

## Therapy Chat Episode 198



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[00:00:00] **Laura Reagan:** Therapy Chat Podcast Episode 198.

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[00:01:08] Hi, welcome back to Therapy Chat. I'm your host, Laura Reagan. This episode's a little late. Things have been kind of wild in my life right now but everything's overall good. I want to bring you a replay of an episode that I found very important, and it may be triggering for some people. It's about the dynamics and families with an abusive or alcoholic parent. And my guest is Sharon Martin, LCSW. Sharon really specializes in working with people who grew up in alcoholic or dysfunctional families where there was either abuse or substance abuse.

[00:01:53] So you may find this hits close to home. And if it does, please practice [00:02:00] self-care. I hope that if you hear this and you decide that you want to seek out a therapist for yourself, you will feel free to contact me. I can make some recommendations. I do not know someone in every single city and town in the world, but I have a pretty good network and I would be happy to try to connect you with someone who would be a good fit.

[00:02:26] And if you want to reach out to me for that, go to [therapychatpodcast.com](http://therapychatpodcast.com) and you can send me an email or feel free to leave a message on Speak Pipe. Maybe the easiest way for me to get back with you would be email. So if you want a quick reply, that's the best way to get in touch, but I hope you find this episode interesting and informative and let's just dive right in.

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[00:03:14] Hi, welcome back to Therapy Chat. Today I am very happy to be bringing you an interview with someone who has been on Therapy Chat before. My guest is the wonderful Sharon Martin LCSW. Sharon, thank you so much for coming back to Therapy Chat today.

[00:03:32] **Sharon Martin:** Of course, my pleasure, Laura.

[00:03:34] **Laura Reagan:** I always love talking to you and there's so much overlap in the work that we do, but I use your blog posts and, all the different things that you're doing so often with my clients. So I said, Hey, let me get her back on here and ask her some stuff that I want to let my clients know about.

[00:03:54] **Sharon Martin:** Great.

[00:03:55] **Laura Reagan:** Yeah. So, let's just start off if we can by you [00:04:00] telling our audience for anybody who's not familiar with your work, who you are and a bit about what you do.

[00:04:06] **Sharon Martin:** Sure. Well, I am a psychotherapist and I work in San Jose, California. And so I work in private practice at this point. And the focus of the work that I do in my practice is helping people overcome issues around codependency and perfectionism and people pleasing. And you know, all those things really overlap in a lot of ways. And often a lot of the clients that come in and work with me are people who experienced growing up in an alcoholic family, sort of the adult child of an alcoholic is kind of the label that we put on that just to help us put it in into some sense of understanding what some of the common issues are. And so in addition to the clinical work that I do, I do a lot of writing. As you mentioned, I write a blog called happily and perfect for psych central. I'm gonna write for some other places as well here and there, but I often write about these [00:05:00] same topics.

[00:05:00] So like you said, you can find out, find out more about what I'm doing. And a lot of the writing that I do either there, or on my website.

[00:05:07] **Laura Reagan:** Yeah. And I'll be sure that at the end, you get a chance to give a link to where to find all your stuff. Because like I said, I mean, I use it all the time with my clients and I always find everything you write to be so helpful.

[00:05:21] **Sharon Martin:** Thank you. I'm glad. I'm glad that it is helpful.

[00:05:24] **Laura Reagan:** Yeah. So what I wanted to talk to you about today is growing up in a family where one parent, at least one parent is an alcoholic. So there are certain

characteristics of families that are headed by a parent who's an alcoholic that are pretty common in what I see in my clients who come in as adults.

[00:05:52] And I know that what you mentioned, codependency, perfectionism, and people pleasing behaviors tend to be really common [00:06:00] for these adults, but they don't always recognize it as being related to the way their childhoods were. So I was just wondering if you could sort of describe what the family dynamics are like in a family where one of the parents is an alcoholic.

[00:06:20] **Sharon Martin:** Sure. I mean, we can kind of get into what some of the common dynamics are. I'll just sort of preface it by saying that, of course, every family is different and this may or may not be true for the family that you, the listeners grew up in. Um, although I think you, you may, you know, find that some of it rings true for you and maybe some of it does not.

[00:06:41] Obviously every alcoholic family is a little bit different and, you know, because alcoholism or addiction is a progressive disease, you know, that it, um, it changes over time. And so depending on, you know, I think the stage that the alcoholic is, and the age of the [00:07:00] child. You know, when a parent is in different sort of phases of the drinking, if you will, or if they're in recovery, that will certainly have a big impact on how, how the alcoholism affects the child.

[00:07:12] And then I think there's also going to be some mitigating factors about if there are other support people or other support systems that are helping again, sort of mitigate some of the challenges that are going on.

[00:07:25] But just to start us off. I think one of the primary things that happens as alcoholism progresses is that really the whole family system starts to revolve around the alcoholic and the alcoholic's ability to be able to have a constant supply of alcohol, and to be able to drink and do drinking related things, if you will.

[00:07:51] And so everything becomes about that. And each individual plays a part in it, really unknowingly a [00:08:00] part in being able to sustain this system. And when we think about, you know, sort of family systems or any kind of system, there's really this, this sort of big kind of pressure for it to just keep going the way that it's going to maintain the system in its current functioning, even if it's really dysfunctional.

[00:08:19] And I think this is the part that can be really hard to understand is, why do we as the family members of the alcoholic continue to do these things that sort of don't make a lot of sense in some ways, that enable the alcoholic to continue the drinking behavior that we all want him or her to stop.

[00:08:38] So it doesn't necessarily make a lot of sense on the surface, but like I said, when you kind of think about that family system, the alcoholic has a lot of power in the family.

And so the alcoholic is sort of the one who's kind of making the rules and sometimes these, these kinds of rules are not necessarily written down or even spoken out loud.

[00:08:59] They're [00:09:00] just the things that everybody in the family knows that you're allowed to do this, or you're not allowed to do that. And a lot of those family behaviors become centered around how do we cope with the alcoholics drinking or, you know, um, their behavior when they're drinking or recovering, you know, we learned that there are certain things that we can or can't do because, you know, we can't have friends over in, you know, in the late afternoons, because by that point, mom has already had too much to drink.

[00:09:29] You know, it's those kinds of things that maybe are never spoken, but we certainly learn that that's a rule in our family that we can't do that. And so again, we've kind of like, we're all focused on how do we navigate this, you know, kind of craziness that's going on in our families without really talking about what's going on.

[00:09:47] It becomes a big secret. That's really not talked about in the family and it's definitely not something that we feel like we can talk about outside of the family. So it becomes a big [00:10:00] weight, I think, for people to carry, you know, there's a big secret, this big source of shame that we can't talk about, that we can't get help for.

[00:10:10] So I think there's a lot of really kind of suffering in silence that the family does: feeling isolated, and like I said, ashamed of what's going on and there's, there's a lot of pressure for the family to look like they have it all together to look like, you know, a quote unquote, normal family and not, not let other people know that there's a lot of really dysfunctional things going on, sort of behind the closed doors of the house, essentially.

[00:10:38] **Laura Reagan:** Yes. So I've noticed that there's a lot of overlap between families where the one of the parents is an alcoholic and families where you know, the dynamics are dysfunctional in general, even if neither parent is abusing substances, it's like, you know, it's that same dynamic of you [00:11:00] know, we don't let people know what goes on inside of our home.

[00:11:03] You know, whether it's there's abuse happening or the kids, you know, everybody looks perfect on the outside, but if people saw how things really were.

[00:11:13] **Sharon Martin:** Yeah. Yeah. It's again, it's the, I think that overwhelming feeling of shame and of secrecy and that it's chaotic and it's unpredictable. And especially for really young children, it's very scary a lot of times. Sometimes because it's physically unsafe or emotionally unsafe with a lot of, you know, yelling or verbal abuse, but sometimes, you know, sometimes that's not the case. Sometimes the alcoholic can, can be pretty quiet if you will. You know, they may be isolating themselves a lot or even not home a lot if they're out drinking. But again, there's still this feeling like that even very small children can sense that there's sort of something wrong in their [00:12:00] family, that there's this unspoken tension and stress within the family.

[00:12:05] And so you know, we all know that children thrive on predictability. They thrive on routine, on knowing what's going to happen, and when it's going to happen. That gives you a sense of security and of safety, which are very fundamental pieces of a secure attachment. And I think just the ability to trust other people and, form healthy relationships in childhood and in adulthood. And so those are sometimes those pieces that are missing again, because the family in one way or another is got this focus on this problem. Like you said, it could be the alcoholism or sometimes it's, it could be a parent who's got a serious mental illness that's untreated.

[00:12:52] Sometimes that can have a very similar effect. A parent who's extremely depressed or suicidal has a, has a lot of those [00:13:00] same dynamics as well.

[00:13:01] **Laura Reagan:** Yeah. Or if the parent is like an abuser, like if they're like sexually abusing one of the children and you know, there's that same dynamic around protecting that secret and also avoiding that person getting upset and not being able to speak about what's really going on, not being able to really freely express their feelings about how things are at home in general.

[00:13:27] **Sharon Martin:** Yes. I, I think there ends up being that underlying feeling that if we were to let other people know about what's going on in our family, than, it would be disrupted. Even though we know that there's problems and maybe we even know that it is unsafe and we don't like it. Families don't want this disruption of the sense like that somebody is going to come in and start telling us what to do. Or of course, children often are afraid their parents are gonna split up.

[00:13:55] **Laura Reagan:** Somehow the children will lose their safety and security.

[00:13:58] **Sharon Martin:** Yeah, they'll have to leave their [00:14:00] school. And again, I mean, this is where there's, I think there's these sort of contradictory pieces of it. Like I was saying that the home life is unpredictable and often chaotic, which is hard for children. And yet there's still going to be fear of the unknown, which is I'm still afraid that the change that might happen, if somebody finds out about our family problems will create even more problems or they will create just problems that I don't know how to deal with because living in this family, I have figured out some coping skills to be able to navigate this particular type of dysfunction. We sort of learned, we learned to anticipate to some extent. You kind of get that hypervigilance and that real attunement to what's going on so that you can try to keep yourself safe, right? That can sometimes literally be making a beeline for your bedroom and closing the door as a child so that you can avoid having a [00:15:00] confrontation with your father or something like that.

[00:15:03] You know? So you've sort of learned how to navigate that and there's the concern that if we have a different family dynamic, a different setup, like I said, the parents get divorced or we have to go live with our grandparents or something like, then I won't know how to deal with that situation, which chances are we could figure out how to deal with that situation.

[00:15:25] But we all are afraid of the unknown. I think that's just part of human nature is that we worry about what we can't see and what we can't touch and we don't know what it's going to be. And so that creates that anxiety that bubbles up in us, when we think about asking for help or getting some support from other people about our family situation.

[00:15:48] **Laura Reagan:** Yeah. And I would say too, that oftentimes the children feel worried about the parent who is abusing alcohol or substances, and it's kind of like they see them in the [00:16:00] way they can understand as being sick. You know, they're afraid that if anybody finds out just how not okay they are, that the child will lose them somehow.

[00:16:10] **Sharon Martin:** Yes and I think going along with that there's also this feeling of if my parents get a divorce or if I'm not around then who is going to take care of mom, let's just say. Well, mom's the alcoholic in this situation. If that has been your job is to make sure that mom gets into bed every night and the cigarette get's put out so that's not a danger, if those have been your jobs in the family, then there's that worry of, I don't know what's going to happen to mom if I'm not around or I don't want mom to get into trouble. I don't want mom to end up in jail. So again, there's a lot of that worry.

[00:16:50] And a lot of that care-taking that, that we take on as kids, because we love our parents no matter I think the abuse or the [00:17:00] dysfunction, we're attached to them and we care about them.

[00:17:03] **Laura Reagan:** There the only parents we know.

[00:17:05] **Sharon Martin:** Yeah, of course, of course. And we feel protective, um, and wanna make sure that they are safe.

[00:17:11] And so, yeah, that's one of those pieces that oftentimes the roles almost get reversed in alcoholic families where, the children are taking care of the parents instead of the parents taking care of the children because the parent is just not able to fulfill those kinds of responsibilities, whether it's, basic things like cooking meals or paying bills, or certainly the emotional caretaking is often lacking.

[00:17:38] You can imagine the alcoholics are very preoccupied, and very shut down emotionally that they really don't have the ability to certainly be in touch with their own emotions or not a wide range of them certainly. They're often a couple of emotions, like a lot of times anger, that is all you see. But they can't nurture you as a [00:18:00] child emotionally and really encourage you to have much of an emotional range, or allow you to express a variety of different emotions. Like I said, the whole family really gets shut down emotionally because it's so painful. People don't really know how to deal with the painful feelings. And so the way they deal with them is the alcoholic is drinking and sort of numbing out all the emotions that way. And for the other families, there's a lot of just sort of repressing, pushing down of the feelings. And sometimes, finding other ways to kind of numb out with other substances- food is a big one, of course. Or even just TV, electronics, just kind of zoning out is sometimes the way people cope.

[00:18:48] **Laura Reagan:** Yes. And I would say from my experience, I want to bring up two dynamics that I've heard a lot. One is where the [00:19:00] child had to, the mom would send the child to the bar or the child would even go with the alcoholic to the bar as a way to sort of make sure the person stayed out of trouble or the child is going there to fetch them from the bar, which really puts a child in a terrible position.

[00:19:24] **Sharon Martin:** Yup. Yup. I've had clients tell me very similar things where they were taken to the bar by their alcoholic parent at a very young age.

[00:19:33] **Laura Reagan:** And sometimes they're put in unsafe situations by the alcoholic.

[00:19:36] **Sharon Martin:** Absolutely. Or they were to wait in the car while the alcoholic went in to drink in the bar. More like you said, the other one is go find your mother, go find your father who's out, drinking somewhere and bring them home safely.

[00:19:50] You know, that became the child's job, which of course is completely inappropriate for a child to have that kind of responsibility. But yeah, sometimes that [00:20:00] does happen.

[00:20:00] **Laura Reagan:** Exactly so the child becomes even to the alcoholic parent, the child is in more of a parental role of you have to come home now they have to like, they're like the stand in for the other parent, but it also it gives no awareness to what the child, maybe the child had an argument with a friend at school that day, who are they going to talk about that with when they have now this responsibility to go and get their dad or mom from the bar and bring them home. And then they know that when they get home, there's going to be conflict with the other parent, you know?

[00:20:39] **Sharon Martin:** Yeah. Most of the time there isn't anybody in the family that they can talk to, honestly, about their problems and their feelings. Then that goes for the problems within the family. And like you said, like the problems that they're having with their peers or in other areas of their life, it's both, it's just, it's not safe. [00:21:00]

[00:21:00] It's either met with anger and blame. It's kind of turned around on them or it's ignored. I think, I think that's a lot of it is that everybody in the family is preoccupied with other things, again, sort of maintaining this dysfunctional family system and that nobody has the emotional wherewithal, to sit down with Johnny and ask him how he's feeling and how his day was.

[00:21:25] Because again, this starts- if we were to do that, if we had that capability in this family, it would start bringing up all of the quote unquote problems, all of the painful feelings that you know, this family is working on, trying to deny everything that's going on. We're trying to maintain this system, which means we have to say there is no problem.

[00:21:47] There is no alcoholism. That alcoholism, if we do acknowledge it, is not causing these kinds of problems. That's not what's going on here. And so if you're starting to bring

up these kinds of [00:22:00] challenging feelings, that sort of puts the whole system in jeopardy, the system is maintained by everybody keeping their mouth shut.

[00:22:07] They're keeping their feelings bottled up and everyone just focusing on, okay, let's just do our best to try to tip toe around the alcoholic and the problems that are associated with that. It's very much that sense of like, I'm just walking on eggshells here. I'm just trying to maintain the status quo, not rock the boat, not cause any problems, not introduce anything new to the family.

[00:22:35] **Laura Reagan:** Yes so, and that's, that brings to mind the other common dynamic I've heard from clients where maybe the parent who was abusing alcohol is a single parent. And the child would come home and just kind of, you know, come home from school and be like very hypervigilant about, okay, what am I about to walk into?

[00:22:58] Am I going to find [00:23:00] happy dad, am I going to find drunk dad, am I going to find that dad had crashed his car during the day? Am I going to find hung over dead?

[00:23:10] **Sharon Martin:** Yeah. That's that unpredictability that, you know, feeling of being unsafe because I don't know what to expect when I come home. I don't know who I'm going to get essentially.

[00:23:21] And I think like you said, it's probably more pronounced in single parent families. I think kids when their parents are together, still experience that, that feeling of dread and anxiety about not knowing. And like you said, there's, there's that hypervigilance that's just one piece of how the whole family is focused in on what's going on with the alcoholic as a way of self-protecting. I, I have to really know what his mood is so that I can predict if he's going to do X or Y here, so that I know how to deal with it.

[00:23:59] **Laura Reagan:** Right. And that goes [00:24:00] back to what you said about those coping skills. And I know people sometimes talk about coping skills as something that you learn in therapy to help you through, but I think you're talking about what we would really call oftentimes we would call maladaptive coping skills.

[00:24:14] **Sharon Martin:** Yes. Yes, i, yeah, I kind of used the word unhealthy, but essentially the same thing, but like we all develop coping skills to get through life. I think, just for the simplicity of our conversation we can kind of talk about them as sort of healthier or less healthy, but of course there's like all this area in between.

[00:24:35] They're not, they don't nicely fall into categories like that necessarily, but, some definitely work better for us and some ultimately causes more problems. And the way I really think about this is that living in an alcoholic family, it's very stressful. It's very challenging. And we've been talking about kids from a very young age, they [00:25:00] learn how to deal with that.



[00:25:01] They learn how to navigate that system in order to keep themselves safe, emotionally and physically the best that they are able to. But when we're a little like that, we don't have a lot to work with and we do not have any one who is modeling the healthy coping skills. So we just do the best that we can.

[00:25:21] And then this is where we end up in adulthood struggling with certain aspects of our relationships or just aspects of our life, because we are continuing to use those sorts of unhealthy coping skills that we learned through no fault of our own. It was the best that we could do when we were children with the resources that we had. But it's often in adulthood or maybe, in adolescence where you start to realize like, this isn't really working that well for me this being, super responsible and taking care of, my parents. [00:26:00] When I was 10 that was like a pretty good coping strategy for me in that family.

[00:26:06] But here I am when I'm 30 and I'm burnt out at work and I'm resentful because I keep giving and giving and doing things for my partner and my friends, and I don't get anything in return. Then you start to go, well, Hey, maybe this isn't working out so well for me anymore.

[00:26:25] I really need to make some changes. I need to learn how to set some boundaries and I need to learn how to take better care of myself, you know, so that I will feel better and I will be happier and I will be healthier. And that's where, you know, there's, there's sort of like there's, there's roots that go back to our childhood in some of the things that are, that are causing us, you know, challenges in our adult life.

[00:26:46] And maybe the connection is not always obvious, like you were saying at the beginning of our conversations. But often that's what's happened is that, you know, they are really things that, worked well for [00:27:00] us at one point. But now we realize. We have more options. You know that, to me, that's one of the big things is, you know, like once you get to be an adult and you leave home, it's not like all of this just magically goes away.

[00:27:15] You know, I think that's often the fantasy is I'm going to leave home and I'm going to leave all this dysfunction behind and I'll start fresh and I'll be different. But you know, like we obviously can change. Well, you know, to some extent like this mold has been set and we have to work hard to make the changes that we want, you know, as adults.

[00:27:34] But yes, I mean, it comes with us to adulthood. You know, it takes us a long time to kind of unwind some of it and, and figure out what else we can do. But like I was saying, I mean, one of the great things is that you recognize now I have so many more choices. There are so many different ways that I can manage things.

[00:27:52] I have more resources I have more support people, hopefully. When you're a child you're limited. There's only [00:28:00] so much that you can do. You obviously don't have independence to exercise a lot of the options that you have when you're older.

[00:28:07] **Laura Reagan:** Yes. Very little control. And you have to do the best with what you have, but when you become an adult and you start to examine, Hmm.

[00:28:15] Now why do I do this? And is this working for me? That's your opportunity to say, how do I want to do things differently? What are the needs that I have that really weren't met when I was younger. And how can I get them met now in a way that's healthy for me and healthy for my relationships.

[00:28:35] **Sharon Martin:** Yeah, absolutely. I mean, and something even just as straightforward as, you know, deciding what relationships you want to continue to have. When you're a child, you get the family that you get basically, um, you don't get to choose, you know, whether you want to continue to have a relationship with your parents when you're living under their roof.

[00:28:57] You know, but you got to be an adult and you [00:29:00] now realize that, wow, I can choose to no longer be friends with this person who continues to, speak abusively towards me. That's an option that I have. And that's, those were not options that you had as a child and it's-sometimes it can just be very empowering to realize that, that there are those options for you now.

[00:29:21] I think sometimes we don't even see them because it's almost like the blinders have been on for so long that you just feel like, oh, I just got to go along with what everybody wants me to do when the way things have always been. Um, but really there's, you know, there's a whole lot out there.

[00:29:38] We don't have to do what we've always done or, you know, be the person that our parents or other people, you know, kind of pushed us into being.

[00:29:47] **Laura Reagan:** Right. You know, and I think one of those things being hyper responsible, like you mentioned, is something that oftentimes people just keep on doing. They go, I just work really hard and, [00:30:00] you know, work, work, work, work, work, and oftentimes that can be a way to sort of not feel the feelings that are still there from, from that childhood. And, you know, it can really kind of interfering with being able to see your options. But the reality is if you look, you know, kind of look within, you don't have to do things the way that you've always done them, just because that's what you learned when you were a kid.

[00:30:28] **Sharon Martin:** Yeah. And I think, you know, the other thing that, that reminds me of Laura is that, you know, I think sometimes, you know, folks, you know, when we start talking about making changes, there's almost this sense or this fear like that, we're suggesting that you do a complete 180 and like, you know, do the opposite of what you've been doing.

[00:30:46] And I think, you know, especially when it comes to something like being very hardworking, being very responsible, taking care of other people, you know, these are

definitely things that are socially acceptable. They are [00:31:00] encouraged in our society to a certain extent and that they definitely have their pluses.

[00:31:04] So it's not like we want to just completely stop being a hard working, responsible person. Oftentimes it's just like, how do we dial it back a little bit? You know, can we do a little bit less of that? Can we learn to balance it out a little bit more with some rest and some fun?

[00:31:22] **Laura Reagan:** Right.

[00:31:22] **Sharon Martin:** You know, so that, um, it kind of works better for you that you're, you know, you're getting the advantages, but not the disadvantages of doing things to the extreme, you know, and that's, that's definitely one of, one of those outcomes of growing up in an alcoholic family, is that things often, you know, we sort of see things as black and white. You know, it's like it's right or it's wrong, or it's good, or it's bad for us. And oftentimes there's, there's a lot of the shades of gray there's things that we can do a little bit of, and that can be in that can work well.

[00:31:57] We don't have to do it [00:32:00] you know, to access or extreme with things we can, you know, have a little bit more self compassion for ourselves and we can set more realistic expectations for ourselves rather than just being so hard on ourselves all the time. You know, almost to that perfectionistic standpoint, sometimes, you know, that, that again is sort of that, that outgrowth of, of, you know, I think the shame and, you know, just being so shut down and needing, you know, the approval from somebody or something outside of yourself to validate that you're worthwhile.

[00:32:36] **Laura Reagan:** Yeah. I'm with ya. I'm with ya.

[00:32:38] **Sharon Martin:** Yeah. So, I mean sort of, you know, just, just thinking about small changes I think is, is often much more doable for people it's less scary obviously than saying, you know, let's, you know, let's overhaul, you know, all of these coping skills that you had.

[00:32:53] Oftentimes it's just some small changes. Some small adjustments can make a big difference for people.

[00:32:58] **Laura Reagan:** That's very true. [00:33:00] Very true. So one thing I wanted to be sure to touch on is if you could tell us kind of what are the common roles that people tend to have in a family where one of the parents is an alcoholic.

[00:33:18] **Sharon Martin:** Sure. Um, I can go over that briefly for you. So, so these family rules, um, for an alcoholic family were developed, by Sharon Webb Shediencruz and I probably butchered her name. So sorry about that. And she did a lot of work with alcoholic families and she came up with these five specific family roles that, she just saw over and over again, working with alcoholic families.

[00:33:44] And it really is pretty remarkable. I think when you, when you hear a little bit about them, my experience is that they really resonate with people. And like I said, it's, um, it's almost just sort of shocking to hear them and go, oh yeah, that was, that was me. That was my role, [00:34:00] or that was my brother. Um, and just sort of how pervasive they really are for people.

[00:34:05] So the first role is, is called the enabler. And this is in most families. It's usually the spouse. If there is one and maybe I should just back up for a second is. These roles are sort of semi fixed within families. People can switch roles. And you can't have more than one role at a time. So it does get a little bit confusing, but I'm just going to tell you sort of the most, common formulation of how this looks.

[00:34:32] So, so usually the enabler is the spouse and the enabler is the primary person who is trying to maintain, the status quo and is trying to you know, sort of unconsciously help the alcoholic continue drinking, but not have the negative consequences disrupt the family system. Um, and then the next one is the hero and this tends to be most [00:35:00] often the oldest child in the family and the hero. You know, I like to think of the hero almost as the perfect child or the very responsible child. That's how some people will, think about the hero. I mean, this is the person who is supposed to really sort of save the family if you will. Is, you know, so good and so perfect all the time. You know, this would be often that parentified child who takes over the adult responsibilities and just make sure everything gets done in the family and a sort of, you know, supposed to bring this positive attention to the family.

[00:35:35] And then after that we've got the scapegoat. And this child, it's really sort of the opposite of the hero. This is, this is the child that receives most of the blame and there's the child who was identified as the problem. So this might be a child who was acting out and getting into trouble. So instead of trying to get attention from positive achievements, like the hero, the scape [00:36:00] goat is trying to get achievement or sorry, is trying to get attention, negative attention essentially. And then the next two roles are the lost child and the mascot. And so these are often the youngest child. And sometimes, you know, if there's a third child here, they may have both of these roles. The last child is kind of, we'll kind of go off into his own world. He will often isolate himself and, you know, kind of be distant. It might be the child who will go you know, sitting in front of video games and kind of trench himself in TV, video games, books, sort of a fantasy world as sort of an escape. And then the mascot is it's really sort of like a class clown. This is the child who tries to diffuse the situation with humor and jokes and goofing around and trying to get people to laugh.

[00:36:48] So, so those are the, you know, those five family roles. And like I said, you know, people can move around within the roles. You know, for example, if. The child who has been the hero [00:37:00] child, you know, does something that, um, causes them to sort of fall from grace here. Sometimes they will become the scapegoat and the scapegoat will become the hero.

[00:37:09] So you end up with situations like that, you know, and obviously it does vary depending on how many children there are in a family. Obviously there's not always this

many children to fulfill all of the roles. And so, you know, what we have found from the research tends to be that most likely, like I said, the role tends to be most strongly associated with the birth order of the children.

[00:37:32] Although certainly, you know, the, the child's sort of innate temperament or personality traits may impact, you know, or gender of children too certainly in some families impacts which role they take. So you know, it's not, um, 100% like this all of the time, but it is pretty interesting too, to think about how everybody plays a part in that system.

[00:37:58] And like I said, like the enabler is [00:38:00] the one who is primarily trying to maintain this system, but everybody's role really does play its part in trying to, um, keep the status quo going in this family as dysfunctional as it may be. That is what the whole family system is working on doing. Does that make sense?

[00:38:18] **Laura Reagan:** Yes. Yes. And that's really helpful. And I mean, I think it is uncanny when you talk to people and I, I personally believe that those roles and dynamics play out the same, whether it's an alcoholic family or just a generally dysfunctional family, you know, you can, you can name the same roles and, see how people do the same behaviors.

[00:38:43] And it's like, how, it's almost like there's a playbook. It's like, how do we all know what to do, but it's pretty fascinating. So that's why I wanted to share it because when I've showed those roles to people who grew up in alcoholic or dysfunctional families, they're always [00:39:00] just like you said, like, oh, oh my gosh, that's me.

[00:39:02] And that's my sister and that's my brother and this, I think this was my mom. And, you know, so. It's really, um, I think it just helps organize something that seems so overwhelming when it's actually your own family and just to look at it on paper and go, oh my gosh, this is exactly what we did.

[00:39:20] **Sharon Martin:** Yeah. And I think maybe there's some element that maybe helps break down some of the stigma and isolation around it too.

[00:39:27] Just when you realize like no it was not just your family who had these roles. It was not just your family who was acting like this, not just your family who had this big secret. Unfortunately there are tons and tons of families who are struggling with very similar issues and it plays out in very similar ways, but you don't realize that because we're not talking about it.

[00:39:53] Yeah and to me the other thing that that's kind of fascinating about it too, is just, you know, even in healthier families, [00:40:00] siblings within a family can have such different experiences. But I think this is very poignant too, just to recognize that two or three or four siblings in this family can have such a vastly different experience of growing up in the alcoholic family in terms of what was expected of them and how they went about trying to cope with it.

[00:40:23] And what the outcome has been for them, what they continue to struggle with as an adult.

[00:40:29] **Laura Reagan:** Yeah.

[00:40:30] **Sharon Martin:** It's so interesting just how, how different that experience can be for people.

[00:40:34] **Laura Reagan:** Yeah. It's so interesting. I often talk to people who will say, you know, maybe it was just them and the younger sibling, and they'll say, why do I feel so terrible and so, you know, wounded by my childhood, but I look at my younger sibling and they really don't seem to suffer the same way.

[00:40:54] And I always say, well, what did they have that you didn't have. [00:41:00] And they're like, I don't know. And I'm like you, the older sibling who was, you know, they're kind of buffering and helping to sooth and ease things as much as possible for the younger sibling, which is, you know, not always the case.

[00:41:14] They can't always do that. But it's a pretty common scenario.

[00:41:20] **Sharon Martin:** Yes their often are the protector. Um, you know, that's, I think part of that hero that often that oldest child is the one who keeps the little one safe.

[00:41:30] **Laura Reagan:** Yeah. Which is, you know, then the older one misses out even more on the normal developmental tasks of childhood and doesn't get to be just a kid. Oh, absolutely. Yeah. And that's often, often the feeling that people have is that they, they didn't get a chance to be kids to just play and be carefree and do normal childhood activities. It was- they had to grow up really fast.

[00:41:59] Yeah. [00:42:00] So for last part of our conversation, I would like to ask a question that was submitted by one of our listeners. I think this is so fun that someone who was listening, found out, cause I told them that I was going to be interviewing you. And they said, oh I want to ask her a question. So this is the question it's from Elizabeth.

[00:42:24] And she said, as someone who grew up with an alcoholic father, I personally know the burden that alcohol addiction places on families from a very early age. She said that she did in her therapy, a genogram where she mapped out characteristics of her family relationships and realized that there was transgenerational alcoholism and substance abuse on her father's side of the family, especially among the males. And so she wants to know what can you say, Sharon, about what are the [00:43:00] drivers that cause individuals to repeat those behaviors across generations? Because she's wondering why someone who grew up in a family where their parent was an alcoholic would grow up and do the same thing, be an alcoholic.

[00:43:16] **Sharon Martin:** Yes. It's a fabulous question. And one that I think on the surface is a big conundrum, like why would you repeat, you know, this very dysfunctional system, you know, how devastating it was for you and you don't want to do the same to your children. And I really do believe that that is true for people, they don't want to repeat this cycle.

[00:43:37] You know? So interestingly, I think we should probably just throw in one piece is that, you know, we know that addiction has a genetic component, so that's part of it is that some people are more prone to becoming addicted to alcohol or drugs or other kinds of substances or things. So that's part of why we [00:44:00] see alcoholism or drug addiction you know, going through generation upon generation.

[00:44:06] But the other part is that these family dynamics get repeated over and over again for a number of reasons. Like one is, you know, this is what was modeled to you. And like we were talking about is that this is how you learn how to solve problems. This is how you learn to deal with painful feelings. This is how you learn to relate to other people. This is how you learned how to feel about yourself. Those basic ideas about your self worth come from that experience in that alcoholic family. And so if there really isn't a lot of work that's done on recovery and learning new ways of coping, solving problems, different ways of thinking and feeling and really building some self-worth, some self-esteem, whenever you want to call it, we don't have anything else to work with.

[00:44:59] We know [00:45:00] that that's not what we want to repeat. But unless we have I think really sort of accepted what has happened to us and really done a lot of work on healing and learning some different ways of dealing with, with the world, we essentially don't have any new ways of doing it. And that's part of what happens in the alcoholic family is- it's a very closed system.

[00:45:26] You know, the denial is so strong that no new information can penetrate that. Right. If, you know, if somebody tries to, you know, bring in some new information or a suggestion or an offer of help or something, it's often met with rejection. There's that feeling like we don't even have a problem, so why would we need that, you know, counseling or that AA group, or, you know, whatever, or there's different, you know, coping strategies.

[00:45:52] So, so often that is what is happening is that people just aren't, aren't really learning another way of doing things. [00:46:00] And I don't know, I feel like I keep saying this. I mean, it's like, it's a lot of work. I think, I think the truth is that it's always easier to just repeat what we already know than it is going to be to learn something new. And in this context where the, like the talking about learning something new involves having to uncover all of that buried pain from years and years and years of painful feelings that we have smushed down so far. It's a lot of work to pull them up. And frankly, it's very unpleasant. It's very painful for people to start to feel painful feelings when they have been trying so, so hard to not feel those feelings.

[00:46:47] So, I mean, it's definitely not that people want to repeat these patterns. And I think a lot of times people have good intentions, but sometimes they also, don't not everyone has access to help and information. I think, you know, [00:47:00] we take it for granted that, that everybody can go to counseling or, you know, can get the books or that there are a lot of things out there more and more, but there are still, you know, some people who don't have a lot of access, but things like just being able to listen to this podcast or going and checking out some books from the library is at least a starting place. I mean, it's probably not gonna be able to change everything for people, but the, the 12 step programs are also widely accessible and those are a great resource. I mean, they have meetings by phone and by internet too, if people can't physically get to those kinds of self-help programs too. So I dunno, I think now I'm just babbling.

[00:47:49] **Laura Reagan:** No, but I think that

[00:47:51] **Sharon Martin:** Hopefully that will answer some of it for her.

[00:47:53] **Laura Reagan:** Yeah, no, I think that's great. Thank you. And I think what you're kind of saying, but didn't say directly so I'll just [00:48:00] say it is that people don't always have the self-awareness to realize that they're repeating the pattern. And just like they had to not see how things really were in their family of origin, they can't really see how things really are now. But it's possible too, but it's just, they aren't intentionally repeating it. It's unconscious. No.

[00:48:26] **Sharon Martin:** Yeah, I think and I think that shame and really the feeling of helplessness that there are a lot of people who are really almost just by even by the time they get to early adulthood of really just sort of given up.

[00:48:41] Like they just don't see that it's possible to do anything else. And the thing is that for most people drinking and substance use begins early, shockingly early. So, you know, when you talk about that, self-awareness, I mean, it's hard when you're [00:49:00] 13 to have a lot of self-awareness generally speaking. And for a lot of times, by the time they're 13, 14, 15, they have already started heavy drinking or drug use, like it's already started. So also it's challenging.

[00:49:14] **Laura Reagan:** Yeah. Yeah, exactly. It's like the numbing has already begun and it just kind of maintains and shows up in different ways throughout the teens and twenties and often thirties, forties, and then the person goes, oh man. Wow. Like what happened? How did I get here? I need to get help.

[00:49:33] **Sharon Martin:** Yeah.

[00:49:34] **Laura Reagan:** Well, Sharon, thank you so much for coming back to Therapy Chat to talk about this. I think this was really helpful and fascinating conversation. And where can people find more of what you're doing?



[00:49:48] **Sharon Martin:** Sure. My website is [livewellwithsharonmartin.com](http://livewellwithsharonmartin.com). So from there you can find, find everything you need.

[00:49:56] **Laura Reagan:** Wonderful. I'll put a link to that in the show notes. And [00:50:00] Sharon, thank you so much. I just really enjoyed this and I might ask you to come back again to talk a little more, so, all right. Well you take care.

[00:50:09] **Sharon Martin:** Thanks Laura. Bye.

[00:50:14] **Laura Reagan:**

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