Dysfunctional Family System Activity

Facilitator Guide | Suggested duration: 60–75 minutes

Purpose and approach

Explore patterns of roles, communication, boundaries, and support within family systems. Roles are metaphors for patterns—not diagnoses, fixed identities, or proof that a person caused family difficulties.

Learning objectives

Participants will identify potential role patterns, name three observations supporting a tentative interpretation, and propose a realistic, safe action to support healthier interactions or boundaries.

Safety and inclusion

Invite participants to use initials, pseudonyms, fictional families, or chosen-family relationships. Do not require naming family members, confronting them, or revealing trauma. A participant may choose “not applicable,” multiple roles, or no role for themselves. Avoid blaming victims of abuse. A functional relationship may mean reduced contact or no contact when safety requires it.

Session plan

• 0–10 min: Introduce group agreements, confidentiality limits, and the meaning of family roles.

• 10–25 min: Discuss six roles using neutral fictional examples.

• 25–45 min: Individual worksheet—identify patterns, three observations, and one intervention for each relevant role.

• 45–60 min: Optional pair discussion or fictional scenario; distinguish what is within one’s control.

• 60–75 min: Personal action plan and closing reflection.

Role descriptions for teaching

Family Hero: Often feels responsible for achievement, stability, or making the family appear successful.

Chief Enabler: May protect someone from consequences or overfunction to keep peace; support and enabling are not the same.

Mascot: May use humor, distraction, or cheerfulness to reduce tension.

Scapegoat: May be blamed for broader family difficulties or cast as the problem.

Lost Child: May withdraw, stay quiet, or minimize needs to avoid conflict.

Identified Patient/Victim: May be designated as the person with the problem; the label can obscure wider patterns and must not minimize genuine illness or harm.

Suggested facilitation prompts

• What does this role help someone manage in a stressful family environment?

• What is the difference between an observation and an assumption about motives?

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- Can one person occupy multiple roles or different roles over time?
- What can you change about your own communication, boundaries, or support-seeking?
- When is it safer to maintain distance rather than pursue reconciliation?

Group exercise: Pattern to possibility

Use a fictional example: Alex makes jokes whenever relatives argue. Participants might tentatively describe a Mascot pattern. Ask for three specific observations (not personality judgments) and one action Alex controls, such as naming discomfort, taking a break, or asking for support. Discuss that humor can also be a healthy strength.

Closing

Invite each participant to select one realistic action, identify a support person, and choose how to measure whether the action is helpful. Remind the group that others may not change even when one person does.

Editorial note

The six roles and three-reasons/intervention structure are retained from the original activity. The roles are not standardized clinical assessments; this resource is educational and should not be used to diagnose family members.

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