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# Common Family Patterns

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# An Enmeshed Family Or Too Much Family

by Dr. Paul Dunion, Transformational Faculty Member



An enmeshed family diminishes the value of individual members while prioritizing the wellbeing of the group. The enmeshed imperative is: Are you giving enough to others? Weak boundaries masquerade as expressions of closeness and togetherness. There is a way to be, and individual family members are encouraged to figure that out and make it happen, in honor of the group. Before taking a closer look at the prevailing characteristics of an enmeshed family and recommended strategies for healing, it may be helpful to stress the importance of understanding the imperfect nature of families.

Parents of an enmeshed family likely recreate the family configuration they were raised in and best know. What they understand is that family is constructed with permeable boundaries – ones that do not effectively separate and honor the unique aspirations, needs, and beliefs of its individual members. Parents tend to not only create what's familiar, but to err on the side of too much support for the group or too much for each separate member.

A more sophisticated boundary is semi-permeable – one established with discernment in assessing whether the autonomy of individuals needs more support or the cohesive connection to the group. The process needs to remain corrective. A group doesn't support the whole *and* support individuals perfectly. It calls for commitment, perseverance, and

enough humility to fumble with the evolving nature of a family.

## Characteristics of an Enmeshed Family

**Weak Boundaries** – Boundaries in an enmeshed family can be extremely permeable. Permeability inhibits how family members distinguish themselves from others in the family. Members get effective at reading what others in the family expect. It becomes only too easy for family members to feel entitled to influence and control others. Hence, enmeshed families typically experience a higher incidence of both emotional and sexual incest.

I was working with Joan, mother of three children and a devoted kindergarten teacher. When introduced to what it means to come from an enmeshed family, she came to the edge of her seat, “Oh my God, I just thought we were just really close!”

“The members of your family may have felt close to each other, and it does sound like the boundaries in the family were considerably permeable,” I suggested, wanting to support Joan's introduction to enmeshment.

“Well, the more I think about it, the closeness mostly happened before we were adolescents. I've recently noticed that several of my siblings get rather critical with a number of my choices, workshops I go to, and people I choose for friends”, she offered, her voice trailing off, with her gaze moving down and away.

“Joan, I wonder if you’re having some feelings about your relationship with your siblings,” I suggested, hoping she might feel invited and comfortable enough to give a voice to her feelings.

“It’s just something my younger sister Sally told me recently about our older brother. It’s hard to believe it happened, and I know that Sally would not make such a thing up,” pausing, with her jaw-dropping and lips quivering, “Sally said that our brother Ted sexually abused her when she was thirteen,” Joan divulged.

“How do you feel about telling me?” I asked, wondering if she might feel like she betrayed Sally.

“I feel nervous and I’m glad it’s coming out. I don’t remember Ted ever touching me inappropriately, but I often got the feeling that he was peering as I left the bathroom after showering. Do you think what happened to Sally has anything to do with the enmeshment of the family?” she wondered, eyes widening, and her tone genuinely curious.

“Well, it’s likely. In an enmeshed family, no one truly owns their own body or for that matter, their own mind,” I pointed out, seeing Joan lean forward with interest.

“I’m not sure I understand what it means not to own your own body,” Joan offered.

“When boundaries are too thin or permeable, the message is that what you call yours is also ours, ours to access and claim in some way. What belongs to one member belongs to everyone. That could be your mind or your body,” I explained, noticing Joan gently nodding as if what she was hearing she already knew.

From there, our work focused on Joan learning about semi-permeable boundaries and committing to employing boundaries in her own family that

supported individual differences while building a trusting and cohesive unit.

***Externally referenced*** – Family members are encouraged to read the needs and dispositions of others in lieu of their own. Love is understood as attending to others and the attention is typically driven by hypervigilance. This exaggerated focus on others happens because it’s a violation of family norms if someone focuses on themselves. Everyone depends upon others to pick up on non-verbal cues regarding needs and upsets. Family members easily succumb to feeling guilty if someone’s discontent was missed. Often these individuals feel low-grade anxiety about the possibility that someone other than themselves was not properly supported.

