

No Matter How Old I Get Why Am I Still A KID AT CHRISTMAS?

Let me, for a moment, set the scene. It is the holidays, a time when families traditionally get together to enjoy each other's company and catch up on the year's events. For some, it is really the only time they get to spend with their families and the only time since they were teenagers that they live under the same roof as all the other family members. Often from the outside looking in, it appears that this is a peaceful, enjoyable time for all. But so often, the truth that is hidden underneath is a sub-plot that would rival anything seen on a daytime soap opera. By the end of the time that you spend with your family, you say to yourself "never again", only to repeat this every year. One over-riding thought that people appear to have is that, "No matter how old I get, why am I still treated like a kid?" Psychology offers an answer to this question, which can be found in family systems theory.

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Possibly the hardest thing to do is to change your role in the family. This is difficult because the roles that members of a family play become interdependent. Family systems theory calls this *family homeostasis*. Theory predicts that when a family does not actively change to incorporate new behavior, individuals will likely revert to the old family role that fostered their problematic behavior in the first place. Families have structures that govern their very interactions with each other, which are often invisible to outsiders and even to the family members themselves.

To help you become aware of your role within the family, we offer the following roles for you to consider. They all come from family systems theory. The enabler is the person who protects and takes care of the identified problem person. They often will find ways to help the person engage in the very behavior that they want to, or even need to, stop. The hero is usually the oldest child in the family and is usually burdened with the task of being overly responsible and over achieving. The mascot is often the youngest child who is placed in the position of striving and thriving to be the center of attention and tasked with distracting the family from their problems. The scapegoat is typically the person who is faulted for all the problems in the family. The lost child is often forgotten by the family and often lives a life in isolation. Which is your family role? ¹

With the above as background, let us offer these examples of how these family sub-plots can play out. Scott is a 30-year-old man who returns for Christmas with his family. Scott has two siblings, of which he is the oldest (he is seen as the hero child). Scott has been struggling with his weight for many years, as a result of the pressure he felt his family placed on him to succeed. Over the years, Scott has worked extremely hard to feel better about who he is and be proud of what he has achieved. But, Scott can do nothing to avoid the giant boulder that heads his way every family holiday and is destined to crush all that he has worked so hard to build. As he sits down at the family dinner table, the questions begin, as if he were 18 and still trying to decide what to do with his life. The family focuses on all the things Scott can do (but has not yet done) to truly be successful. All the while, his brother and sister receive different questions (about social life or hobbies) that Scott can only dream of being asked. He feels the weight of expectation that only an afternoon with family

can produce. And like a textbook response, eating has been his salvation, easing his anxiety and hurt feelings. He leaves totally unaware of why he has stuffed himself to the point of feeling ill, but swearing never to do it again. But if he doesn't know why it happened, how can he possibly know how to change it?

Molly is a 37-year-old woman who, like Scott, goes home for the holidays to see her family every year. She has the family role of the lost child. She is the last to be invited for the holiday (almost an after-thought) and, as is typical for her family role, is always the last to be let into the loop. She has shed over 100 pounds in the last year, but has spent three days with her family and no one has commented or congratulated her on her success. She just blends into the background, almost as if she wasn't there. The lack of support leaves her wondering whether all this work was really worth it and teetering on the edge of eating like she used to.

Cindy, a 63-year-old a mother of two, has her family home for the holidays. Both her children are married and she has three beautiful grandchildren. She has prided herself on being the person who takes care of her family, providing whatever they need and food is a large part of that. Her youngest child, Sally, has recently undergone Lap-Band surgery and is desperately trying to comply with her new eating and exercise regime. Cindy, seeing that her daughter is not eating anywhere near the same volume she used to, takes this personally, as if she is no longer able to provide for her daughter. This leaves her feeling uncomfortable and, in a desperate attempt to return her family to its homeostasis, proceeds to do everything she can to get her child to eat as she always did in the past. Unable to resist her pleading mother's overtures (and let's face it, who could), Sally gives up in a desperate attempt to make her mother feel better. Does Cindy's behavior remind you of a family role?

As stated earlier, trying to change your family role is hard and, to truly be successful, requires the whole family to change. However, by becoming more aware of what your role is, you are better prepared to deal and cope with the challenges your specific role encompasses. Whether you are a Scott (the hero), Molly (the lost), or Cindy (yes you guessed it, the enabler), you can survive. Just because this is how your family views you, it doesn't mean that you have to adopt the same viewpoint and undertake the same behaviors.

As a final note, I leave you with Jill's story. Jill, a member of our weight loss support group, tells us that each night she and her children enjoy what the family has come to call "treat time". They sit around with each other and catch up on the day's events. There is much laughter, joy, and oh did I mention...some delicious high calorie snack. The intimacy and the food have become so intertwined that Jill cannot imagine a way to separate them.

Jill felt that treat time was so important to the family's harmony that she was resistant to changing it. Her support group encouraged her to explore the importance with her children and she was surprised to learn that they valued the talking more than the eating. It was the intimacy that nourished them, not the food. It is important to become aware of your story because it makes changing it possible.

Psychology tells us that awareness is always the first step in the change process. And so, how about you? Have you learned what your story is? Do you have some new ideas about how to reframe your role in the family? Can you change your narrative? We certainly think you can and believe that you need to if you are to lose weight and maintain the loss. Doing the head work is important. Maybe these stories can help you get through this tough and challenging time of year and come through the other side thinking, "maybe I can."

¹The reader who is interested in learning more about Family Systems Theory is referred to: Satir, V.M. (1972) *Peoplemaking*. Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behavior Books



Michael L. Sakowitz, PhD, a Clinical Psychologist, specializes in the treatment of WLS patients. He can be reached in New Jersey at 973-696-0800 or in Arizona at 602-904-3448.

James A. R. Glynn, MA, is a Clinical Psychology Doctoral Candidate at Argosy University/Phoenix. He received his master's degree from the same university in clinical psychology and is developing his specialty in sport and exercise psychology.

