Lesson 1

Understanding Dysfunctional Families`

Imagine if there was nothing like family. For some people that's not a sad thought because of all the negative family experiences they have had. My kids were asking each other challenging questions recently to do with the trade-off between having parents and not knowing Jesus or knowing Jesus and not having any family. Their response was interesting. We began to talk about God as our father and parent. Regardless of our experiences, family was God's plan and idea. Unfortunately the enemy seeks to kill, steal and destroy our lives and destinies by marring God's design and image in the family context. It's important for counsellors to understand what God's blueprint is for family life so that they work with a clear standard to realign people towards. This is crucial because even for counsellors, the social sickness has become the norm. The objective of this lesson is to create awareness so that as counsellors we are empowered to address the relevant issues. We are answering the question of life, Who am I? When you function from your true self its natural and genuine but the false self or poser is uncomfortable, strained and not authentic. It's characterised by anxiety. Perhaps it's the fear of being found out.

I. What are the qualities of a healthy family?

1. **Maintenance – Food, shelter, and health.**
2. **Nurture – a sense of emotional warmth. The feeling of being home.**
3. **Inclusion – a sense of belonging. You feel missed when you are not present. You feel needed. You are known by name. You are unconditionally accepted. You don't have to pay your membership dues to be there.**
4. **Differentiation – You are recognised as an individual. Your privacy is respected. Boundaries are exercised. Your uniqueness is celebrated.**
5. **Esteem – a sense of worth and dignity. You matter.**
6. **Understanding – Judgement is suspended. You have the right to make mistakes and learn from them. Your mistakes don't result in banishment. You experience empathy from others. Emotional empathy – I feel you, cognitive empathy – I get you and empathic concern – I am here for you.**
7. **Recreation – You can have fun. You can be a child. You can laugh freely. You don't have to take yourself seriously all the time.**
8. **Age appropriateness – Developmental stages are respected. You can behave like a child if you are one.**
9. **Healthy Discipline – Discipline is appropriate for the misdemeanour. At the same time misbehaviour is dealt with.**
10. **Spirituality – you are allowed to develop your relationship with God without being mocked or shamed.**

Such a healthy environment is designed to help us to cope with life as adults. When any of these are absent the result is often relationally and emotionally immature grown-ups. In a healthy family there is flexibility of roles in the sense that they are not too rigid. Dysfunctional families

might have "the family priest" who is the moral one; the rescuer who placates others, nurtures and counsels. Because of these rigid roles the others don't learn those skills and have challenges when they start their own families. Reflect on your family and upbringing and comment on the degree to which you experienced these 10 aspects of healthy families.

II. Characteristics of Dysfunctional Families

It's important to understand that there are different types of dysfunctional families. Some of the major categories are: Alcoholic or chemically dependent family systems; Emotionally or psychologically destructive family systems; Physically or sexually abusive family systems; and the authoritarian dogmatic family system. Whilst there are a lot of obvious differences in these families there are a lot of commonalities with regards to the resultant fruit and pain inflicted. Some general characteristics of dysfunctional families are outlined below.

1. **Pain from parents words, attitudes and actions.**
2. **Pain and emptiness from parental sins of omission.**
3. **Damaged or warped personality as a result of pain. Four faces of the false self:**
    - **Hero……PAIN**
    - **Villain……..PAIN**
    - **Judge……PAIN**
    - **Victim……..PAIN**
4. **Missing parts that prepare one for adulthood**
   Eg a sense of competence and self-validation
5. **Strained and unnatural relationships between parents and children.**
6. **Violation of Children's Boundaries**
    - **Children must be seen not heard**
    - **Children's feelings don't matter**
    - **Crying and emotional expression is suppressed**
    - **Emotional boundaries violated**
        - **Parent has mental illness and roles are reversed as child becomes the surrogate spouse.**
        - **Children can't think for themselves in authoritarian families. This limits their mental and spiritual development. The child is also limited in acting upon their own conscience.**
7. **One of the members has deep problems that affect the rest of the family.**
    - **Family life revolves around this person's needs, fears, moods etc.**

   Scenario: Spouse lying about her husband's addiction in order to protect his job and income. In so doing she enables his behaviour, resulting in lack of ownership and avoidance of the crisis that might help him to overcome the addiction. Children begin to play parental roles in order to make up for the deficiency. They end up with a skewed view of authority, God, security, protection and lose many other emotional and personal assets. Their personality is formed in the first 10

years of their lives resulting in deeply ingrained behavioural preferences that affect their patterns of relating.

