

Coping With Dysfunctional Families

In the 5th grade I won the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E) essay contest. I don't remember what my paper was about or what made it compelling enough to receive an award. But I do remember the award ceremony. What I remember most is seeing my family in the audience, sitting together cheering me on. I also remember the subsequent family pizza night. All of us sitting together laughing and enjoying each others company over extra cheese pizza with my favorite accessory, Doritos tortilla chips. That moment is one that will forever be etched into my memory.

Shortly after, I graduated 5th grade and we had another family pizza party. It became a family tradition I looked forward to with every academic milestone. In fact, these dinners fueled every single academic accomplishment I've achieved even into adulthood. At some point, I learned that I could keep my family unified and "happy" with my academic success. And so, I tried with every fiber of my being to accomplish every possible academic award that was available to me. So I graduated with honors, academic achievement awards, perfect attendance awards, honor society awards, and more.

It's My Fault: A Child's Perception of Familial Dysfunction

Fast forward 19 years later after moving away. After earning my master's degree I decided to take a break from school. One year later, my parents separated and I watched the family that I worked so hard to keep together begin to crumble. I was convinced that this was all happening because of my decision to take a break from the one thing that was keeping my family together, my ongoing academic success.

If you're thinking, "that's insane!" You are absolutely right. That's the issue with family dysfunction, it creates an unbalanced dynamic that results in a confusion of roles, and boundaries. It produces a toxicity that undermines our capacity to individuate. Once this dynamic is established, it takes intentionality to see and understand things differently. Many of us are aware of the dysfunction that exists in our families and are looking for ways to cope. And although we can't change our families, we do have a responsibility to work on ourselves. The following suggestions have been personally helpful and can hopefully be just as helpful for you.

Deal With Your Own Dysfunction

The first step to effectively coping with the dysfunction in your family is to deal with it. It is impossible to walk away from family dysfunction unaffected.

"We are connected to people in our family history whose unresolved traumas have become our legacy. When the connection remains unconscious, we can live imprisoned in feelings and sensations that belong to the past."

Mark Wolynn, Founder of the Family Constellation Institute.

Our ability to individuate and raise our level of consciousness is largely dependent upon our ability to make sense of the dysfunction. While some choose to avoid and disassociate from their family unit entirely, this is not a solution. This will only temporarily table an underlying issue that will inevitably resurface (as triggers always do). Having some level of awareness of the dysfunction does not make us immune to its influence.

You Are Your Responsibility

Although we are not responsible for the dysfunction that we inherit, we are responsible for how we deal with it. Making sense of the dysfunction begins with self-exploration. And by practicing and developing new patterns of behavior we can change the negative thoughts and behaviors from our past. This is not something that we should expect to do by ourselves. The dysfunction created was a collective effort. And so your healing process should be just as collaborative. The good news is mental health professionals are passionate about and enjoy helping people like you and me process their past.

An additional underutilized resource is group therapy, also known as a support group. Group therapy provides a space for you to connect with other individuals facing similar issues. Inevitably, you begin to connect with group members (consciously and unconsciously) as if they were members of your original family unit. This creates opportunity to correctly relive familial conflicts. This is important because re-exposure to familial issues has the potential to repair existing wounds.

Forgive Your Parents

But the reality is that often, much of our familial dysfunction is attached to our parents. This is because the parental relationship is the most influential relationship we will ever have. It determines how we see ourselves and how we interact with others. And how we deal with the dysfunction in this relationship determines how we engage with society. In other words, coping with familial dysfunction oftentimes means forgiving our parents, especially when they don't ask for forgiveness.

According to Oprah Winfrey's article "Forgiving your parents," unresolved issues with our parents impedes our ability to form healthy relationships with others. The anger and resentment that we hold onto is infectious and spreads into the new relationships that we form. But the truth is:

"Our parents cannot be expunged or ejected from us. They are in us and we are part of them-even if we never met them. Rejecting them only distances us further from ourselves and creates more suffering."

Mark Wolynn, It Didn't Start With You

Effectively coping with the dysfunction in our families begins with healing

from those childhood wounds through the process of forgiveness. Forgiveness begins with self-understanding which also involves understanding the family history underlying the dysfunction. It is through this process of understanding that forgiveness can occur. Forgiveness heals the wounds created by the dysfunction and allows us to objectively analyze the cause of our familial hurt. Once we identify and acknowledge our familial hurt we can make the changes necessary to keep it from happening again.

Protect Your Emotional Health

Ultimately, when coping with family dysfunction protecting your emotional health is crucial. This requires two things: practicing self-awareness and creating boundaries. Bessel Van Der Kolk, M.D., Professor of Psychiatry at Boston University School of Medicine writes in his book *The Body Keeps Score*:

“We don’t truly know ourselves unless we feel and interpret our physical sensations; we need to register and act on these sensations to navigate safely through life.”

The key to understanding how to protect your emotional well being resides in your ability to be present. Taking a moment to check in with yourself (particularly when interacting with family) is an appropriate practice of self-awareness. Developing self awareness gives us the information that we need to create healthy boundaries.

On Oprah Winfrey’s *Super Soul Sunday* Brené Brown, PhD, explains that “there is no trust without boundaries.” This is because it is with appropriate boundaries that we can begin to trust ourselves and become brave enough to build relationships trusting that others will engage with us with our boundaries in mind. Family members will continue to engage in dysfunctional behaviors. The onus is on you to protect yourself by staying true to the limits and boundaries you’ve set.

Facing the Facts

Facing the realities of the dysfunction that existed in my family was the most difficult thing that I’ve ever had to do. I still have to remind myself to be present. Even so, I wouldn’t change any of it. I wouldn’t be who I am today without it. The “A” student, the overachiever, these experiences taught me how to leverage the dysfunction of past and turn it into the success of my future. I encourage everyone to learn this same lesson because how we deal with our dysfunction determines how we heal. And the fact of the matter is, how we heal influences the next generation’s ability to do the same. Choose wisely.