

Scapegoat Identification Protocol

Assessment Framework

Overview

The scapegoat role is assigned to one family member who becomes the repository for family dysfunction. Identifying this dynamic is essential for understanding client presentations and guiding effective work.

Primary Indicators

- Client reports being blamed for family problems disproportionately
- History of being the "problem child" despite objectively normal behavior
- Sibling(s) treated markedly differently (golden child dynamic)
- Client questions own reality frequently ("Am I crazy?")
- Family narratives about client don't match observable behavior
- Client has been cut off or threatened with cutoff for setting boundaries

Interview Questions

- "When there was conflict in your family, who usually got blamed?"
- "How were you described to others outside the family?"
- "Were you and your siblings treated similarly or differently?"
- "What happened when you tried to set boundaries?"
- "Do family members have a different version of events than you remember?"

Observational Markers

- Excessive self-blame or apologizing
- Difficulty identifying own needs or preferences
- Hypervigilance to others' emotional states
- Chronic self-doubt despite competence
- Relief when validated about family experiences

Differential Considerations

Distinguish scapegoating from legitimate accountability. Key differentiators: scapegoating is disproportionate, consistent regardless of actual behavior, and serves family system needs rather than addressing real issues.

Working with Scapegoated Clients

- Validate their reality without requiring "proof"
- Help them see the pattern is about the system, not their worth

- Support boundary-setting even if family reacts negatively
- Address internalized shame from years of scapegoating

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