

Ep #23: How to Stop Your Dysfunctional Family Role from Keeping You Stuck



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With Your Host

Nicole Symcox

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There are five commonly known roles that we take on in dysfunctional families to help the family function. And again, we do this sometimes we do it consciously, most the time we fall into these roles unconsciously, or these roles were assigned to us so early on in our lives that we don't even remember how it started.

It's like we started to become this role in the family since birth, like our parents decided for us that was going to be who we are and our role in the family. And so, we don't get a whole lot of say into it. So, it could almost feel like we just grew into our role.

Welcome to *Mental Health Remix*, a show for ambitious humans who are ready to think, feel and be different. If you want to stop struggling with perfectionism, build better relationships, and connect with yourself and your potential. This is the place for you. Here's your host, educator, coach and licensed psychotherapist, Nicole Symcox.

Hey, hey, everyone. Welcome to Episode 23. So, I want to talk to you today about family roles. I don't know that we talk about this like a whole lot, but the roles that we take in our family systems have an enormous impact in how we interact with the world around us. And so for this episode, I'm actually going to focus on the dysfunctional family system.

So, when we think about dysfunction, usually what we're equating that to is an unhealthy family environment. And when we have unhealthy family environments, believe it or not, everyone is playing a role, okay? So, it's actually not so straightforward. It's just, "Oh, we're just a family."

Yes, you're a family and there are unconscious systems that are put in place that allow for the family to function as it is. And so, in family systems theory there are five commonly known roles that we take on in dysfunctional families to help the family function. And again, we do this.

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Sometimes we do it consciously. Most the time we fall into these roles unconsciously or these roles were assigned to us so early on in our lives that we don't even remember how it started. It's like we started to become this role in the family since birth, like our parents decided for us that was going to be who we are and our role in the family. And so we don't get a whole lot of say into it. So, it could almost feel like we just grew into our role.

Now, hear me loud and clear. The good news in all of this, you can step out of a dysfunctional family system anytime you want to, and you can make changes within yourself to own your life and own the way that you want to show up in the world.

Okay, so let's go through some of the most common terms when we think about these different roles that we have in a family system. And again, there are sometimes several different names like out there on the Internet, whatever. So, for this episode I'm going to go with the ones that I think are most commonly understood. So, those are the terms that I'm going to use just for this episode would just be aware that if you were to Google this topic there could be other names for these different roles in the family.

And then there's a whole subset of like if your family has an addict and all these different things, okay? So, I'm well aware that this is kind of a broad topic. So, that's why I want to rein it in and just really focus on what is most commonly termed for these dysfunctional family systems and how you can step out of it if you want to, of course.

So, the first one is known as the caretaker. It can also be known as the enabler. So, this tends to be the child who is raising the other children, okay? They are the parent of the children even though they are a child themselves. And so, for whatever reason they are stepping in and parenting their siblings.

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And many, many times since we're talking about dysfunctional families, many times that is because there is not a strong parental unit in the home that is doing that job. So, a child decides to fill in the gaps and become everything to everyone in order to keep the peace. And they learn that their survival is attached to this.

And so, this role as this caretaker actually tends to follow people into adult life. Most of the time we do not leave that role just in childhood because it's a way we start to think and do life. And it's weaved into our survival systems, which as you've learned for me in previous podcast episodes, our brains care most about our survival.

And so, if you learn to avoid scary situations or appease scary people by being a caretaker or enabling them, that is going to follow you into adulthood. And so, it's critically important if you want to stop those behaviors or you want to change the way you relate to people or relate to the world around you, you want to heal whatever wounds there are for you in that. Healing that part of you that felt over-responsible for raising kids that weren't even your own.

And so, I see this all the time even in working with people in therapy they become adults and they're like, "Ugh, I don't even want kids. I feel like I've been raising kids my whole life." And what they're referring to is that they've 1) had to raise their parents who weren't doing or fulfilling that parental role or 2) They had to raise their siblings and they're like over it. They're like, "Now, I'm an adult and I don't even want to do these things."