***Diminished support*** for autonomy and individuation. Being self-focused is frowned upon. Getting clear about one’s own values, needs and desires can be seriously compromised. One consequence is that personal identity can be undermined, leaving family members feeling separated from themselves. They know more about to whom they are related, than they have solid feelings about their own interiority. Their identity is strongly planted in family roles.

The present-day experience of this psychological merger, can leave people feeling haunted by a historical family dynamic. George came from an enmeshed family where he found himself traumatized in a family triangle.

“My two sisters were kind of raised by my mother, while my younger brother and I were raised by my father when he was available,” George’s voice trailed off as he mentioned his father.

“When boundaries are too thin or permeable, the message is that what you call yours is also ours, ours to access and claim in some way.”

“I’m wondering if you saw your sisters getting more parenting from your mother than you received from your father,” I offered, wondering if he might be carrying feelings of loss.

“Yes, my father wasn’t around much, but the big deal was I had no idea how to break into the triangle with my mother and my sister Louise. I mean, they were tight, and I just could not connect to my mom, but I don’t want to take anything away from them. They had a good mother-daughter thing, you know what I mean?” George added, seeming to mitigate his loss in favor of what his mother created with his sister.

“I hear you don’t want to diminish the relationship between your mother and your sister. *And* it’s okay to feel the loss of your mom,” I encouraged.

“Yeah, I hear you. I’m reminded of what you mentioned about these triangles getting reproduced. You know, the one at work with my boss Peggy and my colleague Maureen – sure feels the same,” he admitted with a note of anger, leaving me feeling a bit confused.

“I get that you’ve been in a triangle with two women again. But, my understanding is that the outcome of this triangle at work was quite different than the one in your childhood,” I suggested. Given the information I had, I was confused about the comparison he was making.

“Well, both triangles felt awful. I can’t tell you how many times I witnessed Peggy and Maureen doing their female thing together. They have been really bonded,” stressed George.

“George, I’ve got to tell you that I have a different take. Didn’t Peggy let go of Maureen and promote you?” I asked, seeking confirmation of his experience.

“Yes, yes she did. But I don’t know, nothing about the whole thing felt right,” he added, casting his gaze downward.

“Okay, so what I recall is that Peggy has been very clear about believing in you and supporting you. Sounds like the kind of boss we all might want to have,” I proposed, curious about how much of the energy attached to the original triangle he might have dragged into the current one.

George was willing to interrupt his protection of

his mother and his sister and access his anger and hurt about feeling marginalized in the family. As he was able to access the loss and grief related to his mother, he began to appreciate how much Peggy remained a professional ally. The heartbreak of the original triangle had temporarily blinded George to the fact that the current triangle at work operated without unfavorable consequences for him.

***Love means being self-sacrificing*** – Efforts to support oneself can be viewed as unloving of others. Consistent self-sacrifice typically yields accusations that others are not doing enough. There’s an attachment to the illusion that others can make you happy. Being self-sacrificial also tends to lead to resentment as a family member awaits a payoff for sacrifices rendered.

***Conflict avoidant*** – Family members are encouraged to remain conflict-avoidant since a conflict may have an unfavorable impact upon others. Consequently, family members do not learn how to reach conflict resolution. The typical approach to conflict is avoidance. However, avoidance tends to lead to case-building and narrative confirmation. When we avoid emotional material, we can continue to build a case against someone’s character without ever questioning ourselves. Narrative confirmation follows and occurs when we decide that someone is insensitive, for example, and we tune into any behavior that might support that narrative.

***Learn to become caretakers*** – Family members learn the belief that they are responsible for the well-being of others and remain self-neglectful to meet the family imperative of caring for others.

