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UNDERSTANDING ADULT SURVIVORS OF DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES:  
HELPING TO HEAL THE HURTS OF THE PAST

How often those of us who work with families recognize a child who lives in a dysfunctional home and feel a painful tug at our heart-strings! Every child reacts differently to that unhappiness. Some try hard to be perfect; some become the class clown; some seem to always be in trouble; and some just fade into a corner until we tend to forget their presence. Because we do not live in the home with that child, we cannot know what it is really like, but we can see the effects of the pain and loneliness.

As professionals, we do what we can to help, but very often, it just isn't enough. We realize our limitations and our human inadequacies, and sometimes all that is left is to pray that the child will survive until it is time to leave the home, and that life will then go on in a happier way, with the passage of time.

Time does help to heal, but the emotional residue generally remains. Time simply transformed that unhappy child into a confused and unhappy adult. Every adult survivor of a dysfunctional family has different memories - memories of an alcoholic, mentally ill, compulsive, or abusive parent. Because the memories are different, each survivor of such a family will be different and will function differently. However, certain patterns and behavior characteristics are common and not too surprising. Understanding these tendencies can help professionals minister to the needs of people who grew up in unhappy families. You can assist them in living a happier life and, hopefully, in breaking the patterns before they can be passed on to the next generation.

Janet Woititz, author of Adult Children of Alcoholics, lists 13 characteristics that are frequently problematic to people who grew up in alcoholic and other dysfunctional families.

Let's examine these characteristics, some of the implications as we've seen them in our work with people, and some ideas on how you can help:

1. ADULT SURVIVORS GUESS AT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE "NORMAL"

Children who grow up in dysfunctional families spend a lot of time in a "dream world." They imagine what their lives would be like if the "problem" were not there. They may think other children don't have problems or that other families are perfect. At one time, adults who grew up in these families may have thought "normal" life was that portrayed on "Father Knows Best" or "The Brady Bunch." Now, they worry because their families don't look like the ones on "Family Ties" or "The Cosby Show." They want to live a "normal" life so they try to copy what they think is normal. Because they don't really know, they get confused, but they are afraid to ask questions and appear stupid or expose their pretense. Inside they guess at how they are "supposed" to feel or act. They bury themselves in "shoulds" that may not have much basis. They think that people who grew up in "normal" families don't get confused. They need to hear that "normal" is different for everybody. They may need someone to give them permission to feel as they do. They are often relieved to hear a pastor or counselor say, "If I were you, I guess I'd be

feeling...." In other words, they need to hear what some typical reactions to a situation might be, and are even surprised to hear that their feelings are typical.

They also need to hear that their reactions are predictable based on their upbringing. For example: "It makes sense to me that you become anxious and panic when you're late since your dad used to beat you when dinner wasn't ready on time."

They will also find comfort in the structure God's word provides. It may help to examine with them which "shoulds" God gives us and which ones are self-imposed. For example, God directs us to love our neighbor, but He does not tell us that we should do their cleaning, errands, etc. at the expense of our own families and our own physical and mental health.

## 2. ADULT SURVIVORS FEEL THAT THEY ARE "DIFFERENT" FROM OTHER PEOPLE

Because they don't know that "normal" is different for everybody and everybody is "different," adult survivors may imagine that their experiences set them so far apart that they can never really "fit in" with the mainstream of society. Talking to other adult survivors can be a real revelation. Survivors are often surprised to hear that others share similar feelings.

## 3. ADULT SURVIVORS HAVE DIFFICULTY FOLLOWING A PROJECT THROUGH FROM BEGINNING TO END

Children in dysfunctional families hear a lot of "broken promises." Big ideas are conceived and big projects may be started, but the "problem" often interferes before completion. The child doesn't have many examples of how to follow through on things.

In functional families, parents usually take time to help with homework and projects, and teach their children how to set goals, plan, organize, and overcome obstacles and difficulties. In dysfunctional families, these skills may not be learned because so much energy was needed just to cope with the ongoing "problem." As adults, survivors may need to have someone show them how to break big projects down into smaller tasks, develop a plan, and devise alternatives "B" and "C" if "A" does not work.

## 4. ADULT SURVIVORS MAY LIE WHEN IT WOULD BE JUST AS EASY TO TELL THE TRUTH

Lying is basic in families with a "problem." Especially if the problem is alcohol, denial is part of the dysfunction affecting the whole family. Because of the stigma, families learn to cover-up and hide the problem from relatives and neighbors. Sometimes families hide the truth from each other to avert unpleasant scenes. Because of the entrenched denial in dysfunctional families, lying may seem more natural than telling the truth, and survivors learn to lie to themselves too. Furthermore, it may not be very pleasant to face the truth, even in matters unrelated to the "problem." Survivors may become confused about the difference between truth and untruth. Survivors need to know that lying is sinful, but they also need to hear that you understand why they lie even though you don't condone it. It may help to know that you believe they believe what they have said even if it isn't true. With acceptance, they can start to

recognize the problem and deal with it. Sometimes it helps to view the lying as an "addiction" that faithful repentance and prayer can help to overcome.

