

# Dealing With A Dysfunctional Extended Family

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The topic of dysfunctional families is a difficult one. It gets gray and fuzzy sometimes as to where the dividing line is between normal problems that all families struggle with, and dysfunctionality. I have tried my best to draw the line in sensible and measurable ways. I have written two lectures. The other lecture I have written about extended families is called "Dealing with Diversity in Extended Family Relationships". It deals with the all of the stresses and tensions caused by the high level of diversity in values and lifestyles that is present in most families these days. In dysfunctional families, all these normal stressors are present, and then, superimposed upon them, are mental health problems. I hope, that between the two lectures, I have offered information that people can utilize in their unique family situation.

It would be nice if there were no such thing as dysfunctional families. However, the sad fact is, some families have mental health problems and it's important to acknowledge the

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problems, and address them directly. Dysfunctional families have always been around. It's just that in centuries past, family problems were hidden, or simply not recognized. In the past, people didn't have much opportunity to relate outside of their extended families, so it was difficult for people to recognize that something was wrong with their family's operating modes. It was also pretty much taboo to expose the skeletons in the closet, especially in cases of seriously dysfunctional families. Family business was kept private, so even if you recognized that something was wrong in your family, you probably were too ashamed to tell anybody.

With the emergence of a more active mental health field in the last several decades, the private life of families became more of a public matter. Protective Services began intervening on behalf of children in seriously dysfunctional families. Many social service organizations came into being to assist families with mental health problems: for instance shelters for battered women, telephone hotlines for suicide or other crises situations, for mild forms of dysfunctionism drug/alcohol treatment programs, etc. Help also became available because mental health counseling became assessable to most of the population in the early 1970's. Overall, it became possible for people to confront the

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mental health problems of their extended families. A lot of progress has been made. However, there are still lots of dysfunctional families out there in need of help. I would like tonight to propose some strategies that individuals can use within their extended families to help change dysfunctional patterns of interaction. In addition, I will offer some ideas for disengaging from your extended family for people who are in family situations where that is necessary.

I would like to start this discussion by offering some clear-cut definitions about what dysfunctionality is. The first thing that becomes obvious to me in attempting to define a dysfunctional family is that there needs to be several classifications. There are definitely levels of dysfunctionality. I have therefore broken my definition of dysfunctional families into Mild, Moderate, and Severe. However, classifying complex human behavior is not an exact science. It may well be true that a given family can, in general, be classified in one category of dysfunctionality but have some characteristics of another classification. Families may also operate at different levels of dysfunctionality during different time periods. Despite these classification difficulties, I still think it is helpful to break the idea of dysfunctionality into levels. So--let me lay out my definitions for the three

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classifications:

### **Families With Mild Levels of Dysfunction**

Several of the following behaviors are present:

Infrequent verbal or physical demonstrations of affection.

Discounting a persons competency or intelligence.

Ignoring or down-playing a person's accomplishments.

Frequent insults or insinuations.

Sexism, favoritism, ridiculing and teasing.

A negative outlook on life  
Emotional immaturity.

Insensitivity to the needs of children  
Inadequate attention.

Problem drinking.  
Lack of consideration and cooperation among family members.

Low levels of personal growth.

Lack of acceptance of differences.

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Discouragement of autonomy.

Secretiveness.

Unhealthy attitudes about sexuality.

Inappropriate disclosure of adult matters to children.

Poor coping skills.

Inadequate supervision or healthy rule setting for children.

### **Families With Moderate Levels of Dysfunction:**

Usually many of the behaviors present in Mildly Dysfunctional families are present along with some of the following:

Lack of adequate nurturing, attention, guidance and general parenting skills.

Chronic depression.

Heavy drinking or drug use.

Suicide threats.

Threats of abandonment.

Inappropriate touching or attitudes about sexuality.

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Emotional coldness.

Neglect of housekeeping duties  
resulting in chronic uncleanliness.

Lack of social skills and social  
relationships outside of the family.

### **Families With Severe Levels of Dysfunction:**

Usually, many of the behaviors present  
in Mildly and Moderately Dysfunctional  
families are present along with any of  
the following:

Sexual abuse.

