

How Addiction Impacts the Family: 6 Family Roles in a Dysfunctional or Alcoholic Family

Why is addiction considered a family disease?

Alcoholism or any type of addiction affects everyone in the family in some way. Sharon Wegscheider-Cruse, a respected expert in the field of addictions and codependency, identified six primary roles in an alcoholic family as a way to highlight the effects of alcoholism on the alcoholic's spouse and children.

I want to preface this article by saying that I know that labeling people doesn't usually feel good and often it isn't accurate. However, it can be useful in getting a general picture of the common dynamics in families dealing with addiction. Like anything else, please take the aspects of these family roles that apply to you and your family and leave the rest. Individuals and family systems are complex. In reality, people don't fall neatly into categories. You may have played more than one role at different times in your life, or you may identify with a combination of these traits and coping strategies.

The most important takeaway that I hope to convey is that everyone in an addicted family is impacted by the addiction; everyone adopts coping strategies to deal with the stress of living with an addict and many of these coping strategies have lasting negative effects. In fact, these family dynamics persist even when the addict gets sober, dies, or leaves the family, and they are passed down generationally through modeling and family dynamics.

Children with an addicted parent often experience a chaotic or unpredictable home life which may include physical and emotional abuse. Even more common is emotional neglect, where the child's emotional needs are neglected due to the chaos and focus on dealing with the alcoholic and his or her problems. Children may feel embarrassed and ashamed, lonely, confused, and angry. Some children cope by trying to be perfect and others cope by cracking jokes and getting into trouble.

Family members have to walk on eggshells and quickly learn that the addict dictates the mood of the entire family. Family members don't have the opportunity to explore their own interests and feelings. Life is about keeping the peace, simply surviving, and trying to keep the family from imploding.

Addiction and the resulting chaos is a tightly held secret in most addicted families. Children are told overtly or covertly not to talk about what's going on at home. As a result, they feel shame – a sense that there's something wrong with them, that they are somehow to blame for their parent's addiction, stress, and erratic behavior.

Common Roles in Addicted Families

The Addict

Addicts have varying degrees of functioning or fulfilling their responsibilities. For most, addiction progresses with the quantity and frequency of their drug or alcohol use increasing. Drugs and alcohol become the primary way the addict copes with problems and uncomfortable feelings. Over time, addicts burn bridges and become isolated. Their lives revolve around alcohol and drugs – getting more, using, and recovering. They blame others for their problems, can be angry and critical, unpredictable, and don't seem to care about how their actions affect others. We could also substitute other forms of addiction or dysfunction (sex addiction, gambling, unmanaged mental health problems) for drug or alcohol addiction and the dynamics are virtually the same.

The Enabler (Caretaker)

The enabler tries to reduce harm and danger through enabling behaviors such as making excuses or doing things for the addict. The enabler denies that alcohol/drugs are a problem. The enabler tries to control things and hold the family together through deep denial and avoidance of problems. The enabler goes to extremes to ensure that family secrets are kept and the rest of the world views them as a happy, well-functioning family. The enabler is often the addict's spouse, but it can also be a child.

The Hero

The hero is an overachiever, perfectionist, and extremely responsible. This child looks like s/he has it all together. S/he tries to bring esteem to the family through achievements and external validation. S/he's hard-working, serious, and wants to feel in control. Heroes put a lot of pressure on themselves, they're highly stressed, often workaholics with Type A personalities.

The Scapegoat

The family scapegoat is blamed for all the family problems. A scapegoat child acts out and temporarily distracts attention away from the problems of the addict. He's rejected by his parents and doesn't fit in.

The Mascot (Clown)

The mascot tries to reduce family stress through humor, goofing around, or getting into trouble. He's seen as immature or a class clown. Humor also becomes his defense against feeling pain and fear.

The Lost Child

The lost child is largely invisible in the family. He doesn't get or seek attention. He's quiet, isolated, and spends most of his time on solitary activities (such as TV, internet, books) and may escape into a fantasy world. He copes by flying under the radar.



No matter what role(s) you played in your dysfunctional family dynamics, it's possible to overcome the effects of having an addicted parent and learn healthier coping strategies. Getting a clear and honest look at how your family of origin functioned is an important place to begin. Many adult children of alcoholics or addicts struggle with intimacy and trust in their romantic relationships and have difficulty expressing their feelings and loving themselves. I highly recommend working with a therapist with experience working with codependency. There are also many excellent [self-help books](#) and [groups](#) available.

Further reading:

[Another Chance](#) by Sharon Wegscheider-Cruse

[When a Child Has to Act Like an Adult](#)

[13 Signs You Grew Up in an Enmeshed Family](#)

[You Don't Get a Childhood When You Grow Up in an Alcoholic Family](#)