

Codependency

What Is It?

by Shirley Morris, from "The Bruised Reeds"
www.12steps.org/12stephelp/shortreads/codependency.htm

Codependency is when someone (spouse, parent, sibling, coworker, or friend) allows another person's addicted or dysfunctional behavior to control his/her thoughts, feelings, or actions. Codependents tend to live their lives in response or reaction to the dysfunctional person's behavior or attitudes. They no longer have a life of their own, and they may find themselves unable to relate to others in a healthy way, but they don't know why.

The actions of an addicted person can be so unpredictable and difficult that loved ones (potential codependents) are often in a tense state of alert. The codependent may react by denying there is a problem, or take on responsibility for the problem, or become angry, ashamed, and resentful of the loved one.

The whole household can be adversely affected by living with an addicted/dysfunctional person. In order to survive, family members (or coworkers) may try to hide the problem, or control the addicted person's behavior, or cover up for him/her. This codependent behavior has the opposite effect of what's intended. It keeps the person from experiencing the consequences of his/her actions that might have led them to seek help, and it entraps the codependent in a lifestyle totally dependent on whatever the addicted person does or does not do.

If there are children in the family, they can also be seriously affected and react by either overachieving, rebelling, clowning around or withdrawing from the family. Whatever coping behaviors they adopt may continue to be an unhealthy life-long way to handle conflict.

Codependency can lead to various long-term problems, such as low self-esteem (sense of failure and inadequacy), depression (feeling hopeless and helpless), numbing of emotions, health problems (such as headaches, asthma, ulcers and high blood pressure), or relationship difficulties.

In relationships codependents often find they are no longer able to trust or be open and honest. If they do get involved in relationships, they are usually unhealthy ones that cause them more pain.

There is hope and healing for codependents, however. Family and friends can regain control over their lives and learn to live in healthier ways. Codependents can become actors, rather than reactors. It takes time, courage and determination to begin the recovery journey, but it's worth it.

The first step, if you believe you might be codependent, is to admit you have been adversely affected by living/working in a dysfunctional environment and your life has become unmanageable.

The second step is to seek help. There are counselors and support groups who understand your problems and needs and can help you on the road to recovery. Most support groups do not ask for a fee, and some counselors allow a sliding scale fee according to your income, but your recovery is worth whatever it costs.

Next, begin to think about taking care of your own needs: spiritual, emotional, and physical. This is not easy when you're used to focusing on the addicted person's needs first. Be patient with yourself. It takes time to learn to live a healthier lifestyle. Small steps are better than no steps.

Then, accept your limits by beginning to understand you cannot fix your addicted/dysfunctional loved one. You are not responsible for anyone else's recovery but your own.

Finally, know that you are special in God's eyes, and He created you for something greater than propping up an addicted or dysfunctional person. Sometimes the most loving thing we can do is to let people suffer the consequences of their own behavior, which might force them to seek help for themselves.

You can be set free from codependency. It takes time, courage and determination, but it's worth it. I know because I've been there.