



- Identify painful or difficult experiences that happened during your childhood.
- Make a list of your behaviors, beliefs, etc. that you would like to change.
- Next to each item on the list, write down the behavior, belief, etc. that you would like to do/have instead.
- Pick one item on your list and begin practicing the alternate behavior or belief. Choose the easiest item first.
- Once you are able to do the alternate behavior more often than the original, pick another item on the list and practice changing it too.

In addition to working on your own, you might find it helpful to work with a group of people with similar experiences and/or with a professional counselor.

### Special Considerations

As you make changes, keep in mind the following:

- Stop trying to be perfect. In addition, don't try to make your family perfect.
- Realize that you are not in control of other people's lives. You do not have the power to make others change.
- Don't try to win the old struggles — you *can't* win.
- Set clear limits — e.g., if you do not plan on visiting your parents for a holiday, say "no," not "maybe."
- Identify what you would like to have happen. Recognize that when you stop behaving the way you used to, even for a short time, there may be adverse reactions from your family or friends. Anticipate what the reactions will be (e.g., tears, yelling, other intimidating responses) and decide how you will respond.

### Final Note

Don't become discouraged if you find yourself slipping back into old patterns of behavior. Changes may be slow and gradual; however, as you continue to practice new and healthier behaviors, they will begin to become part of your day-to-day living.

### References and Additional Resources

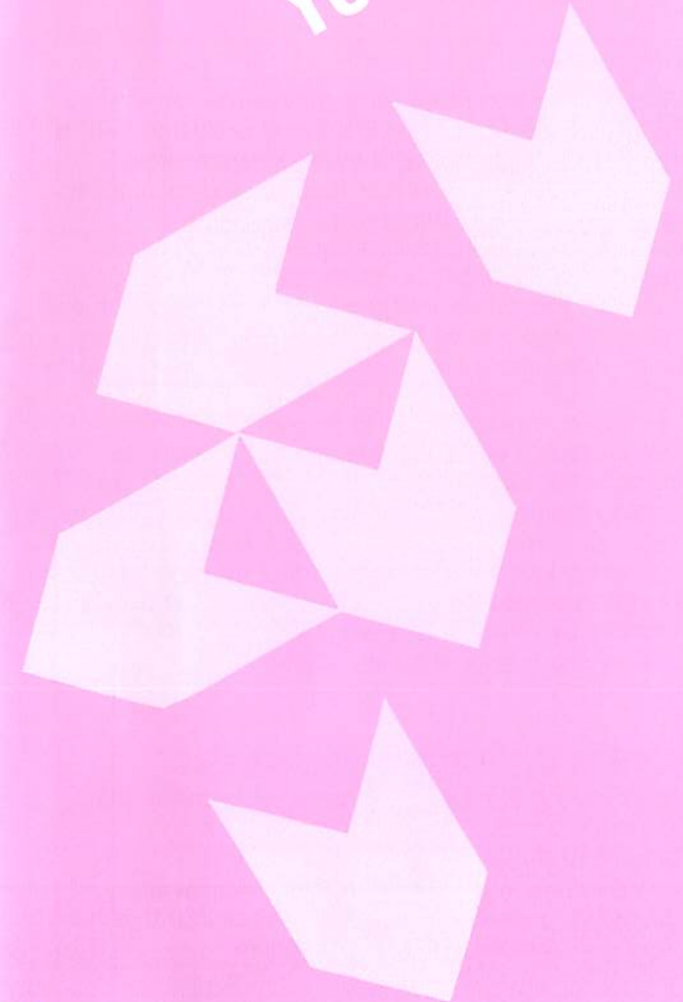
Some excellent books on Dysfunctional Families are:

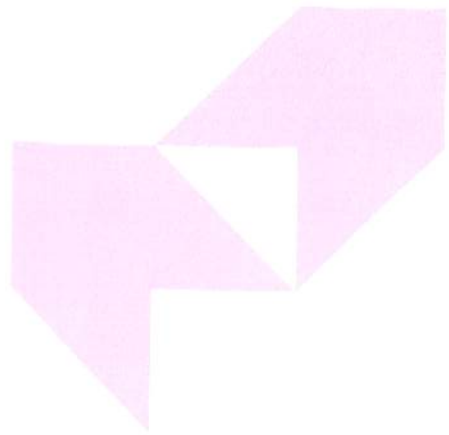
1. *Toxic Parents*. S. Forward. New York: Bantam Books, 1989.
2. *Cutting Loose*. H. Halpern. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976.
3. *How to Deal with Your Parents When They Still Treat You Like a Child*. L. Osterkamp. New York: Berkley Books, 1992.

