

The following material is adapted from Therapist's Guide To Clinical Intervention by Sharon L. Johnson

WHAT IS CODEPENDENCY?

Codependency is defined as when someone becomes so preoccupied with someone else that they neglect themselves. In a way it is believing that something outside of themselves can give them happiness and fulfillment. They payoff in focusing on someone else is a decrease in painful feelings and anxiety.

Some people are in an emotional state of fear, anxiety, pain, or feeling like they are going crazy, and they feel these emotions strongly almost all the time. These people tend to think they can make those around them happy, and when they can't, they feel somehow less than others, they feel like they have failed.

These are people who tend to hold things in and then at inappropriate times they overreact, or they just have a tendency to overreact (e.g., something frightening happens and instead of experiencing normal fear they panic or experience anxiety attacks).

Codependency is when people operate as if they are okay only if they please the people around them.

They live with the false belief that the bad feelings they have can be gotten rid of if they can just "do it better" or if they can win the approval of certain important people in their life. By doing this they make those people and their approval responsible for their own happiness.

Often codependent people appear gentle and helpful. However, in this situation, two different things may be going on:

1. They may be struggling with a strong need to control and manipulate those around them into giving them the approval they believe they need to feel okay.
2. They minimize their emotions until they hardly experience any emotion at all. No fear, pain, anger, shame, joy, or pleasure. They just exist from one day to the next - numb.

It was actually the families of alcoholics and other chemically dependent people who brought these two clusters of symptoms to the attention of professionals.

THE CLASSIC SITUATION

The codependents' efforts were apparently to get the alcoholic or chemically dependent person sober and free from drugs. If they could help the alcoholic the family members would be free of pain, shame, fear, and anger.

But they found that that doesn't really work because even when the alcoholic got sober the family stayed sick and sometimes even appeared to resent the sobriety. Sometimes they sabotaged it.

It was as if the family needed the addict to stay sick and dependent on them so that they could maintain their dependence on the addict as a way of explaining their own experience and how they felt.

In other words, the addict and the codependent are trying to solve similar basic symptoms of the same disease: the addict with alcohol or drugs and the codependent with the addictive relationship.

Codependency may be difficult to see from the outside because people who suffer from codependency generally appear adequate and successful. This is because they are involved in things to win them the all important approval they need.

It's a vicious cycle of addiction because it is common for the codependent to at some point turn to drugs to numb their discomfort. Codependents are set up to be alcoholics or other kinds of addicts.

As you read these examples what do you identify with?

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF CODEPENDENCE

1. My good feelings about who I am stem from being liked by you and receiving approval from you.
2. Your struggles affect my serenity. I focus my mental attention on solving your problems or relieving your pain.
3. I focus my mental attention on pleasing you, protecting you, or manipulating you to "do it my way."
4. I bolster my self-esteem by solving your problems and relieving your pain.
5. I put aside my own hobbies and interests. I spend my time sharing your interests and hobbies.
6. Because I feel you are a reflection of me, my desires dictate your clothing and personal appearance.
7. My desires dictate your behavior.
8. I am not aware of how I feel. I am aware of how you feel.
9. I am not aware of what I want. I ask you what you want.
10. If I am not aware of something, I assume (I don't ask or verify in some other way).
11. My fear of your anger and rejection determines what I say or do.
12. In our relationship I use giving as a way of feeling safe.
13. As I involve myself with you, my social circle diminishes.
14. To connect with you, I put my values aside.
15. I value your opinion and way of doing things more than my own.
16. The quality of my life depends on the quality of yours.
17. I am always trying to fix or take care of others while neglecting myself.
18. I find it easier to give in and comply with others than to express my own wants and needs.
19. I sometimes feel sorry for myself, feeling no one understands. I think about getting help, but rarely commit or follow through.

SUGGESTED DIAGNOSTIC CRITERIA FOR CODEPENDENCE

1. Continued investment of self-esteem in the ability to control both oneself and others in the face of adverse consequences.
2. Assumption of responsibility for meeting other's needs to the exclusion of acknowledging one's own needs.
3. Anxiety and boundary distortions around intimacy and separation.
4. Enmeshment in relationships with personality-disordered, chemically dependent and impulse-disordered individuals.
5. Exhibits at least three of the following.
 - A. Excessive reliance on denial
 - B. Constriction of emotions (with or without outbursts)
 - C. Depression
 - D. Hypervigilance
 - E. Compulsions
 - F. Anxiety
 - G. Alcohol or other drug abuse
 - H. Recurrent victim of sexual abuse
 - I. Stress-related medical illnesses
 - J. Has remained in a primary relationship with an actively mistreating or abusing person for at least 2 years without seeking outside support.

Adapted from Cermak (1986). Cermak believes that approximately 95% of the population grew up in a dysfunctional home, and that 5% of those individuals fit this diagnostic criteria.

Another model describing codependence is called the "iceberg model." Again this model depicts the codependent as growing up in a dysfunctional family of origin as well as living in an

unhealthy society with two major criteria at the foundation: abandonment and shame.

