

In Indian Country How do we make sense out of Relationship Dynamics Within Addicted/Traumatized Family/Clans/Relatives/Co-workers?

**By
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Since December 2008, I have facilitated the certification of Healthy Relationship Curriculum for the Native Wellness Institute. I get requests like “What do you do when someone shows up drunk to work and no one does anything?” “How do you bring back Courtship?”, “How do you help LGBTQ youth who attempt suicide?”, “How do I leave someone who is too controlling?”, and so many other questions, that you wished you could pull out the answer sheet and hand it over. Life is not that easy, so I thought it might be helpful to summarize behaviors that some Native people learn in childhood from generations of Addiction and traumatic experiences.

Go to any reservation, and you will find families that are functioning in emotional extremes. Where feelings can explode and get very big, very fast or implode and disappear into “nowhere”, with equal velocity. Where what doesn’t matter can get unusual focus, while what does matter gets swept under the rug. You see families take small, insignificant behaviors and blow them up way out of proportion while outrageous, horrific, and even abusive behaviors go on entirely ignored and unidentified. Where things don’t really get talked about but instead become shelved, circumvented or DENIED.

“Rez Life” can turn our sense of “normal” on its head, put us regularly on emotional overload, and cause us unusual fear and stress can be traumatizing. Living with addiction, whether its eating bad, drinking, living at the Casino, disturbs our sense of an orderly and predictable life. Normal routines get thrown off, feelings get hurt, doors get slammed, car windows get bashed in, hearts get broken and families get torn apart. Family members are all too often left starring, dazed, and disillusioned, as they witness the lives of those they love, in spite of their best efforts to stop catastrophe, fall apart and end badly. Don’t Talk, Don’t Feel, and Don’t Trust become the norm?

The Cost of “No Talk” Rules

Because alcoholic family systems are often steeped in defenses such as denial and minimization, Indian families resist talking about the fear and anxiety they are experiencing. Instead intense emotions explode into the container of the family and get acted out rather than talked out. Though acting out brings temporary relief, it does not lead to any real resolution or understanding, so nothing really gets fixed, mended, or amended. Walls go up and the battle lines get drawn as family members silently collude to keep their ever widening well of pain from surfacing, blaming it

on anything but what's really going on. They avoid talking about their worries, thinking that if they don't get discussed, they aren't really that bad or might just disappear on their own. Perhaps they worry that talking is a "call to action" that they don't feel ready to take. But by avoiding discussing what is going on and how they feel about it, they lose one of their most valuable and available routes for processing and relieving pain; namely using their thinking minds to translate powerful feelings into words so that they can be made conscious and brought into balance through insight and understanding.

Because they don't have healthy ways of finding emotional middle ground, they tend to achieve balance by swinging from one end of the pendulum to the other. When feeling closeness becomes too claustrophobic, for example, they disengage for space and breathing room because regulating intimacy is tough for them. When emotional chaos gets too overwhelming they shut it down with rules and regulations that seem to appear out of nowhere because handling feelings of anger, hurt, or sadness makes them feel vulnerable and out of control. Their emotions and behaviors seesaw back and forth from 0-10 and 10-0 with no speed bumps in between. Some Indians have trouble self regulating and living within a range of 4, 5, and 6.

The Trauma Extremes: High Intensity vs. Shutting Down

On our reservations we see "chaos junkies" who hardly sleep, always going, and listening to the scanner. Then there are some who never talk. How does the dynamic of seesawing between emotional and behavioral extremes get set up? Here is one explanation that grows out of trauma theory.

The intense emotions of fear and terror, are common living with addiction, ignite our natural fight, flight trauma response. These emotions flood the body with adrenaline so that we can prepare to flee for safety or stand and fight. When we can do neither, when fighting seems exhausting and pointless or when children or spouses feel that they are trapped and cannot really get away, which is often the case with familial trauma, we may simply shut down or freeze so that we don't have to feel such intense pain, fear, rage, or helplessness. Shutting down is also part of the trauma response, it is the freeze state. It is our body/mind system trying to preserve itself from overheating, with too much emotion. Watch any frightened cat, dog, freeze because it senses danger and you are seeing a natural trauma response.

