

“Mama Tried”

(I grew up in a dysfunctional home)

by

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All scriptures paraphrased by author.

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Helpful Guidelines

Let's follow these proven group guidelines as we move through this workbook:

- go around the room answering each question

- pass if you have nothing to share

- take 3 to 5 minutes to share your own thoughts and feelings

- allow the person talking to have the floor (no cross-talk, comments, or contact)

- maintain confidentiality: what's said in the room, stays in the room
 - *except if someone threatens to harm themselves or others

- remember, this is about listening and supporting
 - *not fixing, advising, correcting, or consoling
 - *this applies to encounters that happen outside the group setting

Serenity Prayer

God, grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time,
enjoying one moment at a time;
accepting hardship as a pathway to peace;
taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is,
not as I would have it;
trusting that you will make all things right
if I surrender to your will;
so that I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with you
forever in the next
Amen.

Reinhold Niebuhr

Introduction

There's always been this debate over how we come to be how we come to be. Is it DNA? Circumstances? Trauma? Luck? Fate? It dodges scientific calculation. As soon as one school of thought nails it down, their theories get chucked as outdated.

This workbook is going to leave science and research to do their thing. A simple look around tells us we grow up absorbing and accommodating ideals, habits, expectations, outlooks and attitudes from our families of origin.

For the next eight weeks we will be exploring the deep and profound ways our extended families have shaped our habits and routines, oft times leaving us less than healthy emotionally and in our relationships.

(Session Topics)

Family of origin: people with whom you spent your formative years from birth to independence.

Dance moves: patterned and predictable reactions to life and relationships.

Codependency: to use/utilize others to help you feel a certain way about yourself: affirmed/belittled, superior/inferior, noticed/hidden, needed/needy etc.

Gas-lighting: to critique or dig at a person until they lose self-confidence and start embracing your fabricated reality over their own.

Passive aggression: to get your way by displaying subtle clues that you are displeased/sad/needy, while maintaining plausible deniability that you are.

Triangulation: to self-protect or self-enhance by pulling a third person into a two person conversation.

Pecking order: the unwritten but well-established hierarchy in a family.

Enabling: the practice of encouraging or empowering poor health in another person.

We won't exhaust any of these topics. We will take a running start at each.

One Family of Origin

No two families are alike. Thanks Captain Obvious! These days this is even more apparent. We've expanded beyond Mom and Dad with 2.5 kids. Now, it's Dad and Dad or Mom and Mom. We have kids raised by grandparents, aunts and uncles, god-parents etc. There are foster homes, orphanages, nannies, boarding schools, gangs, or life on the streets. Not judging. Just observing.

As mentioned in the introduction, who knows why we turn out the way we do? Two kids brought up in the same home grow up to be polar opposites. Or take identical twins and bring them up in different homes. They look and sound the same, but respond to life quite differently.

This being said, all would agree our upbringing profoundly impacts who we become: our politics, theology, crisis response, etiquette, protocol, preferences, how we handle conflict etc. Many of us follow our parents in lock step, while some do a 180. Either way, our family of origin continues to shape us.

Daily life stays focused on what, where, when and how we do what we do. We almost never slow down and examine the why behind it. And as we will discover during these sessions, the why of our lives can predictably be traced back to our family of origin.

Take this “why” dynamic and factor in siblings. Now we have a troop trying to negotiate a family's dynamics, only they're each doing it their own way. One son wants to be like Dad, while little brother strives to be just the opposite. One daughter embraces the family's values, while her sister rebels.

The diversity of humanity under one roof:

- we grew up sharing a bedroom with a bully
- every night we sat at the supper table with a chronic complainer
- our dad demanded unquestioning compliance
- mom hovered over, commented on and corrected every move
- big brother crept in drunk every Friday night
- aunt Jane was determined to make some sort of saint out of us

Every part of life is seasoned by the people we grew up with, and some of the flavors are still overpowering. What do we do with this? Will we be passive

replicas, wounded victims, angry rebels ... or explorers searching for discoveries as we dig into our family of origin?

Things to consider:

- 1 Talk about the overpowering flavors in your family of origin.

- 2 What was the happiest and the hardest part of growing up?

Two Toxic Dancing

This session recognizes the tightrope between healthy routines and toxic dancing. Anyone who has or is raising small children knows it's essential to one's sanity to establish patterns where everybody knows the drill. Hitting your marks keeps everybody on time and helps prevent human pile ups.

Life has a flow when there is a predictable rhythm. Let's just leave it at that.

But just because something is predictable doesn't mean it's healthy or desirable.

- *having to run for cover every time you hear your father drive up
- *dreading the inevitable post supper blow up between mom and dad
- *watching your little brother routinely belittled by your step mom
- *being constantly compared to your older sister
- *knowing you're about to be blamed for something you didn't do

Growing up, you figure out the most prudent next step. You want to feel safe, secure and happy, which means staying out of harm's way. You know what Dad will say when he sees your report card. So you conveniently lose it. You can feel the tension rise between Mom and Dad, so you suddenly have to go use the bathroom. Big brother takes his frustration out on you. You learn to keep your distance.

Unhealthy family patterns ... in time, an outside observer could readily predict what comes next. It's like there's a choreographer at work. These dance moves stick with us. Some of us spend our grownup years pushing hard against them, which can be equally harmful. Or we get in lockstep and live out a repeating loop, transferring toxic family dancing to future generations.

Family traditions are to be treasured. Recycled toxic dances, not so much. They etch themselves into our psyche and get passed along to the family we create with our spouse. Which means the two of us are potentially creating a mashup of toxic dances. (Picture Hip-Hop bred with Ballet ... how's that going to work?)

Thing about dances, in time, you memorize what comes next ... "advance warning." You can either take the step that is expected of you, or you can walk away from the dance altogether. That's why recovery is cool. It gives you a chance to exercise your human right to choose.

Things to consider:

1 Describe a recurring toxic dance in your family of origin. How did it play out?

2 Can you talk about patterns from your childhood that were actually healthy?

Three Codependency

This word gets a lot of radio play. What's it mean? How about a Rabbit and his mountain to clear things up. (This comes from a 7th grade English lesson on prepositions.)

There's a rabbit and a mountain. Mr. Rabbit is with, for, by, in, up, down, over, around, through, under and behind the mountain. This is Rabbit's life. Take the mountain away and he's lost. His entire existence has been defined by how he relates to the mountain. Minus the mountain, Rabbit no longer knows who he is.

This is codependency. I don't know who I am without you. I need you to praise me, control me, notice me, need me, judge me, correct me, stay with me, enable my issues. Or the other way around ... you are my whipping post, my sex toy, my puppet, my patient. Exit my life and I no longer know who I am. I am the Rabbit.

Codependency is to use or utilize another person in order to feel the way I want to feel about myself: safer, superior, smarter, smaller, secluded, secondary etc.

Families are fraught with codependency. There is the favored one who thrives on attention, the talented one who occupies center stage, the wounded one in constant need, the compliant one who flies under the radar, the one who passively absorbs the toxicity, the rebellious one crying out for restraint, the hesitant one who holds out for a special invitation, the outspoken one who demands a captive audience, the bully who dominates, the master manipulator.

In time, we the other family members, figure out how to negotiate all this. We feed their needs by enabling. We ignore or walk away. We openly deprive. We turn things around and use their needs against them. We resort to rudeness, violence or abuse. We do nice things, but for selfish reasons. This is us responding to their codependency out of our own codependency.

Codependent families are a pressure-packed cluster of enemies and allies scrambling to feel safe and satisfied. Think of a box of parasites sucking the life out of each other. The agenda is non-communal ... anti-mutual. They are literally draining the life and vitality out of each other.

This relational dynamic is one that needs to roll around your head for a while. In time you'll start connecting the dots between what you just read and your family

of origin, which will help you better understand your current relationships.

Things to consider:

1 This concept is confusing. Take a minute and share your initial thoughts on codependency.

2 Talk about an obviously codependent person from your family of origin.

Four Gas-lighting

When it comes to mind-games, here's a nasty one. Over time I convince you to doubt the legitimacy of your mind: memory, reason, perception, motives. My typical end goal would be to convince you to let me do your thinking for you.

Hovering mothers do this, as do overbearing fathers. People in positions of leadership gas-light their followers to maintain power. This happens between assertive and passive siblings. Of late it's become a fashionable tool craftily used by politicians and the news media to control their constituents.

This technique should be featured in chapter one of *Bullying for Dummies*. It's simple. To gain the upper hand with the person in front of you, do whatever is necessary to dehumanize and diminish them: lie, raise your voice, flex, cry, threaten to leave, grimace. Don't up your game. Undermine theirs.

Advanced gas-lighting perfects its craft by a slow and subtle erosion of the other person's confidence and grip on sanity.

-I've known you since you were little. You can't handle what's out there. I've been there. I know what it's like. You'll never make it without me.

-How many times will you fall down that same hole? Truth be told, I don't know if I've ever seen you correctly negotiate that issue.

-This conflict between us is all on you. You're the one who has made the bad choices and said the hurtful words. If you'd only listened to me.

The idea here is to establish dominance, not by earning anything, but by cutting away at the core of the other person. Convince them they are helplessly lost without you. Without earning the right, you become their auto-correct.

Authoritarian rulers do this in plain view, with global implications. Imagine an X-ray view into neighborhood homes where millions of families are held hostage by gas-lighters. Dictators have nothing on them.

If you get that dark, heavy feeling when you revisit your family of origin, it's possible there's a gas-lighter in the room. Don't throw rocks at them. Just be grateful you're now aware. And pray that if the gas-lighter is you, someone will

care enough to call you out.

Things to consider:

- 1 Like codependency, gas-lighting can be confusing. How would you define it?

- 2 Talk about the primary gas-lighter from your upbringing.

Five Passive Aggression

Passive aggression is when “no” really means “yes” ... when smoldering rage is camouflaged with a smile ... when gifts are bribes in disguise. You know you've been passively-aggressed when you feel compelled to do someone's bidding because you know there's a price to pay if you do otherwise.

This practiced art is born in deceit. “I'm not mad. Why would you even think that? I'll make out just fine on my own.” Catch that aftertaste of superiority ... like they took the high road? The passive aggressor is obviously mad, you just won't catch them admitting it.

Passive aggression has its own thesaurus. Words are handpicked with a hint of helplessness, condescension, mild threat, humility and even generosity.

There's the tone thing. Up-speak. Down-speak. Mumbling. Speaking as one is exiting a room. Blowing. Huffing and puffing. Subtle brushstrokes of drama. There can be gross overstatement or understatement. Exaggeration both ways.

Body language goes wild! Eye-rolling. Slumped shoulders. Clinched fists. Wringing of hands. Tightly crossed arms or legs. Practiced facial expressions: sad, helpless, frightened etc. Downcast look. We're barely getting started.

Families can be held hostage by this. There is usually a “pro” whose got it down. They can shame or frighten without raising their voice. This is about gaining cooperation without directly asking for it.

The end goal varies: pity, help, obedience, attention, affirmation, agreement, etc.

Part of Eden's appeal is the absence of fear and shame. The naked aspect went far deeper than physical. Nobody hid anything. Everyone was an open book. It was like Jesus said: “Their yes was yes and their no was no.” No games. No deceit. No manipulation. Courageous eye to eye respect for each other.

Passive aggression is soaked through with deceit, which is a sure sign of disrespect. I tell you something false, confident you will buy it as true. I'm just that smart, and you're just that not-smart.

Healthy community builds itself on mutual respect, which relies on truth telling.

Passive aggression can only work until we spot and graciously expose it.

Things to consider:

1 How would you describe passive aggression?

2 How did the passive aggressive “pro” in your family of origin ply their craft?

Six Triangulation

Cowardly mediation. Contrived diplomacy. Second hand conversations. We hone these skills with grammar school romance. Remember? “No way am I going to talk to that cute little blond. I'll send Jimmy over to see if she likes me.” Once he gets the green light, then, and only then, will I tip my hand.

Now, in your extended family, you may be the married adult child with 2.5 children, or the parent who lives two states away. Your people are configured and scattered all over the map. And now they've been “invaded” by in-laws.

Factor in distance, busyness along with this in-law invasion and communication can feel like heavy lifting. Value systems, routines, political and religious affiliations, along with general outlooks have created a collection of hybrid mixes. Each satellite family is a breed unto itself.

The likelihood of misunderstanding and miscommunication can become a real challenge. Assumptions run rampant. Dissent mumbles behind backs. Lines get figuratively and literally drawn in the sand. Passive-aggressive threats. Subtle accusations. Score keeping. Favors called in. Expectations are unclear ... thus, frequently unmet.

(Let's not go all dark. There are huge upsides to growing up, moving out and getting married with kids. But that's for another set of sessions.)

Back to the topic of the day ... you know you're in the hot-seat when you wake up one day to find yourself in the middle of one of these feuds. Like back in grammar school, neither party will meet eye to eye with the other. You get pulled in as the third-party “moderator.” Welcome to triangulation.

