

Dysfunctional Family Patterns

Student Counseling

Cumming
470.239.3134
Room 236

Dahlonega
706.864.1819
Stewart 246

Gainesville
678.717.3660
Student Ctr. 115

Oconee
706.310.6205
Administration 106



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Breaking Free of Dysfunctional Family Patterns

Everyone has had a conflict with their family at some time or another, but for some, it is more of a lifetime struggle involving much confusion and emotional pain. Many students come to college thinking that this change will relieve them of their family stress. Very often, however, this change only exacerbates the problem and students find themselves being pulled back into the family chaos.

What is a “Dysfunctional Family”?

The term is often overused, and some people believe that every family is dysfunctional to some extent. Here, a dysfunctional family is one characterized by:

- extreme rigidity in family rules
- little or no communication
- high levels of tension and/or arguing
- extended periods of silence, blame and avoidance as primary coping mechanisms
- the overall message of “don’t feel, don’t talk, don’t trust”

The family problem can take many different forms such as:

- battering/physical abuse of one or more family members
- inappropriate sexual behavior/sexual abuse
- emotional abuse
- chemical dependency
- compulsive eating/dieting
- compulsive gambling
- workaholism

People from dysfunctional families can end up in abusive relationships or find themselves unable to maintain relationships. Other areas in which adult children often report problems include but are not limited to:

- guessing what normal is
- judging themselves without mercy
- difficulty following projects through from beginning to end
- taking themselves very seriously
- difficulty with intimate relationships
- feeling different from other people
- constantly seeking approval and affirmation
- being either overly responsible or overly irresponsible
- avoiding conflict or aggravating it, but rarely dealing with it
- fear of rejection and abandonment, yet rejecting others

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Transitions

Change is something which most human beings resist and/or have great difficulty with, and it is not different for the adult child of a dysfunctional family. One of the hardest things one must realize is that change is up to the individual, not anyone else, including family. We can't wait around for others to change or we may become paralyzed ourselves.

Breaking Free

Often adult children of dysfunctional families will feel controlled by others and at the same time will not take responsibility for their own thoughts, feelings, and actions. To break free, one must take back control over one's life and give back control of other's lives. As one begins to take back responsibility for one's own life, a process of letting go of blame emerges. Blame is very often understandable, but instead of helping it keeps a person tied to the chains of family chaos. A crucial step is learning to set boundaries—what one is willing and not willing to do and/or tolerate in relationships.

Building Support

Breaking free involves developing a new, healthier support system of people who can respect boundaries and changes that occur. Support can be found from a variety of resources such as:

- social events, hobbies, or sport clubs
- religious affiliations
- 12-step support groups such as ACOA, Al-Anon, and CODA
- group therapy specific to dysfunctional families
- individual therapy

Remember

- You're not responsible for changing or "fixing" the whole family.
- You're responsible and in control of taking care of yourself and making the changes you want.
- Change is difficult and takes time; be patient with yourself.
- Creating a healthier support system is an important part of the transition.