When these swings from feeling flooded with feeling to shutting down, happen over and over again, they can become central to our personal operating style and the operating style of the family.

Here are some examples in which see sawing from one emotional extreme to the other, may influence our thinking, feeling and behavior of the family.

Impulsivity vs. Rigidity

Impulsivity can lead to chaos.....then.....family members try to manage their chaos by clamping down and becoming rigid and controlling. They see saw between intense emotional behaviors and shutting down behaviors.

Impulsive behavior can lead to chaos. Painful feelings that are too hard to sit with explode into the container of the family and get acted out. Blame, anger, rage, emotional, physical or sexual abuse, over and under spending, and sexual acting out, are some ways of acting out emotional and psychological pain in dysfunctional ways that engender chaos.

“Only Serial killers have a clean house, and everything is super organized” Rigidity is an attempt to manage or shut down that chaos both inwardly and outwardly. Adults in an addictive/traumatizing family system may tighten up on rules and routines in an attempt to ward off the feeling of falling apart. Many Indians who went to Boarding schools adopt a lifestyle of becoming both controlled and controlling. There is a lack of spontaneity and middle ground, where strong feelings can be talked over or even explodes momentarily but then be worked through toward some sort of tolerable resolution. Black and white thinking with no gray becomes the extremes.

Self-regulation is a basic developmental accomplishment that allows the growing Indian child and eventually the adult to regulate their thinking, feeling and behavior. That is why we sometimes have a 40 year old Indian Man or Woman, who behaves like a teenager.

Despair vs. Denial/Dissociation

When addiction makes family members feel despairing, because they feel that nothing they are doing is making a difference or they are too afraid to openly address their mounting problems, they may use denial or dissociation as a way of distancing their pain. They see saw between intense emotional behaviors and shutting down behaviors.

Denial is a dysfunctional attempt to ward off ever growing feelings of despair. Reality gets rewritten as family members attempt to bend it to make it less threatening, to cover up their increasing anxiety, guilt, resentment, and fear. Denial takes the place of honest self-disclosure, worries and anxieties are hidden rather than talked about and as a result, and despair deepens. Suicides in Native LGBTQ's community are an example of this despair, being rejected and ignored by family and community. Dissociation actually creates a wall of oblivion between consciousness and unconsciousness because undesired emotions get literally thrown out of conscious awareness. Native families learn to deny rather than develop the skills of confronting and managing problems, the more despairing they become the greater

their need to fall back into denial or dissociation. Denial/dissociation and despair feed off each other in a vicious circle.

Reality orientation or an ability to live with life on life's terms is an important part of recovering one's balanced sense of self and a balanced orientation toward the world.

Enmeshment/Disengagement

One way that frightened family members may attempt to ward off fears of aloneness and abandonment may be to become enmeshed. When a house full of family becomes suffocating, some Indians disengage to regain a sense of personal space. They see saw between intense emotions and behaviors and shutting down behaviors.

Enmeshment is a relational style that lacks boundaries and often discourages differences or disagreement, seeing them not as healthy and natural but disloyal and even threatening. Some Indian families will defend the Sexual abuser and take their side, "because they are family". Enmeshment can also be a way of coping with fear that the family is falling apart in which certain family members huddle together for a sense of safety and may develop traumatic bonds. Enmeshment styles of relating formed in childhood tend to repeat themselves in adult relationships.

With disengagement family members are seeing the solution to keeping pain from their inner worlds from erupting as avoiding subjects, people and things that might trigger it. They retreat into their own emotional and psychological orbits and they don't share their inner worlds with each other. They isolate. Some Indian families disengage when they move to the city, and they never move back to the reservation.

Many addicted families cycle back and forth between enmeshment and disengagement, they yearn for closeness but lack the kinds of healthy boundaries that would let them take space, hold different points of view or hang onto a sense of self while in each other's presence and allow others to do the same.

Balanced relatedness is neither a withdrawal from another person nor a fusion with them. It allows each person their own identity and to move in and out of close connection in a natural regular flow.

