



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 normally 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.

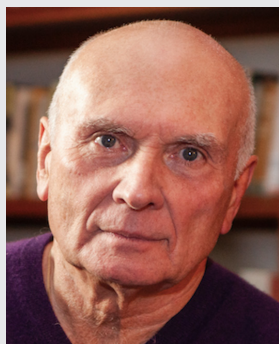
- **Accessing therapeutic support.** It is a big deal for the LGF member to access therapeutic support since it further confirms that all is not well, which interrupts the LGF's mandate.
- **Getting the pain legitimized.** LGF members will need much reassurance from the therapist that the current suffering 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 went 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.



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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).

