

The Five Leading Characteristics of a Functional Adult

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Self-care

Had we grown up in a functional home, our primary caregivers would have taught us that we are worth self-care. Self-care does not mean self-centered or selfish, it means exercising healthy personal hygiene; clothes that fit and are in good repair; a consistent sleep cycle; healthy food; moderate exercise; and medical care when needed. Self-care also means having fun, which is something most codependents have a difficult time allowing themselves. Developing hobbies, enjoying the fellowship of genuine friends is therefore included in self-care. And finally, healthy self-talk; avoiding self-shaming and put-downs. This means we must become aware of our own thoughts, emotions, needs, and wants.

Moderation

The hardest thing for most people in recovery to develop is a balanced lifestyle. Moderation is that place we only visit momentarily as we swing between extremes. Catastrophizing is common for wounded people. "What if?" thinking is usually the question of a frightened child inside making up bad things. Learning to live in the probable, versus the possible, helps us to answer the "What if?" and stay in balance. Many bad things are possible, but are they probable? Most often, they are not. Moderation therefore has to do with monitoring and regulating our thoughts and emotions, and acting accordingly. Most challenges are not as big as we make them, and a functional adult knows how to act in a way so as to avoid victimization and despair.

Boundaries

If we chose one word to describe the essence of recovery, it would be *boundaries*. There is virtually no relational problem that cannot be solved with strong, healthy boundaries. Whenever we feel the "crazies" coming on, this usually indicates we are in boundary failure. Indeed, being "triggered" is best understood as boundary failure. A few important points: First, we must be aware of our boundaries, or we do not have them. When you are in a threatening situation, it is best to immediately set boundaries with the people, place, or thing with which you are now, or soon will be, contending. Second, boundaries are primarily about self-containment, not controlling others. Generally speaking, we have no right to make demands on other people. But we have every right and obligation to remove ourselves from toxic and threatening situations.

Reality

When we were growing up, we often adopted the opinions and even the emotions of our primary caregivers. In a healthy family, this can be a good thing. On the other hand, if parents and caregivers are in denial of their own shame, guilt, and fear, a child will often take on those emotions as their own. This is the meaning of “toxic” or “carried” emotions—emotions that were never our own, but which we took on ourselves. When this happens, it can be nearly impossible to know one’s own reality. A good guideline for distinguishing between healthy shame, guilt, and fear, and that which is toxic or carried, is the intensity with which you feel it, and the unmanageability. As one person in recovery stated, “If it’s hysterical, it is historical.” On the other hand, healthy emotions are simply information about us, from us, and to us. Emotions are our friends; they allow us to navigate a situation in a functional manner. No one can “make you” feel a certain way. You have every right to your own reality regarding a matter, and no one has the right to deny your emotions as true—*for you*.

Spirituality

Most Twelve-Step literature, as well as biblical teaching, define a healthy spiritual life as being of maximum use to God, and maximum service to others. Christians believe Jesus of Nazareth embodied such a life; a life devoted to doing God’s will, and of sacrificial service of others, motivated by love. We can say, in general, a mind devoted to doing God’s will is a sound mind; while self-will is the very essence of insanity. The Twelve-Steps, when applied well, are a helpful tool in realizing a sound mind. This is because the Twelve-Steps move us beyond ourselves. The spiritual life is therefore a transcendent life, meaning it is a life that moves us beyond self-interest, alone. Christians believe this life is only possible by the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit. In other words, spirituality is better understood as “Spirit-uality.” The spiritual life is something you must develop for yourself; it cannot be inherited, or purchased. But it is also critical to develop this life with the aid of a spiritual friend. Spirituality is about community.