But on the flip side, there can be this other aspect where this type of family role ends up marrying the wound essentially like ends up becoming a caretaker or an enabler of a narcissistic personality or someone who needs a lot of caretaking like this is how this can show up. And it can also show up with bosses. It can show up with any kind of authority figures because what ends up happening is you have these behaviors that have been wired in for as long as you can possibly remember.

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It is the way you've learned to relate to the world. And so this is the power and healing from this story so that you can instead let go and change or transcend or transform, whatever word you want to use for that or that feels true to you, instead of just falling into these behavioral patterns just unchecked. Because that's what happens when we don't heal the initial wound.

So, this is probably one of the most common that people recognize pretty quickly I think in therapy and in life, they're like, why am I always getting into these relational patterns where I'm the caretaker or where I'm managing all the dysfunction or I'm trying to control chaos? And then as you sort of unpack how you were taught to think and behave in the world, you kind of realize, "Oh, my role in the family, this was my role in the family." And so then it starts to go out into the world as well.

So, this is true for all of them. I'm going to go through five. So, that was number one, okay? Number two is known as the scapegoat. So, the scapegoat is also known as the problem child, the troublemaker, the one that gets blamed for everything.

This role is usually played out by a child in the family who just gets blamed for anything and sometimes unfairly. The scapegoat usually is blamed for things, regardless of if it's true or not. They tend to just take the blame. Like either the parents put it on them, siblings put it on them, but they become the person in the family that they're like, "That's her again. Of course, she did that. She's always causing problems or she's always doing this."

This can create a very negative self-concept for the child who is plagued as the scapegoat for obvious reasons, right? If you are taught in your family that no matter what you do, you are going to be accused of the worst, that is going to create a series of negative thoughts and negative experiences and negative feelings, right?

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Sometimes scapegoats can go out into the world from there and feel incredibly powerless on what they can do with their lives. On the flip side, scapegoats can also become extremely defiant. It's almost like, "If you're going to accuse me of being this thing then I am going to be it to the Nth degree. Watch me."

Sometimes the rebellious side of people can really come out. And so they just push and push against authority because they're always blamed anyways. So again, it's still coming from this place of powerlessness because you're like, "It doesn't really matter what I do. People are going to see the worst in me and I'm going to get blamed and I'm going to get in trouble anyway."

If that was you, you know, you want to kind of think through how do I want to change this story? Because you being blamed for everything is wrong, okay? There is no way in hell that every single thing you did was wrong. It was just the way the family system was functioning and there has to be a scapegoat in order for the dysfunctional system to work, okay?

But this narrative can be changed. But first, it starts with identifying it that, "Oh, was I even in this family role? What do I want my life to look like? And how can I start changing my thoughts to be ones that fuel a new narrative?"

Number three is the lost child. So, the lost child is usually known as the quiet one, the dreamer, the one who disappears into the background. So, this part, this family role, tends to learn that in order to survive this unhealthy environment you need to disappear.

This child avoids interactions with other family members. They avoid conflict like they do their best to be invisible because they've learned that if you are noticed, the scapegoat is always going to be noticed, the caretaker is always going to be noticed, and so the lost child starts to look around and decides, "My best chance of surviving this family system is to disappear."

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They do their best to disappear into the wallpaper, so to speak. They don't really create waves. They try not to communicate. They tend to numb out. They tend to disassociate. They are just checked out as much as possible. And so then, again, the problem with this is that it worked to survive your family environment.

However, if you do life in a way that makes you feel invisible all the time or you're not getting your needs met or you're not communicating because you never learned how to do that, because your childhood was spent being invisible those are all going to be skills that you're going to need to learn in adulthood. You're going to have to heal those wounds because a lot of times the lost child is filled with fear and they tend to freeze and they tend to be afraid and they might be disconnected from all of those feelings because of the traumatic experience or because of all the things that were going on.

But this is an important one, because there are plenty of people who are actually ambitious or their extroverted, but out of survival became the lost child. It's a really interesting process in what I've seen for humans that are actually extroverts. Because you do think extroverts love talking and they love being around people, but sometimes people can actually be traumatized to where they learn how to mask personality traits, okay?