***A tendency for the children to be Parentified*** – Parentification of children happens as they are encouraged to parent others. Because of the weak boundaries coupled with the heartening to become caretakers, parentified children in an enmeshed family often experience an early role reversal, parenting one of their parents. In addition, they parent themselves and often their siblings.

***Fear of abandonment*** – Because members have a compromised relationship with themselves, their greatest fear is to be rejected or abandoned by others. This fear often carries an acute sensitivity where there is little resiliency for tolerating the unfavorable responses of others. To mitigate others being upset with them, they exercise a strong need to please and be liked. As Emily learned about her fragility when it came to others being angry at her, she understood how she coped.

“I made up the story that I was a very likable person. In fact, I always said that people just naturally like me,” Emily explained with a sheepish smile.

“I’m interested in your smile. What does it say?” I asked, in the hope that she might pause and consider the smile’s message.

“Well, if I’m really honest, the truth is that I give a lot, I mean a real lot in the hope that my giving will be able to fend off unwanted anger, disappointment and frustration people might have with me. You know, I’m starting to think that it’s not about how much I give, I think that people might feel too guilty to be honest with such a kind person. They might not tell me that they are angry at me, but they also aren’t building anything truly intimate with me,” Emily shared, revealing how much she was willing to get honest with herself.

Emily soon learned how much she neglected herself and how much energy she put into taking people hostage with her exorbitant levels of giving. She also became clearer about the possibility of becoming one of the recipients of her giving.

***Encouraged to feel guilt, shame, and anxiety*** – These feelings are encouraged to avoid a family member straying from the group mandate and keep them focused on supporting the comfort and happiness of others.

***Compromised personal agency*** – Once family members have internalized the family imperative to serve the collective and not themselves, they are prone to becoming excessively passive when it comes to even knowing their desire never mind acting toward its satisfaction. They are more comfortable waiting for others to care for them.

***Deluded about genuine emotional intimacy.*** Members of enmeshed families are usually convinced that enmeshment is synonymous with emotional intimacy. If we define emotional intimacy as the unity of two separate and unique individuals, it becomes clear that enmeshment is masquerading for authentic unity. When the denial of the self is seen as loving, it can be extremely difficult to learn what it means to choose oneself, an essential building block of real intimacy.

### **Guidance for Healing**

It is critical that people who come from an enmeshed family, understand that there are no perfect families. Enmeshment was simply the system’s way of attempting to coalesce and cope with the tension of generating unity with unique individuals. It is helpful to introduce the notion that the only option is to come from an imperfect family. It doesn’t mean that someone having been reared in such imperfection is

“Life is a great deal about understanding where you come from, as well as what healing and learning your past is asking for.”

damaged goods. It only means that life is a great deal about understanding where you come from, as well as the healing and learning your past is asking for. Let's look at some of the restorative interventions an enmeshed beginning in life might ask for:

**Permission to grieve** – As you explore the losses that naturally accompany being raised in an imperfect and enmeshed family, it is healing to access the sadness and anger associated with these losses. Losses may be as practical as no door to your bedroom or no lock on the bathroom door, depriving privacy. You may have felt shame because you were called to an ideological path not compatible with that of the family.

**Betrayal of the family mandate** – Simply exploring how your enmeshed family did not reach some idyllic status can feel like a violation of loyalty. The key is to not make your parents bad because they were instrumental in creating an imperfect family. They too came from an imperfect family. Betrayal might simply mean that you are entitled to grow out of an attachment to dysfunctional patterns, an entitlement that can serve all the people in your life including your children and their children.

**Permission to be internally referenced** – This simply means that a healthy relationship can begin because we are acquainted with the person we bring to the relationship. We can know our preferences, our beliefs, and feelings. Our interior world is what we can know and have some measure of control over. We can be internally referenced while being empathic, understanding, and negotiable.

**Boundary education** – Members of enmeshed families live with excessively permeable boundaries. It is important to broaden your understanding of both non-permeable and semi-permeable boundaries. The former is needed when there is an actual imminent threat to safety. However, it is semi-permeable boundaries that support a higher level of relational functioning. These boundaries have a dual purpose.

