

NEW WORKSHOP: Boundaries 101 for the Recovering People-Pleaser on July 26th from 5-7pm. Get tickets here. ×



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Codependency Explained

Codependency is a behavioral condition in which a person with low self-esteem relies on external validation for a sense of purpose.

Tian Dayton, Ph.D., describes codependency as *“a trauma-related loss of self that happens slowly throughout our personality development... Codependency is fear-based and is a predictable set of qualities and behaviors that grow out of feeling anxious — and therefore hyper-vigilant — in our intimate relationships. It is also reflective of an incomplete process of individuation.”*

Codependent individuals have difficulty naming what they think and feel. They find it hard to be themselves, struggle with people-pleasing, and have difficulty setting boundaries. As a result, they prioritize others’

needs while neglecting their own, and spend a disproportionate amount of time thinking about others, often orienting their lives around another person. To avoid the pain and anxiety of being in their own company, many codependent individuals develop addictive behaviors around alcohol, sex, work, or other compulsions.

WHERE DOES CODEPENDENCY COME FROM?

Individuals raised in dysfunctional families are more likely to become codependent adults. Dysfunctional families might include:

- Parents with physical or mental illness
- Parents with an addiction
- Narcissistic parent(s) who rely on children for praise and comfort
- Emotionally immature parents
- Domestic violence
- Physical, emotional, or sexual abuse
- Neglect

Almost all dysfunctional families share these common dynamics:

- A culture of silence that precludes honest conversation among family members

- Emotions are ignored or punished in the home
- Age-inappropriate responsibilities are assigned to children
- Children's needs are secondary or ignored entirely

Dysfunctional families instill upon children some or all of the following messages, which children carry into adulthood:

- "Your needs are not a priority."
- "Your needs are not as important as my needs."
- "You are selfish for trying to meet your own needs."
- "You are responsible for keeping everything under control."
- "Care-giving for others is the only way you can experience stability."
- "Feeling and naming your feelings is unsafe."

Codependent individuals generally possess some or all of the following characteristics:

DIFFICULTY COMMUNICATING

FEELINGS, THOUGHTS, AND NEEDS

As children, we were taught that our needs were unimportant. As adults, we struggle to identify and name our feelings, thoughts, and needs. We may not know how we feel about certain issues. We may not know what we need physically, emotionally, or mentally. When we *are* able to identify our needs, we are afraid to share them. We've internalized the idea that doing so would be "selfish" or "mean," so we often distort the truth to avoid offending others.

AN EXAGGERATED SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR OTHERS

Codependent individuals feel it is our responsibility to help, fix, or heal others, even if doing so puts our own wellbeing in jeopardy. Many of us willingly take on disproportionate amounts of physical, financial, and emotional responsibility when others are in distress, though doing so often leaves us feeling resentful and used.

Balanced relationships in which each partner shares equal responsibilities may make us feel uncomfortable or selfish. It can be hard for us to imagine loving someone we do not need to "save." We wonder how we will prove our value to this person if we don't need to rescue them.

Given our exaggerated sense of responsibility for others, we often take others' moods personally. We may feel at

fault if our loved ones are angry, anxious, or quiet. We feel it is our responsibility to “fix” these negative moods.

PEOPLE-PLEASING

During childhood, we derived a sense of self-worth from fixing, pleasing, or accommodating others. As adults, we naturally assume the role of caretaker and feel it is our responsibility to please others. Sacrificing our own needs and feelings is second-nature; we’ve become so accustomed to doing so that putting our own feelings first, or making our own decisions, causes us great anxiety.

We tiptoe around other people’s feelings. We may feel unbearably guilty for saying no, asserting ourselves, or bringing up a conflicting viewpoint. Many of us avoid disappointing others at all costs and, instead of doing things we “want” to do for their own sake, we do things we feel we “should.” We work to secure approval at any cost.

POOR BOUNDARIES

Codependent individuals have weak or non-existent boundaries. As children, the lines between our responsibilities and others’ responsibilities were blurred. As adults, we have trouble differentiating our feelings, thoughts, and needs from others’, and struggle to place limitations on the extent to which we offer our possessions (including money, belongings, and our own bodies) to others. We feel responsible for others’

problems and/or expect others to be responsible for ours. We find it extremely challenging to say “No,” even when we are being harmed or violated.

