Treating Adults from Dysfunctional Families

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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 identity 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