

CODEPENDENCY

Codependency is a learned behavior that can be passed down from one generation to another. It is an emotional and behavioral condition that affects an individual's ability to have a healthy, mutually satisfying relationship. It is also known as "relationship addiction" because people with codependency often form or maintain relationships that are one-sided, emotionally destructive, and/or abusive. The disorder was first identified about 10 years ago as the result of years of studying interpersonal relationships in families of alcoholics. Codependent behavior is learned by watching and imitating other family members who display this type of behavior.

WHO IS AFFECTED

Codependency often affects a spouse, parent, sibling, friend, or coworker of a person afflicted with an impairment. Originally, the term codependent was used to describe partners in chemical dependency and persons living with or in a relationship with an addicted person. Similar patterns have been seen in people in relationships with chronically or mentally ill individuals and the term has now been broadened to describe any codependent person from any dysfunctional family.

A dysfunctional family is one in which members suffer from fear, anger, pain, or shame that is ignored or denied. Underlying problems may include any of the following:

- An addiction by a family member to drugs, alcohol, relationships, work, food, sex, or gambling;
- The existence of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse; or
- The presence of a family member suffering from a chronic mental or physical illness.

Dysfunctional families do not acknowledge that problems exist. They don't talk about them or con-

front them. As a result, family members learn to repress emotions and disregard their own needs. They become "survivors." They develop behaviors that help them deny, ignore, or avoid difficult emotions. They may detach themselves and may not be comfortable talking about issues, expressing affection, or trusting others. The identity and emotional development of the members of a dysfunctional family are often inhibited.

Attention and energy focus on the family member who is ill or addicted. The codependent person typically sacrifices his or her needs to take care of a person who is sick. When codependents place other people's health, welfare, and safety before their own, they can lose contact with their own needs, desires, and sense of self.

CHARACTERISTICS

Codependents have low self-esteem and look for anything outside of themselves to make them feel better. They find it hard to "be themselves." Some try to feel better through alcohol, drugs, or nicotine - and become addicted. Others may develop compulsive behaviors like workaholism, gambling, or indiscriminate sexual activity.

Codependents have good intentions. They try to take care of a person who is experiencing difficulty, but the caretaking becomes compulsive and defeating. Codependents often take on a martyr's role and become "benefactors" to an individual in need. A spouse may cover for his or her alcoholic spouse; a parent may make excuses for a truant child or "pull some strings" to keep his or her child from suffering the consequences of delinquent behavior.

These repeated rescue attempts allow the needy individual to continue on a destructive course and to become even more dependent on the unhealthy caretaking of the "benefactor." As this reliance increases, the codependent develops a sense of reward and satisfaction from "being needed."

When the caretaking becomes compulsive, the codependent feels trapped and helpless in the relationship but is unable to break away from the cycle of behavior that causes it. Codependents view themselves as victims and are attracted to that same weakness in their love and friendship relationships.

Some characteristics of codependency may include:

- An exaggerated sense of responsibility for the actions of others;
- A tendency to confuse love and pity and the tendency to “love” people they can pity and rescue;
- A tendency to do more than their share, most of the time;
- A tendency to feel hurt when people don’t recognize their efforts;
- A willingness to do anything to avoid the feeling of abandonment;
- An extreme need for approval and recognition;
- A sense of guilt when asserting themselves;
- A compelling need to control others;
- A lack of trust in self and/or others;
- A fear of being abandoned or alone;
- Difficulty identifying feelings;
- Rigidity or difficulty adjusting to change;
- Problems with intimacy and boundaries;
- Chronic anger;
- Lying and dishonesty;
- Poor communication; and
- Difficulty making decisions.

HOW IS CODEPENDENCY TREATED?

Because codependency usually is rooted in a person’s childhood, treatment often involves exploration into early childhood issues and their relationship to current destructive behavior patterns. Treatment can include education, support groups, individual therapy, or group therapy. Treatment focuses on helping the person identify self-defeating behavior patterns and on getting in touch with feelings that

might have been buried during childhood. The goal is to allow people to experience their full range of feelings again and to find freedom, love, and serenity in their recovery.

GETTING HELP

If you would like more information about codependency or would like assistance, call the OAAP at 503-226-1057 or 1-800-321-OAAP.

Adapted from the National Mental Health Association website.