

**Dysfunctional Family Management-** Based on the book “Healing from Family Rifts, Ten Steps to Finding Peace After Being Cut Off From a Family Member” by Mark Sichel, LCSW

## **1 - When a Family Divorces**

**by Mark Sichel, LCSW and Alicia L. Cervini**

When life was more predictable and structured, it seemed that milestone family events -- weddings, births, graduations, christenings, etc. -- brought families together. Lately, it seems that family events often trigger devastating disappointment and shatter family relationships instead. It is as if divorce is no longer a choice that only unhappy spouses are making. In the modern age, the "family divorce" statistics are on the rise, as more and more family members declare irreconcilable differences with their loved ones and decide to go their separate ways.

"Family divorce" -- seemingly irreparable rifts in relationships between family members -- often comes as a surprise. The major refrain when a family first falls apart is "I just can't believe this is going on. It doesn't feel real to me. Other people get into situations like this, not me. I've always been the good girl, gotten along with my parents, done the right thing. I just can't believe this is really happening."

Janet\*, a 24-year-old junior associate in her father's law firm, began dating Cal, another of the firm's young associates. They quickly fell in love and began a very serious relationship. Janet spent increasing amounts of time at Cal's house and she and Cal became more and more convinced that they wanted to marry. When her father became aware of the seriousness of their relationship, he stopped speaking to Cal and became increasingly distant from Janet. When Cal talked to Janet's Dad about their relationship and their plans of marriage, he was shocked to hear that Nick, Janet's father, would not support their marriage or attend their wedding. Janet became frozen in a state of disbelief. She had always imagined her Dad escorting her down the aisle and being an integral part of her wedding. She could not believe he was taking this stand. She proceeded with her wedding plans, but walked through the experience in a frozen state of shock. She felt helpless, hopeless, disoriented and numb.

Janet's are not the only psychological reactions to a sudden schism in a family relationship. Other common initial reactions are poor appetite or overeating, insomnia or hypersomnia, low energy, fatigue, low self-esteem, difficulty concentrating, feelings of hopelessness, feelings of surreality, restlessness and irritability.

As individuals reorganize and regroup following the initial rupture in the family, a second stage of behaviors, reactions, and feelings will begin to emerge. For some people, this second stage can begin weeks after the shattering experience; for others it can take months. In the second stage, the initial psychological symptoms are replaced by strong emotional reactions.

Flora and Al are a couple who have been married thirty years. They have a grown daughter named Camille, who recently eloped with her boyfriend of many years. Camille did without the traditional wedding with all of its trappings, because her parents disapproved of her marriage. They felt her new husband was too different religiously and ethnically and would not be able to properly support their daughter. Flora was devastated that her daughter had eloped, but she wanted to keep the peace within the family. Her husband Al, on the other hand, was enraged by Camille's defiance and wanted nothing further to do with his daughter. Al was demanding a "family divorce." Flora felt caught between a rock and a hard place; her husband, whom she adored, was unwilling to accept Camille's marriage and unwilling to see or speak with their daughter and son-in-law. She felt destroyed by the fact that the two people she loved most in the world were unable to be in the same room together. After her initial reaction of numb shock, Flora began to fluctuate wildly between profound sadness and explosive rage directed at both her husband and her daughter.

In the second phase of a reaction to a family split, periods of rage and sadness are characterized by alternating fantasies of revenge and reunion. Revenge fantasies usually star whoever is thought to be responsible for the family rupture. For example, despite her deep and abiding love for Al, Flora occasionally found herself wishing that something horrible would befall her husband. The other common fantasy is of a magical reconciliation whereby the person who initiated the "divorce" will suddenly come to their senses, beg forgiveness of the family, and bring everyone together once again.

When a family divorces, it hurts everyone in the family in some way. Neither stage of dealing with a rift in the family is pleasant, but the psychological and emotional pain does not have to last forever. Reversing a "family divorce" is not easy, but it **is** possible through persistence and hard work. Accusations, indignation and rage **can** make way for more peaceful communication. Common sense and self-control can be employed to help sidestep potentially dangerous topics and resentments can recede if new ground rules for behavior are initiated and respected.

## **2 - The Family Myth**

**by Mark Sichel, LCSW and Alicia L. Cervini**

What is the Family Myth and why does it have so much power over our individual growth and our family relations? What happens when the Family Myth, nurtured and prized for so long, meets its match at the hands of inevitable change? The answers to these questions can be shattering.

### **What is the Family Myth?**

The Family Myth is a well-rehearsed notion, wholly false, about the nature of the family unit. The Family Myth dictates that surface appearance is more important than individual happiness: that what "ought" to be true must squelch what IS true. The Family Myth is the presumption that every family member is compatible, possesses the same goals and loves one another. The Family Myth is a fantasy predicated on a like-it-or-not unified "we" -- a contract that no one seems to remember signing.

Common Family Myths generally are framed as "we" statements. "We all get along wonderfully." "We all have the same goals and like the same people." "We are all loving and accepting people and we believe in democracy and choice." The Family Myth does not usually allow for "I" statements. The Family Myth does not tolerate choice readily.

### **Why does the Family Myth have so much power over our individual growth and our family relations?**

Family Myths are generally fantasies about the love, support, and caring nature of one's family of origin. This is what makes the dissolution of the Family Myth so terribly profound and earth shattering.

It is very easy to get caught up in the fiction of a Family Myth. The families we envision when the Family Myth is born are always happier, cleaner, better people than ourselves. The Family Myth is supposedly an ideal; unfortunately we don't always *actually* want to be what it is that we *think* we want to be. The resulting conflict between what we want in theory and what we want in reality is often a destructive one. Furthermore, in most cases, the fashioning of the Family Myth is not a democratic process. Not everyone even gets a say as to what the Family Myth is going to be.

Despite the decidedly undemocratic way in which the Family Myth is initially established, the idea of being shinier, better versions of ourselves or having the unconditional love and support of every family member is a seductive one. Consequently, in families where the Family Myth is actively propagated, we all eventually buy in. The pervasive and persuasive nature of the Family Myth is the reason you don't see blue mohawks in Norman Rockwell paintings.

When a family member makes a choice that is an act of independence -- like a blue mohawk, or a spouse of another race, or an unusual hobby, or a career other than the family business -- the Family Myth is threatened and a rupture between family members necessarily results. The typical response to such a threat, by a family under the sway of the Family Myth, is swift retribution or even a family "divorce," whereby the offending family member is cast out.

## **What happens when the Family Myth, nurtured and prized for so long, meets its match at the hands of inevitable change?**

In some cases people we see who are going through a shattering family "divorce" follow the laws of the Family Myth to a tee, not realizing that the tenets of the Family Myth are not necessarily what will actually make themselves or their family happy. In other cases, individuals in the family make choices or decisions that are blatantly in opposition to the Family Myth, causing deep rifts between family members. Let's look at two case studies:

Alice\* had always felt that her family wanted her to marry a man who was strong, stable, a good provider, successful and committed to raising a family. So she did. The Family Myth demanded nothing less. She did not realize, nor did her family consciously realize, that what her parents really wanted was for her to marry a man who would blend in and be unimportant and powerless in relation to themselves. As a result, Alice and her new husband, James could not understand why they were constantly embroiled in bitter family arguments over seemingly inconsequential matters. They could not understand why Alice's parents were constantly provoking them. They did not know how to manage Alice's family from a distance without getting themselves into trouble. No one in the family understood that strictly adhering to the laws of the Family Myth with no room for compromise makes no one happy.

Grace had always been Daddy's girl and Mom's Mommy. After her parents' divorce, Grace accompanied her Dad to social events and was his best pal. Her mom, on the other hand, wallowed in depression and drug abuse for years after the divorce. Grace cleaned the house, cooked, and tried to be her Mom's therapist and best friend. Grace came to therapy to work on developing her career as a singer and actress in musical theater. She also worked out her poor choices of men, and ended up marrying Rod, a successful restaurateur. Not surprisingly, along the way she also became an independent adult, breaking her ties with her dysfunctional parents.

