Dictionary.com defines a scapegoat as “a person or group made to bear the blame for others or to suffer in their place.” According to Wikipedia, “scapegoating is the practice of singling out any party for unmerited negative treatment or blame.”

**Why Does Scapegoating Occur In Families?**

When there is a scapegoat in a family, the deeper, underlying issues that need to be addressed within all family members can be ignored and or denied. The focus of the family’s problems become about one individual and that individual’s behavior making it appear that if the scapegoat was “fixed” or “changed,” everything about the family would be perfect. Since no family is ever perfect, this ideal is never achieved and the scapegoat is continuously singled out.

**The Power of Numbers and Groupthink: A False Perception**

In a family system that engages in scapegoating, groupthink is likely to occur. According to Wikipedia, groupthink can be defined as, “a psychological phenomenon that occurs within groups of people...Group members try to minimize conflict and reach a consensus decision without critical evaluation of alternative ideas or viewpoints...The primary socially negative cost of groupthink is the loss of individual creativity, uniqueness, and independent thinking.” A lone family member who rejects the “groupthink” of the family is often scapegoated as a result of the conflict it creates.

As a result of groupthink, the non-scapegoated family members stick together with their line of thinking. As there is safety in numbers, they tend to believe that their thinking is right, as others agree with them. Thus, the power of numbers creates a false perception. This perpetuates the cycle of singling out the scapegoat, forever judging, criticizing and picking apart the scapegoat's behavior or ways of thinking.

**Examples of Family Dynamics That Often Encourage Scapegoating**

- Chronic untreated or ineffectively treated parental emotional difficulties and/or mental illness such as depression, anxiety, panic disorder, bipolar disorder, etc.
- Untreated or ineffectively treated parental alcohol abuse and/or dependence and substance abuse and/or dependence. This also includes prescription substance abuse/dependence and can be marked by intense denial within the family as family members may feel that if a medication is prescribed, it must be beneficial.
- Adoption. An adoptee is often an obvious and easy target for scapegoating as there are biological differences within the family.
- Emotional and/or physical abuse/neglect.
- Chronic and/or disabling parental health conditions.
- Unresolved marital conflict
- Parental Food Addiction/Obesity
- Multigenerational Narcissism

**How Can Individual Therapy Help?**

Therapy is not about changing others. It is about self-growth, deep reflection, healing past wounds, building skills, and recognizing one’s true potential. Therapy can help by:

- Reducing troublesome symptoms that being the target of scapegoating often creates such as depression, anxiety, and low self-confidence.
- Choosing positive, healthy friendships and social relationships as one who has been scapegoated may be naturally drawn to people who will judge, blame, and criticize them, thus perpetuating past experience.
- Building boundaries with family and friends who judge, blame, and criticize.
- Building coping skills to manage the inevitable negative reactions from those family and friends whom you have had to build boundaries with.

This information is not intended to replace the medical or therapeutic advice of your physician, health care provider, or therapist. Please consult your physician, health care provider, and/or therapist for advice about a personal concern or medical condition.