

Breaking the Codependent Cycle

✖ Do you say yes when you really want to say no? Do you “walk on eggshells” around certain people, believing you can control their emotions? Do you think you must have solutions for other people’s problems?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you may be codependent.

Codependent literally means “dependent with.” People can become “dependent with,” or on, a substance, such as alcohol or drugs; a behavior, such as irregular eating or compulsive shopping; or other people, such as a spouse or adult child.

How does codependency develop?

All humans are born with basic needs. Our physical needs—food, water and shelter—are obvious. Our emotional needs—love, acceptance and significance—are less apparent but just as important to our development. If we are deprived of these basic love needs, we are affected for the rest of our lives.

If you were born into an emotionally healthy family, your love needs were probably met. However, if you were born to parents who themselves were deprived of love, it’s very likely your needs were not met, either.

Alcohol- or drug-addicted parents, for example, are often unavailable to their children both emotionally and physically. The parent who is not addicted is so immersed in the addict and his problems that she has little ability to meet the love needs of the children. The emotionally deprived children often become codependent adults, struggling through life with what Hemfelt, Minirth and Meier refer to in their book *Love Is a*

Choice as an “empty love tank.”

“In a normal, functional family,” they write, “love is transmitted from generation to generation, poured down from parents to children.” If this does not happen, codependency, “a condition that results when love tanks are running on empty,” can occur.

The Codependent Response

How can you tell if you, or someone you love, is codependent? There are a variety of behavioral patterns you can watch for.

Codependents try to fill their emotional voids with people, behaviors and things. Feeling empty inside and unhappy with their lives, codependents use people, behaviors and things to control or medicate inner feelings such as fear, unresolved anger or loneliness.

In a family in which one spouse has an alcohol or drug addiction, the other spouse is frequently dependent upon the person with the addiction. The non-addicted spouse sees the addict as “needing to be taken care of” and assumes responsibility for the addict’s feelings, thoughts and behaviors.

Codependents have a tendency to control. In an effort to control their own emotions, codependents try to control the emotions and behaviors of those around them. What they can’t control, they worry about.

Codependents are motivated by the idea that if they could only get their partners to change, their problems would be solved. Their belief is that others have the ability to “make” them angry, happy or sad.

Accompanying the need to control is the feeling of fear. *Codependents often fear another’s retaliation physically, emotionally or mentally.* They also are paralyzed by thoughts

of being abandoned and left alone to handle life's issues. They minimize their problems, trying to believe the lie that "things aren't really so bad."

Codependents become so enmeshed in another's life and problems that they lose their own sense of identity and self-worth. Constantly looking to others for validation, codependents seek approval at all costs and will do whatever is necessary to please others. The wife of a sex addict may be extremely cautious about crossing her husband, for example, because she fears that if she makes him mad, he'll look at pornography.

Codependents often lack the ability to set clear boundaries—not knowing when to say yes and when to say no to themselves and others. Fuzzy boundaries are a symptom of low self-esteem. They stem from negative thought patterns such as "If I say no, they won't like me." Such constant devaluing prevents an accurate assessment of true strengths and weaknesses, which is the basis for healthy self-esteem and the key to setting healthy boundaries.

Codependents excuse, tolerate and cover up the bad behavior of the person they are dependent upon, even when it is habitual or extreme. Have you ever known a wife who "calls in sick" for an alcoholic spouse with a hangover, or a husband who continues to make the payments on credit card accounts for a spouse who's a compulsive shopper? Codependents enable rather than help correct the bad behavior.

Finding the Source of the Problem

The issues connected with codependency are so complex that helping a codependent through the healing process is difficult. I usually begin by identifying what the factors were, from active abuse to subtle neglect, that prevented the person's love needs from being met. I determine how these painful events affected him in the past and how they are affecting him now. Then I help him come to terms with his past

and begin to make better choices for the present and future by showing him how to work through the grief process (denial, anger, depression, bargaining and acceptance).

One common hindrance to the healing process is the codependent's stubborn defense of his dysfunctional family-of-origin. Often a codependent will pretend things "weren't that bad" and find looking inward very painful. I often hear, "My parents did the best they could."

Though that may be true, it is necessary for the codependent to see that suppression of a painful past has resulted in his present problems. If he wants to complete the grieving process and receive the healing he so desperately needs, he has to get out of denial.

