

Characteristics of Abusive Families

This article is primarily a summary of Chapter Four, "Portrait of an Abusive Family", from Mending the Soul: Understanding and Healing Abuse by Dr. Steven R. Tracy. This article will highlight the characteristics of abusive families identified by Tracy. Mending the Soul was published by Zondervan Publishing, Grand Rapids, Michigan in 2005. This summary was written by Dan Hitz, director of Reconciliation Ministries of Michigan, Inc. More articles on abuse recovery are available at www.recmin.org/newsletter-archives/.



Just as we learned in the article detailing the **characteristics of individual abusers**, abusive families tend to look just like other families in our neighborhoods, schools and churches when they are outside of the privacy of their own home. Unfortunately, the similarities can come to a grinding halt when they are behind the closed doors and curtains of their own home. Tracy describes this as the *banality of evil* – evil people don't look evil, they look like everybody else" (workbook p. 90). This is the challenge for those of us who grew up in a dysfunctional family. I heard numerous times how nice my mother was from people who knew the healthy side of her.

It is amazing how often I hear from the men and women that I'm counseling how respected their abusive parent(s) were/are in the church and the community. This can leave survivors wondering, "What on earth is wrong with me?" It feeds the denial for those of us who have shut down huge portions of our own hearts and don't want to believe that our parent really is abusive. One of the most important steps in the healing process is to recognize and admit that our families were abusive. We need to recognize the areas of dysfunction that we were influenced by in order to begin taking the steps of healing in those areas.

No families are perfect. No parents are perfect. **In looking at the characteristics of abusive families, we are not talking about the "healthy enough" parent who makes an occasional mistake or handles a situation in a way that causes minor offenses. We're talking about chronic, severe offenses that leave deep lasting scars in the hearts of those who are impacted by it.** Tracy identifies 15 primary characteristics of abusive families in Chapter Four of *Mending the Soul*. These characteristics can also be found in unhealthy churches, organizations and social groups. We'll take a brief look at each characteristic here.

The needs of the family members are expendable. God intended the needs of the children to be fulfilled by the parents and the needs of the parents to be fulfilled by other adults. In abusive families, the children are used to fulfill the needs of the parents while the needs of the children go unmet. Where there is favoritism, the needs of the kids seen as "lesser" can go unfulfilled while the "elevated" kids are daunted over.

Reality is difficult to discern. Being at home with our families should be the safest experience we can have. In abusive families, the place which is supposed to be the safest becomes the most dangerous. Children naturally want to believe that whatever their parents do is appropriate. We are taught to ignore our God given discernment and perceptions by abusive parents who tell us that the abuse is a normal "expression of love" or "deserved" because of our own inappropriate behavior.

The victim is made responsible. It is the responsibility of every adult to take care of the children that God has entrusted him or her to parent and provide for. Abusive parents push their own responsibilities onto the children. They may be expected to take care of the younger siblings and perform an unreasonable amount of tasks well beyond their years. Sometimes they are expected to fulfil the sexual desires of evil parents.

The family appearance is deceptive. We have already discussed the *banality of evil* – the thought that most abusive people and families look very respectable to those on the outside. Abusive people can go to great lengths to maintain a “perfect” outward appearance.

The truth is ignored. Members of a dysfunctional family may be so focused on maintaining their own sense of “peace and calm” that they ignore obvious signs that abuse is occurring. I’ve worked with abuse survivors whose history of abuse was so obvious that it is impossible for me to believe that that other parent had no clue that the abuse was occurring.

Family abusers use force. In some situations, abusive family members may use manipulation and grooming to gain the trust of their victims; however, the “tenderness” of the grooming process gives way to threats and force to ensure that the victim maintains the secrecy of the abuse. Other times the perpetrators begin the abuse with aggression. Because the victims feel helpless to stop the abuse, the amount of aggression may decrease over time and may fall away altogether. *Learned helplessness* is when a victim is actually strong enough to stop the abuse, but is convinced that the situation is hopeless and continues to comply. This explains why many victims fail to walk away from the abuse, or reach out for help, even when help is readily available.

There is no straightforward, healthy communication. Much of the communication in abusive families is intentionally confusing and manipulative. Abusers may hide behind words that have double meaning so they can quickly deny their ill intent. If they spoke clearly, the destructive motives of their heart would be evident to all.

The victim’s rational response is often futile. Abusers don’t respond to reason. Abusers aren’t interested in the truth. They are champions of denial (refusing to admit or acknowledge the truth), projection (attributing their own negative actions and motivations to others), and blame shifting (claiming their own negative behavior was the result of the victim’s actions). Abusers “twist reality” to match their world.

Power is used to exploit. In healthy families, power is used to protect and empower the vulnerable to reach their full potential. In abusive families, power is used to control and ensure that the weaker remain under the control of the dominant.

Abusive families are emotionally unstable. Victims often feel like they are “walking on eggshells”. An action that was perfectly acceptable yesterday may trigger a violent reaction today; therefore, life is unpredictable and one can never let down one’s guard. They may also find themselves having a wide range of feelings about their abuser who may be beating them one moment, and pretending to love them by sexually abusing them the next. Victims may recognize that abusive behavior is wrong, but find themselves liking the perceived favorable attention they are receiving.

The victim is shamed, blamed and demeaned. I've heard from many survivors that their abusers manipulated them with kindness before the sexual abuse, and then verbally assaulted them unmercifully after the abuse. Some are blamed for the assaults by the perpetrators and others who claim that the abuse wouldn't have happened if they had better character, or that they specifically behaved in a way to provoke the abuse.

Family members are isolated and lack intimacy. Healthy families have nothing to hide. Dysfunctional families are afraid of being found out. It is common for perpetrators and those who enable them to pull their victims away from those who can identify unhealthy behavior. Since abusers are proficient at using the victim's inner hopes and dreams against them, victims quickly learn to shut off their desires. Ironically, the perpetrators paint a picture where the world is unsafe and dangerous, and that they are the only ones the victims can trust.

A strict code of silence is enacted. Abusive families follow a strict *No Talk Rule*. The perpetrators don't want to be found out and clearly communicate that there will be dire consequences to anyone who tells others about the abuse.



Abusive families deny and distort healthy emotions. Children want the world to make sense. Most abuse victims believe that the abuse was their fault. Many were told so by their abusers. In order for an abusive world to make sense, survivors learn to embrace the idea that the abuse was their fault. This also gives victims a strange, false sense of control. Other victims were told that they were overreacting and/or scolded for having negative feelings about the abuse. Unfortunately, the deeper message is that they learn to distrust their healthy emotions. They either embrace dysfunctional emotions, or shut them off altogether.

The wrong ones are protected. Perpetrators want to prop up their abusive system and maintain a false, outward appearance. They use manipulation, intimidation and violence to achieve that goal. Those who accuse the victims are often shamed and blamed – even within the church. It is important to listen to the hearts of the survivors and pray for discernment to understand the truth of the situation.

Perhaps it was very difficult for you to read this article. If you can identify many of the traits listed above in your own family, don't lose hope. Remember, the first step in fixing a problem is identifying that a problem actually exists. You can overcome the effects of childhood abuse. Start by reaching out for help to the pastoral care department of your local church. Reconciliation Ministries is also here to help. We offer individual counseling and support groups. If you or a loved one needs help, call us at 586.739.5114.