**Dysfunctional Families and Wounded Relationships — Part II**

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**About the Author**

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**Abstract**

This paper will discuss a number of different strategies which people who grew up in dysfunctional families used to stay out of relationships. Alcoholic, incest survivor, and Holocaust families provide contexts to explore some important features of these strategies. They will also illustrate how secrecy, the emotional inaccessibility of parents, and parentification of children often significantly hinder the development of authentic relationships both in and out of the family.

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In a previous paper, “Dysfunctional Families and Wounded Relationships — Part I,” I reviewed several characteristics of dysfunctional families, namely secrecy, emotional inaccessibility of parents, and parentification of the children (Stiver, 1990). Three different dysfunctional family contexts — Holocaust survivor, alcoholic, and incest survivor families — illustrated how these characteristics contributed to major disconnections in the children growing up in these families.

Jean Baker Miller’s paper on “Connections, Disconnections and Violations” has given us a new vantage point to understand how family dynamics contribute to pathological development of children (1988). Let me summarize briefly the key processes which Miller believes lead to significant disconnections in dysfunctional families.

**Disconnections**

When the child’s expression of her thoughts and feelings is not heard nor responded to, when she feels that how she is or what she expresses has no impact on the important people in her life, when she experiences a profound sense of powerlessness in her relational interactions, and when her painful feelings cannot be shared with another person, there are profound consequences, in a marked erosion of trust, in the impaired capacity for empathy, and a lack of empowerment.

Most importantly, a child growing up in these nonrelational settings learns to alter her inner sense of herself in the attempt to deal with the images imposed on her by others. She also attempts to adapt her self-image to her understanding of the meanings of the neglect and/or violations she endures from others. More and more of the child’s experience is split off or “walled off,” leaving her with a constricted and negative image of herself and others.

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In these dysfunctional settings, children learn how to stay out of relationships while behaving as if they are in relationships. They do this as the only mode of survival. For these children, exposing their vulnerabilities through being authentic and empathic in interactions with others is dangerous. This danger leads them to develop strategies to hide their vulnerabilities and, thus, to avoid more genuine relational connections. At the same time, a compelling need for some kind of connection to another person often results in destructive and wounded relationships.

**Staying out of relationship**

In this paper I will explore these strategies of staying out of relationship in the context of the same three dysfunctional families I discussed earlier. There are many ways not to participate authentically and mutually in relationships. For example, there are those who manage through withdrawal and avoidance or over-investment in work to maintain distance from others; or those who become phobic and restrict and constrict their range of functioning and thereby limit their contacts with others; or those who develop somatic symptoms which totally preoccupy them, leaving little energy or available emotion for interpersonal relationships.

However, I will focus on the particular strategies developed by those who make strenuous efforts to make connection with others, but remain unable to engage interpersonally in a genuine and empathic fashion. Although these people are not always aware of the discrepancy between the wish for connection and the nonrelational qualities of their interactions with others, they report that underneath they often feel crazy, isolated, and out of touch with those around them. Some people feel a generalized level of anxiety and unease without knowing why. Others are much more aware of their dissatisfaction with their relationships and are more or less in touch with the source of their distress; many come into therapy as a consequence of this awareness.

One adult child of an alcoholic family reports:

Our whole life was an illusion. We looked like the all-American family, we had upper middle class income, we had people who came over to the house, they weren’t friends but they looked like friends. I was on the swimming team, my sister was a cheerleader, but if anybody had taken the time to look at any of us, none of us had any intimate relationships or ever talked to anybody about how they felt...we were chameleons, put us in a situation, give us five minutes to watch the players and we adapt...we will always feel outside of it but we can present ourselves however we need to present ourselves in order to exist. (V., 1987, p. 39)

Another adult child said, “I was addicted to having a relationship where I was in control; I was addicted to having somebody but not being in a relationship.” She added, “Those are two different things” (V., 1987, p. 11).

I suspect that gender differences may be significantly associated with the different ways used to stay out of relationship. That is, women from dysfunctional families probably make greater efforts to stay in connection than do men, albeit often through superficial and nonauthentic modes of placating and accommodating others. Men from such families may more often take routes of avoidance, compulsive activity at work or sports or the like, and make fewer efforts to establish connections.

**Strategies**

I will now describe three broad categories of strategies which I believe are expressed in different ways in the three family contexts I have chosen to examine. They are (1) various forms of emotional disengagement which include the extremes of “psychic closing off” (Lifton, 1968), dissociative states, as well as the use of substances which numb affect; (2) role-playing which refers to assuming a persona, a style of performing which seems adaptive and appropriate, but is not experienced by the person as authentic; and (3) replication of old interactions and family dynamics which are compelling and unrelenting.

These categories obviously do not cover all possibilities, and they overlap to some extent. I think, however, that they help to illustrate how secrecy, the emotional inaccessibility of parents, and the parentification of a child in a family often significantly hinder the development of empathic capacities, self-worth, and a sense of empowerment in relationships. The message explicitly or implicitly given to the child is that she is not allowed to be authentic.

Although the children growing up in these households experience considerable pressure to stay in the family and not to move out into a world labeled as dangerous and hostile, relationships in the family are more illusory than real since there is a lack of mutuality in sharing affects, information, understanding, and caretaking. The resistance to leaving the family is powerful for many reasons. The