

Main Office
8790 Manchester Road
St. Louis, MO 63144
(314) 962-3456



Branch Office
1723 Pennsylvania Ave.
St. Louis, MO 63104
(314) 664-7550

CODEPENDENCY

Codependency has been described in a variety of ways:

“The denial or repression of the real self based on an erroneous assumption that love, acceptance, security, success, closeness, and salvation are all dependent upon one’s ability to do the ‘right thing’.”

“A spirit divided from itself.”

“The reflection of a Delayed Identity Development.”

. . . . and so on and so on.

Very simply stated, codependency is a pattern of learned, self-defeating behaviors and attitudes which cause pain in one’s relationship with self and others. Note underscore “learned”.

As a result of growing up in dysfunctional families, we learn erroneous behaviors and attitudes and we don’t learn many life skills.

Issues that arise for us as a result of our background are:

1. Fear of Abandonment – which results from psychological neglect (and sometimes physical neglect) in childhood. The primary caregiver is distracted, condescending, or otherwise not emotionally present to the child. Thus, as adults, we will do anything to hold onto relationships, people, situations, jobs, etc., rather than feel abandoned. As codependents, we are ruled by our emotions. We manage to internalize messages received as children, thus making them a part of ourselves. If we internalize our fear of abandonment and rejection, we feel abandoned and rejected.

As a result, we are people-pleasers – sycophants of the worst variety. We have few thoughts or opinions of our own and will go with whatever prevails, becoming emotional chameleons.

Examples:

Person 1: “What do you want to do?”

Person 2: “I don’t know, what do YOU want to do?”

Person 1: “What do you think?”

Person 2: “I don’t know, what do YOU think?” (you get the picture)

2. Unclear Boundaries – We have little or no sense of self, so we cannot distinguish where we end and others begin. We cannot separate out what is our business and what is not, what is our “stuff” and what is not, which are our feelings and which are someone else’s. We are so busy with everyone else, we don’t have time to stop and pay attention to or take responsibility for ourselves.

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If we are in a “relationship” (using the word very loosely) with someone and they are asked how they feel, we will answer. If they have a headache, we take the aspirin, so to speak. (over)

We often have such a poor self-concept that it becomes NO self-concept. Instead, we base our identities on the people around us: If they are successful, we are successful; if they are happy, we are happy. (I live my life only for others, but my underlying motive is for you to love me, love me, and PLEASE don't leave me.) As a result of all this entanglement with those around us, we have a strong need to control.

3. A Strong Need to Control – Since we are so concerned about everyone else and appear to be compelled to live everyone else's lives for them, we must be “in control” of all of these people and situations at all times. Oddly enough our controlling behavior has the opposite of the desired effect. Instead of pulling people closer, we tend to drive people away from us, which reinforces our FEAR OF ABANDONMENT.
4. Inability to Communicate Directly – In our families of origin, it was dangerous to talk about the real issues, so as adult children we learn a lot about indirect communication. We will tell someone something “in hopes that” they will pass it on to the one for whom the message is intended. We will employ dozens of tactics to try and manipulate people into hearing what we want them to hear, and doing what we want them to do. We will be unable to speak directly, honestly, and without deviation.
5. Inability to Trust – In our families of origin, promises were broken, truths were denied, and we learned at an early age that we could not count on the people we loved to be there for us. We grow up with the ability to distort feelings, situations, and most of all, the truth. If we couldn't trust our primary caregivers, we couldn't trust anyone.
6. Inability to Feel & Express Feelings Appropriately – In dysfunctional families, it is often unacceptable to express negative feelings. Thus, when events occur that are so awesome and incomprehensible, a child simply blocks them from memory or shuts down emotionally in order to cope. It is not uncommon for us to have few or no memories of childhood. As adults we are often unable to describe our feelings other than anger or unhappiness (and sometimes we can't even feel those feelings).

Codependents NEED to be NEEDED in order to feel they are worthwhile human beings. As a result, they will find people with major problems and set about trying to “fix” them.

The bright side of codependency is the myriad of helping resources in the community designed to effect positive change. Counseling and self-help groups such as Codependents Anonymous, Al-Anon, Adult Children of Alcoholics, and many other support groups related to problems associated with codependency, are now available.

If you would like to talk with someone about the issues of codependency, please feel free to call the NCADA at the Brentwood office, 314-962-3456. An information and referral specialist is available to answer your questions.

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