

Living With an Addict: Codependency

"Codependency is not about a relationship with an addict, it is the absence of relationship with self." Quote from Broken Toys Broken Dreams by Terry Kellogg

The word "codependency" first came into the treatment arena in the early seventies and is still used today to describe a variety of behaviors. Many people use the word as a way of rationalizing their behavior, by saying "I'm codependent". There are a variety of definitions of codependent and a variety of people who have experienced it in a different manner.

One of the first people to discuss codependency was Robert Subby in his book "Co-Dependency, An Emerging Issue". He describes codependency as "an emotional, psychological, and behavioral condition that develops as a result of an individual's prolonged exposure to, and practice of, a set of oppressive rules which prevent the open expression of feeling as well as, the direct discussion of personal and interpersonal problems." Earnie Larson, another well-known clinician, describes codependency as those "self-defeating, learned behaviors or character defects that result in a diminished capacity to initiate or to participate in loving relationships."



Originally, the word was used to describe a person whose life was affected as a result of their involvement with a person who was chemically addicted. This person was seen as having developed a pattern of coping with life's problems in a way that was particularly unhealthy, as a way of coping with someone else's drug or alcohol problems. It was felt that they have become co-dependent or co-alcoholic as a result of living with an alcoholic.

Melody Beattie, who has written several books on codependency defines a codependent person as: "one who has let another person's behavior affect him or her, and who is obsessed with controlling that person's behavior."

Sound familiar? How many times have you worried, fretted, or obsessed over someone's behavior when you logically knew that you have no control over it? How many times have you wondered "if only they would behave a certain way, then everything would be perfect?" It is very difficult to step outside of our own worries and look at the things that we have control of, and let go of the things that we cannot control. We typically want things to be going well, and agonize over how we can make those things happen.

In her book, Codependent No More, How to Stop Controlling Others and Start Caring for Yourself, Beattie describes many of the characteristics of the codependent person. This person is the typical caretaker and thinks and feels as

if they are responsible for other people. They take on the burden of being responsible for other people's happiness, emotions, feelings, actions, choices, and behaviors. They feel extreme guilt or anxiety when others have problems that they cannot solve. They often find themselves saying "yes" to requests when they would prefer to say "no". They feel safest when they are giving to others, they try to please others instead of themselves, and they always find it easier to display anger when an injustice has been committed against someone else, instead of when it has been committed against them. They may become bored or restless with their life if they are not involved in some type of crisis or feel as if they need to create a crisis when things settle down in their life. They blame others for the spot they are in, and believe deep down inside that other people are somehow responsible for them. They often believe that other people are making them "crazy" and feel angry and unappreciated for all that they are trying to do. They find that other people become impatient with them because they are so giving. They feel a lot of guilt about giving to others and never doing anything for themselves.

People who are codependent are often described as having low self-worth. They usually come from troubled families and may deny that there was anything wrong with their family of origin. They are overly critical of themselves and feel as if they are different from the rest of the world.

They may push their thoughts from their awareness because they are afraid of who they really are. They worry about the little things and spend a great deal of time thinking and talking about other people. They worry about everything and never find answers to their many problems.

Codependents spend a great deal of time in denial. They ignore their problems or try to pretend they are not really happening. They stay overly busy so they don't have to slow down long enough to think about their situation. They find that they are sick often and the doctor may not be able to find anything physically wrong with them.

Many codependents have poor communication skills and blame, beg, threaten, coerce, or advise others. They rarely say what they really mean and try to say what they think people want to hear. They enjoy talking about other people and rarely talk about themselves. They have difficulty asserting themselves and often begin a conversation by apologizing for bothering others.

Codependents have a great sense of lack of trust, not only for others, but for themselves. They are scared of anger and do not know how to deal with anger in a normal way. They may find that they cry a lot, get depressed, overeat, get sick or have violent outbursts.

Many codependents have lost interest in a sexual relationship. They have a difficult time asking for what they want in a relationship, and often have sex when

they don't want to in order to please their partner. They often don't enjoy sex and may have an extramarital affair to try to get in touch with their own feelings of pleasure.

Recovery

The road to recovery can be frightening for some codependents. They fear losing control, but have to learn to be responsible for themselves. The process involves learning to accept love and to fully give it in return. Recovery allows patients to take care of themselves in order that there is something left to give to others. This process involves learning about self-care.

Self-care may involve working with a therapist and learning new ways of coping. The following are some areas they may work on:

Detachment-learning to "unattach" yourself from a negative relationship or way of interacting.

Learning not to overreact to every incident in life.

Learning to set yourself free and give up some of the control that you think you must have in order to be happy.

Learning to see yourself as a survivor, and not a victim.

Learning to live without being dependent upon someone else, and how they are behaving.

Learning to accept yourself for who you are. You can accept your own feelings and thoughts.

Learning to deal with your anger in a positive manner.

Learning to communicate with others in an assertive manner by making sure that your rights are defended.

A therapist may recommend that you follow a 12-step program, just like many patients who are addicted to drugs, alcohol, gambling, or work. The basic principles of addiction apply to the person who is a codependent. They can learn to enjoy themselves again by replacing some of the self-destructive behaviors with positive ones.