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They support our safety or uniqueness while allowing us to be accessible to others.

**Redefining love and intimacy** – Members of enmeshed families need help to let go of understanding love and emotional intimacy as characterized by persistent self-sacrifice and caretaking of others. An important lesson is learning to redefine love, such that both giving and receiving get top billing. They need to add the act of receiving to their understanding of love, as well as making requests of others, and be introduced to their responsibility to support self-love. They also need to understand that when self-love is compromised, they run the risk of passively waiting for others to love them in lieu of loving themselves. Gaining clarity about necessary vs. unnecessary self-sacrifice becomes an essential relational competency. Giving new meaning to love calls for therapeutic support and guidance, and the willingness to stumble with such an immense and honorable undertaking.

**Managing conflict** – Because avoidance was the pattern for dealing with conflict, they will need to learn to interrupt catastrophizing the presence of conflict. They can acquire conflict resolution skills and come to accept conflict as a natural phenomenon in healthy relationships.

**Permission to live from desire** – They will need to be encouraged to be curious about their desire, feel it,

and pursue it as an essential way to engage in life. They will need to be reminded that living from their desire is not unloving. It is simply the most natural way to welcome oneself into life. It can be helpful to remember that as you live your desire, you can be curious about the desire of others.

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It is important to accept enmeshment as one way to cope with the tension of remaining connected to the

group while connected to ourselves. Those connections are not static, but rather organic and ever-shifting. Members of the family change, calling for reparative ways to support connections to self and others. Enmeshment is a strong way to attempt to secure connections to others. Of course, if a family member does not experience his or her uniqueness welcomed by the group, connection to the group will be weakened. Hence, enmeshment is a bad imitation of real intimacy. ■



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# An Estranged Family Or Not Enough Family

by Dr. Paul Dunion, Transformational Faculty Member



An estranged family prioritizes the autonomy and individuality of each member at the cost of emotional connection to one another. Similar to all groups and communities, an estranged family is attempting to cope with the tension between honoring individual preferences and beliefs and coalescing or uniting around a particular vision and set of values. The system operates with heavy non-permeable boundaries aimed at keeping family members separate, with the hope of minimizing disruptive behavior. The goal is to live and let live, limiting mutual support.

Parents of an estranged family may have been reared in an estranged family and are simply reproducing where they come from or compensating for the loss of individuality they experienced while being raised in an enmeshed family. They also may have experienced chronic trauma as children, locking them into the employment of heavy emotional and physical boundaries in order to feel safe. Let's look more closely at some of the characteristics of an estranged family and the impact of having been raised in such a system:

- **Members can't depend upon receiving support from family members.** The loss of family support tends to result in members becoming compulsively self-reliant. The children learn that the family is not a place to get personal needs met. Consequently, they will learn to become very independent or hangout more at the homes of their friends.

- **Parentification.** Children compensate for the lack of parenting they receive by attempting to parent themselves. This might look like the child possessing the freedom and responsibility to decide when to go to bed, whether or not to study, what to eat, what to wear, whom to befriend, and what to deem important. Because a child may not be ready to make sound decisions, self-sabotage becomes likely.
- **Family members don't really know one another.** Due to the separation created by large boundaries family members don't really know each other. Not knowing people you're allegedly close to begins to feel familiar. It becomes easy to expect others to be anonymous and naturally inhibit disclosing who we really are. Consequently, there can be significant confusion about learning to trust, be trustworthy and to distrust, as well as how to develop a meaningful rapport.
- **Love is defined as honoring one's own unique path and that of others.** With enough inner strength and sense of agency, children from estranged families will discover and steward their natural gifts and talents. However, accessing others as valued resources as well as seeing oneself as a valued resource for others can remain obtuse. The connective tissue to others remains mercurial and translucent. The dynamics of wanting from

another and being the recipient of another's care and desire, seem to remain just beyond one's reach.

