

## **There Really is Such a Thing As A Healthy Family** **By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

People from addictive dynasties often experience an absence of knowledge, awareness, and understanding of what constitutes a "healthy family". They may know that they are striving to achieve it, but they may not know what it is that they are going for. Most people that come from an alcoholic household struggle to try to figure out what is "normal" and the concept of a healthy family is often foreign to them. Some recovering people have suggested to me that there is no such thing as a "healthy family".

Not only are there healthy families, they have certain characteristics that distinguish them as "healthy families". These hearty, healthy, content families value each individual member and their family "identity" that distinguishes it from other families. These kinship networks are endowed with efficacy, flexibility, security, and spirituality, to meet the needs of individual members and of the family itself.

Healthy family systems have a flexibility that allows them to make changes in the balance, structure and functioning of the system, as circumstances and people change and grow. Individuals are able to promote each other's growth and development and facilitate the adaptation of the system to allow for those individual changes. They have communication and problem resolution skills that allow them adequately manage stress and promote the wellbeing of individual members.

Security is a healthy family characteristic and value. Each person in that system is committed to maintaining relationships and positive regard among the group. They want to spend time meaningful time with each other. They know that they are welcome, wanted, loved, and connected to the family. They know that other family members may not necessarily approve of all their behavior, but that they are loved regardless. Love is not withheld as punishment. Family members are appreciated for the people that they are and the unique contribution that they make to the family.

Healthy families maintain their collective identity over time. The rules and expectations for are clear and consistent. Rules are not chaotic and fluid. Rules can change as needed, but through negotiation and discussion, rather than at the whim of the most powerful person in the system. Each person know what is expected of him/her and makes decisions based on that knowledge, fully appreciating the consequences of their choices. They know the behaviors that will have approval and disapproval, yet they also know that they have unconditional love. Family members are free to be the people that they are, without fear of ridicule or rejection.

The individuals in these solid families know that the family will maintain stability over time. They know that the family has the ability to withstand the disruptive forces that come with life. The knowledge that the family's flexibility, communication and problem solving skills lends to this sense of self-efficacy, All of these things create a sense of security in family members.

Tradition also helps to maintain a sense of family identity, and seems to impart a sense of individual identity and continuity among family members. Tradition, in some respects, can be part of the glue that binds a family together, with each person feeling like they are a part of something special. Traditions in a family can also evolve over time, with each person contributing a new piece of shared culture and tradition. Traditions change in response to the needs of its members. Shared family customs or rituals promote a unique sense of identity within the family.

Spirituality, also contributes to the sense of cohesion and security. Families that have shared religious or spiritual values, traditions, and rituals or routines tend to be able to weather all kinds of personal and family tribulations. Spirituality as a family characteristic also seems to be an overarching characteristic that positively impacts security, stability, and efficacy. Spirituality, in many cases, seems to be a family's application of values and beliefs.

The characteristics and values of the healthy families described promote the growth and development of healthy, competent, secure, and effective individuals. Healthy families promote the physical, emotional, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual growth of their members.

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