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# Co-dependency

## Fact Sheet on co-dependency from Mental Health America:

Co-dependency is a learned behavior that can be passed down from one generation to another. It is an emotional and behavioral condition that affects an individual's ability to have a healthy, mutually satisfying relationship. It is also known as "relationship addiction" because people with co-dependency often form or maintain relationships that are one-sided, emotionally destructive and/or abusive. Co-dependent behavior is learned by watching and imitating other family members who display this type of behavior.

### **Who Does Co-dependency Affect?**

Co-dependency often affects a spouse, a parent, sibling, friend, or co-worker of a person afflicted with alcohol or drug dependence. Originally, co-dependent was a term used to describe partners in chemical dependency, persons living with, or in a relationship with an addicted person. Similar patterns have been seen in people in relationships with chronically or mentally ill individuals. Today, however, the term has broadened to describe any co-dependent person from any dysfunctional family.

### **What is a Dysfunctional Family and How Does it Lead to Co-dependency?**

A dysfunctional family is one in which members suffer from fear, anger, pain, or shame that is ignored or denied. Underlying problems may include any of the following:

- An addiction by a family member to drugs, alcohol, relationships, work, food, sex, or gambling.
- The existence of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse.
- The presence of a family member suffering from a chronic mental or physical illness.

Dysfunctional families do not acknowledge that problems exist. They don't talk about them or confront them. As a result, family members learn to repress emotions and disregard their own needs. They become "survivors." They develop behaviors that help them deny, ignore, or avoid difficult emotions. They detach themselves. They don't talk. They don't touch. They don't confront. They don't feel. They don't trust. The identity and emotional development of the members of a dysfunctional family are often inhibited.

Attention and energy focus on the family member who is ill or addicted. The co-dependent person typically sacrifices his or her needs to take care of a person who is sick. When co-dependents place other people's health, welfare and safety before their own, they can lose contact with their own needs, desires, and sense of self.

### **How Do Co-dependent People Behave?**

Co-dependents have low self-esteem and look for anything outside of themselves to make them feel better. They find it hard to "be themselves." Some try to feel better through alcohol, drugs or nicotine - and become addicted. Others may develop compulsive behaviors like "workaholic", gambling, or indiscriminate sexual activity.

From <http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/go/codependency>

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They have good intentions. They try to take care of a person who is experiencing difficulty, but the caretaking becomes compulsive and defeating. Co-dependents often take on a martyr's role and become "benefactors" to an individual in need. A wife may cover for her alcoholic husband; a mother may make excuses for a truant child; or a father may "pull some strings" to keep his child from suffering the consequences of delinquent behavior.

The problem is that these repeated rescue attempts allow the needy individual to continue on a destructive course and to become even more dependent on the unhealthy caretaking of the "benefactor." As this reliance increases, the co-dependent develops a sense of reward and satisfaction from "being needed." When the caretaking becomes compulsive, the co-dependent feels choiceless and helpless in the relationship, but is unable to break away from the cycle of behavior that causes it. Co-dependents view themselves as victims and are attracted to that same weakness in the love and friendship relationships.

**Characteristics of Co-dependent People Are:**

- An exaggerated sense of responsibility for the actions of others
- A tendency to confuse love and pity, with the tendency to "love" people they can pity and rescue
- A tendency to do more than their share, all of the time
- A tendency to become hurt when people don't recognize their efforts
- An unhealthy dependence on relationships. The co-dependent will do anything to hold on to a relationship to avoid the feeling of abandonment
- An extreme need for approval and recognition
- A sense of guilt when asserting themselves
- A compelling need to control others
- Lack of trust in self and/or others
- Fear of being abandoned or alone
- Difficulty identifying feelings
- Rigidity/difficulty adjusting to change
- Problems with intimacy/boundaries
- Chronic anger
- Lying/dishonesty
- Poor communication
- Difficulty making decisions



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### Questionnaire To Identify Signs Of Co-dependency

This condition appears to run in different degrees, whereby the intensity of symptoms is on a spectrum of severity, as opposed to an all or nothing scale. Please note that only a qualified professional can make a diagnosis of co-dependency; not everyone experiencing these symptoms suffers from co-dependency.

1. Do you keep quiet to avoid arguments?
2. Are you always worried about others' opinions of you?
3. Have you ever lived with someone with an alcohol or drug problem?
4. Have you ever lived with someone who hits or belittles you?
5. Are the opinions of others more important than your own?
6. Do you have difficulty adjusting to changes at work or home?
7. Do you feel rejected when significant others spend time with friends?
8. Do you doubt your ability to be who you want to be?
9. Are you uncomfortable expressing your true feelings to others?
10. Have you ever felt inadequate?
11. Do you feel like a "bad person" when you make a mistake?
12. Do you have difficulty taking compliments or gifts?
13. Do you feel humiliation when your child or spouse makes a mistake?
14. Do you think people in your life would go downhill without your constant efforts?
15. Do you frequently wish someone could help you get things done?
16. Do you have difficulty talking to people in authority, such as the police or your boss?
17. Are you confused about who you are or where you are going with your life?
18. Do you have trouble saying "no" when asked for help?
19. Do you have trouble asking for help?
20. Do you have so many things going at once that you can't do justice to any of them?



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### **When Co-dependency Hits Home**

The first step in changing unhealthy behavior is to understand it. It is important for co-dependents and their family members to educate themselves about the course and cycle of addiction and how it extends into their relationships. Libraries, drug and alcohol abuse treatment centers and mental health centers often offer educational materials and programs to the public.