- ***Conflicts typically do not reach resolution.*** Unlike an enmeshed family that avoids conflict, members of an estranged family will engage in conflict. However, there is regularly not enough empathy felt nor a desire for both parties to get their needs met in order to reach a resolution. Consequently, participants in conflict are comfortable with someone feeling like they won, someone lost, or someone is right with someone else being wrong.
- ***Members employ heavy non-permeable boundaries.*** This type of boundary is designed to limit the psychological material that flows from person to person. Family members are encouraged to work out their beliefs, decisions and especially their emotions on their own. The family mandate is “don't ask, don't tell and go take care of yourself”.
- ***Emotional intimacy remains a foreign experience.*** If we think of emotional intimacy as the unity of two separate unique individuals, it becomes clear why members of an estranged family will struggle to live intimately. The skills needed to create unity are neither modeled nor encouraged. Unlike members of an enmeshed family who sacrifices their uniqueness, members of an estranged family at least have their individuality as a beginning building block.
- ***Compromised collaborative problem-solving.*** Estranged

families foster a strong “I'll have to do it myself” attitude. Because self-reliance is held as such a cherished value, family members are challenged in regard to holding a vision of authentic collaboration. It may even be problematic to acknowledge needing help or actually asking for help. It can also be difficult to imagine someone gladly contributing to our efforts and joyfully collaborating with us.

### **Guidelines for Healing**

It is important to remember that there are no perfect families. If you were raised in an estranged family as opposed to an enmeshed family, you can begin to calibrate just how estranged the family was. It may have been lightly estranged, moderately estranged or heavily estranged. The more you are able to open up to the level of estrangement you come from without catastrophizing it, the more you will be able to bring healing to your family of origin experience. Here are some suggestions for approaching the healing process:

- ***Getting the right help.*** It can be challenging to identify the loss of something we never had. Consequently, it may be important to access a psychotherapist or mentor who is familiar with the relational losses experienced in an estranged family. The helper needs to know how to build solid rapport so that you don't simply reproduce the estrangement you come from with the person allegedly helping you.
- ***Grieving the losses related to familial disconnection.*** It is important to begin to experience the support

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of the helper by understanding what is being offered to you in the way of support and noticing what it feels like to receive it. Just such an experience can introduce you to what you did not get in childhood from family. The hope is, with such an ally, you can begin to feel specific losses such as being witnessed and welcomed for your accomplishments, your joy, your struggles, your sadness, your fears and your needs and desires. You may be able to feel the loss of someone missing you and delighting in your company.

- **Learning how to live with semi-permeable boundaries.** Typically, coming out of an estranged family where the norm was the use of non-permeable boundaries, these are the kind of boundaries automatically employed in adulthood. You will need to learn about the use of non-permeable boundaries in support of safety but not as way to mostly live. Semi-permeable boundaries are created by the use of a discriminating discernment. The goal is to both support yourself while allowing those you trust or want to get to know more, to move into psychological proximity to you.
- **Redoing an understanding of love.** This new version of love needs to include what it means to co-create a life together, how to be attuned to one another, how to name and present emotional needs to one another, remaining curious about one another, being committed to forgiving one another, creating a shared vision of what truly matters, engaging in interdependence and engaging in collective decision-making.
- **Learning to bring resolution to conflict.** As mentioned, members of estranged families are not conflict adverse, they simply do not know how to reach resolution. Foremost, there is a call to truly listen to the other without interpretations or editorial input. Followed by learning to interrupt the need to win or be right that can naturally arise when diverse views or needs are being discussed. This requires a level of mindfulness that supports letting go of an attachment to win or be right. It means being willing to learn to have conversations

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involving diverse views, feeling the emotions that arise, while allowing for mutual curiosity about the other’s position. It also entails exercising an earnest commitment to brainstorming solutions such that both parties can get their differing needs met.

