Understanding Dysfunctional Family Dynamics

God created families. The family was to be the place where children were nurtured so they could love God and be connected harmoniously with others. When sin entered the picture, families were affected and they became dysfunctional.

Dysfunctional families have dysfunctional patterns:

- **Family secrets** - People pretend. No one talks. Instead, they bear wrongs quietly and do everything to keep up the untarnished family image.
- **Family shame** - Everyone feels embarrassed and defective. People feel responsible for others' actions.
- **Triangulation/coalitions** - This includes three-way relationships, mediation, favorites, speaking for others, manipulation, and inappropriate relationships between family members.
- **Ineffective communication** - Communication is indirect, blaming, abusive, angry, reactive, confrontational or avoidant and passive. Regardless of the pattern, people are unable to resolve conflict.
- **Enabling** - People keep things going by stepping in to take over the responsibilities of another so that the family and/or that person doesn’t experience the consequences of the actions.
- **Blame** - People avoid responsibility for their own actions by shifting responsibility onto others. There is an inability to look at oneself and admit wrong. May scapegoat one family member by making that person the problem.
- **Strong emotions** - Emotional reactivity is high. Some people may stuff and deny their real emotions because they can’t be open about them. Others find ways to numb their feelings through things like addictions. Others react intensely to everything. Regardless, it is all in reaction to strong emotions not properly dealt with.
- **Abandonment** - Abandonment can be emotional and/or physical. Family members feel alone and insecure even when people are there because the problems keep them distracted and inattentive.
- **Denial** - Denial is either denying or minimizing the problems. It is common to doubt one's own perceptions because they aren’t validated by others. Denial is a protective mechanism for survival.
• **Poor boundaries** - Families are either enmeshed or disconnected. People don’t respect the right of members to say no and be different.

• **Broken relationships** - One of the common ways of dealing with conflict is to cut-off a family member. Even when a relationship isn’t physically cut-off, there are lots of barriers between people and intimacy is affected.

• **Family pain** - The family has pain, but no one really addresses it openly to fix it. It is like the elephant in the living room: No one talks about it, but everyone takes care of it. And, no one asks "Why is there an elephant in our living room?"

• **Inappropriate roles** - Family members have inappropriate role as assigned to each individual that tend to be rigid. Some examples are: the responsible one, the clown, the scapegoat, and the enabler.

• **Unspoken rules** – The family has lots of rules that guide the behavior of family members even though they might not be spoken aloud.

• **Generational effects** - The children grow up to be adult children of dysfunctional families and carry the pain into their own relationships. The effects of the sins of the previous generations are passed down to the next generation because family members are affected by the problems and learn dysfunctional ways of interacting and acting in their own relationships.

**Here are a few examples of dysfunctional families from the Bible:**

• Cain killed his brother, Abel, because he was jealous.

• Sarah sent in her handmaiden to bear Abraham a son and then demanded she and the child be kicked out of the house because she was jealous.

• Abraham was torn between choosing one wife and child over another and gave in to Sarah’s demands. This is a dilemma similar to current step family coalitions where someone has to choose between a new spouse and a child from a prior relationship.

• Hagar and Ishmael were thrown out and abandoned because Abraham sided with his new wife.

• Rebekah favored her son Jacob over Esau. Isaac favored his son Esau over Jacob. These family coalitions weren't healthy. Rebekah and Isaac should have been aligned and working together for the best interest of the family and both sons.

• Jacob and Rebekah schemed to trick Isaac into giving him the blessing rather than Esau. Esau hated his brother for tricking him, even though he agreed to do it. This was the result of the dysfunctional coalitions in the family.
• Jacob had to marry sisters, Leah and Rachel, because Laban, his father-in-law, manipulated and lied to him.
• Leah and Rachel competed with each other. Leah was unloved but bore children; Rachel was loved but didn’t have children for a long time.
• Because he was Jacob’s favorite, Leah’s children hated Rachel’s son Joseph and conspired to kill him. They sold him as a slave instead.
• Lot’s daughters got him drunk and then slept with him incestuously to have children.
• Eli did a great job raising Samuel (Hannah’s son), but allowed his own sons to be disobedient, bringing judgment on his whole family line.
• Out of fear, Abraham lied about Sarah not being his wife, stating she was his sister. Isaac, his son, later did the same with his wife Rebekah.
• David committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband killed. The child she bore died, as a result.
• Amnon, David’s son, raped his half-sister, Tamar, who lived in shame thereafter. David did nothing about it. It became the family secret. His brother, Absalom, killed him two years later. He never confronted him openly; instead, he hated him in his heart and conspired to kill him.
• Absalom then went into hiding for three years. After a time, David was willing to forgive Absalom, but still refused to see, maintaining the relationship cut-off. Years later, Absalom tried to take over the throne from his father and slept with his concubines and wives to disgrace him. All of this family anger and pain came out and ultimately destroyed David’s family.

As you can easily see, dysfunction in families has been there since sin entered the human race and the generational effects continue to this day.