8. **There is no health communication of issues and feelings.**
9. **Warped parental image.**
    - **Do as parents say not as they do.**
    - **Parents are no longer role models.**
10. **Can't challenge parent's beliefs and rules.**
11. **Protecting the family image through family secrets.**
12. **Duplicity. Keeping a good image is the most important thing. This in itself is destructive.**
13. **Indirect communication takes place**
    - **Sulking**
    - **Via another**
    - **Acting out**

III. What is the fruit of Dysfunctional Families?

1. **Difficulty expressing feelings.**
2. **Patriarchal psychological contracts at work.**
3. **Repeating the cycle in spousal choice.**
    - **The tyranny of the familiar**
4. **Not taking risks**
5. **Powerlessness**
    - **Leaving decision-making to others**
    - **Gravitating unnecessarily toward strong personalities.**
    - **Perceptual distortions**
        - **Positive and negative blind-spots**
    - **What I do doesn't make a difference**
    - **Avoiding conflict**
    - **I will repress my opinion to keep the peace**
6. **Fear of abandonment**
    - **Common in divorce cases**
7. **Feelings of shame and low self-esteem**
    - **Apologizing for your presence**
8. **Rigid roles and behaviour**
9. **Struggling with change**
10. **Control freak tendencies**
    - **Perfectionism**
    - **Eating disorders**
    - **Obsessive compulsive disorder**
11. **Workaholism**
12. **Hypervigilance**
    - **The result of trauma is often feeling anxious until you have fully scanned your environment.**
13. **Unnecessary or compulsive lying**

14. **Difficulties with intimacy**
    - **Pushing loved ones away through aggression and belligerent behaviour.**
    - **Emotionally abusive behaviour. "I love you now, but not really, or maybe I just need you…"**
    - **Hiding from love**
    - **Rejecting yourself before you can be rejected**
    - **Projecting self-hatred**
    - **Cycle of Shame, Guilt, Rejection and Fear.**
        - **The alone self is a bad self.**
15. **Extreme, Misplaced Blind loyalty**
16. **Survivor's Guilt**
    - **In trauma situations. The result is not being able to have fun. One's mind is programmed to more readily accept failure than success as a form of punishment.**
17. **Addictive relationships**
    - **Need-based relationships**
    - **Debt based relationships**

IV. What are the Roles in Dysfunctional Families

Members of dysfunctional families learn to play specific roles that tend to continue into their adult lives and relationships.

1. **The Caretaker/Enabler**
    - **They protect and take care of the dependent spouse or parent.**
    - **This becomes their identity.**
    - **They struggle to receive from others because they are The Giver or RESCUER.**
    - **This becomes their source of validation.**
    - **Some leave their spouses when they are healed because they don't know how to relate to a healthy person.**
    - **They placate the behaviour of the dependent person**

2. **The Hero**
    - **Highly responsible.**
    - **High achiever.**
    - **This reassures the family that they are alright.**
    - **They become the source of the family's esteem.**
    - **They struggle to express vulnerability.**
    - **Their identity is often in their performance.**
    - **They tend to be driven NOT purposeful.**

3. **The Scape Goat**
    - **They feel hurt that the attention goes to the hero or the dependent person**
    - **They are acting out their emotional state.**
    - **They tend to be emotionally honest.**
    - **A lot of their behaviour is attention seeking.**

4. **The Lost Child/Loner**

- **Shyness.**
- **Outsider.**
- **Fantasy world.**
- **Detached.**
- **Self-nurture through emotional eating.**
- **Dreaming and other mental pursuits.**
- **Spirituality sometimes enhanced due to isolation.**

5. **The Mascot**
    - **Trivial tyranniser**
    - **Clown that minimizes the issues**
    - **Enjoys being the centre of attention**
    - **Disconnected from their pain**
    - **Anxiety and fear**

V. What are the mental barriers to healing?

Mental strongholds

- **Guardian lies are believed.**
- **Strong arguments used to justify behaviour and attitudes.**

1. **Minimizing**
   Acknowledging the problem but then making it smaller than it is.
2. **Projection**
   Appointing the scape goat to bear the shame
3. **Intellectualizing**
   Explaining the problem away
4. **Denial**
   Demanding that others and self believe that there is no problem.

