

# Patterns From Our Family of Origin



**F**amily traditions play a large part in how we as adults cope with living in today's world. The family is the most significant place for handing down the blueprint for living from one generation to the next. Many men that I have worked with have vowed and declared that they would not act like their parents when they grew up. And yet, fifteen or so years later there are distinct similarities in patterns of behaviour.

While some men who grow up in violent and abusive situations do not go on to be abusive physically to their partners, many describe recreating a verbally abusive atmosphere in their families as adults which includes behaviours such as name-calling, put-downs of their partners, criticism and verbal arguments. If self-righteous anger and abuse are part of your family tradition, you have a good chance of giving it the slip and creating a new tradition of safe and non-abusive relationships.

I believe that men who are abusive to others are not exceptions to the rule but are carrying out the very behaviours they are trained to do. Besides what takes place in our families of origin, the training is contained in what I call the 'Old Rule Book,' the traditional blueprint for masculinity as we know it today. This blueprint has had its day and no longer has relevance if we are truly committed to being with others in ways that are respectful and equal. You wouldn't have had much choice about the rule book you received from the family you grew up in. What you do have a choice about is whether you want to continue the traditions from your family of origin or to pioneer the building of a New Rule Book.

Fill in the following questionnaire. Think about particular situations that come to mind. Try to be aware of what you remember before the age of eight years old as these are significant years. If a question does not apply, leave it out and continue with the next.

A word of caution: working through this questionnaire may be painful and difficult. Stick with it. If you cannot do it in one go, put it down and come back to it at a later stage.

## ***Family Patterns***

How did your father or stepfather act when he was angry or uptight?

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How did your mother or stepmother act when she was angry or uptight?

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How did your caregivers handle their conflict and differences?

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Was there any abuse or violence at home? If so, what forms did this take?

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Was anybody afraid at home? Who? How did you know they were afraid?

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# Patterns From Our Family of Origin

Were you hit or abused as a child in your family? What effect did this have on you?

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How did you express your feelings when you were a child?

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What did you learn in the setting you grew up in about:

(a) How men deal with their feelings?

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(b) How men deal with conflict and difference?

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Was anybody afraid at home? Who? How did you know they were afraid?

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# Patterns From Our Family of Origin



Were you hit or abused as a child in your family? What effect did this have on you?

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How did you express your feelings when you were a child?

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What did you learn in the setting you grew up in about:

(a) How men deal with their feelings?

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(b) How men deal with conflict and difference?

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(c) How women deal with their feelings?

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(d) How women deal with conflict and difference?

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Who are you most like when it comes to expressing your uptight and angry feelings?

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Who are you most like when it comes to resolving conflict?

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What would others who know you well say or want to add if they were answering these questions?

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## Healthy and Unhealthy Families

How would you set out to evaluate what is healthy and what is not? There is no blueprint for the perfect family but there are criteria that, if followed, would go a long way towards improving the quality of life for others, especially the children.

### *Your Family of Origin Assessment*

Rate from zero (low) to ten (high) your experience of these qualities. Circle the number that best describes the family you grew up in. Put a cross over the number that best describes the situation in your own family now, as an adult.

People listen to each other.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

People feel connected and close.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

All members have some degree of power appropriate to their age and stage of development.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

There is an acceptance of who you are.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

There is respect for each other.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

Members are appreciated for their contributions and for being themselves.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

Punishments fit the crime.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

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Members trust each other.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Members work together.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Members show warmth and affection to each other.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Members are honest and truthful with each other

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Members can have fun.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

There is a sense of commitment.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Rules are fair and negotiable.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

It's okay to make mistakes.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Members solve problems together

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

The family is a safe place to be.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Members have a clear appreciation of each other's boundaries - that is, they respect the personal and emotional space of each member.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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Reflect upon how you felt about doing this exercise. It may raise some uncomfortable feelings. Some men report that they are amazed and shocked by how low they score on these scales for their own childhoods and their adult lives. It starts to make sense of how they are now.

The next step is to look at the web page on “The new rule book for men.”



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