

Treating Adults from Dysfunctional Families

Judith E. Pierson, Ed.D.



28 to 34 Million



Family Dynamics

- Unpredictability
- Abuse
- Neglect
- Love is inconsistent
- Children parentified
- Feelings okay for dysfunctional parent only



- Children can't bring friends home
- Children hide in their rooms
- Fighting and Explosive Anger
- Children belittled, controlled, mocked
- Intergenerational patterns of dysfunction
- Repeated family crises
- Absence of safe & structured home life
- Denial is the norm



This isn't a Norman Rockwell Home



Rules in the Family

-  Don't talk
-  Don't trust
-  Don't feel



Roles in the Family

- Responsible / Parentified Child
- Family Hero
- Enabler
- Scapegoat
- Clown
- Lost Child



Many of us grew up this way...

- 2/3's of 1,500 Smith College School of Social Work graduates were “**parentified child**” (Lackie, 1983)
- Social worker students had **twice the levels of family addiction** as business students (Marsh, 1988)
- **31%** of social work/counseling students had an **alcoholic parent**;
- **34%** defined self as **parentified**;
- **60%** grew up in **dysfunctional family** (Pierson, 1994)



This enhances our work and is only a liability if we don't treat ourselves as well as we treat our clients.



Your Family Rules & Roles Exercise

Answer Questions 1 & 2 on
Handout



The unexamined
past can dictate
the future.



Your Family
Exercise
Question 3



Long Term Impact

- Strong need for control
- Don't know what's "normal"
- Extremely self-critical
- Difficulty with intimate relationships
- Problems recognizing and expressing feelings
- Difficulty expressing needs



■ Exaggerated sense of responsibility



- Perfectionist
- All or nothing thinking
- Anxious when things are calm
- Over-react to change
- Hypervigilant
- Fear of Anger
- Difficulty being spontaneous
- Risk of alcoholism
- Belief they are loveable or good



Healthy Shame vs. Toxic Shame

- Healthy shame – to be human is to be imperfect
- Toxic shame – I am inherently flawed and worthless



Shame Vs. Guilt

■ Guilt – My behavior is bad

■ Shame – I am bad

■ Guilt allows change

■ Shame is immobilizing







Causes

- Core identify shaped by distorted mirroring.
- Trauma
- Children blame themselves for parents failures
- Not adequately affirmed
- Shame experiences stick to one another



How to people protect against feelings of shame?

-  Avoidance strategies
-  Withdraw strategies
-  Self attack strategies
-  Attack others strategies



Addressing Shame

- Recognizing shame, defuses it
- Healthy mirroring
- Challenge overgeneralization – one mistake, I will always fail, I'm a failure
- Help clients reframe mistakes
- Teach compassionate self-talk
- Expose the inner critic



Circle of Healing Messages Exercise



Taming the Inner Critic

- Identify criticism
- Help client understand where they learned this
- Look at appropriateness of belief
- What purpose did it serve in childhood, befriend it
- Separate truth from the distortion
- Teach a nurturing / balanced response



Shame Exercise

See Handout



Princess Imperfect



Unique Strengths of Adult Children

- Increased capacity for empathy
- Heightened sensitivity and awareness
- Greater emotional intelligence
- Take less for granted
- Inner strength & resilience
- Maturity, competency, ability to problem solve
- Commitment to having a healthy family



Working with Adults from Dysfunctional Families

- Provide a framework for understanding their behavior
 - Rules & Roles in the family
 - Impact on adult behavior
 - Look at behaviors with compassion
 - Most embarrassing symptom is the part of you that refuses to lie about the fact that you hurt inside.



- Help them break the rule of silence
- Help them identify and express feelings in safe ways
- Help them to acknowledge & express their needs appropriately.



Common Barriers to Expressing Needs

- Ignorance

- Limiting and inaccurate beliefs

 - “If you loved me, you’d know what I need”

- Fear

- Low self-esteem

- Pride

See handout on “Needs”



- Teach them about the realities of asking
- Encourage giving back
- Linehan's work with borderlines led to DBT which includes teaching people how to express needs in healthy ways.
- Start small, with someone safe, check out fear



Healing the Wounded Inner Child

- Goal is to learn to stop treating themselves the way they were treated as children.
- So this through positive self-talk and building healthy support networks.



Transactional Analysis

Three ego states:

■ Adult

■ Parent

■ Critical Parent

■ Nurturing Parent

■ Child

■ Adapted Child

■ Natural Child



- Model “corrective emotional experience”
- Not “either / or”
- Need love from within and from outside sources
- Strengthen nurturing voice
- Modify the now counter-productive coping of the adapted child
- Model then have them practice



Techniques – See Handout

- Visualize meeting the inner child
- Visualize nurturing parent
- Work with dialogue between child and parent “voices”
 - Capacchione’s writing exercise
 - EMDR & Gestalt
 - Divine looking down
 - Apply in real life



Work with Feelings

- Regular check-in's
- Safe ways to release feelings
- Techniques to evoke emotion
(empty chair, hitting pillows)



Other suggestions

- Put out pictures of younger self
- Write letters to inner child
- Utilize workbooks
- Encourage good self care
- Frame destructive behavior as repeating the abuse.
- Spirituality
- Self-soothing techniques



- Help them build support networks
- Teach interdependence
- Help them learn to share their feelings
- Encourage them to educate their support network
- Address fears about seeking support
- Create a list of people they can call and ways to self-soothe
- Negotiate “parenting time”



- Find safe ways to be nurtured (ex. massage)
- Identify mentors
- Have them read and take classes on self-care
- Support groups
- Pair up with a friend and coach one another on a goal
- Utilize internet resources



Working with Groups

- Usual guidelines on confidentiality, arriving on time but also “ask for what you want 100% of the time”
- Screen – can they regulate feelings and manage behavior
- First group – each person shares and then gets a response from each group member



- Start with psychoeducational
- Process can focus on replaying roles
- Use group as safe place to express feelings and needs
- Leader can bring a topic & activity
- Clients may also suggest topics



If your compassion
does not include
yourself, it is
incomplete.

The Buddha



Although the world is
full of suffering,
it is also full of the
overcoming of it.

Helen Keller

