When problems and circumstances such as parental alcoholism, mental illness, child abuse, or extreme parental rigidity and control interfere with family functioning, the effects on children can sometimes linger long after these children have grown up and left their problem families. Adults raised in dysfunctional families frequently report difficulties forming and maintaining intimate relationships, maintaining positive self-esteem, and trusting others; they fear a loss of control, and deny their feelings and reality (Vannicelli, 1989).

This brochure will help you understand and recognize family dysfunction and its effects, provide some strategies to help overcome these effects, and list some resources for further help.

**WHAT IS A DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY?**
Family dysfunction can be any condition that interferes with healthy family functioning. Most families have some periods of time where functioning is impaired by stressful circumstances (death in the family, a parent's serious illness, etc.). Healthy families tend to return to normal functioning after the crisis passes. In dysfunctional families, however, problems tend to be chronic and children do not consistently get their needs met. Negative patterns of parental behavior tend to be dominant in their children's lives.

**How Do Healthy Families Work?**
Healthy families are not perfect; they may have yelling, bickering, misunderstanding, tension, hurt, and anger - but not all the time. In healthy families emotional expression is allowed and accepted. Family members can freely ask for and give attention. Rules tend to be made explicit and remain consistent, but with some flexibility to adapt to individual needs and particular situations. Healthy families allow for individuality; each member is encouraged to pursue his or her own interests and boundaries between individuals are honored. Children are consistently treated with respect and do not fear emotional, verbal, physical, or sexual abuse. Parents can be counted on to provide care for their children. Children are given responsibilities appropriate to their age and are not expected to take on parental responsibilities. Finally, in healthy families everyone makes mistakes; mistakes are allowed. Perfection is unattainable, unrealistic, and potentially dull and sterile.

**WHAT GOES WRONG IN DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES?**

**Deficient Parents**
Deficient parents hurt their children more by omission than by commission. Frequently, chronic mental illness or a disabling physical illness contributes to parental inadequacy. Children tend to take on adult responsibilities from a young age in these families. Parental emotional needs tend to take precedence, and children are often asked to be their parents' caretakers. Children are robbed of their own childhood, and they learn to ignore their own needs and feelings. Because these children are simply unable to play an adult role and take care of their parents, they often feel inadequate and guilty. These feelings continue into adulthood.

**Controlling Parents**
Controlling parents fail to allow their children to assume responsibilities appropriate for their age. These parents continue dominating and making decisions for their children, well beyond the age at which this is necessary. Controlling parents are often driven by a fear of becoming unnecessary to their children. This fear leaves them feeling betrayed and abandoned when their children become independent (Forward, 1989). On the other hand, these children frequently feel resentful, inadequate, and power less. Transitions into adult roles are quite difficult, as these adults frequently have difficulties making decisions independent from their parents. When they act independently these adults feel very guilty, as if growing up were a serious act of disloyalty.

**Alcoholic Parents**
Alcoholic families tend to be chaotic and unpredictable. Rules that apply one day don't apply the next. Promises are neither kept nor remembered. Expectations vary from one day to the next. Parents may be strict at times and indifferent at others. In addition, emotional expression is frequently forbidden and discussion about the alcohol use or related family problems is usually nonexistent. Family members are usually expected to keep problems a secret, thus preventing anyone from seeking help. All of these factors leave children feeling insecure, frustrated, and angry. Children often feel there must be something wrong with them, which makes their parents behave this way. Mistrust of others, difficulty with emotional expression, and difficulties with intimate relationships carry over into adulthood. Children of alcoholics are at much higher risk for developing alcoholism than are children of non-alcoholics.

**Abusive Parents**
Abuse can be verbal, physical, or sexual. Verbal abuse, such as frequent belittling criticism, can have lasting effects, particularly when it comes from those entrusted with the child's care. Criticism can be aimed at the child's looks, intelligence, capabilities, or basic value. Some verbal abusers are very direct, while others use subtle put-downs disguised as humor. The Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act defines physical abuse as "the infliction of physical injuries such as bruises, burns, welts, cuts, bone or skull fractures; these are caused by kicking, punching, biting, beating, knifing, strapping, paddling, etc."

