



## THE EFFECT OF TRAUMA ON FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS



By Tian Dayton

A family that contains trauma in the form of addiction or abuse produces relationship dynamics that perpetuate dysfunction. The impact of trauma on the family system has three main components. First is constriction, leading to enmeshment; second is avoidance, leading to disengagement, and third is impulsive behavior, leading to chaos. Let's examine those three more closely.

Constriction of emotional and psychological expression makes dissension and disagreement seem threatening. The underlying unconscious fear is that if everyone doesn't agree, there will be discord, which might explode into pain related to the trauma resurfacing and/or abandonment. Instead, relationships may become enmeshed. In the attempt not to feel isolated or risk abandonment, people may become fused in their identities.

Avoidance is the other side of the

coin, in which the unconscious fear is that somehow charged emotional pain related to relationship traumas will emerge if we allow ourselves to get too close or open with family members. In this case, family members imagine that by avoiding contact with each other or circumventing sharing painful emotional subjects, they will save themselves from pain. They see the solution for keeping pain from their inner worlds from erupting as avoiding subjects, people, places, and things that might trigger explosion that could lead to abandonment.

With impulsive behavior that leads to chaos, that inner world is being acted out. Painful feelings that are too frightening for family members to feel get externalized, exploding into the container of the family and

getting acted out instead of talked out. Blame, anger, emotional, physical or sexual abuse, yelling, and sexual promiscuity are

ways of expressing emotional and psychological pain in dysfunctional ways that lead to chaos.

All of these dynamics are attempts to avoid further pain. Family members who have experienced deep emotional wounding become very adept at colluding to avoid more pain from erupting and "rocking the boat" all over again.

Such a family becomes fertile ground for producing trauma-related symptoms in its members. When addiction is present the often strict taboos

against genuine and authentic expression of the emotional pain that family abuse engenders assure that pain does not get talked about. Consequently, it does not get processed, worked through and put into any context that might allow family members to move past it. Rather, it sits within the family system, a buried land mine waiting to explode when it gets stepped on. "No talk" rules and rigid expectations of "looking good" behavior drive pain downward into the container of the family.

Members who attempt to expose the family pathology, to announce to the world that the "Emperor has no clothes" may be cut off. Members who act out the underlying emotional climate in high risk behaviors may become scapegoats who provide the family with a distraction, giving parents and other siblings something else to be anxious about other than what is really going on.

It is no wonder that families such as these produce a range of symptoms in its members that can lead to problems later in life. This is how the mantle of dysfunction gets passed down through the generations.

Understanding what happened opens the door to healing. Pain, like fire, has the power to destroy or transform. Generally, a combination of treatment, group, and one-to-one therapy supported by twelve-step programs is comprehensive enough to promote and sustain healing. Recovery becomes the path for "growing soul."

*Tian Dayton, PhD, is the Director of Program Development for Life-Services Caron Foundation, and the author of the book Trauma and Addiction.*

---

**...STRICT TABOOS...  
ASSURE THAT PAIN  
DOES NOT GET  
TALKED ABOUT.**

---