

The 6 Family Roles In Addiction

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When addiction happens, it happens to the whole family, and addiction comes in so so so many forms. Whether the addiction is to food, alcohol, heroine, marijuana, chaos (etc.), whether the addiction is loud or quiet, whether the addiction is visible to the public or a closely held secret, each member of the family unconsciously scrambles to find ways to manage and cope with the addiction. Not individually, but within the family unit.

Each family member takes on a specific role to try to graft structure, predictability and some semblance of normalcy onto one of the most traumatic family events possible - addiction.

According to addiction educator Sharon Wegscheider-Cruse, a familiar constellation of characters will often emerge:

1. The addict. This person is the center of attention in the family. Conversations, decisions and energy expenditure revolve around this person. As this role is cemented, others family members unconsciously look for ways to balance this dynamic out.

Side note: I have a problem with the language around this role. Instead of 'addict', I prefer to use phrases like, “a person who is actively engaging in addictive behaviors that are self-destructive,” or, “a person who is repeatedly struggling to cope with stress in a constructive way.” Addict as a stand alone label doesn't speak to the complexity of the experience of addiction, and it reduces a person to their behaviors, which is obviously not a holistic view.

2. The hero. This person sees it as their job to make everyone in the family look good. They attempt to rescue the family from the shame of addiction by putting a positive face forward. The hero seems put together and balanced, but is often isolated in their hurt.

Heroes typically engage in [perfectionistic](#) ways. The perfectionism is motivated by underlying feelings of [fear](#), [guilt and shame](#).

3. The jester. This person uses humor to keep things on a superficial level, so as to protect others and themselves from feeling the deep, painful truth of the situation.

The constant joking is a distraction tactic and can sometimes involve 'mean humor' that distracts even further by adding a layer of anger on top of the superficial joking.

The more layers there are, the more the painful truth of the addiction gets buried. The jester wants to bury it away just like everyone else, because no one really knows what to do with it.

The underlying feelings of the jester are often embarrassment, shame and anger.

4. The lost child. This is the family member who just sort of emotionally checks out of the situation. They are not literally the child, but can be a husband, sister, etc. They care deeply, but step away so as not to be an additional burden. The lost child is careful to avoid drama on any level; they are quiet, low-key and often relinquish their personal needs.

The underlying feelings of the lost child are guilt, loneliness, neglect and anger.

5. The scapegoat. Similar to the jester, the scapegoat makes a lot of noise, only the scapegoat does it through rebellion and dramatics. The acting out is done in order to distract from the problem that no one has a solution to.

This person creates problems that are clearly unnecessary, but there's an "at least these problems have solutions," mentality behind them. Offering the family a set of fixable problems during a time when all the family wants to do is fix the problem of addiction (which has no clear fix) is the way in which the scapegoat tries to contribute.

The underlying feelings of the scapegoat are [shame](#), [guilt](#) and [emptiness](#).

6. The caretaker. This person tries to keep everyone happy, presents well to their community (i.e. doesn't mention the addiction) and continues to make excuses for the person struggling with addictive behaviors.

The caretaker unknowingly makes it more difficult for the person suffering from addiction to realize the gravity of their choices by constantly rescuing 'the addict' before the reality and the consequences of their destructive choices set in.

The rescue isn't a real rescue, it's just a quick fix. It's this cycle of enabling that swallows up the caretakers time, energy and emotional availability for other members of the family and for their own relationship satisfaction in their personal life.

Understandably so (because of their intimate connection with the person struggling with addictive behaviors), the caretaker does not know [how to let go](#) and refuses to do so out of a misplaced sense of loyalty and love.

The underlying feelings for the caretaker are inadequacy, fear and helplessness.

The most ideal addiction treatment would involve the whole family as one unit in family therapy, but that approach is not always practical. The next best thing is for each family member to [seek out their own help](#) in clarifying what their role is, whether they want to continue playing it, and how to step into a new role that is consciously created as opposed to being an unconscious reaction.

Many times the other role players (i.e. the people who aren't struggling with addictive behaviors) hold all the desire for change, "I just want ___ to be happy, truly, that's all I really want in life." **What family members begin to learn in therapy is two fold:**

1. If you're holding all the desire and motivation for someone else to change, you leave nothing for that person to hold themselves.
2. If your happiness is dependent upon the person suffering from addiction engaging in a successful recovery, you are unwittingly doubling the pressure for the addiction sufferer to connect to real help. If the one who's struggling with addiction fails, which is every "addicts" prediction for themselves, they have now failed twice as hard. This makes the person struggling to use positive coping mechanisms twice as likely to avoid treatment.

If you are dealing with addiction in any way, please remember that it's always the strongest people who [recruit support](#). There are so many local, free organizations which offer real help and connection during the deeply isolating and often hopeless experience of addiction. Groups like Al-anon, for example, that are just for family members of those struggling with addiction. There are also [online forums](#), [a ton of books](#), individual therapy and [more formal support groups](#).

You can't control everything, but you can change *some* things. Please also remember that this life your living is yours, if you want to continue playing the role of the jester or the hero or "the addict," that is entirely your choice to make. I wrote this post to let you know that there are other roles, self-defined roles, roles that enable expansion instead of contraction, patiently waiting for you on the other side of your unconscious reaction to the trauma of addiction.

For more of my work, join [my monthly newsletter](#) (the newsletter that everyone gets, then says, WHY DIDN'T ANYONE TELL ME ABOUT THIS BEFORE?!) [You'll see.](#)

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