

# Codependency

## What is codependency?

Recovery from addiction means dealing with challenges that are unique to the disease of addiction. For example, in Step One you admitted powerlessness over alcohol and other drugs. You stopped drinking and using, and you turned your life over to a Higher Power. You may now have a sponsor, be attending Twelve Step meetings, and living by the words of the Serenity Prayer one day at a time. But more challenges remain. One of the major issues you may be facing as you move ahead is codependency.

You may have been participating in a codependent relationship for quite a long time without being aware of it. Once you are aware of your codependent behaviors, and take actions to deal with them, the chances are better that you'll begin to create healthy, fulfilling relationships.

Several decades ago, the word “codependency” referred mostly to people whose lives had become unmanageable due to living with an alcoholic. Since that time, the definition of the word has broadened. Melody Beattie, in her best-selling book *Codependent No More*, defines it this way:

**A codependent person is one who has let another person’s behavior affect him or her, and who is obsessed with controlling that person’s behavior.**

A child can be codependent. So can an adult, a spouse, lover, brother, sister, grandparent, parent, professional, client, or best friend. Alcoholics and addicts often have codependency problems—even in recovery.

## What are the symptoms of codependency?

If you are taking care of others and trying to please them while not taking care of yourself, you likely have problems with codependency.

Codependents tend to ignore uncomfortable feelings, such as those that arise when a parent’s or significant other’s drinking is out of control. The reality of the situation is not expressed. As a result, codependent people find themselves in relationships where honest communication is hardly possible. Codependents

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often carefully choose their words to manipulate, control, and please others, or to cover up unpleasant situations.

If you experience feelings of martyrdom and low self-worth, and have a hard time having fun, you're probably in a codependent relationship. Sooner or later, these negative feelings lead to resentments, anger, and depression.

There are as many symptoms of codependency as there are situations for it to develop. Some of the other major symptoms are as follows:

- denial
- obsessing
- overreacting
- not reacting at all
- approval seeking
- substance use disorder
- fear of abandonment
- becoming overly vigilant

In short, codependent people have a core belief that they can change someone else's behavior, and they spend much of their time rescuing that person from his or her responsibilities.

Despite the negative actions and attitudes that severely impact a codependent's self-image, many former codependents have changed their lives by letting go of old behaviors and developing healthier ones.

### **How does addiction create codependent relationships?**

Although you are in recovery, you might be in a relationship with someone who is abusing alcohol or other drugs. Many who are in this situation become an addict's caretaker: they take care of the addict's responsibilities and rescue the addict from trouble. Consequently, caretaking enables addicts to continue using without suffering the consequences of their behavior, such as missed days at work, missed appointments, and accidents.

The book *Co-Dependents Anonymous* bluntly states, "Codependence is a disease that deteriorates our soul." The fact is that addiction can end up destroying the self-worth of addicts and codependents alike. Those who are in a codependent relationship with an addict almost never know what to expect from that person.

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Besides the unpredictability, a codependent's environment is stressful and often incomprehensible. Codependents begin to "walk on eggshells" around the addict, feeling that the only way to survive is to stay on guard, hypersensitive to shifts in the addict's moods and behaviors. Sooner or later, living with an addict wreaks emotional havoc mentally and physically on a codependent person, whose life revolves around the addict's wants and needs.

Yet some codependents can't imagine leaving an addict without a great deal of fear: "If I leave him, I'll be all alone." They end up convincing themselves that they can't live without someone and will die if that person is no longer in their lives. Some even tolerate abuse in order to stay in the relationship.

Of course, you should never tolerate abuse. If you are in an abusive relationship, there are ways you can exit from it now.

### **What can you do to establish more healthy relationships?**

A good first step out of codependency is to stop caretaking. True caring means knowing when not to give in to another person, and learning how to say no. As you detach yourself from unhealthy attachments with others, you create balance in your life. In well-balanced relationships, people spend moderate amounts of time together and alone; each is dependent on the other, but independent too; there is giving and receiving on both ends, as well as the freedom to be assertive without feeling responsible for everything.

Although the word "codependency" is relatively new, the symptoms are not. Human nature has been wrestling with codependency throughout the ages. One of William Shakespeare's most memorable lines is "This, above all else: To thine own self be true." Perhaps that phrase alone captures the essence of a codependent's challenge: you must learn to stop looking for personal happiness in other people. When you no longer focus intently on others, you come to realize that well-being can be found in one place only: within yourself.

Ultimately, by honoring and loving yourself, you will find self-acceptance while acknowledging that your life does not belong to others. You will come to accept that you are not here to live up to someone else's expectations. You will admit that you are powerless over other people and circumstances that you've tried to control for so long.

Establishing boundaries is crucial to developing healthy relationships. To avoid repeating old behaviors, set limits on what you'll do for others and what

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you'll allow them to do for you. This is not selfish behavior. In the end, clear, firm boundaries benefit you as well as others. Recovering codependents commonly establish boundaries such as these:

- "I will not allow anyone to physically or verbally abuse me."
- "I will not rescue people from the consequences of their alcohol abuse or other irresponsible behavior."

The following are more tips for establishing healthy relationships:

- Don't let your anger or another person's anger take control of your life.
- Set specific goals, both short-term and long-term. For example, what do you want to have happen in your life this week, month, and year? What problems do you wish to solve? What would you choose to do for a career? Remember, goals give us direction and purpose.
- Exercise your body through physical workouts, even mild ones; exercise your mind by getting interested and involved in the myriad activities going on around you.

### **How can you avoid codependency if you are living with an addict or alcoholic?**

Avoiding codependency is difficult if you live with an addicted person, but it can be accomplished if you work at it.

First, think about how you'd live your life if you were not involved with an addicted person. What would you do? Next, consider what you would rather be thinking about if you weren't dwelling on this other person and the problem. The fact is, we can act as if we are not enmeshed in an addict's life and the cycle of turbulent, sometimes violent events that addiction creates. Instead, we can act as if we're moving ahead toward a fulfilling life for ourselves.

For example, we can begin by behaving as if we do not secretly believe that we are able control other people. Step One of Al-Anon is about admitting powerlessness over others and surrendering to a new way of looking at our lives.

Practicing detachment from the addict is key to leaving the dark forests of codependency behind. Even then, old behaviors can spring out of nowhere and throw you off balance. But you can regain your footing by focusing on your wants, your needs, your rights, and your decisions. Rather than needing to please or control others, focus on validating your own feelings. It is through this new outlook

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that you can eventually let events and people be as they are, and get on with the business of living, staying true to yourself and the life you have been given.

### Web resources

There are many resources out there. The websites for the following organizations were chosen for their usefulness and user friendliness.

#### ***Al-Anon or Alateen***

Al-Anon is a recovery group for adults affected by alcoholism. Alateen is a recovery group for teenagers who are affected by others' alcoholism. Alateen groups are sponsored by Al-Anon members, who help adult families and friends of alcoholics recover from the effects of living with the problem drinking of a relative or friend. Their website and hotline will help you find a meeting in your area.

#### ***Nar-Anon***

Nar-Anon is a Twelve Step fellowship group for the family and friends of drug addicts. Their website offers information on meetings, events, and online support group forums.

#### ***Alcoholics Anonymous***

The official AA website offers member guidelines, questions and answers, and a welcome message for newcomers.

#### ***Co-Dependents Anonymous (CoDA)***

Co-Dependents Anonymous is a worldwide fellowship of men and women who gather to share their common and individual problems of codependency, and the solutions that they have found, following a program based on the Twelve Steps. Their website offers news, a calendar of events, and searchable meeting contacts by state.