refusal does not mean you are being rejected, but that the other does not have what you need at that time. Sometimes, people do not have the emotional energy to give, even if a hug is all you ask for, as their own emotional needs are not met.

If you respect others' needs, you are less likely to be hurt if your request for emotional support is denied. To respect others' needs you must first know, accept and respect your own. Forcing someone to give emotional energy against their will is a violation of their power and control. Whether emotional or physical, the result of being forced is feeling violated. Many children grow up to be victims, because we force them to say and do things that are socially acceptable, yet that disregard their feelings and rob them of their own power and control. Protect your power and control, and respect the power and control of others by allowing them choices.

#### **4. To give of ourselves and help others.**

While we must take care of ourselves and our own well-being first and foremost, we also need to give to others. It is in giving love, care and generosity that we receive what we need in return. These things are not returned because they are owed to us, but because as other people's needs are met, they have the emotional energy to give as well. When in relationships with people who take and are unable to give, the "taker's" needs are so great that they drain the life from us, and we may become emotionally depleted, bitter and resentful. This is the classic co-dependent relationship, which is often found in families with addictions, physical or emotional disabilities and other dysfunctional relationships.

#### **5. To be stimulated and have fun.**

As we get older and work harder, caring for ourselves and others, this need is often overlooked. For mental health, it is vital to keep the fun parts of life alive, so whatever yours are, do them! It should not be necessary to be with other people to have fun, so if you are unable to have fun alone, work on your relationship with yourself. If you do not enjoy your company, others will not either. Many of us do not know ourselves very well as adults.

Sometimes we put limits on ourselves based on old beliefs that keep us from having fun. If you believe that adults should not \_\_\_\_\_, re-evaluate that belief to decide if it is still rational by your standards today.

## **6. To give of ourselves and help others.**

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## **7. Irrational Beliefs**

We all have irrational beliefs from time to time. There are several things we unknowingly do to ourselves that can restrict our lives or cause emotional distress. These errors in thinking, which we have picked up along the way, can be changed, once we begin to catch ourselves making them.

Our belief systems are composed of values learned at home and from other influences in our lives. Some are irrational and outdated, and holding onto them can be a source of stress and low self-esteem. For example, you may turn minor troubles into major crises if you believe failure is a tragedy, or you may put too much energy into trying to be "perfect." If you believe that life should always be fun, you may face intense disappointment when it is not. If you learned never to talk to strangers and still believe that warning, it can cause a great deal of anxiety when the person sitting next to you on the subway strikes up a conversation.

Take a look at some of your beliefs. One might be, "Children are to be seen and not heard." What are some family beliefs that you hold onto? How do these beliefs cause you distress? Think back to your childhood, and remember what some of the favorite family sayings or mottos were. Are they still rational?

## Finish these sentences with the first thing that comes into your mind:

I believe that people are:

I believe the world is:

I believe that love is:

I believe that I am:

I believe that my parents are:

I believe that life is:

***Source:** The Dynamics of Relationships: A Guide for Developing Self-Esteem and Social Skills in Teens and Young Adults by Patricia Kramer. Used with permission by Equal Partners: The Self-Esteem Institute, 3371 Beaverwood Lane, Silver Springs, MD 20906, (301)871-9665.*

## Some Common Irrational Beliefs

- **All or Nothing Thinking:** "If I can't be in the starting line-up I just won't play."

**Alternative:**

"I realize everyone wants a chance to play. I'm glad I get to start sometimes."

- **Past Experiences Predict Future Events for Everyone:** "I quit smoking so you can if you try."

**Alternative:** "My experience with smoking was \_\_\_\_\_, however, everyone is different."

- **Can't See the Forest for the Trees:** "If I could only lose twenty pounds my life would be better."

**Alternative:** "I am not happy with my weight now, but at this time I am going to accept the fact that my weight is only a small portion of who I am and it will not change other areas of my life."

- **Discount the Positive:** "Yes, I did well on that test, but it was really easy."

**Alternative:** "Yes, I did well on that test. I was prepared."

- **Fortune Telling:** "He didn't answer the phone so he must be out with another girl."

**Alternative:** "He didn't answer the phone, I'm sure he will be home later."

- **Mind Reading:** "She didn't speak to me. She must be mad at me."  
**Alternative:** "She didn't speak to me this morning. She must have a lot on her mind."
- **Blow It Out of Proportion:** "I failed the test so I may as well quit school."  
**Alternative:** "I failed the test so I need to study more next time."
- **Emotional Reasoning:** "I feel out of place at parties, so I must be different from most of the people here."  
**Alternative:** "I feel out of place at parties. My preference is smaller groups of people."
- **Should, Ought, Must and Suppose to Statements:** "I was raised to believe that children should be seen and not heard."  
**Alternative:** "Children have opinions and have the right to voice their opinions."
- **Labeling:** "I come from a poor family. I'm just a loser."  
**Alternative:** "My family was poor, but I hope to make a better life for myself."
- **Personalization:** "I made her mad so she cut her wrist."  
**Alternative:** "She became angry and chose to hurt herself rather than talk about it." **Source:** *Adapted from: The Feeling Good Handbook by David Burns, Random House, Inc. 201 E. 50th Street, New York, NY 10022.*

## The ABC Theory

Albert Ellis is a psychologist who believes that our beliefs about things that cause our emotional reaction, or feelings toward things. He calls this the ABC Theory. It means this:

**A** stands for the ACTIVATING EVENT

**B** is your BELIEFS about that event

**C** is the EMOTIONAL CONSEQUENCE or FEELING about the event

## Example

What is one of your pet peeves? One of mine used to be tardiness. This example from my childhood helps me understand why tardiness was such a big deal for me as an adult.

When I was growing up my father was always late. One Sunday morning we were getting ready for church and he went to get a paper while we finished getting dressed. When he returned my

mother was furious because we would have to go into church after the service had begun. She refused to go in late, so we changed into our play clothes and stayed home. I remember her saying "Mrs. So and So comes in late to church every Sunday. Right in the middle of the service you can see her parading down the aisle, dragging her scrawny husband behind her, disturbing the people who were on time. That is so ill-mannered."

What unspoken messages were projected here? What could be some of the underlying beliefs behind these messages?

**A** (Being Late)

**B** (It's better not to go than to go late. That is just ill-mannered)

**C** (Embarrassment, Guilt, Fear, Anger)

How could those beliefs shape the way I think about things today?  
How does this effect my day to day life?

I would get angry if people showed up late to meetings I chaired. I would rather risk my life driving too fast than be late for any engagement, I experienced a lot of guilt and became embarrassed if I was late and I was somewhat self conscious to enter a room after a gathering had begun.

How did I change those feelings about being late?

I examined the beliefs and decided that they were not rational. Then, I thought of more rational ways to look at or think about being late, such as maybe someone got caught in traffic, had an emergency or lost track of time, rather than being just plain inconsiderate. I also began to think it is better for me to get as much time in as possible, rather than avoid an event because I am running late. The result is, I am more tolerant of my own occasional tardiness, so I am more tolerant of others when they are tardy. I have discovered that works this for everything I can think of that was once a pet peeve. When I am under a lot of stress I find myself slipping back into those old ways of thinking. However, if I can remember to challenge my thoughts, I can change my feelings about the event. It works every time.

Answer these questions about one of your pet peeves. Think about how this belief influences your life today. Are the beliefs listed in the irrational beliefs list? If so, how can you change those to better serve you as an adult?