Suicide or attempted suicide(s).

Chronic depression resulting in  
hospitalizations.

Severe emotional neglect or emotional  
abuse.

Inadequate life necessities provided due  
to chronic unemployment.

Severe alcoholism or drug abuse.

Prostitution.

Abandonment.

Severe physical abuse or torture.

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As I mentioned earlier, classifying complex human behaviors is not an exact science so there may be problem behaviors that I have neglected to mention. However, I think these are fairly workable definitions of the various levels of dysfunctionality.

Before moving on to coping strategies for each of these levels of dysfunctionality I want to make an important point. **The amount of psychological damage a person suffers is not always directly proportional to how dysfunctional his/her family was.** It is sometimes true that the more severely dysfunctional the family is, the more severe the psychological damage is to the children of that family, but that is not always the case. A person can suffer severe damage from a mildly dysfunctional family, and a person can come out of a severely dysfunctional family with only mild damage. Why is this true? If the mental health problems in our family are subtle, we may not recognize them and therefore not be able to guard against their negative effect on us. Whereas, if our parents are very obviously mentally ill, we may be able to recognize that fact at a young age, and reject their influence and get our parenting needs met from older siblings, aunts or uncles, etc.

This whole idea of recognizing dysfunctional behaviors and attitudes is

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crucial, and I'll get back to that later in this discussion. I want to make one other point which is applicable for dealing with all levels of dysfunctional families.

The first step in recovering from the damaging effects of a dysfunctional family is to let go of the guilt you feel about disconnecting yourself to some degree from your family.

We have all been socialized to believe that families are important. We have all been brought up to believe that we should love and care for and want to spend time with our family members. We all been exposed to commercials and programs on TV depicting ridiculously happy families. All of us would like to be part of a close, loving family.

However, if our extended family is dysfunctional, we need to let go of these visions in our heads and figure out what we realistically need to do to deal with the realities of our given family. Our relationships with and our responsibilities to our extended families must be renegotiated if mental health problems are present. Let me summarize this idea of redefining roles into a clear operating rule:

A person's responsibility to his/her family is predicated on the condition that each family member is living up to his/her responsibility to be a psychologically healthy human being.



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If a given family member reneges on this responsibility, the responsibilities others have to him/her must in turn be re-defined.

What follows from this basic principle is that the more psychologically unhealthy a family member is, the more adjustments have to be made in terms of how other family members relate to him/her. Let me now try to offer some specific suggestions for dealing with each level of dysfunctionality.

### **Coping Strategies For Mildly Dysfunctional Families**

In order to deal with a mildly dysfunctional family you need to ask yourself the following questions:

1) "How do I need to structure my relationships with my extended family so that their dysfunctional behaviors do not interfere with my efforts to maintain my mental health and develop my full potential as a human being?"

2) How can I help my family members to become healthier so they can lead more happy and productive lives?

3) How can I make our family

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interactions more positive for everyone involved?

In cases of Mild Dysfunction, it is rarely necessary to sever family ties. The goal is to protect yourself from the dysfunctional behaviors, while simultaneously helping your family to heal. Many families with mild levels of dysfunctional behaviors will respond positively to information and feedback. I propose the following guidelines for dealing with a mildly dysfunctional extended family:

### **Guideline #1: Confront demeaning behaviors:**

In many families, insults, belittling, discounting and insinuations are a standard mode of operating. These kinds of negative behaviors can seriously undermine self esteem. Allowing your family members to engage in these kinds of destructive behaviors will erode your self confidence and inhibit you from feeling good about your life choices and accomplishments. The first step in alleviating these negative patterns of interaction is to recognize when they are happening. The second step is to find ways to give your family members feedback that these kinds of remarks are unhealthy and harmful to you. This will take patience because usually the

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unhealthy interactions have been going on for years and are quite ingrained. It is important to suggest changes in gentle, non-accusatory ways. Here are some examples:

"I know you don't mean to be hurtful to me but your comment about my changing jobs was very upsetting to me. I need to ask you to not question my judgment."

"I know you aren't intentionally trying to make me feel bad when you make jokes about my vegetarianism, but I need to make you aware that it actually hurts me quite a lot."