What's interesting is, as I've watched the healing process for some people that have been the lost child in their family, all of a sudden their true selves start to appear. And if they do have more of an extroverted personality set that starts to come forward and they start to sort of like shed the skin of this lost invisible child of their past, and they start to really embrace who they actually are now that they don't have to be afraid so much anymore.

This is why this is incredibly important to you. Heal around the story that created this for you because, again, these roles we adopt in childhood don't just end in childhood until we consciously decide we're done with it and it's totally possible.

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Okay, number four is the mascot, also known as the clown. So, this family role is the one that everybody enjoys being around. They are the one that break up the tension. They're hilarious. They lighten the mood. But it is a mask. Usually clowns or mascots, as we call them, carry a lot of deep, dark thoughts, but they're very good at channeling that through humor.

You see this all the time in comedians. You see this all the time in actors that are funny. And so they have learned how to channel their emotions into humor. And so people love being around them. I mean, they're enjoyable, they're entertaining and they're fun. But the role of the mascot or the clown is very, very challenging because you get positive reinforcement from being funny and because you learn that you feel safer when you're functioning within the bounds of humor.

You lean on that and you lead with that and you give very little attention to your actual internal world, which might actually be riddled with depression. It is not uncommon for the mascot of the family to be riddled with depression and anxiety inside, but they hide it. They hide it behind all of their humor.

So again, it's a mask because that is how they learned to survive their childhood. Like if they can, you know, make people laugh, then maybe someone doesn't get into trouble in their family or maybe it makes their parent feel better. So, their parents are in a better mood. But kids really learn how to survive.

When you think about the mascot, they tend to get overlooked because people like, "Oh, they're fine. They're like they're just a delight to be around." And the truth is, they might be struggling a lot internally, but they're afraid to let that out because their safety depends on them being entertaining and funny.

It's really funny the people that I have worked with who tended to be more of the mascot or the clown. They're like, "I want to work on my stuff, but I

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also don't want to be boring.” There is such an emotional connection to their humor. Like they know they're funny. They know they're fun to be around and they don't want to lose that because they also know there's another side of them that is hurting.

I always try to reassure people that healing isn't about necessarily losing parts of yourself. It's just about becoming more authentic and in tune with who you really are. So if you want to be funny, if you want to stay entertaining that's all within your choice. You know you're capable of that.

But how great would it be to not have such polarizing opposites living inside of you? Right. Like deep, dark depression or overwhelming anxiety? Those are the things that we want to heal from. And then you can kind of decide, like, how do I want my gift of humor to show up in the world?

Okay, number five is the hero. The hero in the family tends to basically put on this idea that everything's fine and normal. Nothing's wrong. Everything's good. We're good. And they tend to be really protected. So, it's tends to be difficult for the hero to have really deep, intimate relationships because they're so use of just making everything look good, making everything feel good and the kind of live in this alternate reality of – it can kind of come across as denial in some ways.

But, “Everything's fine. I am going to make everything fine.” So, it's a little bit different than the caretaker role because the hero can sometimes come across as really strong, almost positive and just it's kind of like almost this big denial facade that goes on.

It can be really challenging to be in relationships with a hero because they're not really that in tune with what's actually going on around them. So heroes can be perfectionistic. They don't like to be wrong. They can get really defensive around things like that. They love positive attention in adulthood. They tend to be workaholics like they tend to get a lot of things done.

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They have learned to keep people at a distance and to put their energy into things that make them look good. Again, these are just all survival mechanisms, like we're not even judging any of these. You have to remember whatever role you adopted into your family's system, all had to do with survival because we're talking about dysfunctional family systems everybody has to have a role in order for the system to function.

Without everybody playing their role. The system falls apart. And a lot of times, again, these are all like unconscious things that are going on. You see this all the time when someone finally steps out and they're like, "You know what? I'm sick of being the scapegoat. I'm sick of the patterns that it repeats in my life. I'm sick of the memories that haunt me around it. I'm over it. I want to be healthy and I want to heal."

They make a commitment and a choice to heal from that role of the scapegoat in therapy or however they choose to heal that. I, of course, think therapy is the best model, but I'm biased and I'm a therapist, but they decide to step out of this role.

