

Family Roles in an Alcoholic/Dysfunctional Home

*Alcoholism affects more than the problem drinker.
Rigid roles and enabling behaviors constrict those
who are living with an alcoholic.*

Research abounds for those seeking information on alcoholism. Finding facts on signs and symptoms of problem drinking is a cinch even for the novice. However, all too frequently, the family is the first to detect that alcohol may be an issue. Unfortunately, help for them is less forthcoming. Instead, existing articles focus on the behaviors of the alcoholic. Ironically, the tendency to place emphasis on others is a primary symptom that alcohol has eroded the loved one's role in the relationship.

As the alcoholic's drinking increases and adopts a primary place in his/her world, it assumes membership in everyone's life. Family members and loved ones are forced to ignore their own needs, in order to facilitate the functioning of the household.

At the same time, alcoholism brings its own chaos into the family system. For instance, a loved one cannot predict easily the behaviors of the problem drinker. To compensate for this puzzle, the family member adopts a rigid, two dimensional role that will enable the functioning level of the family. The following are roles that are typical in alcoholic families:

The Caretaker: Usually a parent accepts this role. He/she tends to everyone's need in the family. A caretaker loses his/her sense of self in tasks of a domestic nature. Multigenerational alcoholic families will sometimes designate a child in this role, a sign of more serious pathology. The caretaker's purpose is to maintain appropriate appearances to the outside world. **Negative Consequence:** The caretaker never takes the time to assess his/her own needs and feelings. Others cannot bond with the caretaker due to the bustle of activity.

The Hero: Alcohol bestows this role onto the individual whose accomplishments compensate for the alcoholic's behavior. The child excels in academics, athletics, music or theatre. His/her deeds assure the family that their definition is more than alcohol. **Purpose:** The hero role raises the esteem of the family. **Negative Consequence:** The hero does not receive attention for anything besides an achievement; therefore, inner needs are not met. He/she loses the ability to feel satisfied by whatever feat he/she has manifested.

Source: http://ms.essortment.com/howalcoholeffe_rfng.htm, 2005.

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The Scapegoat: The family assigns all ills to the person who harbors this role. For example, they may tell this person that, "Mom would not drink so much if (Scapegoat's name) were not always in trouble. The child has issues with authority figures as well as negative consequences with the law, school and home. Purpose: The scapegoat puts the focus away from alcohol thereby allowing the alcoholic to continue drinking. This role may seem strange in purpose. However, if there were no scapegoat, all other roles would dismantle. He/she allows others a pretense of control. Negative Consequence: Alcohol is not identified as an issue. Often, the scapegoat is identified as 'The Problem.'

The Mascot/Cheerleader: Often this child is named a class clown in school. The individual is the most popular in the family. Purpose: To provide levity to the family. Negative Consequence: The laughter prevents healing rather than produces it. In addition, the mascot frequently demonstrates poor timing for the comic relief.

The Lost Child: As the title suggests, the lost child disappears from the activity of the family. Favorite places for the lost child are in front of the T.V. as well as in his/her room. Due to the sedentary lifestyle, a lost child tends to have issues with weight. Purpose: A lost child does not place added demands on the family system. He/she is low maintenance. Negative Consequence: The lost child sees much more than is vocalized. The family reduces its depth in not listening to what the lost child thinks and feels.

As is illustrated above, the roles of alcoholic families prove problematic by their two dimensional quality. Contrarily, functional families are allowed to have more than one hero. In fact, in healthy families, behaviors do not cluster toward one particular role or individual. A child who pushed a playmate at recess and was scolded can still receive positive kudos for an 'A' in Spelling.

Alcoholic relationships disintegrate upon close inspection. If pursued, family members will admit that none are entirely comfortable in their designated role. Moreover, if outside circumstances change, the alcoholic family is less able to adapt. Instead, if a crisis or alteration in the system occurs such as a death, birth, divorce, etc, the roles simply switch to accommodate the change. In other words, a child may have been a lost child in younger years, but may grow up to be a mascot when he/she leaves for college. Unfortunately, this switch which occurs to meet the family dynamic is often a shock to the one who now has a new role.

Finally, alcoholism demands that the problem drinker maintain a constant supply of alcohol. This demand encourages enabling behaviors in loved ones.

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Enabling is not a dirty word as is often indicated on popular television talk shows. Enabling means that family members end up facilitating the drinking, in order to prevent negative consequences from occurring to the family. An example of enabling behavior is the purchasing of alcohol by the loved one. The loved one rationalizes this purchase with the excuse that at least the alcoholic will not have to drink and drive. Another enabling example is a family member volunteering to call the alcoholic's employer with a feigned illness when in fact the alcoholic has a hangover. While well intentioned, the enabling behavior serves to protect the alcoholic from accountability.

The examples listed above are not exhaustive but help to demonstrate the amount of energy that the loved one uses to placate alcoholic reactions and stress. In essence, alcoholism dominates the family members without ever reciprocating or apologizing. In time, members lose the ability to coalesce as a united force. At that juncture, alcoholism has won the battle.

In conclusion, to prevent alcoholism from usurping a loved one and his/her family, education can offer further help. Refer a loved one to Al-Anon, a Twelve Step program for those who have a relationship with someone who has a problem drinking. There is even a similar organization for youth called AL-Ateen. Widening the social support network in this manner is an excellent way for the family member to combat alcohol's dominance. Additionally, a visit to the local book store in the Self-Help section can provide further education on the way alcoholism affects loved ones. No matter what, let the person know that he/she matters. It may sound reductionistic, but a little caring goes a long way.

Resources for members of a family impacted by alcoholism and addictions:

Al-Anon and Alateen: <http://www.al-anon.alateen.org/>

Co-Dependents Anonymous: <http://www.codependents.org/>

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