



BREAKING BARRIERS

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What is Codependency?

In many respects codependency can be regarded as part of being human. Whether or not we grow up in an obviously dysfunctional family, most of us are exposed to some powerful, sometimes gross and sometimes subtle formative experiences wherein we feel that there is something about ourselves which is not okay. We react, by making a usually unconscious decision to compensate for, control, or avoid aspects of both our inner and outer worlds. Thus our codependent false self is born and our real self goes into hiding. An example of compensation would be *“I’ll show them what I’m capable of so that they never doubt my worth again;”* and so relationships with people, work, and/or studies become compulsive and competitive. An example of an attempt to control would be making myself so powerful and so needed in a relationship, that my partner would have great difficulty rejecting me and doing without me. An avoider might distort or withdraw from the reality of their lives so that they would describe their dysfunctional, less than satisfying relationships as *“fine”* or even *“wonderful.”* This makes it possible to turn a blind eye to the imbalances which might be obvious to an outsider.

It is important to see that these inauthentic and compulsive ways of dealing with the world are usually based on fear (e.g. of rejection; of not being good enough), or guilt (*“I don’t deserve to have my needs met”*). More often than not, this fear or guilt is outside of conscious awareness. Once someone has crossed a certain threshold where this way of being becomes natural and repetitive, they will find themselves attracting relationships where they re-enact these patterns. If these patterns start in early childhood (eg with the child who feels responsible for an alcoholic or otherwise dysfunctional parent), the person’s whole life can become an exhausting cycle of trying to rescue, control or avoid situations. This could be called primary codependency with deeply entrenched patterns of behaviour and defenses (such as denial). Primary codependency requires a prolonged healing process. Sometimes the codependent pattern develops later in life. For example, someone might find themselves in a dysfunctional relationship with an addicted or otherwise dysfunctional person, and is not part of a lifelong, deeply entrenched way of being. Depending on how long they have been enacting this codependent behaviour, this person may more quickly and easily break the pattern. This could be called secondary codependency. However, if allowed to continue for too long, this initially milder form of codependency easily becomes a rigid pattern of behaviour which, like a computer virus, creeps into all areas of the person’s life. Unless the codependent person *“detoxifies”* themselves and continues to maintain their healing, they are likely to continue to get into dysfunctional codependent relationships.

Let us explore in more detail some of the many ways in which codependency manifests itself. Firstly, codependent thinking and behaviour show many of the features of an addiction. There may be a compulsive aspect to caretaking or controlling others so that self worth is dependent on playing the role of caretaker, martyr or policeman. This is usually at the expense of the codependent’s own

wellbeing in that it firstly becomes physically and emotionally exhausting. Secondly, it allows the codependent to avoid facing important issues in their own lives. In this respect it is interesting to observe at our family programme at Stepping Stones, that many of the codependent family members feel depressed when their addicted family members get into treatment. No longer distracted by the “need” to caretake or control, and without the chaos of living with active addiction, they are suddenly faced with the emptiness which they may have been avoiding for a very long time. This compulsive caretaking is also extremely harmful to the codependent’s significant others. The fact that the codependent takes on an inappropriate degree of responsibility for others, deprives these others of learning to grow from the consequences of their own actions and mistakes. However, the codependent, like the alcoholic or addict, lives in denial and therefore does not see the harm that they are doing to themselves and others. When they do allow themselves to become aware of their exhaustion or the imbalances in their relationships, they may become resentful and feel like victims whose own needs are seldom if ever fulfilled. They are however very unlikely to speak openly about these feelings as they fear even healthy confrontation or conflict which elicit fears of rejection, abandonment or abuse, depending on previous life experience. This places them in a vicious cycle where they continue to act like selfless martyrs on the outside, while inside their exhaustion, tension and resentment build up. This repressed anger usually starts to emerge openly as the person wakes up from their denial and realises how they have slowly allowed their own lives to slip away from them. Unless this anger turns into a paralysing form of self pity, it is a healthy waking up which mobilises hidden inner resources needed for healing and sustained recovery.

Part of the denial of the codependent is to deny or distort real feelings to suit circumstances, or to support a false self-image of being a selfless martyr. So the codependent may change resentment into a resigned tolerance or even a smiling tolerance of difficult circumstances in order to stay true to this false self image. Similarly, any hint of tiredness or exhaustion which does not fit into the “Mother Theresa” selfless self image, quickly gets distorted or ignored. Small wonder that many codependents are who are not obvious compulsive caretakers become workaholics. Whether workaholic or compulsive pleaser or caretaker, they usually allow themselves to rest or be still, only when the body-mind, tired of sending gentle warning signals, sends a dramatic SOS which cannot be ignored. Crucially, this pattern of distorting or denying their authentic feelings, leaves the codependent alienated from themselves and others. Ultimately this results in nothing less than a loss of true self.

By now it should be clear to the reader that the core of codependency lies in a low self-esteem. The demanding and perfectionistic inner critic is constantly judging themselves and their actions as inadequate. They therefore find it far easier to please others (“hopefully this will cause others to overlook my inadequacies and maybe even value me), than to take a stand for the fulfilment of their own needs. As pleasing others overrides the need to be true to the self, the codependent frequently does things for others which conflict with their own real needs and values. So for example, they might agree to have sex in a relationship before they are ready, when they really want love and security. They might need rest, help and support for themselves, but stretch their already drained resources still further by agreeing to help other people out. They often stay in destructive relationships simply because they value themselves so little that it feels better to be in such a relationship than to be alone.

Speaking from personal experience as a recovering codependent, I ended up living my life like a robot, anxiously running from one demand to the next. My life become a matter of how I was going to survive it rather than how I was going to live it fully with open arms. In getting honest with myself in recovery, I became aware of the uncomfortable truth that my pleasing “nice guy” image was a sneaky way of trying to control what others thought of me.

Healing from codependency

Fortunately there are self-help support groups such as Codependents Anonymous, and professionally run group programmes to help people heal and start to live life fully. There are also a

number of therapists who work with codependency. Most codependents are resistant to both admitting that they need help, and to asking for it. Therefore the first step is to acknowledge that their lives have become unmanageable as a result of their codependent patterns. They then need to be helped to examine their real life experience so that they can get present to the true impact of their compulsive codependent behaviour. Once they are more in touch with themselves and their lives, they may need to explore the roots of this behaviour and to go through a process of letting go, or forgiveness of themselves, others and their pasts. This process feeds a new self awareness and self acceptance, which allows the healing codependent to develop the ability to catch themselves acting out their old behaviour patterns, and to develop new ways of being in the world.

Healing then becomes a lifelong process of slow but steady growth; always making progress, accepting that setbacks are part of the process, but never arriving at perfection. This process leads to increasingly satisfying relationships with self, others and Life, and the development of a personal and enriching sense of spirituality.

by Peter Powis, published in Odyssey magazine April 2003