

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.

You Should 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, almost as if it is “contagious.” Even though you might not be the one abusing substances, you also play a role in the ups and downs and moods and problems that occur in your family.

Addiction strongly affects a family’s mental and physical health. Family members learn to cope with the addict’s or alcoholic’s often unpredictable moods and behaviors. So, they adopt different roles as a way to cope.

In this worksheet, you will learn about six common roles that family members adopt, usually without conscious awareness. Typically, the roles refer to children but adult family members, especially spouses, can be involved also.

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 addict or alcoholic at home. 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 Addict or Alcoholic

First, it is important to understand the “addict” (or alcoholic) role—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, the addict’s emotions and behaviors. Affected family members may spend a lot of time and energy thinking, worrying, planning, or rehearsing things to say to and about that person, and so on.

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

The Caretaker (“Enabler”)

To “enable” means to make it possible for the addict/alcoholic to continue his/her behavior. This is the person who often covers up for the addict’s problems and behaviors in order to keep the family “happy.” The caretaker is often considered to be a “martyr,” because they tend to ignore the reality of what is going on and sacrifice their own freedom and independence in order to keep the peace. This person, usually unwittingly, supports the addict’s dysfunctional behavior and protects the addict 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?

The Hero

The hero’s role is to cover up for the addict’s mistakes or dysfunctional behavior in order to keep up the illusion or appearance that their family is “normal.” This is the person who is always coming 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 may be seen as the substitute parent or “golden child,” but they suffer as a result 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?

The Scapegoat

On the opposite side of the “hero” is the scapegoat. This is often 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, that is, 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?

The Mascot

This role refers to the family member who tries to address the dysfunction in the family through humor or being silly. The goal, again usually unconscious, is to distract the family’s energy away from the stress or difficulties through being a “comedian.” The mascot is often always 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?

The Lost Child

The “the lost child” usually refers to the one who stays out of the action, the one who remains quiet and/or withdrawn to avoid attention and exposure to heightened or unpleasant emotions. Sometimes the lost child is seen as “all fine,” as they can be highly self-sufficient, “no trouble at all.” Often, the lost child learns to avoid 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?

Now that you have identified the typical roles that family members play, keep a log for the next week or two 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?

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 alcoholism or addiction 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. Do what feels right to you.

Reflections on This Exercise

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

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

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

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn about yourself during this exercise?
