



# Best Life Counseling

## 7 COMMON DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY ROLES

What does it mean to be a 'dysfunctional family'? It means the family doesn't function in a way that allows all members to feel safe, seen, validated and loved. In a functional family, children grow up knowing they are loved so they feel safe to explore; their imaginations blossom; and when they make a mistake, parents address these mistakes calmly in an age-appropriate manner. Children grow up feeling their opinion matters, and that their parents support them even when they make different decisions than Mom or Dad. There is an acceptance in communication – from parent-to-child, parent-to-parent, and sibling-to-sibling - so that no one is competing for attention or is disrespectful to one another.

I believe very few families meet these criteria. However, it's important to note, that being 'functional' or 'dysfunctional' is not an all-or-nothing thing – it exists in degrees ranging from fully functional (where all members feel safe, seen, validated and loved) to fully dysfunctional (where children are abused and neglected). Therefore, if you feel your family was 'dysfunctional', you are the norm because most people come from some type of family that didn't function optimally.

Given we have no control, as children, over how our families operate, we rarely think about them as functional or dysfunctional – they just were the way they were. Therefore, let's look at some examples of what a 'dysfunctional family' might look like. One kind of dysfunctional family may be when one or both parents are addicted to drugs or alcohol and as a result, children become highly stressed wondering when the next 'out of control moment' will happen. Another kind of dysfunctional family might be when a parent or sibling suffers from a mental health disorder such as Depression, Anxiety, Bipolar, Borderline, Dependent Personality, Narcissism or Obsessive-Compulsiveness. In this situation, children may grow up harboring shame or guilt just for being who they are. A third kind of dysfunctional family might be one in which there is outright abuse – physical, sexual, verbal – and/or neglect. In these situations, children may develop complex trauma. In such toxic environments, children adopt unhealthy roles that result in negative thinking and beliefs that take time, psychotherapy, or a healthy, loving relationship to change.

From Virginia Satir's research on families, we have the concept of family roles. Her work was expanded by Claudia Black and Sharon Wegscheider-Cruse to include *dysfunctional* roles based on their research of families with addiction. The following list describes 7 of the most common *dysfunctional* family roles. Children take on different roles based on a variety of factors such as personality, culture, birth order and what a parent assigns to them.

## **1. ADDICTED PERSON (often a parent)**

This person uses addiction as a way to cope with emotions and the stress of life. He/she struggles with accepting responsibility for their actions and is in denial about the damage they cause. Family dynamics tend to center around the addicted person with much of the family energy being spent trying to keep this person sober rather than resolving family issues. A child who grows up in a household with an addicted parent often suffers neglect and/or abuse at the hands of the parent or other individuals (other family members, neighbors, etc.)

## **2. ENABLER / CARETAKER (often a parent)**

This person, often the spouse of the addicted person, tries to shield the family from the consequences of the addicted individual's choices. The enabler can spend so much time trying to clean up the messes caused by the addicted spouse that they neglect the children, themselves, or their jobs which leads to financial, emotional, and social struggles. The enabler often feels over-worked and mired in resentment for "having" to do all the work to keep the family afloat. Again, a child growing up in a household with an addicted parent often suffers neglect and/or abuse.

## **3. HERO / GOOD BOY/GIRL**

Heroes are often first-born children. These are the dutiful sons and daughters who do "the right things" such as get good grades, avoid making waves in the family, and taking care of Mom and Dad. They cope with the dysfunction of the family by pretending that everything is "fine". They tend to believe that if they could just be perfect enough, mom and dad would be happy and the dysfunction would go away. They exhaust themselves trying to control everything and being helpful. They tend to be highly sensitive individuals who mature young.

As adults, Heroes may harbor resentment and anger at the loss of their childhood and may have trouble being loving toward their parents. They also may have great difficulty getting over feelings of guilt that they didn't do things "right" and their expectation of perfectionism in themselves.

## **4. SCAPEGOAT / REBEL**

The opposite of the Hero is the Scapegoat. Scapegoats are usually middle children who become the "problem" in the family so that the real problem doesn't have to be addressed. Because Scapegoated children are often very aware that they are being blamed unfairly, they often feel rejected and unloved. Scapegoats tend to become angry and act out resulting in problems with other children, school, drugs or drinking, pregnancy, etc. In addition, because Mom or Dad don't have time or desire to deal with the Scapegoat's frustration, they tend to give harsher punishment in an attempt to "break" the Scapegoat's spirit.

As adults, Scapegoats often have problems with authority figures and may associate themselves with rebellious groups. They tend to want to shock society and their family with anti-social behavior, piercings, dress, or language. Anger may be a lifelong challenge for someone who was placed in a Scapegoat role as a child.

## **5. CLOWN / MASCOT**

Clowns tend to be the younger members of the family. The Clown uses comedy and goofiness to distract from the deeper, more serious issues of the family. Just when things are getting really tense, this person will do something that makes everyone laugh which feeds the denial or minimizes the reality of problems. He/she may also use comedy to be seen because they are feel neglected or isolated. Like Heroes, Clowns tend to be highly sensitive people.

As adults, Clowns tend to be less responsible, and use laughter to avoid serious tasks or duties. They avoid discussing highly sensitive emotions and, therefore, have difficulty resolving the pain of their childhood.

## **6. LOST CHILD**

Like the Scapegoat, The Lost Child tends to be a middle child. He/she is the person who becomes invisible whenever things get tense. The Lost Child tries to fade into the background in hopes that people will forget he/she is there. This person sincerely believes that if you don't talk about it, you won't feel the pain. They tend to spend a lot of time on their own or away from home escaping into activities, friendships, or sports – anything to keep away from the infighting of the house.

As adults, the Lost Child may struggle with friendships and romantic relationships due to left over sadness and anger. They tend to have trouble expressing emotions and ignore problems. They can also lose touch with or have a love/hate relationship with family members.

## **7. PEACEMAKER / MEDIATOR**

The Peacemaker is the person found in the middle of family arguments trying to get each side to understand the other or just to get the warring sides to calm down. He or she may be pulled into taking sides between opposing parents, as is the case in contentious divorces. Similar to the Lost Child, the Peacemaker does not feel confident enough to state their personal needs and will rarely, if ever, become confrontational themselves. They tend to “read the room” to identify how others are feeling and adjust accordingly.

As adults the Peacemaker may look very successful on the surface, but can feel empty and sad internally due to unresolved pain from childhood.