"I feel like you cut me off when I try to talk about my relationship with Joe. Joe is a very important part of my life. " If you want to express some concerns, I'm willing to listen but it's not healthy for me to have you just pretend that that part of my life does not exist."

"I need to ask you to not insinuate that I made a bad decision to drop out of graduate school. I thought that decision out long and hard and I'm making more money

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doing my computer work than I would have ever made getting the degree.”

“I need to ask you to not make snide comments about how I’m raising Jason. I try to not criticize your decisions. We have different values about child-raising.”

It will take time to change the negative patterns. In the meantime, you need to protect yourself from being influenced by destructive commentary. I recommend that you have a ventilating session with a friend after family visits where you experienced negative interactions. Verbalize the ways in which you felt discounted, or belittled. Express your anger and frustration, and acknowledge your hurt. This is a good way to prevent the negative comments from sinking in. It’s a way of recognizing the damaging comments and deflecting them.

### **Guideline #2: Asserting your own and other family members right to individuality.**

A common problem in dysfunctional families is that certain values or lifestyle choices or intellectual capacities are accepted or praised and others are downplayed or disapproved of. For example one child may be

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praised for going to law school and the other child criticized for pursuing a music or art career. Good or exceptional grades may be expected of every child instead of recognizing that some children are not good at "book learning" no matter how hard they try. Parents sometimes are unable to see that these "poor students" may have wonderful talents in sales or trades or operating a small business. Analytical skills may be complimented and intuitiveness or creativity discounted. Qualities like adventurous, or assertiveness may be discouraged. People may be pressured to have children or discouraged from having them.

In general, there is a lack of appreciation for the fact that people have different life priorities, aptitudes, and values, and need to be given space to explore the life path of their choice. I do not mean to imply that it is not normal for family members to try and give one another advice and try to influence one another's decisions. It is also reasonable and normal to criticize one another's decisions and choices at times. I discuss this in my "Dealing With Diversity in Extended Family Relationships" lecture. In this day and age family members tend to have diverse values and will undoubtedly at times disapprove of one another's decisions and choices.

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The point at which the advice giving or criticism becomes destructive or dysfunctional is when it is given in ways that make people feel they are stupid, not okay, or a bad person if they do not heed the advice. It is okay to have one's choices and decisions questioned. However, when you present reasonable arguments in support of your choices and are still condemned, or ridiculed, you need to assert your right to have different values and make different choices. If you feel your decisions and life path are continually being criticized assert your right to "be who you are" in a gentle but firm way, for example:

"I feel really good about my decision to pursue my music. I hope you can try and accept how important this is for me, even though it's not a choice you would personally make"

" I know you wish I'd have a baby instead of trying to write my book. But I want to write this book more than anything in the world. I might have kids some day but the book has to happen first. I hope when you read it someday you'll understand."

"I know you find it hard to understand why I want to move up North. I know I will make a lot less money, but being in a country setting is very important to me. I'd

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much rather make \$20,000/year less than put up with the congestion of city life.”

Also try and support other family members who are breaking the family mold and getting flack for it, for example:

“Mom I know you wish Linda wasn’t getting a divorce. But she just isn’t happy in that marriage any more and I’m sure she has given it a lot of thought and is making the right decision even though it has negative aspects.”

### **Guideline #3: Model appropriate behaviors such as positive verbal and physical expressions of affection, etc.**

In the case of parents, it is very likely that your parents did not learn many positive interaction styles from their parents. They literally may not know how to express affection or be nurturing and supportive. The best way to teach them, is to interact with them in the ways you want them to respond to you:

Try saying “I love you” to a family member even if it makes both of you uncomfortable at first.

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Compliment a family members about his or her intelligence or competence even if they act embarrassed and negate your compliment..

Give a family member a hug even if he or she stiffens up like a board and acts freaked out. People have a deep need for verbal and physical affirmations of affection; it can just get buried. Slowly but surely you can change the interaction style of your family to be more positive.