When codependents refuse to face the reality that past events have hurt them, they "re-create" the past by repeating patterns of behavior under a compulsion to fix their dysfunctional families. In psychology we refer to this as "unfinished business."

For example, if the emotional needs (love, acceptance, significance) of a daughter were not met because her father was caught up in sexual addiction, she likely will re-create her childhood by marrying a man who is a sex addict in order to "finish the business" of getting her love needs met. The result, of course, is only the perpetuation of unmet needs.

In facing the "unfinished business" of our pasts, we do not blame or attack our parents. The goal is to try to understand how the way we were raised has affected and may still be affecting us.

Getting Free

As with all of life's challenges, the solutions to codependency are found in God's Word. The Bible tells us in Genesis 1:27 that "God created man in His own image" (NIV). It

goes on to say, "God saw all that He had made, and it was very good" (v. 31).

This passage of Scripture is telling us that our "original" family-of-origin is God's family and that we, a part of what God created, are "very good." We are not forever bound by an earthly family's dysfunctions when we realize who our true Father is! This is good news for the codependent.

The only perfect parent is our Father God, the one who created us. As we come to know Him, we learn to trust Him to meet our deepest inner needs, and we exchange the chaos of our lives for His peace.

The apostle John tells of a Samaritan woman who had been with six different men in an attempt to have her innermost emotional needs met. It was only when Jesus introduced her to her true Father that she came to realize all her needs could be met in Him (see John 4:14).

Like the Samaritan woman, the codependent must learn some things about God: that His love is unfailing, that He never abandons us, that He is patient and kind, even when we make mistakes, that He always tells the truth, that He always keeps His promises, that He always listens and acts on our behalf—and most of all, that He accepts us just as we are and considers us beautiful.

The Bible's help to those who feel the need to control others is self-control, which is a fruit of the Spirit (see Gal. 5:22). God's grace enables us to live self-controlled lives (see Titus 2:11-12). The apostle Paul tells us in 1 Cor. 6:12 that he "will not be mastered by anything." Like him, when we are in control of our own feelings and behaviors, we can give to others out of a position of strength, not weakness.

Note that doing someone a favor is not a sign of codependency. Doing good when you freely choose to do it is from godly strength. But doing for others what we cannot do, do not wish

to do or cannot afford to do is motivated by weakness and is not of God.

Dealing with unclear boundaries and low self-esteem becomes easier when we know who we are in Christ. Then we do not base our success on the acceptance or approval of others.

Jesus did not struggle with His identity. He knew exactly who He was (see John 4:25-26). We need not struggle with our identity or purpose, either. First Peter 2:9 declares that we “are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that [we] may declare the praises of Him who called [us] out of darkness into His wonderful light.”

Knowing who we are in Christ makes us powerful in Him. In Colossians 2:9 we read, “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is head over every power and authority.”

In Christ, we are children of God (see 1 John 3:1). We have His attributes and strengths within us. That means we do not have to fear anyone or anything.

We are free to say no without feeling guilty and yes without feeling angry. We are not constrained by fear of abandonment or retaliation. We are able to confront others in a loving, yet powerful manner. And if they respond negatively, we can hold them accountable with godly consequences.

Breaking free from codependency begins with learning the facts about it and getting help. Codependency will not improve over time. Even if circumstances appear to be better for a season, happiness will be incomplete and temporary.

Extreme codependency can lead to severe depression and even suicide, as well as increasingly poor physical health, especially if addictions to substances are involved. Wounds from the past will become strongholds for pain, bitterness and unforgiveness. And the lives of innocent victims may be in

danger.

If you are involved with someone who is codependent, seek professional help. Educate yourself. Read books. Attend support groups. Remember, you are not powerful enough to change anyone—only God can do that. It is the Son who sets us free (see John 8:36.)

But He is more than able to accomplish what needs to be performed—to sanctify the codependent “through and through” and to keep his spirit, soul and body “blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:23). “The one who calls you is faithful,” the Bible says, “and He will do it” (v. 24).

Julie Roe, Ph.D., is a Christian clinical psychologist who has ministered to hurting and wounded women around the world. Her private practice is based in Sanford, Florida, where she lives with her husband, Allan.