

ADHD Family Article

By Louise Levin

A family is a system comprised of individuals. Each individual takes on a specific role; one may become the family “comedian,” one “the peacemaker,” and one “the troublemaker.” When you look at familial systems, recurring issues or problems are usually attributable to one person—the “troublemaker.” In a functional family system, members are relegated to one of the following hierarchies, with strong boundaries established around each. There are: the adult, parent and child hierarchies. The presence of ADHD in the family system can contribute to a dysfunctional environment where communications are strained; boundaries blurred and imposed hierarchies, abolished.

Though it is often tempting to identify the ADHD individual as the “troublemaker,” an isolated component to the family system, it is wrong to assume that challenges associated with the disorder do not affect each member of the family on a systemic level. For example, the comedian may deal with underlying family problems with humor, effectively glossing over feelings of guilt, blame or shame that are shared by other members. Alternatively, when the “peacemaker” or “caretaker” becomes overwhelmed with the task of continual mitigation and management of the challenges of ADHD, they may experience “compassion exhaustion.” The “troublemaker” may also act as a lightning rod, or repository, for the tensions and frustrations of the family. Each member will have his or her own way of coping with the problem. Disruptions among family members can occur in all hierarchies; for example:

- A single parent may become overwhelmed
- Parents of an ADHD child may experience marital discord as a result of differing ideas regarding appropriate discipline
- Children with an ADHD parent may find home life too chaotic, as an affected parent will exhibit organizational issues and compromised ability to remain “tuned in” to a child’s immediate needs
- Siblings may feel that an ADHD brother or sister receives inordinate amounts of attention from the parents, and that their accomplishments and challenges go unnoticed and unattended
- Extended family may impose judgment on the dysfunctional family unit, especially when uninformed about the disorder and its daily challenges

Communications in the best of families is often strained; when ADHD is introduced into the equation, the situation is exacerbated, and family dialogue may suffer. For example, when one is communicating with an ADHD member, no matter how important or sensitive the topic, the ADHD individual may “zone out” at the most critical or sensitive juncture. This conveys a sense that the party is either disinterested or disrespectful when, in fact, the ADHD individual may care deeply about what is being said; something else has simply, temporarily caught their attention. This can obviously inflame situations between mother and child, husband and wife, or between siblings in emotionally sensitive situations.

As frustration occurs among family members, several coping mechanisms are utilized. The most common and often the most detrimental, is the use of triangulation, or the incorporation of another individual into the adult/parent hierarchy. This third party can include an extended member of the family, a lover, a friend or the parents’ own child. Under all circumstances, the integrity of the parent dyad is compromised. When parents begin to involve their children, the

integrity of the boundaries between the parent/adult and child hierarchies begin to blur. For example, parents experiencing marital problem may involve their children in secrets and emotions that the children are neither emotionally nor experientially equipped to participate in. If there is a problem in the adult dyad, each spouse will subconsciously search for an external symptom, problem or pleasure to take focus from their own. Family equilibrium is threatened, and it is often only through talk therapy and family coaching that relationship issues can be resolved.

As the family descends further into a dysfunctional state, each member becomes solidified in their roles. These roles are used to cope with and maintain the internal dissonance of the family. Because individuals are often incapable of recognizing problematic elements at play, the dysfunction slowly becomes the “new normal.” When, and if, assistance and help are sought; if, in fact, the identified person/s starts to get “better,” everything that existed as equilibrium or “normal” before will change. Even if this is a change for the better, it is, nevertheless, a change, something that humans innately fight against.

Changes to any part of the system may have an impact on all other parts. Each family member responds in his or her own particular way to the ADHD individual. They have become comfortable in their uncomfortable roles. Once the disorder is brought into the open and once a therapist becomes involved, one of the most important issues to address is the need for each family member to shift, or to completely change, his or her role in relation to the affected member and, consequently, to the others. They will be asked to take part in a radical alteration of the family dynamic. Each member has been so used to reacting and responding to aberrant behavior that they will become reluctant to abandon the established “dance” that they have come to master. Once healthy roles have been re-established, the family can mend broken lines of communication and work together to promote the potential of each member as well as the system as a whole.

While there are the challenges inherent to the ADHD family system, affected individuals also possess invaluable gifts peculiar to their population. ADHD individuals comprise a community of exceptional intellects; with proper education and dedication, the ADHD family member, as well as the system as a whole, can realize great harmony and potential. The family will grow to be solution rather than problem focused, providing one another positive assistance. Solutions can also be found in ADHD coaches, talk therapists and/or medical professionals.