A lot of change and growth is necessary for the co-dependent and his or her family. Any caretaking behavior that allows or enables abuse to continue in the family needs to be recognized and stopped. The co-dependent must identify and embrace his or her feelings and needs. This may include learning to say “no,” to be loving yet tough, and learning to be self-reliant. People find freedom, love, and serenity in their recovery.

Hope lies in learning more. The more you understand co-dependency the better you can cope with its effects. Reaching out for information and assistance can help someone live a healthier, more fulfilling life.



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## Moving beyond co-dependency

Co-dependency is a learned behavior. This is good news because it means we can learn a new way, a different way of interacting with others, one that will help us feel good about the relationships in our lives. Below are some tools we can use to move beyond the old pattern of co-dependency.

### Communicate

**Communicate how you feel directly to the person involved in the situation.** Often we spend our time telling other people how we feel about a situation but don't tell the person that was *directly involved in the situation*. One effective way to communicate how you feel is an "I statement". When using I statements you take accountability for your feelings while also explaining the behavior you did not like. Example: I feel (insert feeling) when you (insert behavior). I feel threatened when you yell at me.

**Ask for what you want.** Others cannot read your mind. You may be very perceptive but this is rare in most people. Asking for what you want honors yourself and others. The other person is responsible for answering based on their own needs and abilities and has the option to say no.

**Say "No".** Saying no without guilt takes some practice if you have been in a pattern of co-dependency. Learning to say no doesn't mean that you have to say no to everything. It means that you get to choose what you do. When someone makes a request, ask yourself if this is something you can realistically do or if it will cause you some major inconvenience or even harm. When first learning this new skill, it may be helpful to start with saying, "I don't know. Let me get back to you."

### Set Boundaries with Others

- ❖ Boundaries are the physical and emotional limits we set to protect ourselves from being manipulated, or used by others. Before letting other people know what is okay and is not okay, we have to define it for ourselves. Ask yourself the following questions?
  - What is okay and not okay for me? (Examples: It is not okay for people to take their anger out on me, invade my personal space, go through my belongings, make comments about my weight, tell off color jokes in my company, etc.)
  - What is it that I need to have a healthy balance in my life? (Examples: privacy, quiet time, space to change my mind, etc.)
- ❖ When setting boundaries with others, keep the following in mind:
  - Use simple and direct language. **Explain what the boundary is and what you will do if it continues to be crossed.** Example: "Please do not yell at me. If you continue to yell, I will leave the room". In this example, yelling is considered not okay and is a boundary marker. Leaving the room is what you will do if the boundary is crossed.
  - It is not necessary to defend the boundary, explain your feelings or debate the boundary. Be respectful yet firm when stating your boundary. If the other person attempts to argue or question your boundary, repeat your original statement or request. This is called the **broken record technique**. Keep repeating the statement over and over instead of engaging in a debate.
  - **Follow through and be consistent** after you have set your boundary. If you go back on your statement, it is a signal to others that they can ignore your boundaries.



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## Recognize Unhealthy Boundaries

- ❖ Examine your current boundaries. How do other people treat you? Your response to their behavior tells them whether or not what they are doing is okay. Below is a list of some unhealthy boundaries:
  - Going against personal values or rights in order to please others.
  - Giving as much as you can for the sake of giving.
  - Taking as much as you can for the sake of taking.
  - Letting others define you.
  - Expecting others to fill your needs automatically.
  - Feeling bad or guilty when you say no.
  - Not speaking up when you are treated poorly.
  - Falling apart so someone can take care of you.
  - Falling "in love" with someone you barely know or who reaches out to you.
  - Accepting advances, touching and sex that you don't want.
  - Touching a person without asking.
- ❖ If you recognize these things coming up in your life, go back to the setting boundaries section and rework them. Once you recognize an issue, you have the power to change it.

## Set Internal Boundaries with Yourself

- ❖ Internal boundaries protect our own thoughts, feelings and behaviors. We have the power to choose these. When we set clear internal boundaries, we become responsible for ourselves. We define who we are. When we don't have internal boundaries, others can define who we are and we feel powerless.
- ❖ What other people say about you is not necessarily true. When we have poor internal boundaries we take what others say about as the truth without questioning it. Remember this statement from when you were a kid: "I'm rubber and you're glue, what you say bounces off of me and sticks to you." This statement reflects a universal truth. What other people say about you is really more of a reflection of who they are, not who you are. When someone makes a statement about you, ask yourself the following questions:
  - How much of this is true about me?
  - How much of this is true about the person making the statement?
  - Is there any action I need to take? Set a boundary? Take responsibility for my actions?
- ❖ **Make yourself a priority.** It is not selfish to take care of yourself. Have you ever ridden on a plane and heard the flight attendant explain the safety precautions to take if the cabin loses air pressure and masks drop from overhead. If you are traveling with a small child, who do you put the mask on first? People with co-dependent tendencies usually say the child first. But the answer is **yourself**. If you do not take care of yourself first, you may not be conscious to help care for that child. The same is true in life. The more you care for yourself the more you will have to give to others.



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### **Reading Resources**

*Co-dependent No More: How To Stop Controlling Others and Start Caring for Yourself* by Melodie Beattie

*Boundaries* by Drs. John Townsend and Henry Cloud

*Facing Codependence: What It Is, Where It Comes from, How It Sabotages Our Lives* by Pia Mellody

*Breaking Free: A Recovery Workbook for Facing Codependence* by Pia Mellody and Andrea Wells Miller

*Love is a Choice Workbook: Recovery for codependent relationships* by Dr. Robert Hemfelt and Dr. Frank Minirth