- **Gaining emotional intimacy skills.** Emotional intimacy is the real medicine for bringing healing to estrangement. It certainly calls for remaining an apprentice of semi-permeable boundaries. The goal of such boundaries is supporting our individual uniqueness, while remaining accessible to the other. It also calls for understanding which of the three primary defenses we employ for protection: **distancing**, **dominating** and **adapting**. We carry all three and prioritize one. Typically, too much distancing and dominating result in the loss of the other, while too much adaption leads to a loss of self. The use of these defenses can be mitigated by the use of semi-permeable boundaries. There is also the need to learn to bring vulnerable self-disclosure into the conversation, such as expressing feeling hurt or forgotten. This learning to make clear,

concrete requests of one another with all requests being legitimate. The recipient of the request having the right to respond with “No”, “Yes” or “I want to negotiate”. Emotional intimacy calls for raising our consciousness about how *emotional generosity* deepens our connections to each other.

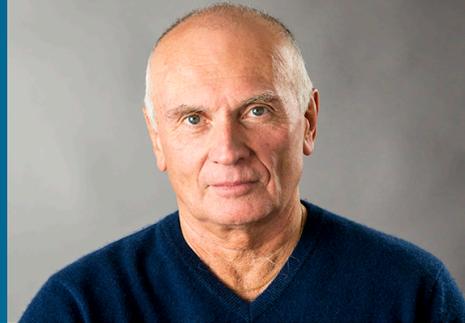
All families are simply attempting to negotiate the single most driving dynamic in all relationships. That dynamic is how to support our connections to others while not injuring our connection to ourselves.

Only too often in families, as well as in all kinds of configurations of relationships, the participants don't know how to hold the polarity of *self-care & relationship care*. The confusion around how to carry this polarity often leads to the participants prioritizing one end of the polarity while sacrificing the other side. Typically, those raised in an enmeshed family fear the loss of the relationship, which they experience as abandonment fear. On the other hand, members of estranged families fear the loss of the self, experienced as fear of being consumed by another. ■



# The Looking Good Family

by Dr. Paul Dunion, Transformational Faculty Member



There is a cultural phenomenon deserving our attention – families committed to looking good. In examining the dynamics of a looking good family, I will attempt to name what drives parents to create such a system, before concluding with some suggestions to support healing for survivors of a looking good family.

## Characteristics of The Looking Good Family

- **A LGF (Looking Good Family) is externally referenced.** This means that the values, beliefs, familial rituals and protocols are adopted from the larger culture, based upon what is deemed socially commendatory.
- **These external references to a set of social standards lack ambiguity.** The LGF cannot tolerate the responsibility or the risk of defining what truly matters for them. Hence, they attach to a social calibration of what is important. The more rigid, concrete and uncompromising the standards are, the less room for interpretation, confusion individual differences. The LGF will especially be drawn to religious and political leaders who are dogmatic with an unwavering ideology.
- **The LGF has no tolerance for authenticity amongst family members.** To allow family members to have their own voice, express their own beliefs and opinions, is taboo. Family members are required to adopt beliefs and behaviors that are socially endorsed. All others will be prohibited and likely shamed. Individual differences threaten the alleged security held by bonding to what the society deems commendable.
- **The LGF is naturally quite comfortable with pretense.** As the LGF regularly integrates its norms, there are no viable criteria to measure what is real and what is bogus. Hence, living in pretense becomes natural and normal.
- **The LGF discourages the expression of human emotion.** The expression of emotion is viewed as an assault upon the family's need for control and stability. The system will likely tolerate joy and feeling generally pleasant. However, emotions carrying a level of tension and unpleasantness such as anger, grief, sadness, hurt and fear will likely be deemed inappropriate. Unacceptable emotions that do not promote harmony threaten the status quo and lead family members to feel out of control. Thus, the need to be seen, heard, encouraged, accepted and supported are typically considered intolerable.
- **The LGF promotes repression.** Because members are encouraged to repress and deny their emotions, they run more risk of a variety of physical and emotional problems. Depression and passive aggression are more likely as a result, as well as addiction and a variety of psychologically

driven physical ailments such as migraines, back problems and digestive issues. Members typically lack the necessary coping mechanisms to effectively deal with stress.

