



Codependent Relationships

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As an adult human being, dependency is not considered a good thing unless you have some health or other issue which makes you unable to act as a fully functioning adult. Then you will usually have a guardian appointed to take care of you and make important decisions for you. While being independent is often considered a hallmark of being a healthy adult, interdependence, where we don't need someone, but can work with other people to better our lives and those of others more than we can do on our own, is really the end goal.

A codependent relationship is a dynamic in a relationship where one person prioritises the needs of their partner and takes care of them and fixes their problems at the expense of their own well-being on a regular and ongoing basis. It doesn't only have to be a romantic or intimate relationship. Codependency can be found in families, amongst friends, and even in the workplace with bosses and co-workers. It is a pattern in relationships where your self-worth becomes tied to the approval, needs, or emotional states of another person. If you are someone who often finds themselves caretaking, people-pleasing, or over-functioning you may be codependent.

Are you codependent?

Ask yourself if you display any of the following which are often key signs of codependency.

- An inability to say "no" and thus doing things that you hate, that scare you, or that violate your personal values.
- Feeling very guilty for saying "no" and sometimes coming back later and saying "yes" because the guilt is just too much.
- Doing things for other people that result in harm to your health.
- Taking on far too many chores and unnecessary tasks because others refuse to do them.
- Covering up or making excuses for someone else's bad behaviour.
- Extreme self-sacrifice.
- Allowing someone to be irresponsible and taking responsibility for what is not yours to be responsible for.
- Making excuses for someone who treats you badly.
- Poor or no personal boundaries.
- Deriving your happiness from being needed by another person.
- Taking your sense of identity from another person.

- Taking responsibility for the emotions of others.

Many codependent patterns begin as protective responses to situations in early life. Some common early experiences which can lead to codependency developing in relationships include:

- Growing up in very unpredictable environments.
- Learning that safety means hiding yourself and not expressing your needs.
- Experiencing emotional neglect – your feelings are ignored or discounted.
- Feeling responsible for family conflict or family problems.
- Having to take on adult roles too early (while still a child).
- Learning that love is only received through giving.
- Receiving praise for sacrificing your needs and wants.
- Experiencing rejection unless you meet the demands of others.
- A requirement to have to conform to the needs of others.
- Being blamed for the faults of others.

If you think you are codependent realise that you can do something about it. Relationship patterns can be changed. Not overnight, and not easily, but they can be changed. And when you do work on them don't blame and shame yourself. It won't make it any easier to change. You learned to behave in that way because that was the best way to act at the time. It was how you got through life. As an adult though, you no longer need these dysfunctional ways of relating to other adults, and you will experience greater happiness and a better life if you do try to change.

The first part of change is always awareness. Notice the way you interact with others. Notice the way people who are not codependent interact with others. Think about how you want to change your relating style and practice it. You don't have to get it right immediately. Behaviour does not change overnight. You need practice. But keep on going and notice when you get it right and when you don't. You can also help overcome codependency by working on your self-esteem, understanding what your needs and wants are, learning how to communicate assertively and express what you want and need in healthy ways, and setting and enforcing personal boundaries. You can also do some work on finding yourself again. Lots of people tell me that in codependent relationships they "lost who they are". Some people have never really had the chance to truly understand who they are separate from another.

I have never come across someone who was codependent and was truly happy. Some people are so conditioned to be codependent that they don't really know how else to be. Sometimes being codependent is how people make it through life, especially if they are emotionally or financially dependent on someone who is not interested in their needs. Sometimes people just think that it is their lot in life to be codependent and so continue to be like that. However, I have found that no one in a codependent relationship is really happy with their life. There is something unsettling about another adult human being deriving their identity and sense of worth from someone else. Even if you do have some level of dependence on another person, you need to be your own person as well. You need to honour your needs and wants and be your true self. Anything less is to diminish yourself and people who do that are not truly happy and fulfilled in life.

I spoke about interdependence earlier as probably the healthiest way in which to have relationships. Healing from codependency does not mean becoming completely independent or stopping yourself from caring about others. It means building relationships that also make room for your needs, identity, boundaries, and emotional well-being, as well as those of the other partner.