



Addicts' families use roles to cope

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Preserving the family unit is everyone's job and when a parent or child has a substance-abuse problem, balance is crucial.

Family members take on roles that are designed to allow the family to present a good image to outsiders and to help members cope with anxiety.

Such roles are intended to help, but often delay or reduce consequences for the substance abuser, and instead contribute to their addiction. These roles have been categorized as:

The Family Hero: The family hero, usually the oldest child, is the perfectionist. Self-sufficient and a goal-oriented overachiever, this child believes that if he is perfect, the focus will be taken off the substance abuser.

This individual generally is involved in many activities and appears to be highly successful and well-adjusted. However, a feeling of inadequacy lies underneath as this "hero" becomes the family "caretaker" and his/her self-worth becomes dependent on the approval of others.

The Scapegoat: The scapegoat is the opposite of the family hero. This is the child who acts out for attention, accepting the family's blame for its problems. Scapegoats act on their feelings of hurt, anger and rejection and may abuse alcohol or other drugs, display behavior problems, truancy or poor school performance.

The scapegoat often gets into trouble because he is aggressive and doesn't accept authority well.

The Lost Child: The lost child is quiet, aloof and sometimes withdrawn. Lost children do not want to draw

attention. Often overlooked, they feel lonely, depressed and rejected.

The lost child may be perceived by others as anti-social because he prefers to be alone. Because he tries so hard to stay invisible, he often is overlooked.

The Mascot: The youngest child is most frequently the mascot. The mascot's job is to be cute and funny. He provides a diversion by entertaining everyone. Often the class clown, he uses humor for protection from family problems. In reality he feels helpless, confused and frightened because he doesn't know how to communicate his feelings.

The Enabler: This is the person who protects the substance abuser from experiencing the consequences of his use. This individual often rationalizes, minimizes or denies the behavior. This well-intentioned behavior often complicates the problem.

When families take on these roles other patterns emerge which can continue to cause problems in relationships. Individuals learn things such as "keep secrets," "don't trust" and "don't feel." Being in a relationship with someone who did not grow up in a family with these "rules" can make life very confusing, if not very difficult.

Addiction is a family disease and treatment should involve the whole family. If you suspect a loved one is battling an addiction, please encourage him to seek treatment.

Help is available through local treatment facilities and self-help groups such as Alcoholics

Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and Families Anonymous.

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