Striking a child has much to do with meeting the parent's emotional needs and nothing to do with concern for the child; parents often erroneously justify the abuse as "discipline" intended to "help" the child. Physically abusive parents can create an environment of terror for the child, particularly since violence is often random and unpredictable. Abused children often feel anger. Children of abusive parents have tremendous difficulties developing feelings of trust and safety, even in their adult lives.

Sexual abuse can be any physical contact between an adult and child, where that contact must be kept secret. Demonstrations of affection -- such as hugging, kissing, or stroking a child's hair -- that can be done openly are quite acceptable and even beneficial. When physical contact is shrouded in secrecy then it is most likely inappropriate.

Sexual abuse happens to both boys and girls. It is perpetrated by both men and women. It cuts across lines of race, socioeconomic level, education level, and religious affiliation. In most cases, sexual abuse is part of an overall family pattern of dysfunction, disorganization, and inappropriate role boundaries. No child is responsible for being abused. Most sexually abused children are too frightened of the consequences for themselves and their families to risk telling another adult what is happening. As a result, they grow into adulthood carrying feelings of self-loathing, shame, and worthlessness. They tend to be self-punishing and have considerable difficulties with relationships and with sexuality.
HOW CAN SOMEONE OVERCOME THE EFFECTS OF A DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY?

therapy groups such as Survivors of Incest or Adult Children of Dysfunctional Families (ACODF), and self-help groups such as Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOA), Alanon, or Codependents Anonymous (CODA).

2. Learn to Identify and Express Emotions.
Stop each day and identify emotions you are or have been experiencing. What triggered them? How might you affirm or respond to them? Try keeping a daily feelings journal.
Be selective in sharing your feelings with others. You may not find it helpful to share all of your feelings. In sharing your feelings with others, take small risks first and then wait for a reaction. If the responses seem supportive and affirming, try taking some larger risks.

3. Allow Yourself to Feel Angry About What Happened.
Placing the responsibility for what happened during your childhood where it belongs, i.e., with the responsible adults, allows you to feel less guilt and shame and more nurturance and acceptance toward yourself.
It is usually helpful to find productive ways to vent your anger. This can be done in support groups or with good friends. Try writing a letter to one or both of your parents and then burning the letter. You may want to talk with your parents directly about what happened.
If you decide to do this, it is important to keep your goal clear. Do you want to encourage change and work for a better relationship, or are you trying to get even or hurt them back? Pursuing revenge frequently results in more guilt and shame in the long run. Holding on to anger and resentment indefinitely is also problematic and self-defeating. Focusing on old resentments can prevent growth and change.

4. Begin the Work of Learning to Trust Others.
Take small risks at first in letting others know you. Slowly build up to taking bigger risks. Learning who to trust and how much to trust is a lengthy process. Adult children from dysfunctional families tend to approach relationships in an all-or-nothing manner.

5. Practice Taking Good Care of Yourself.
Frequently, survivors of dysfunctional families have an exaggerated sense of responsibility. They tend to overwork and forget to take care of themselves. Try identifying the things you really enjoy doing, then give yourself permission to do at least one of these per day. Work on balancing the things you should do with the things you want to do.

Keep the focus on yourself and your behavior and reactions. Remember, you cannot change others, but you can change yourself. Counseling or support is usually crucial when trying to change family relationships. It is also important to be patient with your family. They may find it difficult to understand and accept the changes they see in your behavior. While most families can be workable, undoubtedly there are some rare families who are far too dangerous or abusive to risk further contact.

7. Read.
Many books provide helpful information about dysfunctional families and strategies for recovering from their effects.

Either they become very intimate and dependent in a relationship, or they insist on nearly complete self-sufficiency, taking few interpersonal risks. Both of these patterns tend to be self-defeating. Recognize your parents' limitations while still accepting whatever support they can offer. Seek your support from other adults. Practice saying how you feel and asking for what you need. Don't expect people to guess -- tell them. This step will likely require much effort.

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