Over functioning vs. Under Functioning

Over functioning can wear many hats; spouses may over function to maintain order and "keep the show on the road" while the addict falls in and out of normal functioning. Children may over function, taking care of siblings when parents drop the ball. Or they may work over time striving to restore order and dignity to a family who is becoming increasingly neglectful, irresponsible or strange. One might

see an acting out child (a scapegoat) as over functioning on behalf of the system to take focus off the family's real problems.

Under-functioning may be associated with the learned helplessness that is part of the trauma response, in which one comes to feel that nothing they can do will make a difference or make things better, so they give up. Family members may freeze like deer in the headlights, unable to mobilize, think clearly or make useful choices.

The addict themselves, along with others in the system, may do both, over functioning to make up for periods of under functioning. Here we see a lack of ability to self regulate as a family unit, to work as a team where each member is expected to carry their load, to suit up and show up.

Balanced functioning is the obvious in between of over and under-functioning. When we do what is appropriate to the circumstance and when we have conscious choice around the degree to we function.

Caretaking vs. Neglect

Caretaking can be an attempt to attend to, in another person, what needs to be attended to within the self. We project our own unconscious anxiety or pain onto someone else, seeing it as about them rather than understanding it as our own. Then we set about fixing in them what actually may need fixing in us. It is a form of care that is all too often motivated by our own unidentified pain rather than a genuine awareness of another's. Because this is the case, neglect can be its dark side. We neglect or don't see what is real need within another person because we can't identify real need within ourselves.

Neglect can take the form of ignoring or not seeing another's humanness, withholding care, nurturing and attention or a shutting down of the relational behaviors that reflect attunement and connection.

Neglect can be particularly difficult to address in recovery because there is no obvious parental abuse to point to. Some recovering Indians are left feeling that they have too many needs for anyone to meet and are often mistrustful of deep connection. Consequently, they may push away the very vehicle that might help them to heal, mainly relationships.

Balanced care of self and others is part of living a healthy life of Wellness.

Abuse vs. Victimization/Collapse

The line between who is abusing whom can get very fuzzy in a pain filled family system. Abuse is part of the impulsivity that characterizes families where feelings are acted out rather than talked out. The victim is the person who is being abused.

When individuals are unable to process personal pain, anger and hurt and talk it out, they are at risk for acting it out instead. These roles are traded back and forth, as family members bully and hurt each other over and over and over again. Hurt people hurt people. They see saw between intense emotions and behaviors and a shutting down, or collapsing into helplessness.

Sometimes the roles become stratified and certain family members become the obvious abuser while others become the obvious victim, small children are sitting ducks for being abused and victimized by out of control parents and older siblings. Both roles can become personality styles or relationship dynamics that get carried along through life.

Unfortunately, the abused child, the victim, is at risk, without recovery, of becoming an abusing parent. Rather than identifying and feeling their own helplessness and rage at being a victim of abuse, they act out their childhood pain by passing it on in the form in which they received it, (e.g. the abused child becomes the abusive parent). All of these patterns reflect a lack of emotional and behavioral balance. Eventually, whether alcohol and drugs are present or not, painful patterns of relating continue to insidiously move down through the generations and become inter-generational trauma.

Balance can be achieved when intense emotions can be tolerated both within the self and within the emotional container of the relationship or family. When this is possible, painful feelings, even if they explode momentarily, can be worked through toward some sort of resolution. After a disconnection occurs a reconnection can occur which will represent a slight step up in relating, healing, wellness, or interpersonal awareness and understanding.

So what is the good news?

Emotional modulation is a skill that we learn literally in our parent's arms and within our family systems. When children have extreme emotional responses they are "wooned" back into emotional balance through the nurturing and sustained actions of mature parents and caring adults. Over time they absorb the skills of self-regulation through these healthy family interactions. As we see in this article the opposite is also true, we can equally learn the skills of emotional toxic behaviors if we live with toxic patterns for long enough. The good news is that skills of Wellness and balance can be relearned in recovery through regulating activities like sweats, renewal ceremonies, twelve step programs, therapy, meditation, yoga, massage, deep breathing and exercise; activities that quiet and soothe the emotional system and teach skills of mind/body/spirit balance.