Grace stopped being the caregiver for her mom, and instead gave her the name of a therapist. Grace became less pathologically involved with her Dad. Then, after she announced her marriage to Rod, both her parents stopped speaking to her. Grace was shattered. She had been punished for her emancipation. Grace was not aware that healing herself was against the rules of her family. She was shocked to realize that neither of her parents wanted to have connections and lives of their own, and yet they resented and envied Grace's new life. In this instance, the Family Myth was a rather dingy and broken-down one - not the utopian familial vision that most families subscribe to. However, in the most dysfunctional of families, it is not at all uncommon for the Family Myth to be the picture of dysfunction: "If I'm messed up then you'd better be, too."

Family members pay a high price for going against the grain. Grace had tired of putting her own

life on hold and forced her parents to release her. Alice and James excelled and surpassed her parents in their accomplishments and education with their independent thoughts and actions. Powerless in the face of these decisions, family members responded with "divorce," the casting out of the offending family member.

Births, deaths, marriages, ageing, holidays, retirement, career successes, business failures - all the ups and downs of life - all have the potential for challenging the Family Myth and creating shattering scenarios for individuals. Both Grace and Alice were devastated by their family's rejection of them. The loss of their parents' approval shook the very foundation of their lives, leaving them hurt, disoriented and depressed.

Over time, Alice and James were able to repair their family "divorce" by acknowledging the myths of Alice's family and learning to adapt to the family's need to feel that Alice and James were submissive and accepting of them. Of course, in this healing process, Alice's family had to learn to live with the level of distance and difference exhibited by James and Alice.

It took Grace many months to work out her differences with her parents. Room had to be made in the Family Myth for Grace and Rod's marriage. Grace had to convince her parents that her own rejection of an unhealthy lifestyle was not a rejection of them.

It is neither necessary nor a good idea to give up hard won emotional growth in order to remain a member in good standing of your family. Neither should you sublimate all of your wishes and desires in order to please your family. But it is important to examine your own Family Myths. Once you understand them, you will be able to avoid a "divorce" in the family by negotiating safely the rocky paths that could challenge the Family Myth. Or, if a schism has already occurred in your family, it will be possible to see what steps can be taken to begin the healing process.

### **3-"I'm Done" - When Families Stop Speaking**

It's astounding to me how many people I know, both clients and personal acquaintances, who have had family members go off speaking terms with them: siblings who become estranged, adults who electively orphan themselves, ageing parents who refuse to speak with their own children, and close friends who suddenly terminate friendships. Whoever the players in these dramas may be, there is a commonality of experience and process that characterizes the family breakup.

The manifest causes of people going off speaking terms are very often never even discussed, or if they are, they are usually still inexplicable to the person who is dismissed from the relationship. The reasons given almost never make any sense to the person who is on the receiving end of the statement, "I'm done." Certainly, to the victim the alleged crimes committed never seem to be commensurate with the punishment.

Very often these episodes of "being done" occur simultaneously with a major life event, such as a marriage, a graduation, or a birth, where expectations are running high, new elements are introduced into the family dynamic and most of the family is gathered together. As a result, these episodes often ruin what should be joyous milestones for families, turning these occasions instead into sad memories. During trying family occasions, such as the loss of a job, a pet, or a family member, stress and sorrow can make people feel extra sensitive and fragile, increasing the likelihood that they will perceive remarks and actions as direct attacks on themselves. When an episode of "being done" occurs during a sad time, the family splinters when it most needs to pull together for the well-being of each family member. Nobody wins when a family member declares "I'm done," whether it's a happy or a sad time.

The dance of "I'm done" is often repeated within a family for years, even decades. The choreography is intricate and detailed but the process is predictable: A family member feels insulted, slighted, wounded and injured by someone else in the family. They then confront the offending family member with the alleged crime, and the insult is generally not understood or even remembered by the "perpetrator." Sometimes the perpetrator does remember and acknowledge the crime, but cannot understand the level of fury exhibited by the accuser. In either case, unless the accused immediately grovels and apologizes, the fighting will invariably escalate until it culminates in phrases like: "I'm done." "I'm never speaking to you again." "You're no longer welcome in my house."

Ultimately, no one wants to be without family, not even the initiator of the family breakup. Once put out there, though, ultimatums and harsh words are hard to retract. Generally, the person who is dismissed by a family will go to great lengths to fix the family for one central reason: The pain of elective loss is a huge burden to bear. It feels bad, sad, wasteful, awful, and lonely.

Read on to understand more about the drama and characters in this wretched scenario that is being played out in families throughout the country. The repercussions of family splits have been downplayed in the media -- especially in shock daytime shows where family disharmony and fighting is the coin of the realm -- and all but ignored in discussions of public health. However, from my personal and professional experience, I can guarantee that the toll this phenomenon takes on individuals and families is massive.

#### **4 - "I'm Done" - The Family Drama**

The drama of family members going off speaking terms generally revolves around a long-term lack of communication within a family. Often, it is difficult to find the words to express or explain important issues, particularly if a family has a history of poor communication with one another. When people cannot use words, they resort to actions that symbolize the intensity of

their emotions about a particular issue: severing ties with one another.

For example, Christine\* and Claudia are two grown siblings who became estranged after their mother's death. They had had an amicable relationship up to that point, and when Claudia came to see me for counseling, she was extremely upset about their estrangement. Their mother had not been particularly affluent, and when she died she left a small estate that she equally divided between her two grown children, with the exception of her diamond engagement ring, which she had left to Claudia. Christine, who was 55 years-old at the time, called Claudia in a rage, demanding that she compensate her for half the value of the ring. She then proceeded to list all of the ways in which she felt their mother had favored Claudia's family over Christine's family over the years.

Claudia told me that she had cared for both their parents as they aged, and that while Christine, who lived in a distant city, had helped from time to time, the bulk of the elder care had been her responsibility. She also said that their mother had always told her that she wanted her to have the ring when she died, and to pass it on as an heirloom to her daughter, Joan. Claudia was shocked that this offended Christine, given the fact that Christine had no daughter. Claudia was even more shocked that Christine's husband Robert was insisting on the compensation as strongly as her own sister was. Robert had been given their father's gold watch when he died, to pass on to his and Christine's son, and while Claudia had not been happy about this and her husband Charles had been even less happy, they had let it pass because of the knowledge that Claudia would be getting their mother's ring.

When Claudia responded to Christine's demand with an assertion that it was unfair to ask for compensation, Christine flew into a rage, calling her names and ending with "That's it. I am done with you. Don't call me ever again." She then proceeded to hang up on Claudia and has not spoken to her since that day. Claudia left some phone messages for Christine after this, but her calls were never returned and she stopped trying to mend her relationship with her sister after that.

Claudia and Christine were not at war over a ring; they were staging the last scene of a drama that had to do with life-long unresolved issues of competition, sibling rivalry, poor self-esteem, feelings of deprivation, and other central psychological problems, which, when left unresolved, wreak havoc on people's lives.

The drama of family estrangement, we see, is not actually about any one given incident, but rather an accumulation of negative feelings and lack of communication. The drama is a life long drama, and for many, going off speaking terms is the final scene - a way to exit stage left and put an end to the anguish. It is a highly dysfunctional method of coping, of course, but the subplots and scenes of the drama exist in each player's mind and memories, thus explaining why dropping

the curtain on the whole thing often seems like the easiest way out.

## **5 - The Ties that Bind, the Ties that Strangle** by Mark Sichel, LCSW and Alicia L. Cervini

Sadly, the ties that bind are often also the ties that choke, suffocate and punish. People have a great deal of difficulty comprehending how and why family fights and ruptures can occur. To more fully understand some of the trauma you may have experienced with the family you grew up with, or with the new family you have created as an adult, it will help to familiarize yourself with two specific concepts:

### **1- Separation**

### **2- Individuation**

**Separation** and **individuation** are normal and healthy phases of human development; they are psychological processes that begin in the first year of life and resurface, in various forms, throughout childhood, adolescence and adulthood. While the natural processes of separation and individuation are sometimes painful for various family members to experience -- often resulting in family conflict -- they are an inevitable part of healthy development for the individual.

The successful process of **separation** is the source of our personal autonomy, our independence, our ability to assert ourselves and our capacity to make choices. The first act of separation occurs in early childhood when a child first says "no." When a 2-year-old says "no" to her mother, she is exercising her natural instinct to separate from her mother. As a person ages and there is more power behind the "no" (a young child can *say* "no," but she does not yet have the power or autonomy to *enforce* her "no"), it is increasingly difficult for the parent, who naturally thinks that "parents know best," to let their child take the risks that her "no" implies. Separation is often difficult for parents that love and desperately want to protect their children.

The successful process of **individuation** creates each person's identity, uniqueness, interests, points of view, likes and dislikes. The first act of individuation occurs in early childhood when a child first says "me" and "mine." "Me" indicates that the child is developing an awareness that there is a difference between her and everything else. Individuation is also a natural, healthy instinct for children and, like separation, can be either fostered by parents or discouraged by parents. Individuation in teenagers and young adults is often difficult for parents to accept, because it is hard for the parent to witness the being they brought into the world liking, believing in or doing things that they themselves would not.

Certain dysfunctional families tend to punish evidence of both these developmental struggles in their children. Often those who choose to separate and individuate are seen as traitors. In dysfunctional families, choosing health, growth, progress or sobriety could all be seen as a rejection of the family. It is surprising to think that successful, psychologically evolved, healthy and sober people could be cast out by their families of origin as "black sheep," but this is not an uncommon occurrence in a dysfunctional family.

So, families who have extreme difficulty accepting separation usually treat their children and relatives who have successfully separated as if they were deserters. Families who have extreme difficulty accepting individuation usually treat their children and relatives as if they were snobbish or devaluing their familial roots. Do either or both of those scenarios sound familiar to you? Whether you are the perpetrator or the victim, understanding that separation and individuation are normal processes and working to accept them as such or working to accept the struggles of those who can't, can help to heal the familial wounds.

## 6 - Coping with a Family Rift

We read so much about family estrangement, about mothers and fathers and their grown children who simply enter a cold war of ceased communication: Eminem and his mother, Jennifer Aniston, Kim Basinger, Jenna Malone, and their mothers, Gerard Depardieu and his son, the Reagans, whose estrangement from their children even merited prominence in the TV special about the former First Family. The list goes on and on.

While glamorous stars get into the spotlight when there's a rift in their family, the problem afflicts ordinary folk with a surprising frequency as well. There's a shocking lack of statistics available on the subject of family estrangement, but as a psychotherapist in practice for many years, it's my impression that cut-offs have become a lot more common than they used to be. I hear this from other therapists, too. I also teach family counseling to pastors of all faiths and they tell me that family rifts are an increasingly frequent problem brought to the clergy's attention.

In my own practice, I'm reminded of Gail\*, a young mother and freelance commercial artist in New York. Gail has two of the most wonderful daughters in the world, but her mother hasn't spoken to her since she married Carlos, her college sweetheart, who's unacceptable to her mother because he's Latino. Janet is a grandmother of four who's got a great relationship with her two sons, but whose daughter Shelly hasn't spoken to her since she divorced Shelly's father.

Why are so many family members not speaking to each other these days? If I had to isolate the common thread in these situations, I'd have to say it's because of intolerance. Certainly that's evident in instances where family members bury each other for lifestyle choices such as homosexuality and choices to marry outside one's religion, race, nationality or ethnicity. **But intolerance is also the root cause of family fights that lead to rifts, and by that I mean a prejudice toward differing points of views, small-mindedness when it comes to giving up a grudge, or pettiness and nastiness about forgiveness.** It's very similar to the intolerance, bigotry, and prejudice that create rifts between nations and among diverse groups in our cities, states, and nation.

There are other factors, of course. For example, these days people feel freer to stand behind their convictions and don't feel as much of a demand to comply with rules that don't make sense to

them. This may be expressed in intermarriage or coming out of the closet. **People are increasingly unwilling to deny their real selves and their genuine feelings and desires.** I think that's a wonderful sign of progress in our society. Unfortunately, often their family doesn't think that's so great. They think that by cutting off the family member they will change his or her behavior.

Increased freedom has also brought on changes in rules for civil behavior. **Family members who at one point might have been constrained by religion or social custom now feel free at times to act on impulses that are devoid of spiritual or social appropriateness.**

Living with a family estrangement is extremely painful and can even be debilitating. But I know from personal experience and from treating hundreds of patients in this situation that healing is possible. The central premise of this article is that all healing starts from within. The most important reconciliation is the one you make with yourself. That way, your family's willingness or unwillingness to participate in a healing process will not be able to take away your peace of mind. When you feel good about yourself and the ways in which you relate to others and are at peace with your spiritual side, you'll be okay whether or not your family speaks to you.

## **7 - You Voted for Whom?!**

More than one parent of a college age child has had the not-so-delightful experience of having said child drop a few bombs on the family while home for winter break. I guess coming home for the holidays seems like a good time to air differences and provoke controversy, because final exams are over and who would want a holiday celebration without a little color and drama anyway? In some families, the shock jock is sporting a purple mohawk and assorted piercings, but in our family the provocateur is wearing Brooks Brothers and carrying the Wall Street Journal.

I imagine it's not easy being the child of two shrinks, particularly liberal, tolerant, non-judgmental, ex-sixties radicals who value uniqueness, diversity, and self-determination above all else. Our children didn't have pressure from their parents to conform like the other kids in their school. Our son came home with a pierced ear in high school, and much to his chagrin, his mother and I admired his new jewelry. When he introduced us to his girlfriend, a beautiful African-American classmate of his, we welcomed her into the family. We were two self-satisfied, ageing professionals, pleased with our liberal and non-judgmental stance regarding our children's lives and lifestyles.

Until this past Election Day, it never occurred to us that we might have nascent wells of judgmental-ism buried deep within. Our son was old enough to vote, and despite his having

declared his major in business, and his overall conservative demeanor, his mother and I were floored when he told us he had cast his first ever vote for the much loathed, in our house at least, George "Dubya" Bush. A Republican? One of our kids a Republican? Well, he is and so are MANY of the children of our group of ageing, dyed-in-the-wool liberals.

As psychotherapists and experts in human development, we should have seen this coming. Children need to rebel; teenagers and college-age kids often form their identity based on rebellion against their parents. The tasks of adolescence and young adulthood are all related to identity formation and the process of becoming independent from the parents. Young adults need to differentiate themselves in order to form a stable and firm adult identity, and this process of differentiation often leads to rebellion.

Rebellion to the right, though? How could it happen to us? We could live comfortably with nose rings, green hair, even supporting Ralph Nader and the Green Party, but being a Republican was just too much for us. What was even harder to bear, was realizing that we turned out to be the judgmental parents we never thought we were. If this had been a client in a similar situation, we would have advised them to suspend judgment and focus on the principles of self-determination, which are necessary parts of every child's healthy psychological development. So, daily, we try to take our own advice and respect our son for his growth, strength of character, and ability to form his own convictions, which, ultimately, is all we ever wanted for our children in the first place.

We sit with envy and awe of those parents whose children come home with green hair, body piercings, and tribal scarifications. And, like those parents who reassure themselves that the green hair and piercings are probably just a phase, we soothe ourselves in knowing that luckily, in our Democracy, party loyalty is not a lifetime contract or commitment.

## **8-People Pleasers**

One begins to wonder, at times, whether the world consists of a combination of People Pleasers and people who are never pleased with anything. Dysfunctional families, in particular, are composed of these two character-types, forever dancing an awkward dance of unhappiness and frustration. People Pleasers are generally full of self-doubt, self-blame, shame, and humiliation. They go to great lengths to get love and approval from others, but no matter how much they get, they never feel loved or good about themselves.

*"I felt like it was my fault when it rained, and that if I was stronger, better, smarter, or kinder that the rain wouldn't fall. When my Dad had a bad day at work and came home all tanked up on Jack, I felt responsible for his anger and unhappiness and thought that I should do something about it quickly. When my Mom was frustrated at her own inability to pull together a career for*

*herself, I thought it was my fault, and that if I only would do something differently, that my Mom would be okay."*

Does this sound familiar to you? Do you think you might be a People Pleaser?

### **Characteristics of People Pleasers:**

1. People Pleasers rarely consider their own needs, wants, and desires.
2. People Pleasers take any criticism as fact, and immediately suffer a deflation in their own self-esteem.
3. People Pleasers feel an extraordinary fear of abandonment.
4. People Pleasers blame themselves for everything that ever goes wrong.
5. People Pleasers are more concerned with others' feelings than their own.
6. People Pleasers have an overdeveloped sense of responsibility, expecting of themselves magical abilities to fix the significant others' in their lives.
7. People Pleasers learned early in their lives to bury their own feelings, needs, and wants, and keep them buried until they get help for their problems.
8. People Pleasers chronically confuse pity with love and self-sacrifice with caring for others.

People Pleasers are often the unwitting contributors to family dysfunction, although they are far from being the only culprit in a dysfunctional family. People Pleasers tend to have Injustice Collector counterparts: the Injustice Collector in the family remembers every slight, real or imagined, and throws it back in the People Pleaser's face, while the People Pleaser scurries to set things right with the angry Injustice Collector. The cycle will repeat indefinitely, because the particular dysfunctions of the People Pleaser and the Injustice Collector are a perfect fit with one another: Injustice Collectors feel entitled and People Pleasers feel that everyone ELSE is entitled.

### **9 - Injustice Collectors**

"My father always had a list of people who he felt were "bad." These bad people, he felt, had insulted, injured, or treated him unjustly. I was often on that list; at one point, he would not talk to me for a period of five years. As he got older, his list grew and he became even more isolated, angry, and bitter. It was very sad to watch, and it was horrible to have to worry about it until he

died when I was in my fifties."

Barbara\* is a 67-year-old woman who is telling me about her difficulty in letting go of a chronic need to please people. She feels that her need to please others is highly related to having grown up with a parent who was an injustice collector. Barbara identified with her mother, who was a People Pleaser until the day she died, but her sister Eileen, on the other hand, inherited their father's destructive habit of collecting wounds, insults, slights, hurts, lack of respect, lack of understanding, and whatever other grounds either of them could use to place people on their "Bad List." Barbara and her mother are examples of People Pleasers; Eileen and her father are examples of Injustice Collectors.

"Eileen seemed to want to spoil every moment of happiness in everyone's life but her own. She always seemed to be able to manipulate a story and present it in a way that would portray her or her family as poor pitiful victims of whoever in the family seemed to be having a good day. For years, rather than get angry, I would, as I had learned from dealing with our father, quickly apologize and scramble to make everything ok again. I never really felt that I did anything terrible to Eileen, certainly nothing to merit her levels of rage, but whatever it was, I'd always make the peace."

Barbara told me that her sister's chronic drama would repeatedly take the form of hurling accusations at her or her husband or children, and then saying, "I'm done. I'm never speaking to you again." Barbara would immediately say she was sorry, and then spend inordinate amounts of time courting Eileen for forgiveness. Whatever Eileen accused her of did not make sense to her; nonetheless, she immediately felt that it was her fault. She felt overcome with shame and guilt, and in her self-blame would readily prostrate herself before Eileen, groveling to get through the episode and avoid an ugly scene at a family event.

When Barbara's oldest son Lawrence was getting married, he had decided to have a small wedding, and to that end, while he had invited his Aunt Eileen and her husband, he had not invited their grown children with whom he had never been closely involved. Two days before Lawrence's wedding, Barbara had received the dreaded call of rage from Eileen. This time, however, when Eileen shouted, "I'm never speaking to you again, instead of scrambling to fix it, Barbara simply said, "OK. Goodbye." She hung up the phone and never looked back.

