



Understanding The Rules of Dysfunctional Families

By

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A dysfunctional family is a family system that fails to meet the needs of its members in a way that is healthy and nurturing. Obviously, there are times in the life of most families where not everyone gets what they need. This can occur for a variety of reasons, including divorce, addiction, physical illness, life circumstances, etc. While many families quickly adjust to changes, others become stuck in patterns of dysfunction which can be passed on from generation to generation. As a result, dysfunctional families tend to develop unspoken rules that govern the way the family operates. The more you understand these rules, the more power you will have to break the cycle of dysfunction that these rules create.

Rule # 1: Denial

Dysfunctional families tend to operate in a state of denial about the problems the family is facing. I call this the Pink Elephant Syndrome. Imagine walking into a

room at home and seeing a large pink elephant. Most people might ask "What is an elephant doing in here?" However, imagine how you might feel if everyone else forcefully responded "What elephant? Are you crazy? There is no elephant here." If the family denies the presence of the elephant long enough and hard enough, you might begin to doubt your own perceptions and intuitions. This is the experience that dysfunctional families create when they "deny" the problems that they face.

Rule # 2: Silence

Dysfunctional families encourage and enforce a conspiracy of silence in the family. Even if you can see that there are problems, you aren't allowed to talk about them. Common statements include: "Don't say anything, you don't want to upset them." "Quiet they are sleeping." "Family issues are private, don't talk about them outside the home."

Rule # 3: Rigidity

Dysfunctional families develop ways of operating that become entrenched over time. There is an expectation that you will always act a certain way. You have your role and you are supposed to stay in it.

Rule # 4: Isolation

Dysfunctional families become isolated and alone. They tend to hide problems from people outside the family and avoid dealing with the problems within the family. As a result, people from dysfunctional families tend to feel like they have to face life alone.



Changing the Rules to Create Healthy Families

In order to create a healthy family system, it is important to establish rules that support growth and health. A starting place is to replace the rules that lead to dysfunction.

Rule # 1: Honesty

By replacing denial with honesty, you create an atmosphere where trust can develop. Secrets can destroy a family. Create an open atmosphere where problems can be identified and

explored honestly.

Rule # 2: Communication

Open communication should replace the conspiracy of silence. The more that you are able to openly talk about feelings and problems, the more you can create a healthy family system.

Rule # 3: Flexibility

Healthy families allow room

for everyone to grow and change. Don't get stuck in rigid roles that only entrench unhealthy patterns. In healthy families, if something doesn't work, then it becomes OK to try something new.

Rule # 4: Intimacy

Healthy families actively create intimacy by allowing open honest communication, resolving conflicts, and supporting individual and family growth.

New Dimensions Can Help If You or Someone You Know Is:

- Depressed or Suicidal
- Stuck and having difficulty making changes
- Dealing with trauma
- Struggling with Panic Attacks
- Having difficulty working or going to school
- Struggling with addictions or substance abuse
- Cutting or doing other self-destructive behaviors
- Struggling with anger issues
- Struggling to get their medications stabilized

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Understanding Systems

Families, like all systems, want to maintain homeostasis or balance. Whenever anyone in the family tries to change, the change creates pressure on the family system. As a result, the family system begins to put pressure on the individual to return to their previous role in order to get the system back in balance. This pressure can be subtle or it can be overt. For example, a stay-at-home mother who decides to return to school may hear complaints from her spouse and her kids about how much she is gone. The pressure to stay home might cause her to give up her goals. The system would thus return to "normal". Remember, healthy families support each others' growth and allow for change.

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Characteristics of Healthy Families

1. Accept each other's differences.
2. Celebrate each other's successes.
3. Encourage each other to take healthy risks and to try new things.
4. Allow each other to fail.
5. Learn from each other.
6. Listen to each other.
7. Laugh together.
8. Play together.
9. Work together to accomplish tasks.
10. Validate each others feelings.
11. Support each other in pursuing individual interests.
12. Allow open expression of feelings.
13. Respect each other
14. Trust each other.
15. Honest with each other.
16. Communicate with each other.
17. Accept feedback from each other and are willing to make changes based on that feedback.
18. Let go of resentments and forgive each other.
19. Resolve conflicts.
20. Build intimacy.

Roles of Dysfunctional Families

There are a number of roles that tend to develop in dysfunctional families. While individuals within the family may shift between more than one role, it is important to remember that each of the roles tend to have the same underlying rules associated with dysfunctional families.

The Pink Elephant

This is the person in the family that the dysfunction centers around. This person might be an alcoholic or an addict. They also might be depressed, struggling with physical illness, or a workaholic. Basically, this is the person in the family that no one wants to confront or deal with directly.

The Enabler

This is the person that goes to heroic lengths to pick up the pieces left behind by the Pink Elephant. For example, they are the first one to bail the addict out of jail when they get arrested. Their intent is to try to help, but instead they often unintentionally end up enabling the very behavior that they are trying to change.

The Hero

Imagine a dark room with no light and some one lights a match. Your eyes would immediately look at the light. This is the job of the hero. The darker things are at home, the more they feel like they have to shine. They may try to be perfect and

excel in everything, but end up feeling empty and overwhelmed.

The Scapegoat

If the hero's job is to be perfect, the scapegoat's job is to be perfectly bad. This is the person in the family that is always in trouble. The scapegoat is often criticized and is blamed for all of the problems in the family. They, however, are often simply acting out the problems that aren't getting resolved.

The Lost Child

This is often the person in the family that withdraws and isolates. They may be shy or depressed. Whenever family conflict begins, they disappear.



The Mascot

This is often the youngest child in the family. Their role is to do something silly or cute whenever tension rises in the family. By focusing the attention on them, they tend to defuse the tension and the family breathes a temporary sigh of relief.

Remember, the best way to change these roles is to change the rules that the family operates under. Healthy families grow and adapt.