

‘Is My Relationship Codependent?’ These 4 Questions Will Help You Decide

Unhealthy people draw other people into their dysfunction. Anyone trying to be married to, parent, care for or love someone who is harming themselves and others struggles with knowing what to do. How can you tell the difference between codependency and love?

Your person may be an alcoholic or abusing drugs. But he/she may also be emotionally unavailable; addicted to food, gambling, rage or porn; or have any other persistently destructive behavior. Who is your person? What is their struggle?

It’s been said that codependency is when you are about to die and someone else’s life flashes before your eyes. That’s not love.

Jesus always, *always*, embraced anyone truly wanting help. He believed in them. But remaining in sin was never an option if someone wanted to be in relationship with Jesus. He called them up to a higher standard of living and made it possible for them to become a different person.

You and I are not Jesus, but we are called to be His representatives—His hands, feet, arms and voice to those we love. We are *always* called to love. Love makes change possible. We are never called to enable destructive behavior.

Though that may sound straightforward to someone looking on from the outside, it’s often very difficult for someone in the middle of such a relationship to know the difference between

codependency and love. And it's even harder to consistently act out of love and not codependency. Honestly and prayerfully contemplating these questions will help you come closer to understanding the difference, and what God is calling *you* to do.

1. What is true?

Jesus said, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free" (John 8:32). As with many of Jesus' sayings, this applies on several levels.

Jesus *is* truth, and He does set us free! In addition, coming to understand the truth about ourselves, another person and the related circumstances also sets us free in critical ways. Denying or ignoring your spouse's porn use or, your child's use of drugs or any other bad behavior only enables further destruction.

The truth about your own heart is one of the most important truths of all. Are you trying to control your person? Are you acting out of fear? Fear and control are always danger signs. Have you dealt with, or are you dealing with, your own traumas and past history?

Looking honestly at such truths can feel painful. Do it anyway.

2. What is kind?

Niceness is not kindness. Denying the truth is not kindness. Enabling a person to continue to destroy themselves is not kindness.

There's been a lot of debate about tough love, and there are times the concept has been used in harsh and harmful ways. Dr. Henry Cloud uses the helpful example of going to the dentist in understanding the difference between hurt and harm; getting a root canal may hurt, but it does not harm. Setting healthy

boundaries with your person may hurt, but it will not harm.

What's the difference? It's unique to each relationship. For example, talking with your child's school counselor about their withdrawal and bad behavior at home is kind; sharing all the details on social media is just complaining or vindictive gossip. Removing yourself and your children when your spouse is acting out in rage is kind; raging back is harmful.

Kindness is not weakness. Kindness takes courage.

3. Who is responsible?

You probably know well the scripture, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2). But many are less familiar with what Paul says just a couple verses later: "For each one shall bear his own burden" (Gal. 6:5).

God designed us to need each other. Your person needs you! But they also are responsible for themselves. It dishonors them when you try to do the work *for* them. You cannot get over your child's drug addiction. You cannot stop using porn for your spouse. You cannot heal for your person who is acting destructively out of their trauma. You can only grow and heal for yourself.

Believing in your person? Yes, that's just like Jesus does. Supporting them? Yes. Walking alongside them? Yes. Being responsible *to* them? Yes.

Providing money to continue their bad behavior? No. Having sex with your spouse when they're engaging sexually elsewhere? No. Taking responsibility *for* them? No.

And remember, this means you're responsible for your *own* journey—for your own growing and healing and becoming who God created *you* to be.

4. Who is suffering?

If you are doing the suffering *for* your person, it's likely codependency. If you are doling out suffering, making your person suffer, that's cruel and anti-love. If you are suffering *with* them, it's likely love.

Love often means suffering. But it does not mean living someone else's life *for* them. This may often take prayer to discern what your person is able to do and what they cannot do.

Godly suffering is when you shoulder some of the load your person is not able to carry, and when you provide support and care as they are doing the hard work of changing, healing and growing. Codependency is when you try to do for your person what they could do for themselves.

Learning to Love Well

God's purpose for the relationships we have in this life is that you and I learn to love well. God is love, and we need a laboratory in which to learn to love as He does. That's the purpose of marriage and all good relationships. It's a foundation of parenting, friendship and much more.

You can only learn to love well by doing it, and by staying on your knees. Love comes from God; we can't generate it ourselves. And we need a constant fresh supply.

Perhaps the best prayer when it comes to wrestling with the difference between codependency and love is, "God, who do You need me to be to this person in this season?" Ask Him to show you His perspective on your own heart, on their heart and on the relationship. Remember, He loves them even more than you do, and He is after their heart as well as yours.

In the final analysis, codependency is really about you. Love is truly about the other person.

May you continue learning to love well!

Your Turn: *Do you wonder if you are in a codependent relationship? What do you know to be true in this situation? Where's your biggest challenge? Leave a comment below.* {eo}

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