LACK OF TRUST IN OURSELVES AND OTHERS

Codependent individuals lack an intrinsic sense of identity. We base our self-perception on others’ attitudes towards us and crave recognition and approval. Due to poor interpersonal boundaries, we assume that others’ treatment of us—positive or negative—is how we “deserve” to be treated. This can lead to extreme shame and self-loathing if we are in a toxic or abusive relationship.

Given our absence of a sense of self, we find security in societal roles such as “mother,” “boss,” or “partner,” that offer a pre-built identity. We identify strongly with external labels and feel existentially anxious without them. For many codependent individuals, the desire to feel seen is paramount. We want desperately for others to witness our authentic selves, but preclude them from doing so by presenting a falsified persona to the world.

OBSESSION

As adult codependent individuals, our lack of self-concept and corresponding lack of self-love creates a fierce sense of anxiety. We soothe this anxiety by throwing ourselves into activities that give us an external sense of meaning, especially relationships.

Codependent individuals obsess about our relationships because they distract us from being alone with ourselves and give us a place where we can replicate the meaning-making activities of our childhood, including care-taking, self-sacrifice, and martyrdom.

DEPENDENCY AND FEAR OF ABANDONMENT

Relationships are our salve for our inner anxieties. Over time, we develop an unhealthy dependence on our relationships. They become our identities. Without them, we feel existentially empty and meaningless. We will hold onto these relationships—even if they are broken or toxic—at any cost. If our partner leaves us, the abandonment we feel is excruciating because we feel we've lost not only our partner, but our sense of identity as well. Some of us will choose painful, unhealthy relationships over being alone because the anxiety of being alone is too much for us to bear. We may feel simultaneously trapped in an unhappy relationship but unable or unwilling to leave.

CONTROL

As children, many of us were taught that we alone were responsible for ensuring safety, peace, and harmony. As adults, we crave a sense of control in order to feel calm and safe. We have no tolerance for uncertainty or chaos. Many of us are perfectionists with little tolerance for error.

Our control manifests interpersonally as care-taking and people-pleasing. Though we prefer to view our efforts as “helping” others, they are manipulative; we act a certain way to ensure a desired reaction. We become chameleons, modifying our behavior and personalities to elicit approval from others. We have difficulty accepting the boundaries that others set with us because we view them as an affront to our attempts at helping—and, as a result, an affront to ourselves.

Constant control becomes tiresome. Alcohol, sex, and other escapes from reality may become addictive because they feel like the only place we can truly relax. Alternatively, we may become preoccupied with arenas where we can exert complete control, developing workaholism, eating disorders, or compulsive exercise habits.

PAINFUL EMOTIONS

Codependency is a mask for our deeply-rooted painful emotions. Many of us go years without realizing we are buried under layers of anxiety and pain, choosing instead to lose ourselves in externalities. For the codependent person, anxiety is ever-present. Spending time alone may exacerbate this anxiety to an unbearable point. Meanwhile, shame and guilt motivate the majority of our actions. We are terrified of doing something “wrong,” being disliked, or being rejected. We are hyper-vigilant, which often leads to fatigue, resentment, and depression.

Beneath these painful emotions often lies a chronic anger. Our resentments at feeling unseen, unheard, and taken for granted compound over time. Though we may have difficulty accessing this anger consciously, it may appear in short bursts or unexpected fits.

Alternatively, we may feel numb or depressed as our bodies protect themselves from being overwhelmed by emotion.

DISHONESTY

Codependent individuals feel that we can only relax when those closest to us are happy. For this reason, we will go to great lengths to keep others happy or keep the peace in our relationships, including lying or being dishonest. Dishonesty comes naturally to us in the form of people-pleasing (lying about who we are, what we want, and how we feel) or direct untruths, such as omitting information that might make our partners uncomfortable or displeased. The thought of speaking our truth may fill us with fear. Because we've developed our sense of self around pleasing others, we worry that being honest would cause others to reject or abandon us. Codependent individuals catastrophize the consequences of truth-telling and will go to great lengths to avoid doing so.

Want to break the codependency pattern? Join me at an [upcoming workshop](#) or participate in MY 6-WEEK GROUP COACHING PROGRAM, [THE SAY NO CLUB](#).

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