5. ADULT SURVIVORS JUDGE THEMSELVES WITHOUT MERCY

Children in dysfunctional families sometimes grow up thinking they are one of the reasons for the "problem." They become scapegoats to take the focus off a parent. They think that if they were better children, the parent wouldn't drink or wouldn't be ill or their parents wouldn't fight. Furthermore, the family is too busy coping to think to offer praise and encouragement. Members of such a family need reassurance that God has had mercy on them and expects them to forgive themselves too. They need someone to help them to like themselves and to see themselves as worthy and likeable. One survivor said that he needed to learn that he made mistakes but he was not a mistake.

They may need to practice accepting compliments. They tend to answer with a disclaimer instead of just saying "thank you." For example, when praised for a job well done, they may say, "It wasn't much" or "I should have done it differently."

6. ADULT SURVIVORS HAVE DIFFICULTY HAVING FUN

7. ADULT SURVIVORS TAKE THEMSELVES VERY SERIOUSLY

Life is a very serious business in dysfunctional families. They learn to do what has to be done, but they don't learn to have fun doing it. Adult survivors are often workaholics. They sometimes feel out of place with a group of people who are having fun, but inside, they're wishing they could be part of it.

Survivors may need encouragement to plan leisure activities and the reminder that it's OK to have fun. Remind them that even our Savior took time to relax and enjoy life. Let them know that even pastors allow themselves to have fun. They may need to be taught to have fun with people who know how. Children are especially good at teaching adults to be spontaneous and silly.

Often, the underlying problem is guilt. Survivors may feel guilty for allowing or causing the dysfunction. Once that guilt is worked through, they can begin to have more fun.

8. ADULT SURVIVORS HAVE DIFFICULTY WITH INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Many adult survivors had sporadic nurturing in their early years. They experienced closeness and warmth when things were going well, but rejection and a "stay out of the way" attitude when the "problem" flared up. Furthermore, they probably didn't see many good examples of healthy marriages or relationships.

Because fear of rejection has become so strong, it is hard for adult survivors to allow themselves to get close to anyone. They may also react strongly to disagreements and anger because unpleasant childhood memories come flooding back.

Secrecy is a strong family rule in dysfunctional families. Children are taught to hide the "problem" from others. If denial is very strong, family members do not discuss the "problem" with each other either. Because they haven't learned how, adult survivors find it difficult to share feelings and problems even with a spouse. Therefore, it is important for helpers to encourage that the spouse be part of counseling sessions. In this way, the survivor can begin to learn the benefits of sharing and the spouse can begin to understand and learn how to help.

Survivors often have some faulty beliefs about relationships. If the love they received as a child was conditional, they tend to think that love always has a price. They are suspicious of members of the opposite sex who are kind and giving. They think people will only love them if they can satisfy them sexually or get some selfish return from the relationship.

Because their needs for nurturing were unmet as children, adult survivors may feel that the only way they can get their needs met is through manipulation. It may have never occurred to them to just ask for what they need. For example, someone who felt abandoned as a child may look for someone who is "needy." A person who needs them to survive will be less apt to abandon them. In this way, they control and manipulate relationships instead of just saying, "I need to know you won't abandon me."

Some people may have become "addicted" to unhealthy relationships. They develop patterns of connecting with people who evoke the same feelings and reactions in them that they experienced with their parents. Even if feelings are not positive or enjoyable they are familiar. These relationships may also give the survivor a "second chance" at working out conflicts that began in childhood. For example, a woman whose mother was critical and blaming may choose a husband who is critical and blaming. Somehow, she feels that if she can win his acceptance and approval, she can also resolve the conflict with her mother.

Another aspect of addictive relationships is the relief they provide from depression or emptiness. Some people say that they are not attracted to or are bored by members of the opposite sex who are "too nice." That may be because they grew up in a family where conflict seemed normal and natural. Indeed, conflict over trivial things saved them from focussing on the deeper problem. Without conflict, they are forced to focus on themselves and the intense fear and pain that they often repress and avoid.

Professionals can help uncover these patterns by continually asking, "Did anyone else ever make you feel this way?"

