

The Family Dynamics of Addiction

This doesn't mean that the family system and addiction are only related during childhood, however, and there are several models aimed at showing how the behavior of an addict's family can help or hinder their recovery, even as an adult.

One focuses on six roles that a family is likely to break into when a member is addicted to drugs or alcohol.

Family 'Survival' Roles

Source: <http://www.addictioninfamily.com/family-issues/unhealthy-families/>

Families often form into roles when they are dysfunctional.

The Enabler



Close to addict, allow them to continue destructive behavior and provide them support as they spiral downward.

The Hero



Often the oldest in the family, seen as a success and 'having it together'. May be involved in many activities but struggle internally.

The Scapegoat



The Scapegoat is the focus of attention in the family for trouble. They don't seem to care about consequences.

The Lost Child



This role is often occupied by the quiet child. They refrain from talking to stay out of trouble. "Out of sight, out of mind".

The Mascot



Often taken by the youngest child. The family tries to protect this member from the reality of issues within group.



First, there's **the addict**. This is the center of the struggles of this sample family. Their inability to deal with this person's addiction in a healthy way means that this person struggles to break the cycle of addiction, regardless of whether they understand their problem and want to get better.

Closest to the addict is **the enabler**. Often, this person is misguided in the belief that their actions are helping the addict.

They may take over some of the addict's responsibilities and even cover for them to try to make it seem like everything is ok. Really, all the enabler is doing is making it easier for the addict to continue living a destructive lifestyle.

Next are **the hero** and **the mascot**. Each of these roles involves common coping mechanisms that people tend to conform to when their family is in conflict.

The hero, for example, turns toward the conflict and tries to assume responsibility. While this a noble pursuit, it tends to be misguided because one person isn't can't fix everything.

On the other side of the spectrum, the mascot tries to use comedy to avoid the situation. This is a person that typically feels that they aren't strong enough to face the responsibility of helping the family during a hard time.

The final two roles are the result of a family's focus being concentrated in one place. **The scapegoat** is the person who receives the blame for issues at home. While the scapegoat does tend to be performing poorly at school or work, much of this blame is a coping mechanism for the family that doesn't want to confront the addict's behavior.

Conversely, the **lost child** is isolated by the family. They're typically not as assertive as other members of the family and may become distanced from the conflict. This can result in poor academic, career and social performance.

There are other models of understanding complex family dynamics during addiction; we feel this one is one of the easiest to understand.

What This Can Mean for Your Family

In order to grow to support a family member struggling with addiction, you have to understand which role in family addiction is the one you're playing.

First, a note: In recovery with an unsupportive family, sometimes, families that slip into these roles simply refuse to change their behavior.

People with toxic family members, you have to find recovery separate from them.

You may believe therapy is to:

Expensive – Most insurance covers therapy.

Time Vacuum – Really even 2-5 sessions can greatly help you understand how to interact with your loved one.

Smarter than Therapy, More Educated – Even Healers cannot heal themselves. You are too close to the center of the storm (loved ones addiction) to take proper action and say correct things. You do need guidance.

Therapy is “hookie” it doesn’t work – Attending 2-3 sessions should help change your mind. Ask your loved ones Counselor if they think you and Client would have a better, healthy relationship if you went to therapy.

The bottom line is this:

No one wants their loved one to relapse or ever go through the difficult, painful process of treatment again. Why not give the person recovering the best version of you!