VI. What are the 10 steps to healing?

1. **Take your power back**
    - **Choose your own standards by which people qualify to be in your inner circle.**
    - **Exercise your boundaries.**
    - **Take charge of your life.**
    - **Decide which relationships to initiate, nurture, rebuild and terminate. Remember that healing takes place in community.**
    - **Recognize that you have a will and the power to choose.**
    - **Who will be in your private space? Who will be in your intimate space?**
    - **Shift from an external locus of control to a more internal locus of control.**
2. **Inventory**
   Face Yourself, Work and Others.

- **Physical health and appearance**
- **Home and living environment**
- **Relationships**
- **Emotions**
- **Habits**
- **Career**
- **Community**
- **Ethics**
- **Relationship with God**
- **Finances**

3. **Resolution**
    - **Express how fed up you are with the status quo.**
    - **Put emotion to it.**
    - **What do you resolve to do? Eg I separate myself from this by releasing the person.**
4. **Processing**
   Ask questions to challenge the status quo:
    - **What makes me attracted to people that abuse me?**
5. **Argument**
   Highlight the absurdity of your previous way of thinking and behaving. Highlight the benefits of functioning in alignment with your authentic self.
6. **Misbeliefs**
   Identify your misbeliefs (lies, wrong scripts) behind your behaviour and replace them with counterarguments.
7. **Belief Re-patterning**
   Reprogramming through Affirmations. Make sure you state these:
   Passionately, positively, in present tense, and personally with visualisation.
8. **Rehearsal**
   Role-play the new behaviour and give yourself behavioural challenges each day.
   Develop positive recent experiences to help you see yourself in a new way.
   Treat yourself in new ways eg doing a course, going for a pedicure. Doing something you felt was being selfish yet it was your self-hated operating.
9. **Re-relationshipping**
   Whose support do I need in this process?
   Who do I need to relate to in order to reinforce my new sense of identity?
10. **Planning**
    Set up a schedule, commit yourself to new standards and rituals that reinforce the new way.

Appendix 1 – Personal Restoration Plan

SAMPLE SUCCESS SPREADSHEET

MY GOAL	WHAT WILL HELP ME COMPLETE THIS	COMMENT
Better Self-Esteem	Get counselling. Read good books about building self-esteem. Complete some goals so I feel better about myself. Practise word based affirmations	
Be less of a doormat	Take an assertiveness training class. Read a book on assertiveness training.	
Set better limits	Decide what are appropriate limits on C.W.'s behavior. Say no when I mean no. Practice my assertiveness skills. Talk over with my counselor why I'm in this relationship.	
Need more discipline	Take up a commitment I can't get out of so I'll be sure to do it. Get someone to do it with me so it won't seem like a burden. Read *The Act of Will* by Roberto Assagioli	A great book!
Improve my relationship with my boss	Discuss relationships with authority figures with my therapist.	

	Work in my journal about resentments toward mom and dad.	
To disclose myself	Work on trusting with my counselor more fully so I can feel safer in intimate relationships. Journal on my fears of talking to my parents. Make a list of what I am afraid to tell about myself and tell them to spouse.	
Clearer communication	Learn to negotiate by reading a book about this subject. Take a public speaking class.	
Learn Accounting	Enrol in a class at the university next semester. Get an accounting package for my computer and use it.	
Stop Using Alcohol	Get into a recovery program today. Read Hazelden recovery books. Attend Alcoholics Anonymous and work the steps of the program.	Do whatever it takes to stop drinking!
Deal with pain of growing up in an alcoholic family	Attend ACA (Adult Children of Alcoholics) meetings. Get therapy and counseling. Work on my codependency by working the steps. Read books on codependency and	

	ACA issues.	
Enhance my relationship with God	Church on Sundays. Read faith building books. Read the entire *Bible.* Keep a spiritual journal.	

Bibliographic References

1. Wegscheider, Sharon. Another Chance: Hope and Health for the Alcoholic Family. 1981. Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behavior Books. Pages 85-88.

2. op. cit. See chart on page 86 of her book for a brief summary and comparison of these roles.

3. op cit. Page 88.

4. Op. cit. Page 88.

5 Material from Dr. Janet Kizziar's class, "Counseling Survivors of Dysfunctional Families," presented at the University of California, Riverside, 1/21/89

6. Woititz, Janet G. Adult Children of Alcoholics. 1990. Dearfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc.