

## Therapy Chat Episode 308



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[00:00:00] **Laura Reagan:** Therapy chat podcast, episode 308. This is the therapy chat podcast with Laura Reagan, LCSW-C. The information shared in this podcast is not a substitute for seeking help from a licensed mental health professional. And now here's your host, Laura Reagan LCSW-C.

[00:00:34] **Laura Reagan:** Thank you to sunset lake CBD for sponsoring this week. Use promo code chat for 20% off your entire order@sunsetlakecbd.com. Sunset lake CBD is a farmer owned, small business that ships craft CBD products directly from their farm outside of Burlington, Vermont to your door. Sunset lake CBD has something for everyone.

[00:00:54] **Laura Reagan:** They offer tinctures, edibles, solves, and coffee designed to help with sleep, stress and sore muscles. Sunset lake CBD customer support, regenerative agriculture that preserves the health of the land and creates meaningful employment in the community. Farm workers are paid a living wage and employees own the majority of the company.

[00:01:13] **Laura Reagan:** Remember use promo code chat to get 20% off your entire order@sunsetlakecbd.com.

[00:01:23] **Laura Reagan:** Hey everyone. It's me. Laura Reagan just wanted to make sure that you know about what I've got going on this summer. I don't think I've really talked about it much here, which is silly, but in case you didn't hear, I did start a second podcast called trauma chat, which is really for anyone who wants to understand what trauma is and how it shows up in our lives.

[00:01:49] **Laura Reagan:** As you've heard me say, if you've listened to this show, I've mentioned a million times that people tend to think that trauma is something that happens to someone else, something horrific and unthinkable unspeakable. And that is true. Trauma is that, but it's also experiences that are very commonly shared among many of us - most of us on trauma chat. I break down what trauma is in hopefully understandable language that's not stigmatizing. I know I couldn't have possibly captured every thought there is about trauma and every aspect of trauma and how it shows up, but I hope that trauma chat will be helpful to people who really don't understand what trauma is, and may be wondering, do I have trauma, you know, or wanting to better understand what someone they care about is going through. And most importantly, how to get help if you have experienced trauma, what to look for, how to describe your experiences or how. Find the words that, that name, what you've been through so that you can then connect with whatever type of resource support, whether it's therapy or a podcast that you'd like to listen to, to learn more about it, or an article, another website.

[00:03:10] **Laura Reagan:** This is my hope in creating trauma chat. And the second part of that is the new trauma therapists network community that I'm creating. It's unbelievable to say this because I've been laboring behind the scenes to bring this to you for a long time. Starting in around 2018 is when I first had the idea.

[00:03:32] **Laura Reagan:** And then the process of getting from there to here has been slow and with many twists and turns, but I'm creating a community for people who have experienced trauma to find help for trauma therapists, to find other trauma therapists to network with and refer to, and gather and collaborate and share ideas and hopefully come together in person in, in gatherings that I don't know if there'll be able to happen in 2021, but maybe by 2022, we can have in-person gatherings of trauma therapists to provide support to one another and combat the isolation of trauma work. Even if you work in a large agency or group practice, trauma work is so isolating. It's just part of the nature of it. And connecting with other people who get it is so valuable. The participants in my trauma therapists, consult groups share how useful they find them to be because we're in our offices doing our work, and then we go home and it can be really hard to receive the same kind of support that you give to your clients.

[00:04:43] **Laura Reagan:** So I hope that trauma therapists network will be a useful resource for you, whether you are. Trying to find more information about trauma, or if you are a trauma therapist, yourself to learn more, please go to [traumatherapistnetwork.com](http://traumatherapistnetwork.com). The website is not live yet as of June 28th when I'm recording this, but it will be live by August 1st, if all goes well.

[00:05:09] **Laura Reagan:** And hopefully there may be even a soft launch before. A beta version. So please go to [traumatherapistsnetwork.com](https://traumatherapistsnetwork.com), where you can find a free download and sign up to be notified. As soon as it officially goes live, whether you are a therapist or just someone who wants to learn more about trauma, there's a download there for you, different ones for each group.

[00:05:33] **Laura Reagan:** And I hope that this resource that I've really created from the heart will bring healing to more people. I really want people who have experienced trauma to be able to find the right kind of support. And that's why I created the trauma therapists network. I hope you will join me there. Like I said, you can get more information by going to [www.traumatherapistnetwork.com](https://www.traumatherapistnetwork.com), where you can sign up to be notified as soon as the official website goes live. Which will be in August of 2021. If you're hearing this after August, 2021, go there and hopefully you will find the site and you'll see everything that it has to offer. I cannot wait. This is such a labor of love, something that I've really poured my heart into.

[00:06:21] **Laura Reagan:** And I'm just so excited for you to see it. Thank you so much for your support.

[00:06:30] **Laura Reagan:** Hi, welcome back to therapy chat. I'm your host, Laura Reagan. I hope you got through the holidays with your family. If you spend time with your family and you're refreshed, or like so many people, you may have decided that it's the time to start therapy or dive back into therapy, those family dynamics really seem to be amplified during the holidays when we have these fantasies about how wonderful and loving and happy everything's going to be. And everyone that is going to be, as we gather for holiday celebrations, but all of those old patterns of dynamics do tend to rear their heads in those moments, which is why I last week shared with you my interview with Sharon Martin about setting boundaries.

[00:07:21] **Laura Reagan:** Sharon is one of my favorite go-to people to have as a guest, talking about family dynamics and healthy family dynamics. So this week we're going to hear a replay of one of Sharon's previous interviews talking about unhealthy family dynamics and patterns. You know, we don't always realize how dysfunctional the patterns can be in our families when it's just what we know.

[00:07:51] **Laura Reagan:** It's just, what's normal to us. But then when we become adults and we go out there and try to have relationships and we're having all these problems. So we have no idea why. Oftentimes the answer is held in our family of origin, relationships, communication patterns, and

boundaries. So if you think that might be you, here's an interesting episode for you to listen to from Sharon and I hope that it will be helpful to make you realize that you're not alone in the way you might feel about your relationship with your family of origin. I think it's one of the biggest reasons why I created trauma therapist network is that people commonly have. Trauma and attachment wounds from early childhood that we don't realize are still affecting us, but they are.

[00:08:41] **Laura Reagan:** And when you find a therapist who specializes in helping people, who've been through the same things that you've been through, it really makes a difference in the healing process. So I'm going to be making an announcement soon about what's coming up with trauma therapists network. But in a nutshell, the members who are currently the therapists who are currently subscribed to trauma therapists network are our founding members.

[00:09:08] **Laura Reagan:** And by joining early, all of them will be locked in at the same monthly membership price for having their listing in the trauma therapist network. But the exciting news is that I'm adding more value for the, the registration price, which is currently \$33, but it's going to go up on February 1st, 2021. 33 a month and February 1st, 2021, it goes up to reflect the new offerings that I'm including for therapists who subscribed to the listing in the trauma therapist, network trauma therapist directory.

[00:09:46] **Laura Reagan:** So if you're a trauma therapist and you want to get your name out there and get locked in on this founding member pricing with all of the benefits that entails, join us. Now you can go to trauma therapists, network.com and you'll see the sign up as a therapist link and just go right there, sign up and we'll see you there.

[00:10:07] **Laura Reagan:** Let's dive into my conversation with Sharon Martin about dysfunctional family dynamics and through the month of December, since the winter holidays can be very intense for so many. And really bring back those memories of what was missing during childhood. Unfortunately, even as we're trying to create or recreate this fantasy of perfection that we dream of, you'll be hearing from Sharon all month long with replays of some of her various episodes, including one on getting through the.

[00:10:41] **Laura Reagan:** And we'll have another episode about putting yourself first and finding boundaries with kindness at the end of the month, then in January, the first episode of the year is an interview with my guest, Dr. Lindsay Gibson on the topic of self care for children of emotionally immature parents, which I think will again, resonate for very many of us.

[00:11:08] **Laura Reagan:** And those of you who are therapists, who are listening, certainly these dynamics and issues are common for your clients and for most of us as therapists as well. So I'll be back in touch with you soon until then take care.

[00:11:26] **Laura Reagan:** Hi, welcome back to therapy. 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.

**Sharon Martin:** Of course, my pleasure, Laura, 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, uh, all the different things that you're doing so often with my clients.

[00:11:59] **Laura Reagan:** 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. Great. Yeah. So, um, let's just start off if we can by you telling our audience for anybody who's not familiar with your work, who you are and a bit about what you do. Sure.

[00:12:19] **Sharon Martin:** Well, I am a psychotherapist and I work in San Jose, California.

[00:12:25] **Sharon Martin:** 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 kind of, you know, put in an, into some sense of understanding what some of the common issues are.

[00:12:59] **Sharon Martin:** Um, 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 imperfect for psych central. I'm gonna write for some other places as well here and there, but I often write about these same topics. So like you said, you can find out, find out more about what I'm doing.

[00:13:16] **Sharon Martin:** And a lot of the writing that I do either there, or on my website

[00:13:20] **Laura Reagan:** 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.

[00:13:34] **Sharon Martin:** Thank you.

[00:13:34] **Sharon Martin:** I'm glad. I'm glad that it is helpful. Yeah.

[00:13:37] **Laura Reagan:** 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.

[00:14:04] **Laura Reagan:** And I know that what you mentioned, codependency perfectionism and people, pleasing behaviors tend to be really common 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 family dynamics are like in a family where one of the parents is an alcoholic.

[00:14:32] **Sharon Martin:** Sure.

[00:14:32] **Sharon Martin:** I mean, we can kind of get into what some of the, 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, that you, the listeners grew up in. Um, although I think you, you may find that some of it rings true for you and maybe does not, 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 of the alcoholic is, and the age of the child, um, you know, when a parent is in different sort of phases of the drinking, if you will, or if they're in recovery, um, that will certainly have a big impact on how, how the alcoholism affects the child.

[00:15:24] **Sharon Martin:** And then I think there's also going to be some mitigating factors about, you know, um, if there are other support people or other support systems that are, um, helping again, sort of mitigate some of the challenges that are going on, but just to kind of, to start us off. I think one of the primary things that happens as the alcoholism progresses is that really the, 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. And so everything sort of becomes

about that. And, and each individual plays a part in it really unknowingly a 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. Um, and I think this is the part that can be really hard to understand is, you know, why do we, as the family members of the alcoholic, you know, continue to do these things that sort of don't make a lot of sense in some ways that enabled the alcoholic to continue the drinking behavior that we all want him or her to stop.

[00:16:50] **Sharon Martin:** Um, 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 is kind of making the rules and sometimes these, these kind of rules are not necessarily written down or even spoken out loud.

[00:17:12] **Sharon Martin:** They're 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, you know, in the late afternoons, because by that point, mom has already had too much to drink. 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. Um, and so again, we 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.

[00:17:59] **Sharon Martin:** 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 weight, I think, for people to carry, you know, this big secret, this big source of shame that we can't talk about, that we can't get help for.

[00:18:22] **Sharon Martin:** So I think there's a lot of really kind of suffering in silence that the family does, um, feeling isolated. Um, and like I said, ashamed of what's going on and there's, there's a lot of pressures. You know, 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.

[00:18:50] **Laura Reagan:** Yeah. 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 know, we don't let people know what goes on inside of our home.

[00:19:15] **Laura Reagan:** 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, you know?

[00:19:26] **Sharon Martin:** 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, you know, especially, you know, 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.

[00:19:51] **Sharon Martin:** 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 family, that there's this unspoken tension and stress within the family.

[00:20:18] **Sharon Martin:** 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, you know, very, you know, fundamental pieces of a secure attachment, you know, and I think just the ability to trust other people and, um, form healthy relationships in childhood and in adulthood.

[00:20:45] **Sharon Martin:** And so those are sometimes those pieces that are missing, um, 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, um, mental illness that's untreated. Um, sometimes that can have a very similar effect.

[00:21:06] **Sharon Martin:** A parent who's extremely depressed or suicidal has a, has a lot of those same dynamics as well.

[00:21:14] **Laura Reagan:** 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. Right. Waiting 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.

[00:21:39] **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, then, then 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. You know, families, you know, don't want this disruption of, you know, the sense, like somebody who's going to come in and start telling us what to do.

[00:22:03] **Sharon Martin:** Or of course, you know, children often are afraid, you know, their parents are gonna split up.

[00:22:07] **Laura Reagan:** Somehow the children will lose their safety and security.

[00:22:11] **Sharon Martin:** Yeah, they'll have to leave their school. Um, 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.

[00:22:26] **Sharon Martin:** And yet there's still going to be fear of the unknown. 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.

[00:22:50] **Sharon Martin:** I can, you know, we sort of learn, we learn to anticipate to some extent, you know, you kind of get that hypervigilance in that real attunement to what's going on so that you can try to keep yourself safe, right. That can sometimes literally be, you know, making a beeline for your bedroom and closing the door as a child so that you can avoid having a confrontation with your father or something like that.

[00:23:16] **Sharon Martin:** You know? So you, so you sort of learn how to navigate that and, you know, there's the concern that. You know, if we have a different family dynamic, a different setup, you know, like I said, the parents get divorced or we have to go live with our grandparents or, you know, something like, then I won't know how to deal with that situation, which, you know, chances are, you know, we could figure out how to deal with that situation, but we all are afraid of the unknown.

[00:23:40] **Sharon Martin:** I think that's just part of human nature is that we, you know, we worry about what we can't, you know, we can't see and we can't touch and we don't know what it's going to be. And so that creates that anxiety, um, that bubbles up in us, when we think about, you know, asking for help or getting some support, um, from other people about, about our family situation.

[00:24:01] **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 that in the way they can understand as being sick. You know, they're afraid that if anybody finds out just how not okay. They are. The child will lose them somehow.

[00:24:23] **Sharon Martin:** Yes. And I think going along with that, you know, there's also this feeling of, if, you know, 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. It's like, if that has been your job is to make sure that, you know, mom gets into bed every night and the cigarettes put out.

[00:24:46] **Sharon Martin:** So, you know, that's not a danger, you know, if those have been your jobs in the family, then there's that worry of. Oh, you know, I don't, I don't know what's going to happen to mom if I'm not around or, you know, 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 and a lot of that care-taking that, that we take on as kids, because we love our parents, you know, no matter I think, you know, the abuse or the dysfunction, you know, we're attached to them and we care about them through the only parents. Yeah, of course, of course. And we feel protective, um, and wanna make sure that they are safe.

[00:25:26] **Sharon Martin:** And so, yeah, that's one of those pieces that oftentimes, you know, the roles almost get reversed in alcoholic families where, you know, the children are taking care of the parents instead of the parents taking care of the children, because, you know, the parent is just, you know, not able to fulfill those kinds of responsibilities, whether it's, you know, basic things like, you know, cooking meals or paying bills, or certainly the emotional caretaking is often lacking.

[00:25:51] **Sharon Martin:** The, you know, you can imagine the alcoholics very preoccupied, um, and very shut down emotionally that, you know, they really don't have the ability to certainly be in touch with their own emotions or not a, not a wide range of them. Certainly. Um, they're often a couple of emotions, like a lot of times anger.

[00:26:10] **Sharon Martin:** That is all you see, but they can't nurture, you know, you as a child emotionally and really encourage you to have much of an emotional range, um, or. Allow you to express a variety of different emotions. The, you know, like I said, the whole family really gets shut down emotionally because it's so painful.

[00:26:31] **Sharon Martin:** You know, we really, you know, now call it families. People don't really know how to deal with the painful feelings. And so the way they deal with them is, you know, the alcoholic is drinking and sort of numbing out all the emotions that way, you know, and for the other families, there's a lot of just sort of repressing, you know, pushing down of the feelings.

[00:26:48] **Sharon Martin:** Um, and sometimes, you know, finding other ways to kind of numb out with other substances or food is a big one, of course. Um, or even just, you know, TV, electronics just kinda zoning out is, you know, sometimes the way people cope.

[00:27:02] **Laura Reagan:** Yes. And I would say from my experience, I want to bring up two dynamics that I've heard a lot.

[00:27:10] **Laura Reagan:** One is where the 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 for the mom, which really puts a child in a terrible position.

[00:27:38] **Sharon Martin:** Yep.

[00:27:39] **Sharon Martin:** 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.

[00:27:47] **Laura Reagan:** And sometimes they're put in unsafe situations by the alcoholic.

[00:27:51] **Sharon Martin:** Absolutely. Or they were to wait in the car while the alcoholic went in to drink in the bar. Or like you said, the other one is, you know, go find your mother, go find your father who's out, drinking somewhere and bring them home safely.

[00:28:04] **Sharon Martin:** You know, that became the child's job, which of course, you know, is completely inappropriate for a child to have that kind of responsibility. But yeah, sometimes that does happen.

[00:28:14] **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, you know, they have to like, they're like the stand in for the other parent, but it also, you know, it doesn't like it gives no awareness to what the child, maybe the child has an argument with a friend at school that day. Who are you 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?

[00:28:53] **Sharon Martin:** Yeah.

[00:28:55] **Sharon Martin:** You know, 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, you know, the problems within the family. And like you said, like the problems that they're having, you know, with their peers or in other areas of their life, it's both, it's just, it's not safe.

[00:29:14] **Sharon Martin:** 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, you know, everybody in the family is preoccupied with other things, again, sort of maintaining this dysfunctional family system and that nobody has the emotional wherewithal, you know, to sit down with Johnny and ask him how he's feeling and how his day was.

[00:29:39] **Sharon Martin:** Because again, this starts, I mean, it's, 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. 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.

[00:30:01] **Sharon Martin:** 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, you know, these kinds of challenging feelings that sort of puts the whole system in jeopardy. The system is maintained by everybody keeping their mouth shut.

[00:30:21] **Sharon Martin:** They're keeping their feelings bottled up and, you know, everyone just focusing on, okay, let's just, you know, do our best to try to, you know, tip toe tip toe around the alcoholic and you know, the problems that are associated with that, you know, it's very much that sense of like, I'm just walking on eggshells here, you know, I'm just trying to maintain the status quo,

not rock the boat, not cause any problems, not introduce anything new to the family.

[00:30:50] **Sharon Martin:** Yeah.

[00:30:50] **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?

[00:31:12] **Laura Reagan:** Am I going to find happy dad, am I going to find. Drunk dad, am I going to find dad had crashed his car during the day? Am I going to find over dead?

[00:31:24] **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.

[00:31:35] **Sharon Martin:** And I think, you know, like you said, it's probably more pronounced in single parent families, but I think kids, you know, when their parents are together still experience that, that feeling of dread and anxiety about not knowing. And like you said, there's, you know, there's that, hyper-vigilance again, that's just one piece of how like the whole family is focused in, on what's going on with the alcoholic as a way of like self-protecting I have to, 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.

[00:32:13] **Laura Reagan:** Right. And that goes back to what you said about those coping skills. And I know people sometimes talk about coping skills is 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.

[00:32:29] **Sharon Martin:** Yes, yes, I, yeah.

[00:32:30] **Sharon Martin:** I kind of used the word unhealthy, but essentially the same thing, but yeah, like we all develop coping skills to get through life. I think, you know, it's not, we don't, I guess, you know, just for the simplicity of our conversation, you know, 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.

[00:32:49] **Sharon Martin:** They're not, they don't nicely fall into categories like that necessarily, but, um, some definitely work better for us in some ultimately causes more problems, you know, in the way I, I really think about this is that. Living in the, in the alcoholic family, it's very stressful. It's very challenging. Um, and like we've been talking about, you know, kids from a very young age, they learn how to deal with that.

[00:33:16] **Sharon Martin:** They learn how to navigate that system in order to keep themselves safe, emotionally and physically the best that they are able to. But we don't, 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, you know, sort of the healthy coping skills. So we just do the best that we can.

[00:33:35] **Sharon Martin:** And then this is kind of where we end up in adulthood, you know, sort of 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, the best that we could do when we were children.

[00:33:58] **Sharon Martin:** Um, and with the resources that we have. But it's often in adulthood or maybe, you know, an adolescence where you start to realize like, this isn't really working that well for me, you know, this being, you know, super responsible and taking care of, you know, my parents, you know, when I was 10, you know, that was like a pretty good coping strategy for me in that family.

[00:34:21] **Sharon Martin:** But you know, here I am when I'm 30 and you know, I'm burnt out at work and I'm, you know, resentful because of, you know, 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, you know, Hey, maybe this isn't working out so well for me anymore.

[00:34:39] **Sharon Martin:** 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.

[00:35:00] **Sharon Martin:** Um, and maybe the, the, the, the connection is not always obvious, like you were saying at the beginning of our conversations, but, but often that's what's happened is that, you know, they are really things that,

um, worked well for 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.

[00:35:30] **Sharon Martin:** 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 all these different, but you know, like we obviously can change, but 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.

[00:35:49] **Sharon Martin:** But yes. I mean, it comes with, 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.

[00:36:07] **Sharon Martin:** I have more resources. I have more support people, hopefully, you know, when you're a child year, you're limited. I mean, there's, you know, only so much that you can do. You obviously don't have independence, you know, to, to, um, exercise a lot of the options that you have when you're older. Yes.

[00:36:23] **Laura Reagan:** Very little control.

[00:36:24] **Laura Reagan:** And you have to do the best with what you have, but when you become an adult and you start to examine, Hmm. Now why do I do this? And isn't working for me, that's your opportunity to say, how do I want to do things differently? What are the. You know, what are the needs that I have that really weren't met when I was younger.

[00:36:43] **Laura Reagan:** And how can I get the met now in a way that's healthy for me and healthy for my relationships.

[00:36:53] **Laura Reagan:** Hey everybody. I wanted to take a quick minute to tell you about my experience with sunset lake CBD. I first tried CBD when my integrative doctor recommended it for chronic neck pain intention that tends to wake me up at night. I really liked sunset lake CBD products. The full spectrum CBD tincture is mild tasting compared to others I've tried and I find it works quickly. It doesn't feel sedating, but it does have a pleasant calming effect. And I also like the CBD gummies. They taste good and they work well. So if you're

looking for a craft CBD product that comes directly from a farm outside of Burlington, Vermont, that's a producer for Ben and Jerry's ice cream.

[00:37:30] **Laura Reagan:** You're going to want to check out sunset lake CBD and remember therapy chat listeners get 20% off using the promo code chat. So go to sunset lake cbd.com and use the promo code chat.

[00:37:46] **Sharon Martin:** Yeah, absolutely. I mean, and something even just as straightforward as, you know, deciding what relationships you want to continue to have, you know, 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, you know, but you got to be an adult and you now realize that, wow, I can choose to no longer be friends with this person who continues to, you know, speak abusively towards me.

[00:38:19] **Sharon Martin:** That's an option that I have. And that's, those were not options that you had as, as, as a child. And it's, you know, sometimes it can just be very empowering to realize that there are those options for you. Now. 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 and the way things have always been.

[00:38:45] **Sharon Martin:** Um, but really there's, you know, there's a whole, whole lot out there. 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.

[00:38:58] **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, you know, I just work really hard and, 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.

[00:39:39] **Sharon Martin:** 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 the

sphere like that. We're suggesting that you do a complete 180 and like, you know, Do the opposite of what you've been doing.

[00:39:57] **Sharon Martin:** 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 encouraged in our society to a certain extent and that they definitely have their pluses.

[00:40:15] **Sharon Martin:** So it's not like we want to just completely stop being a hard-working, um, responsible person. Oftentimes it's just like, can 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, right. You know, so, 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, 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.

[00:41:08] **Sharon Martin:** We don't have to do it, 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.

[00:41:47] **Sharon Martin:** Yeah.

[00:41:47] **Laura Reagan:** I'm with ya. I'm ya.

[00:41:48] **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 and 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. Oftentimes it's just some small changes.

[00:42:06] **Sharon Martin:** Some small adjustments can make a big difference for people.

[00:42:09] **Laura Reagan:** That's very true. 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.

[00:42:29] **Sharon Martin:** Um, I can go over that briefly for you.

[00:42:31] **Sharon Martin:** So, so these family roles, um, from an alcoholic family were developed, um, by Sharon Webb, shader Cruz. And I probably butchered her name. So sorry about that. But, um, and she did a lot of work, um, with alcoholic families and she came up with these five, um, specific family roles that, um, she just saw over and over again, working with alcoholic families.

[00:42:55] **Sharon Martin:** 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, or that was my brother. Um, and just sort of how pervasive they really are for people.

[00:43:16] **Sharon Martin:** 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, um, these roles are sort of semi fixed within families. Um, 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, um, common formulation of how this looks.

[00:43:43] **Sharon Martin:** 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, um, 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 often the oldest child in the family and the hero.

[00:44:15] **Sharon Martin:** 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, um, Think about the hero. I mean, this is the person who is supposed to really sort of save the family if you will, is 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 in a sort of, you know, supposed to bring this positive attention to the family.

[00:44:46] **Sharon Martin:** And then after that we've got the scapegoat and this child. It's really sort of the opposite of, of the hero. This is, this is the child that receives most of the blame or 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 scapegoat is trying to get achievement or sorry, is trying to get attention, negative attention, essentially.

[00:45:16] **Sharon Martin:** 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.

[00:45:36] **Sharon Martin:** It might be the child who will go in, you know, sit in front of video games and kind of in trench himself in TV, video games, books, sort of a fantasy world as sort of an escape. And then the mask. 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.

[00:45:59] **Sharon Martin:** 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 like the child who has been the hero child, you know, does something that caused them to sort of fall from grace here. Sometimes they will become the scapegoat and the scapegoat will become the hero.

[00:46:20] **Sharon Martin:** 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 trials. Um, 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, the birth order of the children.

[00:46:43] **Sharon Martin:** Although certainly, you know, 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 it's not, you know, it's not, um, 100% like this all of the time, but it is pretty interesting to, to think about how everybody plays a part in that system.

[00:47:09] **Sharon Martin:** And like I said, like the enabler is 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?

[00:47:30] **Laura Reagan:** 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 name the same rules and, and see how people do the same behaviors.

[00:47:54] **Laura Reagan:** And it's like, how, it's almost like there's a playbook. It's like, how do I y'all know what to do, but it's, 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 just like you said, like, oh, oh my gosh, that's me.

[00:48:13] **Laura Reagan:** 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.

[00:48:31] **Sharon Martin:** And I think maybe there's some element that maybe helps break down some of the stigma and isolation around it too.

[00:48:38] **Sharon Martin:** Just when you realize like, no, it was not just your family had these roles. It was not just your family who, you know, was acting like this, not just your family who had this big secret. There were, you know, unfortunately there are tons and tons of family. 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.

[00:49:04] **Sharon Martin:** Yeah. And to me, the other thing that that's kind of fascinating about it too, is just, you know, even in healthier families, siblings within, within a family can have such different experiences. But I think this is very pointed to just, you know, recognize that, you know, 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.

[00:49:34] **Sharon Martin:** Um, and what the, you know, sort of the outcome has been for them, what they continue to struggle with as an adult. Yeah. It's interesting. Just how, how different that experience can be for people.

[00:49:44] **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. And I always say, well, what did they have that you didn't have? 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 Sue them, ease things as much as possible for the younger sibling, which is, you know, not always the case.

[00:50:30] **Sharon Martin:** They can't always do that but it's a pretty common scenario. Yes, they are often are the protector. Um, you know, that's, I think part of that hero that often that oldest child is the one who, you know, keeps the little ones safe.

[00:50:41] **Laura Reagan:** Yeah. Which is, you know, then the older one misses out even more on the normal developmental tasks of childhood.

[00:50:49] **Laura Reagan:** And doesn't get to be, just get.

[00:50:53] **Sharon Martin:** 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, you know, do normal, you know, childhood activities. It was, you know, they had to grow up really fast.

[00:51:12] **Laura Reagan:** So for the 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, um, 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, this is the questions from Elizabeth.

[00:51:37] **Laura Reagan:** 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 Gina Graham, 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.

[00:52:05] **Laura Reagan:** Um, especially among the males. And so she wants to know what can you say, Sharon, about what are the drivers that caused 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.

[00:52:28] **Sharon Martin:** Yes. It's a fabulous question. And one that I think on the surface is, you know, a big conundrum, like why would you repeat 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, that is true for people.

[00:52:47] **Sharon Martin:** They don't want to repeat this cycle. You know? So interestingly, I think we should probably just throw in one, 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. You know, becoming addicted to alcohol or drugs or other kinds of substances or things.

[00:53:10] **Sharon Martin:** Um, so that's part of why we see alcoholism or drug addiction, um, you know, going through generation upon generation. But the other part is that these family dynamics get repeated over and over again for a number of reasons. 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.

[00:53:35] **Sharon Martin:** This is how you learn to deal with painful feelings. Um, this is how you learn to relate to other people. This is how you learned how to feel about yourself. Um, those basic ideas about your self-worth, you know, 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, you know, really building some self-worth some self-esteem whenever you want to call it, we don't have anything else to work with.

[00:54:11] **Sharon Martin:** Like we know 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.

[00:54:38] **Sharon Martin:** You know, the denial is so strong that no new information can penetrate that. Right. If, you know, 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, you know, 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 where there's different, you know, coping strategies.

[00:55:04] **Sharon Martin:** So, so often that is what is happening is that, you know, people are just, aren't, aren't really learning another way of doing things. And I don't know, I feel like I keep saying this. I mean, it's like, it's a lot of work. Um, you know, 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.

[00:55:27] **Sharon Martin:** And in this context where the, like the talking about learning something new, um, involves having to uncover all of that buried pain from, you know, years and years and years of painful feelings that we have smushed down, you know, so far it's a lot of work to pull them up. And frankly, it's very unpleasant.

[00:55:49] **Sharon Martin:** It's very painful for people to start to feel painful feelings when they're, you know, they have been trying so, so hard to not feel those feelings. So, I mean, it's definitely not that people want to repeat. Patterns, you know, 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.

[00:56:11] **Sharon Martin:** I think, you know, we take it for granted that, that everybody can go to counseling or, you know, can get the books or that, I mean, there are a lot of things out there more and more, but there are still, you know, some people who, who don't have a lot of access, but, you know, you know, things like just being able to listen to this podcast or, you know, going and checking out some books from the library is at least a starting place.

[00:56:33] **Sharon Martin:** I mean, it's probably not gonna, you know, be able to, um, you know, change everything. I mean, for people, but, um, you know, the, the 12 step program. Are also widely accessible and those are a great resource. So I mean, they, you know, they have meetings by phone and by internet too, if people can't physically get to, um, those kinds of self-help programs too.

[00:56:58] **Sharon Martin:** So I don't know. I think now I'm just babbling. No, but I think that answers some of it

[00:57:04] **Laura Reagan:** for her. No, I think that's great. Thank you. And I think what you're, you're kind of saying, but didn't say directly, so I'll just say it is that, you know, people don't always have the self-awareness to realize that they're repeating the pattern and, you know, they don't just like they had to not see how things really were in their family of origin.

[00:57:27] **Laura Reagan:** They can't really see how things really are now, but they it's possible too, but it's just, you know, they, they aren't intentionally repeating it. It's unconscious.

[00:57:38] **Sharon Martin:** No. Yeah. I think, you know, and I think that shame and really, you know, the feeling of helplessness that, you know, there are a lot of people who have really almost, you know, just by, even by the time they get to early adulthood have really just sort of given up.

[00:57:54] **Sharon Martin:** Like they just don't see that it's possible to do anything else. You know? And, and the thing is that, you know, for most people drinking and substance use begins early, it was shocking. Really. So, you know, when you talk about that, self-awareness, I mean, it's hard when you're 13 to have a lot of self-awareness generally speaking.

[00:58:15] **Sharon Martin:** And for a lot of times, by the time they're 13, 14, 15, they have already started heavy drinking or drug use, like the, you know, it's already started. So, so I'm also, it's challenging.

[00:58:27] **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.

[00:58:37] **Laura Reagan:** Often thirties, forties, and then the press goes, oh man. Wow. Like what happened? How did I get here? I need to get help. Yeah. 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?

[00:59:00] **Laura Reagan:** Sure.

[00:59:01] **Sharon Martin:** My website is live well with Sharon martin.com. So from there you can find, find everything you need.

[00:59:08] **Laura Reagan:** Wonderful. I'll put a link to that in the show notes. And Sharon, thank you so much. I just really enjoyed this and I might ask you to come back again. Talk a little more, so, all right. Well you take care.

[00:59:22] **Sharon Martin:** Thanks Laura. Bye bye.

[00:59:27] **Laura Reagan:** Thank you to sunset lake CBD for sponsoring this week's episode, use promo code chat for 20% off your entire

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[01:00:40] **Laura Reagan:** Thank you for listening to Therapy Chat with your host, Laura Reagan LCSW-C. For more information, please visit [therapychat podcast.com](http://therapychatpodcast.com).