

Family Systems

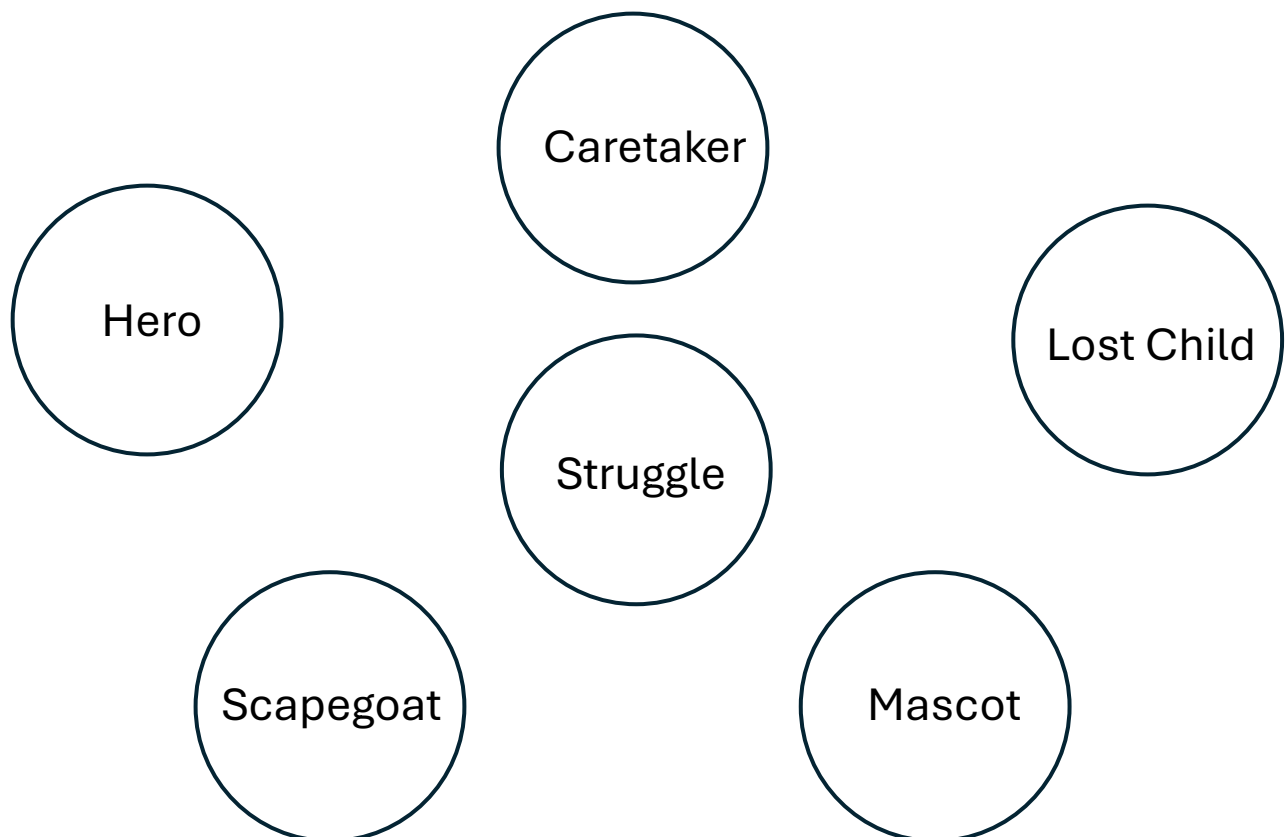
We all are a part of a “family” system. Each family system has certain invisible boundaries in place, or unspoken rules and roles that dictate the behavior within the family.

When there is an ongoing struggle in the family, whether it’s a chronic illness, unresolved grief or substance use disorder, the whole unit will work together to meet the family’s basic needs to the best of its ability.

If the struggle continues, family members can become stuck in specific roles and the system may begin to depend on each person continuing to play their part.

The roles develop as survival strategies and often bring relief to the family in the short term.

On the following pages you’ll see a short description of each role, the survival strategy, the wounds people in that role tend to carry, the healed expression (in recovery) and the hidden gifts.



The “Caretaker” / “Enabler”

Compassionate. Responsible. Attuned to others needs. Often neglects their own. Often carries more than belongs to them.

Survival Strategy

- Manage everyone else’s emotions
- Prevent collapse
- Over-accommodate
- Confuse rescuing with love

Wounds Beneath It

- Fear of abandonment
- Fear of conflict
- Identity fused with helping
- Difficulty identifying their own needs
- Hypervigilance

Healed Expression

- Compassion with boundaries
- Support without control
- Can tolerate others’ discomfort
- Understands helping is not saving
- Has a separate identity and joy
- Practices interdependence rather than codependence

Gift Underneath the Role

Devotion. Empathy. Loyalty. Generosity.

