

Do You Have a Dysfunctional Family?

Objective

To identify if your family of origin is dysfunctional and explore how this impacts your current life.

What to Know

Lots of people describe their families as “strange,” or “weird” or “unusual.” However, psychologists feel that “dysfunctional families” are in a different class. To put it in simple terms, a dysfunctional family detracts from, rather than promotes, the emotional and physical health and well-being of its members.

Aspects of a dysfunctional family can include:

- **Addiction** can create unhealthy relationships among family members.
- **Expectations of perfection** can damage relationships because expecting everything to be perfect places pressure on everyone.
- **Poor communication** leads to a lack of understanding, an inability to express opinions, and feeling unsafe. Problems tend to be swept under the rug.
- **Abuse and neglect** lead to cycles that normalize harmful treatment.
- **Unpredictability and fear** make it hard to establish trusting relationships. Perhaps you constantly anticipate conflict and cannot honestly express yourself.
- **Withholding love** can lead to people-pleasing. Love is conditional and given based on performance or other conditions.
- **Lack of intimacy** results in superficial relationships.
- **Loose or nonexistent boundaries** include:
 - controlling parents who make life decisions for you and ignore your opinions.
 - intimidating parents, who actively discourage asserting yourself or speaking your mind.
 - an older child taking on the parental role.
 - lack of respect for each other’s autonomy.

There are consequences to being reared in a dysfunctional family. Do any of these statements apply to you? Check off any that you relate to.

- _____ low self-esteem
- _____ irrational beliefs
- _____ overwhelming guilt
- _____ inability to trust others
- _____ insecurity
- _____ fear of being vulnerable

- _____ inability to take risks
- _____ fear of failure
- _____ fear of success
- _____ inability to let go
- _____ inability to have fun and play
- _____ immobilizing fears
- _____ problems managing stress
- _____ inability to accept personal responsibility
- _____ excessive denial
- _____ unresolved anger
- _____ difficulty handling loss
- _____ problems accepting change
- _____ problems with interpersonal relationships
- _____ inability to handle conflict in a healthy way
- _____ difficulties with problem-solving
- _____ fear of rejection
- _____ insatiable need for approval
- _____ people pleasing or inability to be assertive
- _____ taking on a victim or martyr role
- _____ power and control issues
- _____ always feeling blamed by others
- _____ problems with intimacy
- _____ feeling worthless or inadequate
- _____ overly competitive
- _____ inability to forgive and move on
- _____ tendency to develop an over-active fantasy life
- _____ communication problems
- _____ compulsive behavior (e.g., perfectionistic, very orderly, meticulous, inflexible)

_____ other: _____

_____ other: _____

What to Do

Write down some of the “family rules” you experienced in your family of origin. Examples include avoiding conflict at all costs or never discussing taboo topics like sex or substance abuse.

Do you think your family of origin was dysfunctional? Why or why not? If yes, write down some examples.

Compare your family of origin with your current family. List any similarities of shared dysfunctional behaviors.

Were there high-stress conditions in your family? Explain.

List the negative consequences or unproductive behaviors each of your family members experienced from living in your family of origin.

How did you family manage guilt? Shame?

List the "hidden" feelings each family member most likely experienced in your family of origin.

Write down feelings that:

- you experienced in your family of origin when you lived in it.
- you experience when you return "home" to visit.
- you are currently experiencing as complete this exercise.

List which of your current traits you believe are the result of being reared in a dysfunctional family.

Which of your current problems are also current problems for your parents and siblings?

Compare your family of origin with your parents' families of origin. Are there similar dysfunctional elements shared by these three families? Describe.

Compare your family of origin with the family of origin of your current spouse (*if you are married*) or with the family of origin of your former spouse(s). What are some similarities?

Write down any dysfunctional elements your spouse brought to your relationship. Compare them to what you brought to the relationship. Were you aware of the dysfunctional elements in both of your backgrounds? How would knowing this information have influenced your decision to get involved? In what ways did your individual backgrounds influence your relationship?

What age were you when you first realized there were problems...

_____ in your family of origin?

What were the signs of trouble?

_____ in your marital relationship?

What were the signs of trouble?

_____ in your current family?

What were the signs of trouble?

How did you (and do you) cope?

What problems currently cause you stress? Be specific.

Write the following information down on a separate sheet of paper.

- father's name and age he married your mother
- mother's name and age she married your father
- siblings' names and birthdates
- names and birthdates of relatives who lived with your family of origin
- date parents married and divorced (*if they did*)
- date parent(s) died, ages, and causes of death (*if applicable*)

- names of stepparent(s) (*if applicable*)

Write down the following information for each family member:

- unhealthy or maladaptive behaviors they had or currently have
- family “roles”
- how they appeared to the world
- physical characteristics that made them stand out in your family
- illnesses or conditions of each family member
- if any family members are deceased, when and why did they die?

For you and your siblings, write down:

- educational accomplishments
- work history and current career status
- marital history and current family makeup

Role Play Activity

Do this activity with your friends or in a support group. This exercise can offer insight for behavior change. It is helpful if a counselor or coach is present to offer feedback.

1. Ask some friends and acquaintances to help you with this exercise. Choose people to play the role of each member of your family. Tell each person their name, relationship to you (e.g., father, mother, sibling, etc.), and what role or attitude they brought to the family. Assign “dysfunctional” behavior, include deceased or absent people, important responsibilities, or other relevant family issues.
2. Ask each person to assume a position appropriate to their roles for about five minutes, and then ask each one of them how it feels to be in that role.
3. Ask them to re-enact a specific time or event in your life that may be the root of a current issue or problem you have.
4. As they re-enact it, focus on your feelings.

Describe this experience.

Remember – it is not your job to change your family. You can only take responsibility for yourself and your choices. Setting boundaries is one of the most important steps you can take. Describe some of the ways you can set boundaries with your family of origin.

Reflections on This Exercise

Did you experience any challenges while completing this activity? What was hard? Easy? Explain.

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn during this exercise?