This is a web not easily escaped. To pick a side makes at least one enemy. To do nothing makes two. Stuck between two feuding parties, you're sunk either way, so you might as well pick an option that is healthy for you.

Let's try this ... tell both parties how the situation is making you feel, without accusing either? Let each know you love them. Then tell them you're stepping out of the triangle to maintain your own sanity. Plus you have full confidence the two of them can work it out.

... Just make sure you're not the one trying to pull a third party into a two party issue.

Things to consider:

- 1 What do you think drives the fear of one-on-one communication?

- 2 Talk about your experiences with triangulated conversations.

Seven Pecking Order

Chickens in the barnyard have a hierarchy. Even Uncle Bill from the city can sort it out. There are the fat feathered bosses and the emaciated bald underlings. The system establishes who gets choice edibles and preferred roosts.

Who was the boss in your family? If you didn't have one, your case was rare. Families generally have alphas. It can go along traditional lines with Dad or Mom, or be based on other factors:

- strength of personality ... who wants it the most
- achievement ... who has earned the right
- IQ ... who is the smartest
- track record ... who messes up the least (or the most)
- birth order ... who got here first
- dysfunction ... whose brand of crazy demands the most attention

There is a continuum. One end is generosity and goodwill. The other is a greedy hunger for power. We find alphas at both extremes and points in between. The health of the family depends on how close the alpha is to the good end.

This hierarchical system can be static or fluid. As a family ages, an emotionally healthy alpha steps back and either shares or relinquishes leadership to a qualified replacement. An aging unhealthy alpha will often tighten their grip even as their capabilities are diminishing. Dysfunction on steroids!

Groups function best with some healthy form of leadership. A generous family "boss" is payoff in and of itself. A selfish "boss" is in it for their own payoff, controlling the landscape so as to protect their safety and significance. The welfare of the whole is priority only on paper.

Unhealthy leadership can go wrong in so many ways. Our previous sessions explore ways it can come into play: toxic dancing, codependency, gas-lighting, passive aggression, triangulation, etc. It basically comes down to, "Do what the boss says or suffer the consequences."

Watch your extended family at holiday gatherings. Do members fall back into the old pecking order, or jockey for position? Has there been a passing of the alpha-baton? Who sets the tone in the room, determines the topic of conversation,

oversees the emotional climate? How do you feel about all this?

Things to consider:

1 Talk about where you fell in the pecking order of your family of origin.

2 Looking back, was the alpha in your family generous or selfish?

Eight Enabling

Feeding the monster ... that's how one person described enabling. To drive your alcoholic son to the liquor store when he's already wasted. To loan money to a "hungry" friend, knowing they'll spend it on gambling. To cower to a mouthy bully. To routinely rush to the aid of a hypochondriac. To keep a child from throwing a fit by bribing them with treats. We could go on.

The dysfunction we've explored in these sessions is frequently fed and sponsored by enablers. Dysfunction can't survive in a vacuum. It requires willing supporters.

We convince ourselves that enabling comes from a place of love. "I'm doing this for them." But, imagine saying "no." When we comply it's because we know what will happen if we don't. We do their bidding out of guilt or fear, not love.

This begs the question ... how deep or loving is a relationship that can't endure some push-back. Is there not even room for polite negotiation? And if the relationship is so conditioned by your unquestioning compliance, is it actually one you should be pursuing?

Toxic dances cannot happen if one partner sits down. Codependency can't thrive once one person becomes emotionally healthy. Gas lighting won't work if the lightee discovers their worth. Passive aggression doesn't get what it wants once it is called out. Triangulation and hierarchy are rendered useless once I gain the confidence to speak for myself.

Health in my extended family will likely start with me. I can't fix my siblings, children or parents. But ... I can seek personal health, believing that the greatest gift I have to offer the rest of the people in my family is a healthy version of myself. And this new version of me will need to learn to say "no" to the unhealthy dysfunction of others.

So, how does one find health? Look back through these sessions. You are now actively in pursuit of self-awareness. Authenticity is becoming your default. You're no longer closed off emotionally, relationally or ideologically. Obstacles are becoming possibilities. You've even found people you can trust with your stuff.

If this kind of group is working for you, keep signing up.

Things to consider:

- 1 Talk about your “history” as an enabler?

- 2 Share some significant discoveries you've made during these 8 weeks.