

Warped by Your Family? Join the Club

Written by Ginny Grimsley

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Psychiatrist Offers Tips to Overcome Common Issues

At the heart of almost all of his patients' problems, says psychiatrist Gary Malone, are issues that stem from the family that raised them creating problems in the family they've started.

"Almost all of us deal with this to some degree or another. Very few families are idyllic," says Malone, a distinguished fellow in the American Psychiatric Association, and coauthor with his sister Susan Mary Malone of "What's Wrong with My Family?" (www.whatswrongwithmyfamily.com).

"Forget 'Leave it to Beaver.' Normal families are more like 'The Twilight Zone.'"

Despite that, most of us manage to lead happy, productive lives.

"Once we recognize the childhood baggage we've carried into adulthood, we can take steps to compensate, make corrections, and change how we raise our own children," Malone says.

These are some of the qualities of a healthy family, and what you can do if that quality was missing or in short supply as you were growing up:

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- Shows love: Family is usually the one place and time in life that a person experiences unconditional love. If you did not receive that as a child, you likely have difficulty loving and valuing yourself. There is no substitute for loving yourself; this issue is the No. 1 cause of unhappiness in adult relationships. The first step in healing is recognizing the damage and being willing to believe your feelings of unworthiness are not based in reality but are the product of a deficit likely handed down through generations in your family. Listen to what you tell yourself – if it's things like, "I'm an idiot" and "I am really messed up," change that self talk. Words are powerful!
- Respects autonomy: Individuals in the family are encouraged to develop their own personal identity and separate from the family while maintaining a role within it. The family supports and even cheers on individuals in their personal quests. Children who are not allowed the freedom to express and explore their identities may become adults who develop co-dependent relationships – wherein they put the needs of others before their own and/or are dependent on the control of others. Ways to begin addressing autonomy issues as an adult include learning how to comfortably spend time alone, pursuing interests (whether or not they are valued by friends and family) by taking classes or joining clubs, and boosting self-esteem through positive self talk.
- Creates structure & boundaries: Parents are the keepers of the rules; they provide structure for children, both to protect them and to foster learning and growth. People who grow up with little or no structure may fail to offer structure to their own children – or overreact and be too rigid. Provide structure and consistency by setting up routines that everyone in the family is expected to follow daily, with occasional exceptions. These might include making your bed in the morning; daily chores; a set dinnertime, with everyone at the table; and "together" time, such as a game night.

About Dr. Gary Malone, M.D. & Susan Mary Malone

Dr. Gary Malone is an Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Texas Southwestern and a teaching analyst at the Dallas Psychoanalytic Institute. He is a distinguished fellow in the American Psychiatric Association with board certifications in general and addiction psychiatry. He has worked in hospitals and private practices for more than 30 years. Dr. Malone is director of Adult Chemical Dependency Services at Millwood Hospital in Arlington, Texas.

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Award-winning writer and editor Susan Mary Malone is the author of the novel, “By the Book,” and three nonfiction books, including “Five Keys for Understanding Men: A Women’s Guide.” More than 40 of the book projects she has edited were purchased by traditional publishing houses. She is Dr. Malone’s siste