

Yes Virginia, There Really Is Such A Thing As A Healthy Family

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D,

Many people believe there is no such thing as a healthy relationship or a functional family. Those who think it is possible to have a healthy family seem to strive toward this ultimate goal but have yet to develop a fundamental concept of what a functional family looks like, what makes it healthy, or how you get there. It is assumed that healthy families spring from healthy marriages. Many people are hard-pressed to figure out what is "healthy" is, given the non-exemplary presentation of relationships and personal behavior displayed in the media by celebrities, politicians, community leaders, and "Average Joes." Families with significant challenges have been labeled "dysfunctional" and alternately glorified, ridiculed, and "normalized." Many people believe that there is no such thing as a "healthy" family.

Functional families and healthy marriages are possible. There are distinguishing features that help to categorize them as "healthy." Effective families value each member and their family's "identity." They are endowed with efficacy, flexibility, security, and spirituality, to meet the needs of individual members and the family.

Healthy family systems have flexibility that allows them to change the system's balance, structure, and functioning as circumstances and people change and grow. Individuals promote each other's growth and development. The system shifts to accommodate those individual changes. They use effective communication and problem-resolution skills to be flexible enough to manage stress and maintain well-being.

Emotional security is a healthy family characteristic and value. Individuals in that system are committed to maintaining positive relationships among the group. They want to spend time meaningful time with each other. They feel welcome, wanted, loved, and connected to the family. They

know that other family members may not necessarily approve of all their behavior but that they are loved regardless. The withholding of love is not a tool of punishment. There is a general appreciation of family members for the people they are and the unique contribution that they make to the family.

Healthy families maintain their collective identity over time. The rules and expectations are clear and consistent--not chaotic. They can change as needed, but through discussion and negotiation rather than at the whim of the most powerful person in the system. Each person understands family expectations of them and makes decisions based on that knowledge, fully appreciating the consequences of their choices. They know the behaviors that will have approval and disapproval, yet they also know they have unconditional love. Family members are free to be themselves without fear of ridicule or rejection.

The individuals in these solid families understand that the family will maintain stability over time. There is a sense of confidence that the family can withstand the disruptive forces that come with life. This confidence in the family's flexibility, communication, and problem-solving skills lends to this sense of self-efficacy of individual members. All of these things create a sense of security in family members.

Tradition also helps to maintain a sense of family identity and impart a sense of individual identity and continuity among family members. Tradition can be part of the glue that binds a family together, with each person feeling like they are a part of something special. Traditions in a family can also evolve in response to the needs of its members. Each person can contribute to developing new family traditions. Shared family customs, rituals, and meanings promote a unique sense of identity within the family.

Spirituality also contributes to a sense of cohesion and security. Families with shared religious or spiritual values, traditions, and rituals or routines can weather all kinds of personal and family tribulations. Spiritual faith is an overarching characteristic that positively impacts security, stability, and efficacy. Spirituality is a family's application of values and beliefs.

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The characteristics and values of the healthy families described promote the growth and development of healthy, competent, secure, and functional individuals. Healthy families promote their members' physical, emotional, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual growth.

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My article.

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