

# 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 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