- ***Bodily secretions are shamed.*** Tears, perspiration, vomit, nasal discharge, urine, menstrual blood and feces are considered contemptible and should be denied or at least hidden. Family members are encouraged to reject their bodies, making it very difficult to pay attention to vital somatic clues, or trusting their body's information.
- ***Bodies are generally relegated to what should be shunned.*** Because bodies possess such a propensity to be unpredictable and creaturely, they present an ongoing threat to interrupt a looking-good image. Males will be encouraged to amplify their intellectual ability by displaying a strong academic commitment. Females will likely pay the price of being influenced to pursue some cultural image of female perfection, often leading to an eating disorder.
- ***Acceptable jobs include those sanctioned by the culture.*** Jobs or occupations that have a concrete or measurable purpose are valued. A skill set that is easily quantifiable is viewed as important. Any occupational pursuit coming out of the Arts or Humanities is not seen favorably by a LGF.
- ***No tolerance for conflict.*** A LGF will have little or no tolerance for any form of conflict, since conflict typically reflects anger, dissatisfaction, and hurt. Conflict also implies that someone has an unmet need, which suggests that the system is not maximizing its alleged capacity to guarantee harmony and tranquility. Most importantly, children in a LGF are not shown how to move a conflict toward resolution. Hence, avoidance replaces conflict resolution. Children may continue to practice avoidance far into their adult lives. When it's not possible to maintain avoidance with their own children, they will resort to exercising parental authority.
- ***Religious, but not spiritual.*** A dogmatic religion will likely appeal to a LGF, because members can

simply follow the script offered by the liturgy. They do not challenge themselves spiritually, since such a path commonly calls for living from a deep personal place regarding values and feelings. LGF members will struggle to understand what it means to live devotionally, since they do not take their direction from heartfelt experience.

- ***Acting courageously becomes difficult for LGF members.*** Because courage calls for feeling vulnerable and uncertain about outcomes, LGF members are committed to limiting the amount of risks they face. They strive to remain attached to convention, in the hope that there will be no need to feel vulnerable and no need to act courageously.

### What Drives a LGF?

We can say that the refusal to live life on life's terms is what mostly drives a LGF. Typically, fear and terror motivate such a refusal. The fear can be the result of unaddressed trauma experienced in childhood by the parents. The trauma may have been caused by abuse, neglect, loss, addiction or mental illness. When such trauma goes untreated, defenses are assembled, aimed at preventing shock or surprise, but ultimately, leaving one feeling helpless and vulnerable. In so many cases, survivors of trauma regard their mistreatment as a statement of their worthiness, resulting in deep feelings of shame. The attachment to looking good operates as a salve, offering some small measure of relief from the shame. However, looking good cannot take the place of genuine feelings of deservedness. Members of a LGF are often caught on treadmill of attempting to prove their elusive goodness over and over again.

### Healing Members of a LGF

- ***Healing can begin when the survivor of a LGF acknowledges some measure of suffering.*** It can be a major breakthrough when pain can be acknowledged. It may take pushing through shame to both admit and speak to someone about what is going on.

