

Codependency - "Who am I Without Others?"

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When you find yourself obsessed with someone, walking on eggshells to keep someone you care about from leaving, or trying to figure out how to keep someone safe from themselves, you may be experiencing signs of codependency. Codependency is an uneasy kind of love where one's own true feelings and needs become secondary to someone else's. It often results in unhappiness, frustration and exhaustion instead of closeness and understanding.

What is the difference between codependency and just caring a lot about someone? I define codependency as the habit of avoiding oneself by focusing on another person. When one is having a codependent relationship, healthy love, respect and trust are compromised. If a codependent pattern has gone too far, establishing an important relationship on better footing may seem almost impossible.

Codependency is often a pattern that develops over time, so it can be hard to see. It is also reinforced by occasional payoffs – both on the conscious and unconscious levels. Conscious payoffs may include feeling needed and useful. And you need not feel alone, even when you are, because that other person is on your mind. Other conscious payoffs may include the experiences of infatuation or drama, which can give rise to feelings of romance or excitement that one might be afraid would otherwise pass them by.

Unconscious roots of codependency run deeper. Sometimes, people develop codependency as a life-long strategy of handling fear and trauma by focusing on others. In some families, about the only positive attention a child gets is when they are being useful and undemanding. As adults, these people often end up care taking others beyond what is useful to either person. A person who is frequently criticized and judged at any age can become vulnerable to believing that they are not worthy of their own support and attention. These are just a few of codependency's causes.

Ultimately, the worst thing about codependency is that it puts you in the backseat of your own life.

To be in the backseat of one's own life means that one's own natural talents and abilities may not be fully realized or even recognized. Because codependency is draining, codependent people may find that they do not have the energy or confidence they need to carry out personal goals, including finding the kind of love they deserve. The habit of focusing too much on others means that ultimately, a person will miss taking charge of the only thing anyone can really take charge of – their own life.

If you think you may have codependent leanings, you are not alone. If you feel stuck in codependent patterns with someone you care about, there is a silver lining: because codependency is a habitual state, it can be changed. Although this self-stifling pattern may not dissolve overnight, there are many tools available if you are serious about freeing yourself from it.

First, it is very important that you find supportive people that you can trust to help you break the codependency habit. To try to break this kind of habit just by reading about it is like trying to learn to swim without getting into the water. Find supportive friends and family with whom to talk. Also, it can be helpful to work with a therapist who understands codependency in order to develop a greater understanding of not only what you want to change but how you plan to get there. You may also want to attend group therapy, or try 12-step groups like Co-dependents Anonymous (CoDA) or Al-Anon. Groups like these can be motivating because you will find people there who are already working on issues similar to yours.

Here are some other tools to help you to free yourself of codependency:

- * Keep a journal. Write about what you are grateful for, what you want out of your life, and what is stopping you. Self-focus is easier when you can actually see your thoughts on paper.
- * Pleasing yourself has its own reward. Remember what activities or hobbies you like and do them – even if no one else in your life wants to do them with you.
- * Become more aware of your inner world. Take time from your day to contemplate and meditate. If you remember your dreams at night, write them down.
- * Take a relationship inventory. Who in your current life makes a better or a worse person out of you when you are with them? You don't have to be someone's friend just because they want you to be. Seek out people who help you to grow inwardly.
- * Stop “enabling” others. If someone you are helping is not improving, check in with yourself. How do you feel - are you worried or resentful? Is your “help” really helping?
- * Avoid the payoffs of codependency, such as approval for doing more than your share, or getting sucked in to drama and infatuation. These are inner enemies. Note what feelings different people and places bring up for you.
- * When you find you are obsessed, take time and space away from the person or thing you are obsessed with. Setting interpersonal boundaries can help to put your focus back on yourself . Generally, others will respect you more for it as well.
- * Develop a sense of spirituality. This can be as simple as appreciating nature, focusing on a hobby or talking to a wise person. Developing a concept of having a higher power within yourself that has answers for you is also helpful.

The most important tool in all of this is that you think well of yourself. This may feel awkward or even like you are just pretending at first. Yet it is critically important to making progress. One of the most heartbreaking things is to watch a codependent person trying so hard to fix things, only to fail and then turn on themselves. People can treat themselves much more harshly than anyone else would. Codependency and low-self esteem go hand in hand so let go of that inner voice that says you can't change. The beginning of recovery can be just as simple as allowing oneself to begin to see what is good and true about oneself.

It is my hope that you will start to rid yourself of codependent patterns with those you care about by trying out at least one of these tools today. To do so is to begin the process of learning what you need to know about healing your life and your relationships - from the inside out.

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