### **Guideline #4: Decrease the frequency of contact with your family.**

This is very important. Dealing with a mildly dysfunctional family can wear away at you if you can't get breaks to regroup and "debrief" from the negative interactions. You have to be on guard to protect yourself from the insinuations, discounts, etc and this takes a lot of energy. In general, if your lives are too intertwined, you will probably find yourself getting sucked back in to old unhealthy behavior patterns that you have worked hard to overcome. You will probably have to be the one to set boundaries and parameters and you may have to tell some white lies sometimes to get the space you need. Supplement visits with phone calls because they are



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easier to terminate if the conversation gets negative.

**Guideline #5: Schedule recreational activities during your visits with your family so you can limit the amount of dialogue.**

If your family is too dysfunctional to carry on normal, healthy conversations set your visits up so they don't allow much time for conversation. For example, . Go to the movies or a concert, skiing or snowmobiling, roller-skating, etc. This is particularly helpful during times when you know controversies are brewing that will be handled in unhealthy ways.

**Guideline #6: Set some topics as off limits, and limit what you share and when.**

Refuse to get in arguments about the same subjects. It is also a good idea to refrain from sharing information about certain aspects of your life unless your family is willing to respond to you in a more accepting manner. Do not talk to your family about decisions you are grappling with if you repeatedly receive unhealthy advice. Protect yourself from their negative influence by simply informing them of your choices after the fact.

## **Dealing With A Dysfunctional Extended Family (Continued)**

**Guideline #7: If you are married or have a partner: make sure your spouse is present during visits you fear may be problematic.**

It is much easier for a person who is outside of a family to not get caught up in the old family systems. Give your spouse full permission to confront inappropriate behaviors. The worst thing you can do is to let your spouse get sucked into the negative interactional patterns of your family.

**Guideline #8: Recognize the limits of your family relationships and develop alternative support relationships.**

Acknowledge the sadness you feel about not being able to be closer with your family members. Do not set yourself up for repeated disappointment by having unrealistic expectations. Do not count on your unhealthy family members for the emotional support you need. Appreciate what your family members do give you. Your family members may in fact love you quite a bit; They may just not be capable of expressing that love in very healthy ways. You need to develop support people outside of your family so that your needs for emotional support, positive feedback and encouragement are met. These supportive relationships can help counteract the

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negative input you receive in your family. Hopefully you can improve the interactions in your family through discussions and therapeutic interventions and at some point in the future have closer relationships with your family members.

### **Guidelines for Moderately Dysfunctional Families.**

The questions I try to have clients who come from Moderately Dysfunctional families focus on are the following:

- 1) How do you need to interact with your family so that they do not sabotage your efforts to be a mentally healthy person?
- 2) What kind of boundaries do you need to draw between yourself and your family to protect your own needs?
- 3) How can you keep yourself from being engulfed by your family member's problems?
- 4) How can you help your family members to recognize their mental health problems and get professional help?

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Most of the strategies I outlined for dealing with a Mildly Dysfunctional family such as limiting the amount of contact, confronting negative comments, choosing what to share with your family, having your spouse accompany you on visits, modeling appropriate behaviors etc, are applicable for moderately dysfunctional families. In addition, I encourage people to terminate visits if problems behaviors erupt for example drinking or any kind of physical abuse.

I also encourage people to continually confront the seriousness of the problems and encourage the family members to get professional help. I encourage laying out strict conditions about what behavior standards are necessary in order for you to continue the relationship. Discontinuing the relationship on a temporary basis may be necessary in order for you to enforce the conditions. As I mentioned earlier, in order to draw boundaries and limit contact on a temporary basis, you will have to work through the guilt you feel about disconnecting from your family.

I remember working with a client who came from an abusive family who was experiencing guilt about cutting off contact with her father even though he had been physically abusive with her on many occasions. She told me she felt like she was disobeying God because the ten commandments say to "Honor your Mother and Father." The only

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response I could think to give her was "Perhaps if your mother and father are not honorable people, God did not mean for them to be honored."

I've noticed guilt is particularly troubling when a person's family is dysfunctional in self destructive ways. It is usually much easier for people to protect themselves from the mental health problems of their extended families when the behaviors being exhibited are aggressive; for instance if the family members are verbally or physically abusive. However, it is important for people to learn how to protect themselves against more passive kinds of problems as well.

