

Stuck in a rut: Family roles often can be limiting to personal growth

In an effort to inform and assist the community at large, Smoke Signals publishes a monthly article addressing various mental health issues written by a member of the Behavioral Health Department at Health & Wellness. They welcome e-mails, letters and questions from people with mental health-related questions at tom.bender@grandronde.org.

By Tom Bender

Tribal Mental Health counselor

I read an article recently that said some people come into therapy not because they want to be happier, but because they want to find a way to be more comfortable in their suffering.

I interpret this to mean that, simply put, change is hard.

Most of us resist giving up roles that we first took on as children and carried with us into adulthood. There's the hero: a person who feels a need to save everyone in their family (often to their own detriment); the placator: someone who's job it is to create peace in the family at any cost; the black sheep; the lost child (often the middle child who got lost in the shuffle); the enabler; the achiever; the "substitute spouse," and so on.

In the chaos of an alcoholic or drug-using home, children are often "volunteered" to take on the parental role not only to their younger siblings, but to their own parents as well. The parent-child relationship in such families has become reversed, and the parent and child may start to feel more like siblings or peers.

As we grow older, these roles do not magically disappear. They've become part of our identity and we struggle to see ourselves any other way. Additionally, these roles also presented us with a gift. They taught us how to survive and gave our lives meaning and purpose.

Now one might ask what the gift

is in playing the black sheep, but if one thinks of the family as an engine, each member plays an important part in keeping the motor running. Remove one of the parts, and the engine breaks down.

For reasons the family itself might not even be aware, what is required to maintain balance in the family system may be for one of its members to play the black sheep, the hero, the responsible one, etc. In other words, we take on certain roles because our family unconsciously needs us to do so to maintain a balance.

Oftentimes, when a role taken on by a child appears dysfunctional, he/she has done so because the relationship between the parents is troubled. When a child feels compelled to be someone they're not, they are essentially blocked from becoming their true and authentic selves, and this is the real tragedy.

Part of what we do in counseling is shed light on the roles we still carry that are no longer serving us. Sometimes a family member feels a strong internal and external pressure not to change because to do so can feel as if they're betraying or abandoning their family.

Nothing could be further from the truth. By letting one's old and outdated roles gently fall by the wayside, we find more room in our lives to become the person we were truly meant to be. The shift is not easy, but infinitely worthwhile. ■

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