As children they feel many things; there is a dominance of emptiness. In many ways their life journey is an effort to fill the emptiness. This may result in experiencing painful consequences which include: depression, anxiety, chemical dependence, eating disorders, other compulsions, relationship addiction, and stress-related disorders.

Codependency can be thought of as the growth stopping behaviors that occur between two people. Such behavior is on a continuum from infrequent and not particularly significant to frequent and destructive.

Examples that might exist on a continuum are:

1. A father who is contacted by the school about his teenage son being absent. The father covers for the teenager so that he won't get in trouble. This prevents the son from experiencing the consequences of making bad choices. The result is that it creates an opportunity to reinforce poor decision-making skills.
2. The house always needs to be picked up, but instead of making everyone responsible to pick up after themselves the oldest daughter always does it "to avoid an argument."
3. The alcoholic who has a hangover and can't make it to work every other Monday never is confronted with the consequences of his substance dependence because his wife always calls in the office that he is sick. This is just one of the ways she protects him. However, there are also enumerable fights about her wanting him to quit drinking.

In each situation you have someone trying to control what another person's experience will be. As a result the person is denied being put in a situation in which they have no choice but to deal with the consequences of their behavior are. Additionally, each person has the risk or tendency to become more embedded in their role.

HOW DOES CODEPENDENCY WORK

Codependency creates a set of rules for communicating and interacting in relationships.

1. It's not okay to talk about problems.

"Don't air your dirty laundry in public."

Never hear mom and dad arguing but there is often a lot of tension.

This results in learning to avoid problems.

2. Feelings are not expressed openly.

Taking pride in being strong and not showing emotion.

"Big boys don't cry."

The result is coming to believe it is better (safer) not to feel, eventually we get so cut off from self that we are unsure what we feel.

3. Communication is often indirect, with one person acting as a messenger between two others.

Dad tells son "I wish your mom was more understanding" (he talks to mom). Using someone else to communicate for you results in confusion, misdirected feelings, and an inability to directly confront personal problems.

4. Unrealistic expectations: be strong, good, right, perfect, makes us proud.

Doing well and achieving is the most important thing.

Enough is never enough.

Results in creating an ideal in our head about what is good or right or best that is far removed from what is realistic and possible. This leads to us punishing others because they don't meet our expectations. We may even blame ourselves for not pushing someone enough to meet our expectations.

5. Don't be selfish.

Views self as wrong for placing their own needs before the needs of others.
End up trying to feel good by taking care of others.

6. Do as I say ... not as I do.

This rule teaches us not to trust.

7. It's not okay to play.

Begin to believe that the world is a serious place where life is always difficult and painful.

8. Don't rock the boat.

The system seeks to maintain itself. If you grow and change you'll be alone.

THE RULES OF CODEPENDENCY

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HOW CODEPENDENCY AFFECTS ONE'S LIFE

1. When I am having problems feeling good about myself and you have an opinion about me that I don't want you to have, I try to control what you feel about me so that I can feel good about myself.

2. I can't tell where my reality ends and someone else's reality begins. Leads to making assumptions, belief that you can read the thoughts of others, and as a result choosing your behavior based on your perception of what the other person's opinion of you is.

3. Have trouble getting my own needs and wants met.

4. Resenting others for the pain or losses they have caused you. This can lead to obsessively thinking about them and how to get back or punish them.

5. Avoid dealing with reality to avoid unpleasant feelings.

6. Difficulty in close or intimate relationships. Relationship implies sharing - one person giving and the other receiving (without trying to change each other). Also affects how we parent our own children.

SYMPTOM/EFFECT IN CHILDREN OF CODEPENDENTS

Difficulty with self-esteem / inability to appropriately esteem our children.

Difficulty setting boundaries / inability to avoid transgressing our children's boundaries.

Difficulty owning and expressing our own reality and imperfections / inability to allow our children to have their reality and be imperfect.

Difficulty taking care of adult needs and wants / inability to appropriately nurture our children and teach them to meet their needs and wants.

Difficulty experiencing and expressing our reality / inability to provide a stable environment for our children.

WHAT CAN YOU DO

First of all, it is necessary to examine objectively your life to see if you have codependent behaviors. If you do, but generally not that often (like a parent who occasionally covers for their teenager) then just understanding the impact of the behaviors may be enough to cause change. However, more chronic use of codependent behaviors warrants more intervention to understand what is happening, how it got started, and what the choices are. This can be accomplished in various ways which include:

1. Education. There are many self-help books written on the subject.
2. Self-help groups such as Codependents Anonymous.
3. Male / Female Support Groups (facilitated by a licensed therapist).
4. Individual therapy.

STAGES OF RECOVERY

1. The process actually begins by seeing yourself where you are right now. Before you start recovery you are in the mode of "survival and denial." This is existing, not living. There is a denial of having any problems or that behaviors are self-defeating.

2. Acceptance for the realization that you cannot change others and learning to deal with it.

3. Identifying and working through personal issues. This is where you see and understand more about yourself. Awareness is increasing. There is an understanding of the past, but living in the present.