#### 9. ADULT SURVIVORS OVER-REACT TO CHANGES OVER WHICH THEY HAVE NO CONTROL

Adult survivors may give the impression of being very rigid people. They may seem to want things to go their way or not at all. Little things set them off. Again, this relates back to childhood. Dysfunctional families have trouble communicating. Seemingly trivial things may become "the straw that breaks the camel's back." Even as adults little things that go wrong can evoke feelings of panic and dread of traumatic consequences. Helpers can assist the survivor in recognizing extreme reactions. The next step is to identify the connection with feelings from the past. Perhaps a minor glitch in plans brings back feelings

of disappointment from broken promises, confusion about punishments unrelated to the crime, or fear of violent confrontations.

People who grew up in dysfunctional families may also transfer fears about things they can't control to fears which they can control. For example, a fear of the dark is overcome, but soon replaced by a fear of snakes, which is overcome and replaced by a fear of crowds. These are fears which can be managed and dealt with. The deeper root is apt to be fear of abandonment, fear of psychological annihilation, or fear of loss of self-esteem. Until this root is dealt with, it may keep sprouting up in the form of more easily controlled surface fears.

10. ADULT SURVIVORS CONSTANTLY SEEK APPROVAL AND AFFIRMATION

Survivors often grew up with a conditional kind of love. Because the family was so focused on the "problem," they may have had to try very hard to be noticed. Just being good wasn't enough to feel loved - they had to go out of their way to please people enough to be appreciated. If they caused trouble, they were noticed too and probably punished. But the family was probably too busy coping to recognize them when they were "just there." As adults, survivors need to be convinced that people can like them and accept them just as they are - even if they don't bring gifts or food. They may need help separating themselves from their behavior. It's hard for them to believe that even if you sometimes disapprove of their actions, you still value them as a person.

11. ADULT SURVIVORS ARE EITHER SUPER-RESPONSIBLE OR SUPER-IRRESPONSIBLE

Survivors seem to fall into one extreme or the other. Some are perfectionists. This stems from their desire for approval, confusion about what is "normal," and taking themselves seriously. It may relate to their experiences with minor incidents "breaking the camel's back." Or it may be a result of their need to control people so they will need them too much to abandon them. Again, they need to be reminded that God in Christ accepts our imperfections, so they can too. They need to know that other people will accept them even if they don't do quite as much. They need to be reminded that God will never abandon them.

Survivors at the other extreme may be irresponsible because it is the behavior they learned from a parent or because they never learned "follow through." It may also be an over-reaction to the fear that nothing they ever do will be good enough. Being irresponsible protects them from disappointment and feeling like a failure. Again, it may help to separate the person from the behavior.

12. ADULT SURVIVORS ARE EXTREMELY LOYAL, EVEN IN THE FACE OF EVIDENCE THAT THE LOYALTY IS UNDESERVED

Survivors learned early on to put up with destructive behavior and protect the "problem" parent from the consequences of that behavior. Furthermore, their low self-esteem and insecurity may keep them hanging on to the security of established relationships, even destructive ones.

This problem is difficult to overcome because it is so entangled with issues of self-worth. Helpers can assist in sorting out the reasons for involvement

with people who do not deserve loyalty. What is the pay-off? Are the responsibilities to that person real or imagined? A closer look may even reveal that the undeserving person reminds the survivor of the "problem" parent and evokes feelings of protectiveness or guilt. Sorting it out can help.

This loyalty may also stem from a fear of being alone. Pointing out the painful consequences of undeserved loyalty will help, but may not be enough. Connecting with others and building new support systems can help to fill the void of feeling alone. Improved self-esteem and deepened assurance of God's presence are also important if the survivor is to learn to let go of self-destructive loyalties.

13. ADULT SURVIVORS ARE IMPULSIVE. THEY TEND TO LOCK THEMSELVES INTO A COURSE OF ACTION WITHOUT THINKING IT THROUGH AND THEN USE EXCESSIVE ENERGY TRYING TO CLEAN UP THE MESS

This behavior may be partly a result of modeling a parent who was impulsive. It may also result from a learned need for immediate gratification. They learned that they had better get something as soon as they asked or the "problem" would interfere, leaving them with "another broken promise" and feelings of hurt and disappointment. So, they often act first and think later.

Helpers can slow them down - ask them to "sleep on it" or postpone a decision until they can see you in person. This may give them time to sort through it rationally. You can also help them explore alternative courses of action as they tend to think in terms of "black and white" and "all or nothing." Above all, help them weigh positive and negative consequences.

In addition to the points listed by Woititz, we have found that:

14. ADULT SURVIVORS HAVE TROUBLE RELATING TO GOD

In light of their early experiences, adult survivors may have unique difficulties relating to God.

Because they have been made to feel unworthy by their families, they have extreme difficulty believing God could love them. Because they feel they are different than other people, they may feel that Christ died to redeem everyone but them.

