



Codependence and Addiction

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What is Codependence?

There is no official medical definition of codependence, and it is not a condition which ever receives a diagnosis. Some professionals argue that it does not really exist. Nonetheless, it is a concept that seems to be useful in helping those who have felt the effects of another person's addiction in their lives. How can this be?

One explanation is that the term has been overapplied and used in many contexts apart from the basic idea: that of identifying a set of symptoms and behaviors common to people who have been affected by another person's addiction. One way to see this is to look at the word "codependence."



Co: "with"

Dependence: "dependence on a substance or behavior"

Seen this way, codependence may be seen as a set of symptoms and behaviors that people have developed to cope with living around active addiction. Some point out that codependent patterns are seen even when there is no active addiction present. This may be explained by noting that even if active addiction is not present in a particular generation of a family, the behaviors developed by an earlier generation will still be taught and modeled. For instance, many people may say, "We don't express difficult emotions in my family," or "We don't air our laundry out in the street." This is a way of being that is handed down whether the active addiction is present or not.

Ironically, these very patterns that were developed to cope with active addiction can make it easier for addiction to flourish in the family. Furthermore, addiction and codependence go hand in hand so well that someone who embraces these family patterns is more likely to fall into active addiction themselves, to subconsciously seek out relationships with those who are in the grip of addiction, or both.

In fact, seeking or creating such relationships can start to show all the hallmarks of active addiction, as the next few pages will illustrate. Notice how each of the addictive symptoms, behaviors, and feelings shows up for both active addiction and codependency.

Addictions and Codependency: Symptoms, Behaviors, and Feelings

Substance addiction and codependency share similar symptoms, behaviors, and feelings.

Disease Symptoms	Disease Behaviors	Disease Feelings
Preoccupation	Rationalizing	Numbness
Increased tolerance	Minimizing	Anger
Loss of Control	Blaming	Loneliness
Denial	Lying	Sadness
Blackouts	Holding Secrets	Disappointment
Craving	Isolating	Guilt
Euphoric Recall	Compulsive Behavior	Fear
Medical Problems		Shame

Disease Symptoms

Preoccupation

Substance addict: "I didn't get much accomplished because all I cared about was getting high."

Codependent: "My work performance went down because I was obsessed with my son's problems."

Increased Tolerance

Substance addict: "I need to use more and more to get high or sometimes just to get by."

Codependent: "His behavior that used to drive me crazy has become normal or even okay."

Loss of Control

Substance addict: "I told myself that my supply would last a lot longer."

Codependent: "I told myself I wouldn't give in this time, but I did anyway."

Denial

Substance Addict: "I don't have a problem; it's everyone else."

Codependent: "I'm not codependent; I just love my son."

Blackouts

Substance addict: "I have no idea what I did."

Codependent: "I completely forgot that I had said that."

Disease Symptoms, Cont'd.

Craving

Substance Addict: "I need my fix to be okay."

Codependent: "I need my kid at home to be okay."

Euphoric Recall

Substance Addict: "That was the best time ever."

Codependent: "Things used to be perfect in our family."

Medical Problems

Substance Addict: "My liver seems ten years older than I am."

Codependent: "The doctor says that I'm getting high blood pressure from the stress."

Disease Behaviors

Rationalizing

Substance Addict: "It was such a good/bad day that I deserve to get high."

Codependent: "I didn't want another big scene so I let it go."

Minimizing

Substance addict: "This level of use is no big deal."

Codependent: "It could be worse."

Blaming

Substance Addict: "if you hadn't been so mean I wouldn't have drank that much."

Codependent: "His friends got him into it; they're such a bad influence."

Lying

Substance Addict: "I have no idea where your jewelry went."

Codependent: "I tell all my friends that he's doing great."

Holding Secrets

Substance Addict: "I'll never tell how the car got scratched."

Codependent: "No one needs to know about this ."

Disease Behaviors, Cont.

Isolating

Substance Addict: "I prefer to hang out alone in my room."

Codependent: "I can't face my friends and their questions."

Compulsive Behavior

Substance Addict: "I've been using even when I said I wouldn't."

Codependent: "I eat more when I'm stressed, which seems to happen more and more."

Finding a Way Out

So, how do we start to break these patterns? First we must recognize the thinking that underlies it.

Since codependence often shows up as a focus on others and their behaviors, it may be useful to see how this thinking appears in your own life. One way to do this is to fill in the blank in the sentence below:

"I need you to

so that I can be okay."

Now consider how much this puts your power and well-being in the hands of someone else and their behavior. Ask yourself a few of questions:

- Was this your intention?
- Is it wise to put this much power into the hands of someone in the grip of active addiction?
- Did you mean to give that much power to *anyone* else in your life?



If the answer to any of these questions is “no,” consider adding one word to the sentence, like this:

“I *don't* need you to

so that I can be okay.”

This gives you your power back and starts you on the road to putting codependence behind you. When it gets hard to remember this or believe it, reach to others who can support you in keeping your power and losing your codependence.