

Codependency

Caring Until It Hurts

If you are overly concerned about the well-being of others or live your life to meet the needs of another person, while denying your own needs, you may earn praise from those around you. But if you are unhappy with your relationships and struggle to find more balance, you may be struggling with codependency.



What is Codependency?

Codependency is a term used to describe problematic ways of thinking and behaving that contribute to adult relationship problems. Generally, these maladaptive behaviors are learned in one's family of origin, and reflect the spoken and unspoken rules, and ways of coping with stress, associated with physical or emotional issues of one or more family members. Codependency is a common problem, and much attention has been dedicated to understanding it and helping people overcome it.

Codependency vs. Co-alcoholism

The word "codependency" evolved from the word "co-alcoholic," a term commonly used to describe a person in a close relationship with an alcoholic (or drug addict). Co-alcoholics naturally attempt to cope with the alcoholic's dysfunctional behavior by enabling — controlling, protecting, and compensating for the alcoholic's problems. Many people in adult relationships with alcoholics grew up in an alcoholic home, and as a result, exhibit learned codependent behaviors in their relationships.

Growing up in an alcoholic home is one way to be affected by codependency, but other health conditions and psychological problems may contribute to the development of codependency. The personalities of family members and the types of problems they experience shape the codependent behaviors.

Rules for Codependents

Rules codependents learn in a family troubled by dysfunctional communication and personal problems include some of the following. (Notice how many are associated with denial, overcompensation, and unhealthy ways of coping with stress)

- It's not okay to talk about your problems.
- Feelings should not be expressed openly — keep feelings to yourself.
- Communication is best if indirect — one person acts as a messenger between two others.
- Be strong. Be good. Be right. And be perfect.
- Make us proud beyond realistic expectations.
- Don't be selfish. Consider your needs last.
- It's not okay to be playful or authentic.

Symptoms of Codependency

As a result of the rules that codependent persons learn to follow, many struggle with how to ask for help, how to say no, feelings of self-doubt, and the need to control intimate relationships. They may find it difficult to trust others and struggle to acknowledge their feelings. Many codependents feel driven by perfectionism, and experience volatility and instability in their relationships. Self-denial and an overriding concern for the well-being of another person, however, are the key traits codependent persons bring to their relationships.

Other signs and symptoms of codependency may include tailoring one's actions or conversation about caretaking to get atten-

tion and approval from others; high expectations from others, especially family members; feelings of extreme discomfort when not in a relationship; and frequently feeling depressed.

Codependency Takes the Stage

As adults, codependent people have a greater tendency to form relationships with people who are unreliable, emotionally distant, and dependent. Although the codependent person may promise never to enter into a relationship with a dependent or dysfunctional person, such behaviors are nevertheless familiar, and the codependent person may feel more competent and in control, and less vulnerable in such relationships. Act two begins when the codependent person reenacts his or her childhood role in the adult relationship. Once again, they avoid meeting their needs and feel unfulfilled.

What the EAP Can Do

Codependency is treatable, and you can find relief from the cycle of guilt and caretaking behaviors that may cause you to feel sick and exhausted. The key is learning new skills, taking a close look at your behavior in relationships, and investing the time in yourself necessary to make the changes you want. Begin by talking to the EAP. The EAP can refer you to mental health professionals and popular and successful self-help support groups. The EAP can also recommend books that explain codependency and how you can break free of the limiting pattern.