Adult survivors have difficulty trusting God, and may be suspicious of His love. They may have grown up in a home where love meant manipulation to meet one's own needs. They then wonder if God is somehow manipulating them to manifest His own power. They may have grown up being hurt by a lot of broken promises, so they're afraid to trust that God will keep His promises.

Survivors may be a little paranoid when something goes wrong in their lives. If they grew up with no concept of discipline as a form of love and guidance, they interpret hardship as God's punishment for some wrong-doing.

If survivors grew up with the concept of love as an exchange, they may always feel that God is short-changing them or not quite giving them their due. Others who claimed to love them cheated on them, so why shouldn't God?

People who have trouble with intimate human relationships may also have trouble being intimate with God. They don't trust prayer. If people who claimed to love them never listened, why should God? If their families led them to believe they were unworthy of being heard, doesn't God think so too? They may say that they don't want to waste God's time with their trivial problems because He has so many more important things to do.

In some very dysfunctional families, God's word may have been used to manipulate. One woman tearfully related that her father justified sexual abuse by telling her that God wanted her to "honor" her father and that meant taking care of his sexual needs. Her concept of God as her heavenly Father was anything but one of a warm and loving protector.

Because they had so little control over situations as a child, people who grew up in dysfunctional homes tend to be "fatalistic." They need to know that not everything is computer controlled by God. He does give us free will and He does give us choices. They don't have to let the past control them. They can use God's gift of free will to make positive changes in their lives.

Each of us has a unique personal relationship to God, often profoundly affected by our childhood experiences and our relationship to those who cared for us and had control over us.

Helping adult survivors examine their individual relationship to God and correct faulty beliefs is critical in the process of making change and growth possible.

#### TIPS FOR WORKING WITH ADULT SURVIVORS OF DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES

1. If you're working with someone who seems to fit some of these patterns and you don't know the family well, a statement like, "Tell me what it was like to grow up in your family" may be a helpful starting place.
2. Show approval and acceptance of the person without condoning negative behavior or allowing past experiences to be used as an "excuse."
3. Don't let them "explode" and tell you everything at once. Because they have difficulty trusting and establishing intimacy, opening up too fast may frighten them away.
4. Avoid words like "sexual abuse" and "alcoholism." If they are still in denial, questions like "Did anyone ever touch you in a way you didn't like?" or "Did anyone in your family drink too much?" are more effective. Better yet, try - "Tell me what it was like for you when you were growing up."
5. Don't force repressed memories. Bad memories are blocked for a reason, as a protection. When the survivor brings them up, listen sympathetically and without judgment. Assure them that "black-outs" or disassociations are common, and a form of self-protection. Once the memories start coming back, nightmares are common and it's appropriate to discuss them. Thoughts about suicidal behavior, self-mutilation, and drug or alcohol abuse are also common at this point. Assure them that these types of thoughts are predictable, but take them seriously. Encourage them to seek professional help and, if necessary, hospitalization. They will need intense support from you and others at this

time. Helping them connect with others who have been through it and are further along in the healing process can be extremely beneficial. This connecting must be done with great care and constant monitoring.

6. Help them get in touch with their feelings. Survivors may report horror stories with such emotional detachment that you doubt their truthfulness. Pay attention to your own feelings and mirror them back. One therapist commented that, "If you find yourself getting angry, it's probably because your client should be, but isn't."
7. Avoid sounding like a parent. Encourage taking responsibility for one's own actions and decisions. Telling what to do may have the connotation of manipulation or exploitation experienced with parents in childhood.
8. Model self-care. The survivor may seem to idealize you and put you on a pedestal. This is an uncomfortable position, but it also paves the way for modeling appropriate behaviors. Set limits on the times you're available and structure your contacts. It is important to show that it's OK to set limits to take care of yourself and your family.
9. Work on building self-esteem in a Christian context.
10. Help recognize irrational or destructive behavior, its roots, and alternative courses of action.
11. Encourage them to express and share feelings.
12. Involve the spouse in sessions as soon as possible.
13. Help them see how their attitudes affect their parenting. Family sessions may be necessary. Adult Children of Alcoholics includes a chapter entitled, "What About Your Children?"
14. Regardless of the dysfunction of the particular family, encourage adult survivors to buy and read Adult Children of Alcoholics by Janet Woititz. It is available in paperback at most bookstores, and is a valuable guide for discussion.

In a way, it is comforting to know that it is never too late to help that sad adult child of an unhappy home. Life as an adult can be better, but it may involve some painful remembering and hard work. It also involves patience. We can't expect in a few sessions to change beliefs that took 20 years to evolve. Most of all, that change requires faith and prayer, which can be nurtured by the encouragement and support of Christian helpers.