The healed caretaker becomes:

“I can love deeply without carrying everyone.”

Practices for this week:

- ☐ Ask for help once
- ☐ Identify one need and share it with a loved one
- ☐ Schedule some time just for you to enjoy a favorite activity
- ☐ Journal your thoughts and feelings

The “Hero”

The Over functioning one. Responsible. Achieving. Mature too early. Often praised for competence while quietly drowning.

Survival Strategy

- Earn safety through performance
- Prevent chaos
- Take care of everyone
- Stay useful so you stay valued

Wounds Beneath It

- Fear of failure
- Fear of burdening others
- Conditional self-worth
- Exhaustion
- Difficulty receiving support

Healed Expression

- Responsible *without* self-abandonment
- Capable and collaborative
- Allows imperfection
- Knows love does not need to be earned
- Delegates and trusts others
- Leads from authenticity rather than control

Gift Underneath the Role

Integrity. Leadership. Reliability. Vision.

The healed hero becomes: “I can contribute greatly and still be human.”

Practices for this week:

- ☐ Ask for help with something you could do yourself
- ☐ Share one struggle or vulnerability with a trusted person
- ☐ Do something imperfectly, art, arrange furniture, recipe
- ☐ Rest. Half hour. Do nothing.

The “Scapegoat”

Outspoken, Independent. Courageous. The rebel. Often the truth-teller of the family system.

Survival Strategy

- Express the pain that the family avoids
- Draw attention away from deeper dysfunction
- Externalize distress
- Gain identity through opposition

Wounds Beneath It

- Feeling fundamentally misunderstood
- Rejection
- Loneliness
- Rage at hypocrisy or emotional dishonesty

Healed Expression

- Courageous authenticity
- Healthy boundary setting
- Uses anger as information rather than destruction
- Channels intensity into advocacy, creativity, justice, leadership
- Speaks truth without needing chaos
- Learns they are not “too much”

Gift Underneath the Role

Discernment. Honesty. Passion. Social courage.

The healed scapegoat becomes:

“I can tell the truth without burning the world down to say it.”

Practices for this week:

- ☐ Share a vulnerable feeling with someone you trust
- ☐ Reach out to spend time with someone
- ☐ Journal about 3 strengths you can recognize in yourself
- ☐ Ask someone you love what their favorite thing is about you

The “Mascot”

The comic relief. Charming. Funny. Light-bringer.

Survival Strategy

- Reduce tension through humor
- Distract from pain
- Keep everyone emotionally regulated
- Stay lovable through entertainment

Wounds Beneath It

- Fear of seriousness
- Fear that their pain will burden others
- Difficulty being emotionally vulnerable
- Anxiety beneath humor
- Feeling unseen beneath the performance

Healed Expression

- Joy that is genuine, not defensive
- Uses humor with emotional honesty
- Can be playful *and* vulnerable
- Comfortable with emotional depth
- Lets others care for them too
- Brings levity without erasing pain

Gift Underneath the Role

Warmth. Emotional intuition. Social connection. Hope.

The healed mascot becomes:

“I don’t have to perform to deserve closeness.”

Practices for this week:

- ☐ Share a struggle with someone you trust
- ☐ Reach out to have an earnest conversation with someone
- ☐ Identify one goal that you would like to reach in the next week
- ☐ Write a sincere letter of gratitude to someone you love

The “Lost Child”

Quiet. Invisible. Self contained. Often deeply imaginative.

Survival Strategy

- Stay small to avoid conflict
- Ask for and need little
- Retreat inward
- Soothe through fantasy, isolation, books, games, creativity

Wounds Beneath It

- Fear of intrusion
- Fear of emotional intensity
- Feeling unseen or unimportant
- Difficulty expressing needs
- Learned helplessness or passivity

Healed Expression

- Peaceful rather than absent
- Comfortable taking up space
- Emotionally connected
- Self aware and expressive
- Able to ask for help
- Deeply observant and thoughtful

Gift Underneath the Role

Creativity. Insight. Sensitivity. Imagination.

The healed lost child becomes:

“My presence matters, and I’m able to be safely connected to others.”

Practices for this week:

- ☐ Share a need/want with someone you trust
- ☐ Notice when you're withdrawing and purposely re-engage
- ☐ Attend one social activity
- ☐ Ask someone for help with something you could do yourself