

Dysfunctional Families

QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE

An Excerpt from the *BIBLICAL COUNSELING KEYS*

What Is a Dysfunctional Family?

- A **dysfunctional family** is one in which improper and immature behavior of at least one parent damages the growth of individuality and the development of healthy relational skills among family members.
- A **dysfunctional family** is one in which family members are impaired emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually.
- A **dysfunctional family** is one in which all members are so emotionally and psychologically connected to one another that everyone is negatively impacted when only one family member experiences harm or encounters a problem.

*“Whoever brings ruin on their family
will inherit only wind,
and the fool will be servant to the wise.”*
(Proverbs 11:29)

What Is a Functional Family?

- A **functional family** is one in which proper and mature behavior of two parents cultivates a healthy balance between embracing individuality and embellishing relational skills among family members.
- A **functional family** is one in which healthy emotional, psychological, and spiritual growth is cultivated among family members.
- A **functional family** is one in which individual family members cultivate the ability to face problematic situations specific to them with personal confidence in God and self and with the general support of other family members.

*“For you have been my hope, Sovereign LORD,
my confidence since my youth.”*
(Psalm 71:5)

God’s Heart on the Significance of Family

- Provides the basis of forming genealogical records (Nehemiah 7:5)
- Verifies the lineage of Jesus Christ (Luke 2:4–5)
- Identifies the relationship believers have with Christ (Hebrews 2:11)
- Displays the wisdom of God to rulers and authorities in the heavens (Ephesians 3:10)
- Applies God’s Word to life’s problems (2 Chronicles 19:8)
- Confirms that it is worth fighting for (Nehemiah 4:14)

God’s Heart on the Role of Family

- Rejoices together in God’s blessings (Deuteronomy 12:7)
- Supports the local church (1 Chronicles 29:6–7)
- Gives regularly to God’s work (2 Chronicles 35:12)
- Provides for individual family members (1 Timothy 5:8)
- Does good to everyone, especially to God’s family (Galatians 6:10)
- Loves God’s family (1 Thessalonians 4:10)

God’s Heart on the Purpose of Family

- Praises the attributes of God (Psalm 96:7)
- Practices Christianity (1 Timothy 5:4)
- Promotes impartiality (1 Chronicles 24:31)
- Participates in regularly scheduled group Bible studies (Nehemiah 8:13)
- Portrays humility before God (Psalm 22:27)
- Protects against loneliness (Psalm 68:6)

Characteristics of Dysfunctional Family Systems

1. **Chaos**—Drama and confusion reign with emotions ruling decision making. Reasoning and self-restraint take a backseat.
2. **Control**—Keeping members in compliance with family rules and ideology is critical. Maintaining and supporting the hierarchy is essential to family preservation.
3. **Denial**—Obvious family problems are unacknowledged, unaddressed, and unchanged. Lies are accepted as truth, and inappropriate behavior is often ignored.
4. **Inconsistency**—What was said one day is retracted the next. Expectations constantly change, and commitments are easily broken.
5. **Indifference**—Emotional support of family members is blatantly lacking unless challenged by outsiders. Children are valued for their devotion and contribution to the family system.
6. **Instability**—Emotions quickly fluctuate from happy to sad, pleased to angry. Change is constant and unforeseeable; insecurity runs rampant among family members.
7. **Shame**—Members serve as emotional punching bags for each other, with shame being the most effective way of hurting, manipulating, and obtaining compliance.
8. **Unpredictability**—Keeping each other guessing is everyone's long suit; therefore, what is allowed one day is forbidden the next day and what pleases someone today displeases them tomorrow.

“Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days. ...

You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.”

(Psalm 90:14; 145:16)

What Causes Dysfunction to Develop in Some Families?

Just as there can be multiple reasons people do the things they do, there can be a multitude of reasons for a family being dysfunctional. For some families, the ...

