

# Understanding Family Roles Where Drugs or Alcohol Are a Problem

## Objective

To identify and track the various roles family members can assume when a loved one is experiencing problems with drinking or drug use.

## What to Know

You have probably heard it said before that alcoholism and addiction are a “family disease.” That is, when one person in the family is drinking or using drugs, the entire family is affected. Even though you might not be the one using or abusing substances, you also play a role in the problems that occur in your family.

Addiction strongly impacts a family’s mental and physical health. Family members learn to cope with the substance user’s often unpredictable moods and behaviors. So, they adopt different roles to manage.

In this worksheet, you will learn about six common roles that family members adopt, usually without conscious awareness. Children can also fill these roles.

## What to Do

Read the descriptions below and then write down whether you or someone else in your family has adopted that role in response to the member who is using or abusing substances. Then, describe how that role affects you. As you read, try to suspend any judgment or criticism—know that most family members are doing the best they can to both protect themselves and to sustain or restore the sense of equilibrium in the family while someone is actively drinking or using drugs.

### The Substance User

First, it is important to understand that this person is almost always at the center of the family’s dynamics. Whether they are aware or not, family members’ emotions and behaviors are expressed in response to, or in anticipation of, this person’s emotions and behaviors. For example, affected family members may spend a lot of time and energy thinking, worrying, planning, or rehearsing things to say.

Who is in this role in your family? How long has this been happening? What is it like for you?

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**The Caretaker (“Enabler”)**

To “enable” means to make it possible for the substance user to continue their behavior. This person often covers up problematic behaviors to keep the family “happy.” The caretaker is often considered to be a martyr because they tend to ignore reality and sacrifice their own freedom and independence to keep the peace. This person, usually unwittingly, supports dysfunctional behavior and protects the substance user from the consequences of their actions.

Who is in this role in your family? How long has this been happening? What is it like for you?

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**The Hero**

The hero’s role is to cover up mistakes or dysfunctional behavior to keep up the illusion or appearance that their family is normal. This person comes to the rescue to avoid the experience or perception that anything is wrong. Among children, these are the ones who are overly responsible, highly independent, or perfectionistic. They might be the “golden child” or parentified child, but they suffer because of trying to live up to that role.

Who is in this role in your family? How long has this been happening? What is it like for you?

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### **The Scapegoat**

On the opposite side of the hero is the scapegoat, the “problem child,” the one who is defiant or hostile, the one who “acts out,” and/or gets in trouble at school or at home. The scapegoat provokes negative attention, which has the effect of drawing attention away from the real problem – the family member who is drinking or taking drugs.

Who is in this role in your family? How long has this been happening? What is it like for you?

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### **The Mascot**

This family member tries to address the dysfunction in the family through humor or being silly. The goal, usually unconscious, is to distract the family’s energy away from the stress or difficulties through being a comedian. The mascot is often in motion and can become depressed or anxious if things are calm or if they are not getting attention in some way.

Who is in this role in your family? How long has this been happening? What is it like for you?

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### **The Lost Child**

The “lost child” usually refers to the family member who stays out of the action and remains quiet and withdrawn to avoid attention and exposure to heightened or unpleasant emotions. Sometimes the lost child is seen as “fine,” as they can be highly self-sufficient. Often, this family member avoids interpersonal interactions and becomes “invisible.”

Who is in this role in your family? How long has this been happening? What is it like for you?

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Now that you have identified the typical roles that family members play, keep a log for the next two weeks of what you observe in your family. In what situations do you notice people playing one of these roles? What happened beforehand? What is the effect of their role on the family dynamic?

Situation	Who/What Role?	What Happened Beforehand?	What Is the Effect?

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**Optional Activity:** Draw a family tree or chart (ideally over three generations) that shows all the members of your family. Write their names, year of birth, and relationship to you. Note any pattern or history of substance use among each member. Then identify, if you can, any roles that family members might have assumed. This might require asking parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, etc., some difficult questions.

## Reflections on This Exercise

What are themes or patterns that you observe in your family, in the past and the present?

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Does anyone assume different roles from time to time? That is, does the “hero” become the “lost child”? Why or why not?

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What would it feel like for you to stop playing a certain role in your family? What are your fears and hopes?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn about yourself during this exercise?

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