

Chapter Eleven

FAMILIES—FOR BETTER OR WORSE



Families. Everybody has one, yet no two are alike. Thinking of your family of origin (the one in which you grew up) may cause you to smile and feel loved or to cringe and feel pain. Yet our families of origin are what give us a sense of belonging in this world. When they function properly, they are where we learn, through daily interactions with each other and our parents' guiding responses, how to grow into mature adults. If our families were dysfunctional, filled with violence, addictions, neglect, chaos, or other behaviors that harm children, the children cannot learn truth. Parents are the ones who define truth to their children. Therefore, children caught up in dysfunctional families take in the lies and assume they are the truth. They also learn to deny their own ability to recognize and face their own feelings and solve problems. The children see the terrible behavior, hear the angry words spewed during outbursts, and feel the emotions that accompany the situations, but their perception is denied by their parents. Instead of questioning their parent's inappropriate behavior, children question their ability to accurately interpret their feelings or those of the people around them. These lies are established when children are young and are carried through adulthood. They spill over into the parenting of the next generation. There are unspoken rules in these families that ensure the dysfunction continues.

BE BLIND

In dysfunctional families, real problems must be denied. The child must be blind to any perception of reality that contradicts the parent's creative rearranging of the facts. Real problems must be denied at all costs. What the child sees with his own eyes is denied by the adults around him. And for children, adults establish truth. Feelings that occur when those problems come up must be shut down to align with the parents' distortions of the truth.



BE DEAF

In homes with chaos and conflict, there are a lot of problems and no problem-solving taking place. Instead, there is yelling, screaming, cursing, and crashing. Children grow up hearing the sounds of a slap and the cries of pain of their mother. Then it's over, and everyone acts "normal" again. These occurrences raise tremendous emotions in a child, but nobody acknowledges them or helps the child work through them. Children learn not to trust their emotional interpretations of circumstances.

BE QUIET

As children grow up in these families, they learn early that there are things they don't talk about. For example, you definitely don't talk about the family problems to anyone outside the family, and you don't talk about problems or secrets within the family. This is particularly true in families where there is incest. The result is that troubled families do not reach outside the family for help or work inside the family to find validation and help with the pain, and they punish the children who do speak out. Survival demands remaining quiet!

BE NUMB

In troubled families, there is often a chaotic atmosphere that creates intense emotions. At the same time, parents regularly teach their children to numb the very emotions that arise from the chaos and abuse. Children are taught to be numb to personal boundary violations. When parents hit, molest, and punish a child for thinking differently from the parent, they violate their children's physical, sexual, and intellectual boundaries, and then require them not to feel the violation.



BE CAREFUL

In families with significant issues, the atmosphere can be unpredictable. A wrong word, a word spoken at the wrong time, a normal need, or an innocent accident can all become battlefields filled with explosive words and behavior. A child learns to be careful. They watch facial expressions, mood indicators, alcohol consumption, and other clues that determine their fate for that moment.

FAMILY MESSAGES/LIES

"We are the perfect family." This seems an innocent enough statement. All moms want to think this is true. The problem is, there are no perfect families. This message denies the truth and establishes a lie at the expense of the children. First of all, there are no perfect families. There are healthy families, but not perfect families. When the family mantra is perfection, it must deny problems within the family. Problems that need to be faced and remedied instead are ignored or excused. Yet children in families with these lies see the evidence and feel the strong emotions in response to the problems. Since they cannot acknowledge them, they come to the conclusion that something must be wrong with them. The lie of shame is being layered in their little souls!

One young woman I was talking to described a family of such dysfunction with so much sexual abuse and violence that I wondered how she survived. Yet, the parents always framed their family as perfect and better than everyone else's families. In the beginning of our counseling relationship, there was a huge disconnect with her family dysfunction. As she told the hair-raising stories, she then stopped and talked about what a great family she had. Attendance at family Thanksgiving dinners was expected, and you were "bad" if you didn't participate. Guilt and shame were heaped upon such a person. However, every Thanksgiving ended in verbal and even physical fights. It took her many years to work up the courage to say "no" to the mandatory attendance. And even with that, the shame and guilt were almost overpowering. Recognizing and dismantling the lies of childhood is a difficult and scary process, especially when your family acceptance hangs in the balance. Often the person who speaks about the problems becomes the problem!