- **Presence** of chemical addiction results in maladaptive behavior
- **Existence** of emotional, physical, or psychological disturbances damages family members
- **Tolerance** of abusive behavior within the family prevents healthy interaction

- **Adherence** to a rigid, dogmatic belief system leads to bondage
- **Unexpected death** of a significant family member creates a crisis of faith that causes chaos

*“Now the Lord is the Spirit,
and where the Spirit of the Lord is,
there is freedom.*

*And we all, who with unveiled faces
contemplate the Lord's glory,
are being transformed into his image
with ever-increasing glory,
which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”*
(2 Corinthians 3:17–18)

Key Verses to Memorize

*“If you hold to my teaching,
you are really my disciples.
Then you will know the truth,
and the truth will set you free.”*

(John 8:31–32)

Key Passage to Read

Genesis chapter 37

Joseph's Dysfunctional Family

How to Cultivate Your Family for the Future

Forgiveness is more often than not the starting point for restoring relationships, and it is critical for cultivating emotionally and spiritually healthy families. Forgiveness does not always come easily and may need to be offered over and over. Look at what Jesus said to the apostle Peter. ...

*“Then Peter came to Jesus and asked,
'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother
or sister who sins against me?
Up to seven times?' Jesus answered,
'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.'”*
(Matthew 18:21–22)

As you endeavor to cultivate the hearts of family members ...

- Emphasize the uniqueness of each individual family member. (1 Corinthians 12:14–17)
- Seek togetherness, but also encourage individuality. (1 Corinthians 12:4–7)
- Maintain consistency in the messages you communicate. (James 3:10–13)
- Practice immediate but appropriate discipline. (Proverbs 13:24)
- Allow a generous margin for mistakes. (Ephesians 4:32)

- Encourage the appropriate expression of feelings. (Proverbs 20:5)
- Promote and develop natural talents and abilities. (Proverbs 22:6)
- Require family members to take responsibility for their own attitudes and actions. (Galatians 6:4–5)
- Treat everyone with love and respect (1 Corinthians 13:8)
- Nurture a dependence on the Lord. (Proverbs 3:5–6)

Questions and Answers

“I grew up in a messed up family, and I am now repeating many patterns from the past. What should I do?”

Ask the Lord to give you discernment in identifying which patterns need to be changed and wisdom in selecting several action steps that will enable you to move toward emotional health and healing. Tell those closest to you that you want to give up these unhealthy, childhood ways of thinking, reasoning, and acting from the past. Ask them to help hold you accountable.

*“When I was a child, I talked like a child,
I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child.
When I became a man, I put the ways
of childhood behind me.”*
(1 Corinthians 13:11)

“Someone close to me died, and now it is too late for me to ask forgiveness for what I did wrong. What can I do about my heavy guilt?”

You do not have to live with guilt even though the person you wronged is no longer available to you.

Realize that God is available to you.

- Write down every wrong attitude and action. Then confess your sins to Him.
- Ask God’s forgiveness, realizing that all sins (even against others) are sins against God because He has told us how we are to treat one another.
- Write a letter to the one you wronged, read it aloud, and ask God to forgive you on behalf of the other person.

God knows your heart, and He can forgive your sins and restore to you a clear conscience.

*“Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me. ...
My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.”*
(Psalm 51:10, 17)

HOPE FOR THE HEART’s *Biblical Counseling Library* contains our *Biblical Counseling Keys*, providing *God’s Truth for Today’s Problems* on 100+ topics.

The *Quick Reference Guides* contain excerpts from our *Biblical Counseling Keys* and offer immediate, concise answers with *biblical hope and practical help*. For more comprehensive help and additional resources, refer to our *Biblical Counseling Keys on Dysfunctional Families*.

If you would like more information, biblical counsel, or prayer support, contact:
1-800-488-HOPE (4673)
www.HopeForTheHeart.org

The information in this resource is intended as guidelines for healthy living. Please consult qualified medical, legal, pastoral, and psychological professionals regarding individual concerns.

THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV®
Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™
Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Related Topics ...

- Alcohol & Drug Abuse
- Blended Families
- Communication
- Conflict Resolution
- Divorce
- Forgiveness
- Marriage



*Together ... Changing Minds.
Changing Hearts. Changing Lives.*

P.O. Box 7, Dallas, TX 75221