4. Reintegration. Learning to be okay with yourself - not identifying yourself by what you do for others. This prepares you for taking responsibility of self-care and getting your own needs met.

5. A new beginning. Living a new, emotionally healthy way of life.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ADULT CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLICS

Adult children of alcoholics appear to have characteristics in common as a result of being raised in an alcoholic home. Review the characteristics listed. If you identify with these characteristics then seek appropriate sources of support to understand and resolve them. You will find many books at the bookstore on this subject. Additionally, there is Adult Children of Alcoholics 12-Step self-help community meeting, individual therapy, and group therapy facilitated by a therapist.

1. Isolation, fear of people, and fear of authority figures.
2. Difficulty with identity issues related to seeking constantly the approval of others.
3. Frightened by angry people and personal criticism.
4. Have become an alcoholic yourself, married one, or both. A variation would be the attraction to another compulsive personality such as a workaholic. The similarity is that neither is emotionally available to deal with overwhelming and unhealthy dependency needs.
5. Perpetually being the victim and seeing the world from the perspective of a victim.
6. An overdeveloped sense of responsibility. Concerned about the needs of others to the degree of neglecting your own wants and needs. This is a protective behavior for avoiding a good look at yourself and taking responsibility to identify and resolve your own personal difficulties.
7. Feelings of guilt associated with standing up for your rights. It is easier to give into the demands of others.

8. An addiction to excitement. Feeling a need to be on the edge, and risk-taking behaviors.
9. A tendency to confuse feelings of love and pity. Attracted to people that you can rescue and take care of.
10. Avoidance of feelings related to traumatic childhood experiences. Unable to feel or express feelings because it is frightening and / or painful and overwhelming. Denial of feelings.
11. Low self-esteem. A tendency to judge yourself harshly and be perfectionistic and self-critical.
12. Strong dependency needs and terrified of abandonment. Will do almost anything to hold onto a relationship in order to avoid the fear and pain of abandonment.
13. Alcoholism is a family disease which often results in a family member taking on the characteristics of the disease even if they are not alcoholics (para-alcoholics). Dysfunctional relationships, denial, fearful, avoidance of feelings, poor coping, poor problem solving, afraid that others will find out what you are really like, etc.
14. Tendency to react to things that happen versus taking control and not being victim to the behavior of others or situations created by others.
15. A chameleon. A tendency to be what others want you to be instead of being yourself. A lack of honesty with yourself and others.

GUIDELINES FOR COMPLETING YOUR FIRST STEP TOWARD EMOTIONAL HEALTH

The first step is simply an honest look at how your life experiences have affected you. This includes how you perceive things, how you react and respond to various situations and other people, your coping ability, problem-solving skills, conflict resolution skills, what motivates you, and the ability to form healthy relationships.

Answer all of the questions that follow as thoroughly as possible, citing specific incidents, the approximate date, how you felt, what you thought, and how you responded. It may be an emotional experience for you to review your life experiences in detail, but remind yourself that there is nothing that you will write about that you haven't already experienced and survived. This writing will help you understand yourself better, clarify what the problems are, and find what you need to do to solve these problems.

1. Describe in detail your childhood home life. Include descriptions of relationships with family members, and extended family members that you view as significant.
2. What is your earliest memory? What emotion(s) does this memory evoke?
3. Share two of your happiest / pleasant and two of the most painful life experiences that you have had. Be specific in describing the experiences.
4. How did these experiences affect you?
5. What did you learn from your family about: A. What it means to be a family member. B. How to be a partner to someone. C. How to resolve conflicts and problem solve issues. D. How to deal with anger and other emotions.
6. How do you function in social relationships? A. Are you friendly, reserved, distrustful, easily hurt? B. How do you respond to the ideas or opinions of others? C. Do you easily form acquaintances / friendships? D. Are you able to maintain relationships? E. Do you have any behaviors or attitudes which create difficulties for you?
7. How did your early life experience affect self-esteem and self-confidence?
8. When did you become aware that you have emotional and behavioral difficulties that contribute to negative life experiences?
9. Explain how your difficulties have prevented you from reaching desired goals and having fulfilling relationships.
10. What are your fears, and how do they affect your life?
11. Do your difficulties increase during times of stress or discomfort resulting from job, family, or personal problems? Give examples of each.
12. Discuss how your emotional and behavioral difficulties have had negative impact on significant relationships, intimacy, trust, caused you social problems, such as loss of friends, inability to perform

sexually, unreasonable demands on others, allowing yourself to be taken advantage of, etc. Tell how they interfered with your relationships. How do you feel about that now?

13. How have your emotional and / or behavioral difficulties affected your health?

14. List the emotional and behavioral problems that you have attempted to resolve. How successful have you been?

15. Review all that you have written. Use this information to take responsibility for your life. No matter what has happened to you or what others have done it is up to you to make yourself and your life what you want them to be. This requires that you live consciously maintaining a good awareness for what you are doing and why you are doing it. Marketing things right is an active process not just a thinking exercise.