



IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

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UNDERSTANDING CODEPENDENCY

Many people care deeply about someone who is chemically dependent or who suffers from some other dysfunction. Whether that person is a friend, parent, spouse, or child of the dysfunctional person, his or her life is changed by the experience. The person may not realize it, but his or her behavior is probably changed, too. Many become codependent. They react compulsively to the dysfunctional person's behavior and try to control it. Codependent habits often go unrecognized and cause great damage. These habits may actually help the dysfunctional person stay dysfunctional, and they prevent the codependent person from living a fulfilling life, sometimes for years after the original codependent relationship is over. If you think you might have codependent habits, learning about codependency is the first step toward making a happier life for yourself. And although no one can force another person to choose recovery, this knowledge can also help you create an environment in which a dysfunctional person can become and stay healthy.

CHARACTERISTICS AND CONSEQUENCES

Codependency has many characteristics that vary dramatically from person to person, but the central characteristic is the same. The codependent pays tremendous attention to the actions and feelings of others and neglects his or her own needs. The codependent is always reacting to another, rather than acting for himself or herself. Some common characteristics of codependency include worry and anxiety, "bending over backwards" to

take care of others, not knowing or not trusting one's own feelings, feeling guilty for "not doing enough," feeling isolated or depressed, staying in bad relationships (or even sabotaging potentially good ones), trouble with emotional intimacy or sex, workaholism, lack of energy, and low self-esteem.

Codependent people often "rescue" chemically dependent or dysfunctional people from the consequences of their actions by lying for them, lending them money, or assuming their responsibilities. By covering for them, the codependent thus enables the addict to keep on using and the dysfunctional person to remain dysfunctional.

The codependent may try to control the habits of the addict or dysfunctional person by nagging, pleading, or hiding the alcohol or other drug. Although the codependent may be motivated by love and may struggle heroically to get the addict or dysfunctional person to change, only the addict or dysfunctional person can change himself or herself. Whether the addict or dysfunctional person chooses recovery or not, codependent people can learn to make choices that will bring peace and happiness into their lives.

THE RECOVERY PROCESS

The recovery process for a codependent person is simple to state but takes time and effort to bear fruit. The essence is learning to take good care of oneself and to let others take care of themselves. To do this, the codependent needs to find out how he or she is feeling and behaving, to become detached from involvement in other people's problems, to learn to love himself or herself, and to take respon-

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sibility for attending to his or her own needs. Detachment doesn't mean indifference or avoiding responsibility. It simply means putting that energy to better use.

Loving a chemically dependent or dysfunctional person can be terribly painful and can affect your life for years, even after that person is no longer in your life. Recovering from codependency is a process of acknowledging and then letting go of pain, and finding ways to build a happy life.

If you would like more information on recovery from codependency, contact the attorney counselors at the OAAP, 503-226-1057 or 1-800-321-OAAP.

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