There are also many other family messages. They exist to keep families from looking at the real issues. In the process, children's emotional needs are overlooked, and the burden is placed upon them to perpetuate the family lies by denying what they see, hear, and know. Below are some common family messages:

- My family is perfect.
- I am bad if I talk about what goes on in our family to anyone else.
- I am responsible for my parents' happiness.
- I am responsible for my parents' behavior.
- I am the problem in my otherwise perfect family.
- If I don't behave a certain way, our family will fall apart.
- My mother can't cope, so I must make sure things don't upset her.
- If I were only prettier, smarter, more clever, more _____, my parent(s) would love me.
- Feelings are bad. I am bad for feeling them.
- I am bad for having an opinion different from that of my parents.
- I have no right to be heard.
- My sister is the smart one, my brother is the bad one, my sister is the perfect one, etc.





ROLES IN THE FAMILY

Everyone has roles in life and in a family; it is essential for family functioning. Dad is the provider, Mom keeps the family running smoothly (or vice versa), children have chores, etc. These roles have a time limit on them, based on family functions and needs. And there are also acknowledged gifts that establish roles. One member may be creative, another organized, another musical. These are talents among family members, and each member acknowledges and encourages those talents. However, these are not the kinds of roles we are talking about.

The family roles that are harmful are those that are assigned to a person's character. These roles are reinforced by the parents, and soon the siblings pick up on the message and they then cast their siblings into those roles. In these families, the roles are unintentionally but inexorably assigned early, and they are reinforced continuously. Even if people change naturally as they mature or purposefully through counseling, the family still holds the individuals to that role. It is true that a child's behavior might have something to do with the original establishment of the role. A strong-willed child can easily be labeled "the black sheep" because of his temperament. In a healthy family, the parents understand that their job is to shape and mold the child's character without breaking her spirit. When a child is labeled, the child lives "down to" the role they are cast in. This ensures that the child will be seen in that role into adulthood.

In my semi-dysfunctional family of origin with our six siblings, we were the poster children of family roles. Even for the golden child or the caretaker who received praise and affirmation, it was still a huge burden to feel like they were responsible for the family happiness. For others, like my brother, the burden was painful and self-fulfilling as the "bad" child. As adults, it took a great deal of conscious effort for us to untangle the lies of our family roles and see each other as adults with a shared history but not rigid roles. And for most of us, we have seen the negative roles move into a positive outcome. On the following page is a chart that defines some roles in families. *(For the only child, this is more difficult to decipher, and only children can move between roles depending on the parent's needs.)*

Family Roles (Lies) In Dysfunctional Families

Dysfunctional Family Role	What's On The Outside	What You Don't See	What's Their Role in The Family and Why They Go Along	Without Help This May Be The Outcome	With Help This is Possible
Hero	Perfect. Can't be wrong. Gets awards, excels in school and/or sports. Positive attention.	Fear of failing. Feels over-controlled.	Family feels "we aren't so bad because he/she is so good." Likes the attention.	Workaholic, Physical Illness, Controlling, Not much fun, Proudful, Cut off from emotional self	Can drop perfectionism yet achieve much. Get in touch and emotions and have good relationships.
Scapegoat	"Bad", angry, impulsive, never good enough. Black Sheep of the family, doesn't fit in.	Hurt, rejected, full of shame and self loathing, feels like a "loser."	Family can avoid looking at problems by focusing on the "bad" one.	Addictive behavior, rebellious, promiscuous, self-destructive, chip on shoulder.	With God's morals and love, self value is restored. Often become missionaries or businessmen.
Lost Child	Ignored, quiet, compliant, invisible. Loves animals and things. Often artistic, sometimes learning disabilities.	Frozen feelings, feels isolated and very lonely.	Family sees this child as the one they don't have to worry about.	Doesn't share opinions. Doesn't feel he/she has a right to a voice. Doesn't feel needed.	Talented and creative with a positive outlet. Can learn to see the value of a quiet, listening person.
Caretaker	Takes responsibility for the emotional well being of the family.	Don't know how to get their own needs met. Self definition is centered on others.	Seen as kind hearted, a good listener, generous, the person to turn to in trouble.	Often go into helping professions like nursing, counseling. Try to save or fix people. Is always "nice."	Make wonderful people helpers who have a great deal to offer others in need without sacrificing self.
Mascot	Funny, hysterical, anything for a laugh, cute and immature	Hides pain with humor. Scared and feels inadequate.	Bring comic relief to family to avoid family seeing problems.	Pain continues to build. Others tell what to do. Never grows up.	Grows up. Uses humor appropriately. Takes the lead in his/her life.

SHALL WE DANCE?

Dysfunctional families do not face reality. Instead, they create intricate dances of lies in which every member knows his or her steps. As the problems come and reality is in conflict with the family dynamics, everyone starts dancing. One family of whom I have intimate knowledge comes to mind as a perfect example of this. The mother was a master manipulator. She used martyrdom, harsh discipline, and control to keep her large family in line, all the while sowing the lie that her children couldn't survive without her. This pertained not only to their physical needs, but they also needed her to think and feel for them because she'd convinced them they could not do this for themselves. They presented themselves as the "perfect" family, and they only had contempt for other families who had problems. If the mom felt someone had offended her, she immediately made herself into the victim. Most of the time this was imagined, but reality was not an issue since the family danced to the lies quite well. The dad sprang to the mom's defense and often sent letters belittling those involved and raising his wife's pedestal a little higher. The children, in perfect sync, defended their mother, and the whole family did a dance of "poor Mom," reciting negative statements about the "bad people who don't see her as perfect." Conflict and challenges came as they do in all families. But the intricate dance required to keep the "perfection lie" afloat made sure that the mom's spouse and children did not question the terrible consequences of her control. They did not question the cruelty, the irrational control, and the personal boundary invasions. They just went into their dance, over and over and over. The result was estrangement from their families of origin, adult children who were unnaturally emotionally tied to their mother, and the absence of close friends.



There are some children who are natural truth speakers. (They are often the "rebellious" ones.) They blurt things out and will talk about the problem, often in anger, as they fight to be heard and validated. When dysfunctional families have children who talk about the problem, those children are often silenced by being MADE to be the problem. The family member who dares to speak the truth stops dancing, and then everyone else trips on them and piles up in condemnation and contempt toward them. In the end, that person is moved to the sidelines and isolated. The family will close ranks on them and label them as "bad" instead of dealing with the problem that is being pointed out. And so, the dance goes on. Such was the case with this family I just described. The oldest daughter would challenge the parents' perceptions. But the censure and silent treatment she received from her entire family was unbearably painful, and she eventually turned to drugs and alcohol in her rebellion. And so, she fulfilled their assessment of her. She was "bad," and this label remained with her into adulthood. Even as an adult, with her own family, the dance still goes on with her on the sidelines. It is painful because she wants so badly to be a "part" of her family of origin, but she cannot overcome the lies.

ARE ALL FAMILIES DYSFUNCTIONAL?

Over the years, I have asked many women if they believed that all families are dysfunctional. The answer was always "yes." It would certainly seem that way. But it is not true. If all families are dysfunctional, then there can't be any functional families. You have to have something to compare them with, a standard by which to measure dysfunctional.

Dysfunctional is a word that we hear used a lot. The definition is:

- not operating normally or properly.
- deviating from the norms of social behavior in a way that is regarded as bad.

You see, you have to have normal to have abnormal. You have to have functional to have dysfunctional. The word functional, when applied to a family, means simply that it works. Children get what they need emotionally, physically, and cognitively—not perfectly, but adequately. There are disagreements, there are fights, and there are problems, but they are resolved and not used as ammunition at a later date. Interestingly, dysfunctional families are shame-bound families. Shame is often at the core of the dysfunction.