So, when you decide to do that, it's going to put the family system into chaos. The system has to function with everybody doing their role just as they've always done. So, take it as a compliment if you have decided to step out of your dysfunctional family and heal and do something different and there is a huge reaction to it. It's probably validation that you are doing the right thing by stepping out of the system.

Now, of course, you want to do this with safety and you want to be careful because every family is different in its level of dysfunctions and level of safety, unsafety so you want to first, take steps to make sure that you are safe and protected, of course. But additionally so, that is the reason that they're mad.

Especially for the scapegoat role. If you are the person that the entire family is always piled all their shit on all their life and now you're learning

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boundaries and you're learning your own self-worth and how to feel good about yourself and kind of disconnect from the opinions and thoughts of others that is going to piss off all of your controllers, obviously.

That is not something that they want for you because then that means they have to change. And the thing is, is they don't want to change. They like the way the system goes because it allows them to keep their role in the family. Do you get how this works?

I'm guessing for many of you hadn't really thought about like think about the family as a system. Everybody plays a role in it. And this is beyond too, like healthy family systems also have roles, okay? Systems with addicts, they all have roles.

So, think about your family system and everybody's role in it. And it might be different from what I talked about today. It may not be the exact roles. Again, today I talked about like the most commonly known ones, but there can be others as well. And just kind of thinking about your family, is this how I want my family to run or is this what I want my role to be in the family?

This is probably one of the most common things, as I was talking about earlier, when we decide to heal because it disrupts the family system so much you're going to get pushback. That is all part of the healing process because you're making a decision that your health and well-being is important enough to cause this kind of disruption and that you are willing to take the steps to be different because these family roles will repeat in adulthood more likely than not, unless they are interrupted.

If you are sick and tired of your family role showing up at work with friends, in your marriage, with your kids, whatever it is, you're going to have to take active steps to heal that in working towards that. And I want to encourage you, like it's hard emotional work, but it's completely doable. It is definitely something that is possible for you.

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To kind of get you going on this, I would take inventory of yourself and kind of think back to, "What was my role in the family? How do those traits serve me? And what steps can I take to actively shift how I show up?" It's kind of like taking inventory of yourself because this stuff doesn't change on its own.

You do not turn 18 and then all of a sudden you are no longer the scapegoat or you're no longer the lost child like these are wired into you from a very early age and so to unlearn some of those unhealthy coping strategies or to learn a whole new way to be in the world is going to take some time. So, I would encourage you to be patient with yourself.

But just start with the question, because if you don't have a question, you can't have an answer. And so it has to start with the reflection. And so, again, I have a bias because I'm a therapist. I've seen people make the most headway in this when they find a therapist that is trained in how to do trauma recovery, family systems, that kind of a thing to really help you change, grow and move forward in your life.

But what I want you to most here for me is that just because you were born into a family situation, just because a role was designed for you to keep a dysfunctional family unit rolling doesn't mean you have to continue, okay? You are the decider of that. When you are ready to change the role that you have had in your family and thus in life, it is available to you.

It takes hard work. So, do not get me wrong. Like. I mean, it takes some work in therapy, but it is incredibly possible. And I know this because I see it in real life with people I work with. So, this is actually incredibly possible. It feels big, heavy and impossible because it's all your brain knows, okay?

Our brain is really attached to things that are familiar, but that does not mean it's unchangeable. Completely different, okay? So, I want to really encourage you with that today that you can be who you want to be. Just set yourself up for success and learn how to make that happen for yourself.

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And I would encourage you if this sort of struck a chord for you, if you're like, "I'm ready to heal, I'm ready to move forward." Look for therapists in your local state of residence, because there's absolutely no shame or blame in getting mental health support. It's probably the best thing that you can do, especially when you're trying to heal and rewire your brain to be different in the world.

All right, my loves, if you enjoyed today's episode, if you can leave me a rating and review, I would love it. It helps other people find the podcast. And I hope you all have a great week. I am rooting for you and I will see you next time.

Thanks for listening to this week's episode of *Mental Health Remix*. If you like what you've heard and want to learn more, go to nicolesymcox.com.

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