Even though a depressed, emotionally immature, or self destructive family member may not deliberately lash out and hurt other family members, meeting his or her emotional needs can be exhausting. It becomes overwhelming to try and be a support person for someone who continually engages in irresponsible or self destructive behaviors. It often becomes necessary to distance yourself from an emotionally unhealthy family member who refuses to address his/her problems. This does not mean you should totally refuse to see emotionally sick relatives. However, it will be necessary at times for you to draw some boundaries between yourself and dysfunctional family members in order to protect your own needs and rights.

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No one wants to be seen as the cruel, uncaring brother/sister, son/daughter, mother or father who abandoned a family member to poverty, loneliness etc. However, it is very difficult to be truly helpful to someone who does not have a commitment to being a healthy, functional person. Your efforts to loan money, help them get their lives together, alleviate their loneliness, etc. will continually be undermined by their self destructiveness, lack of responsibility and unwillingness to change. You will fall victim to being a "rescuer" or "enabler". You will come to resent the constant efforts you are called upon to put forth on their behalf.

If a family member refuses to take the steps necessary to become a healthier person reduce the amount of time and energy you invest in the relationship. When making a decision to stop relating to a family member(s) or to decrease the frequency of interaction because of mental health issues, it is important to communicate your dissatisfactions in an honest but considerate manner. Try to separate the person from their behavior. Connect your decision to decrease your contact with them to the problem behaviors and include a statement of caring for them despite the problems. Here are some examples:

"I'd like to spend time with you  
because you are my brother and

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I care about you, but I am not willing to be with you when you are drinking. I think you need to seek professional help."

"I wish we could spend the holidays together but I cannot be around people who are abusing alcohol if I am going to maintain my own sobriety."

"I care about you a lot but I cannot help with you with your depression. We have talked many times about the issues bothering you and I can't help you find the solutions you need,

"You need to see a therapist."

"I'm sorry, that you have worked yourself into a financial bind. But—I'm not going to loan you any more money. I've bailed you out a number of times and it has not made a difference in your life. The only way you will solve your money problems is by digging yourself out of the hole one step at a time."

"You're my sister and I love and care about you and want for us to be close. But I am not willing to visit you at your house until you get out of your self destructive relationship. I do not feel safe there. I want you to know that I

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think it is very unhealthy for people to hit one another and I think you deserve someone who will treat you right."

If you confront a family member about his/her mental health problems he or she may not be ready to admit the problem and he/she may lash out at you in anger and tell you he/she never wants to see you again. If this happens, I suggest that you say something like

"We'll I still think there is a serious problem here. I'll give you a call in a few months and see if you see things any differently"

This leaves the door open for you to periodically check in and continue encouraging them to get help.

A therapist I once trained with coined a phrase I have always remembered. She said the best thing you can do when a person you care about is engaged in self destructive behaviors is "Invite them to health." Sometimes that is all we can do with our family members: We can continually invite them to be healthier.

Another helpful piece of advice for dealing with a moderately dysfunctional family is "Do not be embarrassed by your family members' behaviors." They are not a reflection of you. You cannot control who they are or the choices



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they make about their lives. It is important to be able to spend time with your family without feeling they are a reflection on you. You have to maintain a strong sense of self and separateness.

It is also important to continually work through the anger and sadness you feel about having a family that is less than you wish they could be. There is a certain "luck of the draw" as to what kind of family we end up in, and some of us end up in better families than others. It is okay to grieve the loss you feel about your family not being able to give you what you see other people getting from their families. This grieving is an on-going process that spans years. As I mentioned earlier, it is very important in the case of moderately dysfunctional families to have a strong support network of friends who can meet the needs you cannot get met from your family members. You need to have friends you can vent your frustrations to when you have difficult encounters with your family. It's crucial to have people who will validate the healthy changes you are trying to establish, and support your unwillingness to continue to engage in destructive patterns of interaction.

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### **Guidelines For Severely Dysfunctional Families.**

Several questions need to be considered in cases of severe levels of dysfunction.