FAMILY FUNCTIONING COMPARISON

FROM SHAME FREE PARENTING BY SANDRA WILSON

Well-Functioning, Shame-Free Family

- Parents are substantially shame-free, so they don't expect to be perfect.
- Parents are consistently adequate because they admit personal problems and seek help to resolve them.
- Parents expect family problems, so when problems come, they focus on problem solving.
- Parents consistently tell the truth about what's happening in and around the family.

Poorly Functioning, Shame-Bound Family

- Parents are significantly shame-bound, so they believe they should be perfect, despite the evidence in front of them.
- Parents are significantly impaired because they won't admit personal problems and seek help to resolve them.
- Parents expect the family to be problem-free, so when problems come, they focus on appearance management and shaming.
- Parents consistently distort and deny what's happening in and around the family to conceal problems.

Let's examine what a functional family looks like. First, the word functional connotes a family that works. The members feel safe, nurtured, loved, and emotionally fulfilled. When conflict (*which is inevitable*) happens, the family faces it and deals with it in a constructive manner. Children aren't blamed for the adult's problems. Children aren't required to act like little adults, responsible for their parents' happiness.

This description allows for a vast difference in approach to family structure and function. For instance, you can have a very strict family, where there are age-appropriate expectations and a great deal of structure, with firm rules. Or you can have a family where creativity and spontaneity define it. Here children have fewer rules and more expression. And there are families in between. These are family styles, and they all can operate in the "functional family" category.





Dysfunctional families may also be strict and structured or freewheeling and spontaneous. It isn't about the style. It is about the emotional needs of the children being met. In unhealthy families, there may be chaos, rigid rules, unrealistic expectations, unpredictability, parents acting like children, children required to act like adults, no personal boundaries, and no safety for their thoughts or bodies.

The Bible is full of dysfunctional families. Look at the first human family, for example—Adam and Eve and their sons. In their family, one son, Cain, killed the other son, Abel (Genesis 4:8). Imagine the dysfunction

this caused. And later, what about the brothers Jacob and Esau? Jacob swindled Esau out of his birthright with bread and stew, since Esau despised his birthright (Genesis 25:29–34). Talk about tension between brothers! Look at Joseph—his brothers wanted to kill him because they were so jealous of him and the favor their father showered on him. One brother talked the others out of murdering Joseph, but they faked his death and sold Joseph into slavery (Genesis 37:18–36). And these are just three examples within the first few generations of God's people. The Bible is full of these stories from its beginning to its end. Yet, when we read about these families, we see evidence of God's loving patience. He works with us to help us find peace in each of our families.

Jesus is not afraid of your dysfunctional family. He doesn't shake His head in disgust or set you on the sidelines because of your upbringing. He works through ordinary people from ordinary families full of chaos, pain, failure, and triumph. God loves us and offers us healing in the midst of our foolishness. The great news is that God loves you before you get your act together. No matter how crazy your life or your family tree is, God has said, in so many words, "I want to use you. I want you to be part of My plan for healing and peace. Your history of pain and chaos can help others find peace and healing." God wants to use you to help others. He wastes nothing in our human experience when it is surrendered to Him. Somehow, the circumstances that brought us the most pain and anger become the very things that He uses to work compassion and purpose into our lives. Restoration is an attribute of God. Because families are made up of individuals with free wills, your family may never be fully restored and have loving relationships. But you can be restored to God, and He can fill the hole in your heart and heal the pain. Instead of the pain and dysfunction defining you, He can define you as a beloved child in His family. He becomes your identity. He gives you purpose and meaning in spite of your painful upbringing. And, paradoxically, if you let Him, He uses those very things to offer hope to others and bring glory to Him. And in the process, you become a part of a new family—the family of Christ!



In your own family of origin, did you have to follow any of the “rules” present in dysfunctional families?

Looking at these roles, can you see any in your family?

Can you identify a dance your family performed when faced with problems?

On the family function comparison chart, where did your family fall?

This next week, ask God to reveal to you the messages/lies that were in your family. As He does, write them down in a journal, then talk about them with your mentor. As you fully look at the message they give about your value and significance, surrender the lies and the pain that goes with them. Remember, you can’t fix it. You can’t change it, but God can redeem it!