"My father died a bitter, lonely and angry man, taking his precious "bad list" into the coffin with him. The funeral was sad for me, not because I would miss him and his atrocious behavior, but because by that point he had alienated everyone but my mother and sister, and we were the only ones at the funeral. I realized with my sister that she was going to play out the same ugly drama, and I finally decided that I didn't need or want to be part of that."

### **Characteristics of Injustice Collectors:**

1. Injustice Collectors are convinced that they are never wrong. How is it possible that they are never wrong? It is simple: They are always right.
2. Injustice Collectors never apologize. Ever. For anything.
3. Injustice Collectors truly believe that they are morally and ethically superior to others and that others chronically do not hold themselves to the same high standards as the injustice collector does.
4. Injustice Collectors make the rules, break the rules and enforce the rules of the family. They are a combined legislator, police, and judge and jury of
5. Injustice Collectors never worry about what is wrong with themselves as their "bad list" grows. Their focus is always on the failings of others.
6. Injustice Collectors are never upset by the disparity of their rules for others with their own expectations of themselves.
7. Injustice Collectors rationalize their own behavior with great ease and comfort.

The unfortunate outcome in the dysfunctional family is that either the People Pleaser has to become progressively more crippled and entrenched in their subservient role in the family, or else they become healthier and stronger and ultimately are accused of breaking up the family. The sad part about this drama is that once the People Pleaser has grown to the point where their self-respect is high enough to not grovel and shake in the presence of the injustice collector, the family remains divided.

### **10 - Don't Burst My Bubble – The Pin Pricker by Ellen Mareneck**

When you prick your finger with a pin or other sharp object, you draw blood. When you prick a balloon with a pin, the whole thing explodes. "Pin-pricking" is a term I use for little comments made to burst someone's bubble, or to rain on their parade. Often these comments are masked as "support" by loved ones, "friends," and co-workers, who are envious of our success. When someone is happy or elated about an idea, a new love, or a new dress, a friend may express "concern." This takes the form of a negative comment meant to bring the person down. "Hasn't that already been done?" "Isn't that a little risky?" "Is he or she trustworthy?" "Isn't that dress a little short?" These seem to be innocent little comments. But they are actually dangerous and undercutting jabs.

**BEWARE:** these pin-pricks, are non-supportive little digs indicating that this friend, loved one, or co-worker, is really threatened by something about you. They may feel that you are getting too much attention, being popular, succeeding, standing out and otherwise shining and in the spotlight. The people in your life who like you when you're down in the

gutter, may not like you as much as you begin to stand out in life.

Many of us grew up in families where pin-pricking was common. We are so accustomed to it, that we don't even notice the sting. We think of it as support, concern, "worrying", even caring. BEWARE: it is none of those things, it is a subtle form of criticism.

Many of us are unfamiliar with true support, in fact it confuses us. Has this ever happened to you? Do you become uncomfortable when someone compliments you or says, " You're great!" Do you start to think, "What do they want?" or "They must be an idiot"? Some of us are so familiar with being cut down and put down, that we come to expect it. We don't trust anyone who isn't taking a stab at us. In fact, someone who grows up with constant criticism becomes very good at pricking themselves. When you are feeling proud of an accomplishment or happy about something, do you ever feel like you should "take it down a notch" or "not get too big for your britches"? Do you ever feel that feeling great is actually dangerous? The subtle message of pin-prickers is: Don't be proud of yourself. Don't feel good about yourself, or something bad may happen.

I often say I have never encountered a situation yet where having a positive attitude can actually hurt. Yet many of us feel that by being positive, happy, proud, and excited we are in some way setting ourselves up for disappointment, doom, and disaster. This is the long-term effect of pin-pricking. While it may only be a tiny stab, to a child's developing sense of self a pin-prick can undermine their confidence and make them doubt and second-guess everything they do.

When you find yourself feeling good, standing out, and having a smile on your face, just remember: BEWARE the Pin Pricker!