- 1) If you continue to relate to your dysfunctional family will you run the risk of suffering any further abuse? Do you put your children at risk?
- 2) Do you want to have contact with your family given that the abuse happened, even if there is no likelihood of abuse in the present?
- 3) In cases of self-destructive kinds of dysfunctionism you need to ask yourself: Do your family members have anything to offer you, given how incapacitated they are by their mental illness? Can you see them without getting caught up in the complex web of their problems?

I actually do not work with clients from severely dysfunctional families as I don't have the training. I highly recommend finding a therapist training in the issues present in severely dysfunctional families to help you come up with a workable plan for dealing with your extended family. I will therefore not offer specific strategies, just some general guidelines. Every person has to

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make his/her own decision about whether he or she can forgive past abuse. There are no blanket answers. There are many things that impact a persons decision to forgive. For instance whether the family member who abused you was abused as a child, whether he or she seems sorry for what happened, and is able to admit his/her wrong doing, etc.

However, no matter how sorry a family member may at some point profess to be, being sorry does not erase the pain that was suffered and forgiveness is not always possible, or the right choice. A person should not feel guilt about not wanting to forgive. There are many complex emotions to be worked through that a trained therapist can assist you with.

Sometimes ways can be found to continue limited contact with your family. In some cases, there is too much risk of further abuse so severing ties is necessary to protect your own safety and mental health. Severing ties is also often necessary with self-destructive kinds of dysfunction. Sometimes a family member remains locked into a self destructive life path no matter how many gallant efforts are made to help him or her. Though it is extremely difficult to detach oneself in these instances, it sometimes boils down to an issue of self preservation. If you've done everything you can be reasonably expected to do to help save

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your family member, but he or she will not do his her part to heal him or herself, you need to draw whatever boundaries are necessary to salvage your own life. Otherwise, you may well run the risk of drowning with him/or her. If you do decide to maintain contact, with self destructive family members, it is crucial that you maintain a good deal of emotional detachment, dissolve yourself of any sense of responsibility for your family member's life situation, and resist the desire to help him or her financially.

In cases of severe dysfunction, your family is forfeiting their right to have you as part of their life. Your right to protect yourself from their negative influence supersedes any obligation you have to your family members. If you do conclude that you need to sever ties with your extended family or severely limit your contact, it is very important to form family-like relationships with friends to replace your dysfunctional family of origin. I have heard people refer to this process as creating a "family of choice". As you build memories and new traditions with your new family, the old pain will begin to heal. Of course it is impossible to forget the pain you have suffered, but you can move on from it, and fill your future with a circle of loving supportive people. Maybe you'll get lucky and marry into a supportive and healthy family.

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In summary, dealing with a dysfunctional extended family is very difficult and confusing. There are no absolute rules; each family situation must be evaluated on an individual basis and solutions developed that feel right to the people involved. Hopefully this discussion has helped you to evaluate the level of dysfunctionality in your family and offered some possible strategies for dealing with the mental health problems. I very much hope I have convinced you that you do have the right to restructure your family relationships to protect your own mental health and well-being. As children, we are stuck with our families, however good or bad they may be. However, as adults we can extricate ourselves from relationships that are harmful to us.

If you come from a severely dysfunctional family I encourage you to wade you through the process of disengaging from your family as painful as it is and build a new family of choice. If your family is unwilling to get the help they need to heal their mental health problems, you need to do whatever is necessary to salvage your own life. If you come from a moderately dysfunctional family, figure out where you need to draw boundaries from your family and stick to those boundaries. Do not let your family members "guilt trip" you into being closer than you feel is healthy and

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workable for you. Continue to encourage your family members to get professional counseling. Get what you can from your family and develop strong friendships to supplement the needs your family cannot meet for you.

If there are only mild levels of dysfunction in your family, you can be a catalyst for healing. In order to do that, you have to refuse to participate in the destructive modes of relating and model appropriate ways of interacting. Not allowing yourself to get caught up in unhealthy games and patterns is crucial for maintaining your own well being. Make sure to criticize the behaviors not the person. Always keep in mind that it feels a lot better to be healthy than unhealthy. If you continue to invite your family members to a greater state of health, you may be surprised at the changes you will see. With patience and perseverance you can all learn more satisfying ways of relating.