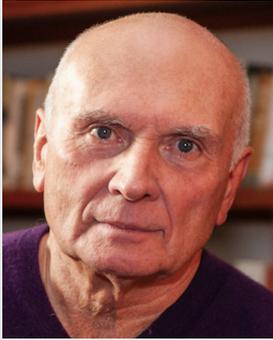
- **Accessing therapeutic support.** It is a big deal for the LGF member to access therapeutic support since it further confirms that all is not well, which interrupts the LGF's mandate.
- **Getting the pain legitimized.** LGF members will need much reassurance from the therapist that the current suffering is real and legitimate. They will be working on accepting a part of themselves that has been banished for years.
- **Attending to symptoms resulting from the LGF's denial of reality.** Calling children away from reality generates considerable stress, often resulting in psychological as well as physical symptoms. Depression, histrionics, anxiety, learning disabilities, migraines, intestinal issues, fibromyalgia and back problems may need to be addressed.
- **Learning to reclaim their bodies.** Survivors of a LGF experience need to gradually learn to become familiar with their bodies. It can be helpful to have them track internal sensations such as warmth, tingling, pulsations, tensions, numbing, burning, quivering, spaciousness and calm – as well as feeling and responding to a need to drink, eat, rest and move. Gradually, survivors need to feel and express needs for affiliation; to be seen, heard, touched and encouraged.
- **Affirming that they are not crazy.** Because image was prized and endorsed in lieu of reality, survivors will need ongoing reassurance that their experience of reality was and is legitimate.
- **Being taught relational skills.** Survivors of a LGF experience are typically short on having effective rapport-building skills. Children of a LGF learn quickly that their unique emotional experiences will not be welcomed. They cope by preventing

their feelings and emotional needs from being expressed. In order to ensure an emotion does not spill out involuntarily, they often exercise a significant level of repression, leaving their emotional lives anonymous, even to themselves. The average LGF family member is emotionally isolated. They need to learn to ask for what they want and need, as well as becoming familiar with exercising effective boundaries, leaving them neither unusually alienated nor enmeshed. They need to learn to both express their emotions and hear the emotions of others. Conflict resolution skills are a critical for deepening bonds and creating intimacy.

- **Getting help to give back what doesn't belong to them.** Because parents of a LGF are in such significant denial of their pain and shame, children often internalize and carry these energies for the parents. The giving-back process does not have to occur with the parents. It can easily happen in a therapist's office with someone professionally trained in how to support giving back pain and shame to the person to whom it really belongs.

Perhaps these named characteristics flared up in your family of origin, perhaps they were subtler. The key is to learn to accept that all that went into looking good was not the real stuff of family life. If you were not previously aware of the perfect family presence, then this can be very challenging at first. Your parents were not trying to deceive you. They were struggling to cope with the trauma of their own pasts.

The key now is to interrupt any attachment you may have to looking good, rather than living life on life's terms. Your current life will offer ample opportunity to get more honest about how it feels to travel such a journey and what it means to build genuine relationships.



**PAUL DUNION**, Mobius Transformational Faculty, Senior Expert, and track leader at the Next Practice Institute, earned his Doctoral degree in Counseling and Consulting Psychology from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and his M.A. in Philosophy from the University of Connecticut. He taught Philosophy for thirteen years at the University of Connecticut and Three Rivers Community College.

He has been in private practice for the past thirty-seven years. As a holistic psychological healer, employing an existential modality as well as a somatic approach to treating trauma, Paul is trained in EMDR and is a graduate of the Somatic Experiencing Institute.

From its early beginnings, Paul represented the State of Connecticut at the national gatherings of the mytho-poetic men's movement, sponsored by Wingspan. As the founder of Boys to Men, he created a mentoring community for teenage boys. He is the co-founder of COMEGA (Connecticut Gathering of Men), having served over 6,000 men since 1992, which continues to offer biannual retreats. In 2013, Paul established the Croton Mystery School and designed its curriculum with a focus on teaching students how to make peace with life's mystery and unpredictability. He has offered over 200 workshops on topics related to Human Potential. Currently, Paul offers supervision for younger psychotherapists.

Paul has published six books: *Seekers – Finding Our Way Home* (2016); *Dare to Grow-Up – Become Who You Are Meant to Be* (2016); *Path of the Novice Mystic – Maintaining a Beginner's Heart and Mind* (2013); *Shadow Marriage – A Descent into Intimacy* (2006); *Temptation in the House of the Lord* (2004); and his latest offering *Wisdom – Apprenticing to the Unknown and Befriending Fate* (2021).



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