Final Note
Don't become discouraged if you find yourself slipping back into old patterns of behavior. Changes may be slow and gradual; however, as you continue to practice new and healthier behaviors, they will begin to become part of your day-to-day living.

References and Additional Resources
Some excellent books on Dysfunctional Families are:

Special Considerations
As you make changes, keep in mind the following:
• Stop trying to be perfect. In addition, don't try to make your family perfect.
• Realize that you are not in control of other people's lives. You do not have the power to make others change.
• Don't try to win the old struggles — you can't win.
• Set clear limits — e.g., if you do not plan on visiting your parents for a holiday, say "no," not "maybe."
• Identify what you would like to have happen.
  Recognize that when you stop behaving the way you used to, even for a short time, there may be adverse reactions from your family or friends.
  Anticipate what the reactions will be (e.g., tears, yelling, other intimidating responses) and decide how you will respond.
Introduction

Many people hope that once they leave home, they will leave their family and childhood problems behind. However, many find that they experience similar problems, as well as similar feelings and relationship patterns, long after they have left the family environment. Ideally, children grow up in family environments which help them feel worthwhile and valuable. They learn that their feelings and needs are important and can be expressed. Children growing up in such supportive environments are likely to form healthy, open relationships in adulthood.

However, families may fail to provide for many of their children's emotional and physical needs. In addition, the families' communication patterns may severely limit the child's expressions of feelings and needs. Children growing up in such families are likely to develop low self-esteem and feel that their needs are not important or perhaps should not be taken seriously by others. As a result, they may form unsatisfying relationships as adults.

Types of Dysfunctional Families

The following are some examples of patterns that frequently occur in dysfunctional families.

- One or both parents have addictions or compulsions (e.g., drugs, alcohol, promiscuity, gambling, overworking, and/or overeating) that have strong influences on family members.

- Be ignored, discounted, or criticized for their feelings and thoughts.

- Have parents that are inappropriately intrusive, overly involved, and protective.

- Have parents that are inappropriately distant and uninvolved with their children.

- Have excessive structure and demands placed on their time, choice of friends, or behavior; or conversely, receive no guidelines or structure.

- Experience rejection or preferential treatment.

- Be restricted from full and direct communication with other family members.

- Be allowed or encouraged to use drugs or alcohol.

- Be locked out of the house.

- Be slapped, hit, scratched, punched, or kicked.

Resulting Problems

Abuse and neglect inhibit the development of children's trust in the world, in others, and in themselves. Later as adults, these people may find it difficult to trust the behaviors and words of others, their own judgments and actions, or their own sense of selfworth. Not surprisingly, they may experience problems in their academic work, their relationships, and in their very identities.

In common with other people, abused and neglected family members often struggle to interpret their families as "normal." The more they have to accommodate to make the situation seem normal (e.g., "No, I wasn't beaten; I was just spanked. My father isn't violent, it's just his way"), the greater is their likelihood of misinterpreting themselves and developing negative self-concepts (e.g., "I had it coming; I'm a rotten kid").

Making Changes

Sometimes we continue in our roles because we are waiting for our parents to give us "permission" to change. But that permission can come only from you. Like most people, parents in dysfunctional families often feel threatened by changes in their children. As a result, they may thwart your efforts to change and insist that you "change back." That's why it's so important for you to trust your own perceptions and feelings. Change begins with you. Some specific things you can do include: