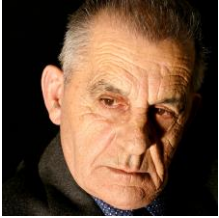


## ***Dysfunctional Family Roles – Dan Hitz***

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*Last month's newsletter article entitled "Home for the Holidays" talked about preparing for family gatherings which are often a source of stress and triggers of emotional wounds. This month's article explores various roles people play in the dysfunctional family. These roles serve as coping skills and defense mechanisms, but often tend to keep the dysfunction going. Recognizing your role in the family system can help you make healthier choices to overcome the dysfunction and walk in better emotional health. Most of the roles in this article are widely recognized and can be found by searching "dysfunctional family roles" on the internet. This article is a compilation of the roles found through multiple internet resources.*



**The Person with the True Problem.** Simply put, this is the person with the addiction or other dysfunctional behavior. It may be the alcoholic father, the vengeful mother, or the sibling with the substance abuse problem. Rather than seeking the help he needs, the person with the true problem expects others to adjust to his dysfunctional behavior. Others in the family learn to comply with his demands rather than facing the wrath and harshness of the broken system.

**The Enabler/Codependent.** This is usually the spouse of the person with the true problem. She is the family peacemaker who keeps the creator of the dysfunction in business by covering for him. She tries to smooth over the waves caused by the true problem and the fallout from the emotional reactions to that problem. Rather than trying to fix the root, the enabler seems to fertilize the bad fruit hoping for a good harvest. She feels responsible for everyone's emotional well being. Strangely, the enabler's behavior tends to get worse when the person with the true problem begins to get help. She isn't used to "normal" and seems to try to get everyone back to "broken" where she can feel "needed".



**The Hero.** This person adopts the values and dreams of others in an attempt to show the outside world that the family is actually okay. Heroes are usually overachievers with poor self-esteem who intellectualize problems and disregard their own feelings. Although they are forced to interact with others, they don't allow others to get close enough to see their true emotional brokenness. They view appropriate vulnerability as dangerous and work hard to put up a good front. The oldest children in the family are usually the heroes.

**The Scapegoat.** The scapegoat is the opposite of the hero. Rather than playing the game and pretending that things are okay, he tends to rebel against the dysfunctional system and begins acting out unspoken family conflict. The scapegoat is the problem child who takes the focus off of the real problem and makes everyone else look good. Scapegoats are often the second born.



**The Lost Child/Loner.** The lost child is usually a loner who becomes a chameleon to disappear into the background and not cause problems. He brings relief because he has learned not to rock the boat and others don't have to worry about him. He has no opinions of his own and no expression of emotional needs. This complies well with some of the unspoken rules of the broken family system including "don't talk", "don't feel", and "don't have needs". He may also leave the family system as soon as he is able and maintain only minimal contact with them. Middle children are often the ones in the role of the lost child.

**The Mascot/Class Clown.** Mascots seek to be the comic relief of the dysfunctional family system and try to diffuse emotional pain through humor. They can develop friendships easily and usually spend little time at home. Mascots have a short attention span and are very poor with responsibility. This serves to help them avoid the family dysfunction and puts their mind on fun things to fuel their escapism. Mascots are usually one of the younger children in the family.



**The Doer.** The doer is similar to the hero. Doers may also be referred to as the "adult child". She is the overdeveloped, overstressed family member who often excels academically and takes care of the siblings for the dysfunction parents. Although she may still be a child, herself, she has learned to act like an adult as a matter of emotional survival. This helps her cope with the adult who is acting like a child. Doers live in the illusion that they exist to meet the needs of the dysfunctional adults.



**The Manipulator.** Manipulators use their skill to get others to do what they want them to do. They have learned the unspoken message that needs and desires expressed directly clash with the family dysfunction and go unmet. They play off the dysfunction of the person with the true problem and the attempts of the enabler to smooth the wake from the problems if the system. Manipulators control others indirectly. Manipulators are extremely intuitive and know what buttons to push in each family member to get their way.

**The Critic.** As the name implies, critics use negativity and fault finding to control others.



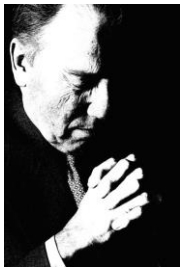
**Daddy's Little Princess.** This role develops when the father uses the daughter to fulfill his broken emotional needs, and is a subtle form of emotional incest. The father uses the child by drawing her into adult conversations and/or activities. For example he may tell the princess about sexual or emotional struggles that he may be having with her mother. Rather than serving to protect and empower the daughter, the father uses his little princess to fulfill his own brokenness. In her own emotional dysfunction, the princess learns to embrace her role for the perceived benefits she receives. Benefits which are merely illusions and only wound her further.

**Prince Charming.** This role is similar to the little princess and occurs when the son is expected to fulfill the emotional needs of the dysfunctional mother.



**The Saint/Martyr.** The saint's sense of worth is derived from fulfilling a predetermined occupation or course of action regardless of his own personal needs and wishes. She may attempt to gain extra value by "informing" everyone of the many sacrifices she has made in order to "help" those in the dysfunctional system. Although they often flaunt their own virtue and goodness, saints are internally sad and unfulfilled, hoping to gain a sense of inner acceptance and appreciation from people incapable of providing it.

If you've seen yourself as you read through the dysfunctional family roles, there is hope. One of the main steps in your journey into relational wholeness is recognizing the things that need to be corrected. Many of these roles are merely broken expressions of character strengths that are undeveloped. The hero is able to play the hero because he does possess the intelligence and ability to succeed. The lost child is able to become the chameleon because he is able to read people and situations and attempt to bring himself to a place of internal peace in the middle of the storm. The mascot is able to be the mascot because he is personable and able to develop many friendships and make people feel comfortable with him. Through counseling and a deeper walk with Christ, those in dysfunctional family roles can learn to shed the false uses of their personal gifts. They can learn to step out in the power of Christ to implement their gifts for the good that God intended. The hero can learn to evaluate her own personal abilities and determine what is and is not her personal responsibility. Accepting the personal responsibilities of walking in her gifts and allowing others to experience their own personal responsibilities offers both the opportunity for self improvement. The mascot



can learn to use her people skills to create a friendly work environment while receiving the satisfaction of meeting her personal responsibilities. Walking into the good of our god-given design will help us to become all that God created us to be.

For others whose roles are deeper expressions of brokenness and sin there is repentance and the grace of God. Through repentance, the scapegoat can learn to accept the responsibility for his own sinful choices and learn to overcome the emotional distress they formerly tried to escape through sin.

Help is available for those who are walking out of a dysfunctional family system. Seek the assistance of the pastoral care department from your local church, a professional therapist, or a good support group. Living Waters, Celebrate Recovery, and other life care groups offer support to those dealing with codependency, negative life patterns, and habitual sin. There is help and hope for everyone through the power of Jesus Christ.

*Reconciliation Ministries offers licensed professional counseling and prayer ministry.*

*If you or someone you know needs help, call 586.739.5114 to schedule an appointment.*

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