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# Understanding Dysfunctional Relationship Patterns in Your Family





## Introduction

Many people hope that once they leave home, they will leave their family and childhood problems behind. However, many find that they experience similar problems, as well as similar feelings and relationship patterns, long after they have left the family environment. Ideally, children grow up in family environments which help them feel worthwhile and valuable. They learn that their feelings and needs are important and can be expressed. Children growing up in such supportive environments are likely to form healthy, open relationships in adulthood.

However, families may fail to provide for many of their children's emotional and physical needs. In addition, the families' communication patterns may severely limit the child's expressions of feelings and needs. Children growing up in such families are likely to develop low self-esteem and feel that their needs are not important or perhaps should not be taken seriously by others. As a result they may form unsatisfying relationships as adults.

## Types of Dysfunctional Families

The following are some examples of patterns that frequently occur in dysfunctional families.

- One or both parents have addictions or compulsions (e.g., drugs, alcohol, promiscuity, gambling, overworking, and/or overeating) that have strong influences on family members.

- One or both parents use the threat or application of physical violence as the primary means of control. Children may have to witness violence, may be forced to participate in punishing siblings, or may live in fear of explosive outbursts.
- One or both parents exploit the children and treat them as possessions whose primary purpose is to respond to the physical and/or emotional needs of adults (e.g., protecting a parent or cheering up one who is depressed).
- One or both parents are unable to provide, or threaten to withdraw, financial or basic physical care for their children. Similarly, one or both parents fail to provide their children with adequate emotional support.
- One or both parents exert a strong authoritarian control over the children. Often these families rigidly adhere to a particular belief (religious, political, financial, personal). Compliance with role expectations and with rules is expected without any flexibility.

There is a great deal of variability in how often dysfunctional interactions and behaviors occur in families, and in the kinds and the severity of their dysfunction. However, when patterns like the above are the norm rather than the exception they systematically foster abuse and/or neglect.

Children may:

- Be forced to take sides in conflicts between parents.
- Experience "reality shifting" in which what is said contradicts what is actually happening (e.g., a parent may deny something happened that the child actually observed, for example, when a parent describes a disastrous holiday dinner as a "good time").

- Be ignored, discounted, or criticized for their feelings and thoughts.
- Have parents that are inappropriately intrusive, overly involved, and protective.
- Have parents that are inappropriately distant and uninvolved with their children.
- Have excessive structure and demands placed on their time, choice of friends, or behavior; or conversely, receive no guidelines or structure.
- Experience rejection or preferential treatment.
- Be restricted from full and direct communication with other family members.
- Be allowed or encouraged to use drugs or alcohol.
- Be locked out of the house.
- Be slapped, hit, scratched, punched, or kicked.

## Resulting Problems

Abuse and neglect inhibit the development of children's trust in the world, in others, and in themselves. Later as adults, these people may find it difficult to trust the behaviors and words of others, their own judgments and actions, or their own sense of self-worth. Not surprisingly, they may experience problems in their academic work, their relationships, and in their very identities.

In common with other people, abused and neglected family members often struggle to interpret their families as "normal." The more they have to accommodate to make the situation seem normal (e.g., "No, I wasn't beaten, I was just spanked. My father isn't violent, it's just his way"), the greater is their likelihood of misinterpreting themselves and developing negative self-concepts (e.g., "I had it coming; I'm a rotten kid").

## Making Changes

Sometimes we continue in our roles because we are waiting for our parents to give us "permission" to change. But that permission can come only from you. Like most people, parents in dysfunctional families often feel threatened by changes in their children. As a result, they may thwart your efforts to change and insist that you "change back." That's why it's so important for you to trust your own perceptions and feelings. Change begins with you. Some specific things you can do include:

