

# What It Means to Be Codependent

## CODEPENDENT BEHAVIOR

Most people want to feel needed by the ones they care about. Men and women who are codependent take this to an extreme. They devote time, effort and emotional energy to a one-sided relationship trying to meet the needs of someone who is incapable of appreciating them, in the process allowing themselves to be abused—emotionally and/or physically, often financially as well.

“Codependent” originally was a term that applied to the spouse of an alcoholic. While it still is commonly used to describe a person’s relationship with someone who is dependent on alcohol or drugs, it also applies more broadly to any relationship in which someone—a spouse, partner, friend, sibling, parent or coworker, for example—focuses on taking care of another person’s needs at the expense of their own.

Codependents mean well; they think they are aiding a person who is in crisis. For example, a parent might make excuses for a child’s repeated misbehavior and try to “protect” the errant child from suffering unpleasant consequences; a wife or girlfriend will hide bruises from physical abuse or explain them away as a “clumsy accident”; or someone might help a friend with a gambling problem by repeatedly lending money and covering debts. In fact, in a codependent relationship, ongoing attempts to “rescue” someone simply enable that person to continue his or her detrimental behavior. It also deepens the person’s reliance or “dependency” on his or her “protector.”

Despite the emotional and/or physical pain and other problems this typically causes for the codependent or “enabler,” there is also a perverse benefit. Because they have low self-esteem, codependents must look outside themselves for affirmation and self-worth. Finding someone to “take care of” gives them the satisfaction of feeling needed. Excusing or denying problems is a way of avoiding rejection. Codependents often suffer from depression, anxiety and/or substance abuse themselves.

Initially the codependent’s goal may be to help the person overcome the addiction or problematic behavior. Over time, as it becomes clear that this goal has little chance of being achieved, he or she adapts to the person’s dysfunction and focuses instead on maintaining the status quo. The thought of leaving the relationship causes more pain and sadness than the thought of staying.

## THE ROAD TO CODEPENDENT BEHAVIOR

Codependency is usually rooted in childhood. Children of uncaring or abusive parents may put aside their own needs and adopt self-sacrificing behaviors in order to survive. If a parent or parents suffer from an addiction or untreated mental disease, a child may be thrust into the role of caretaker. Codependence may be learned by imitating other family members who display this type of behavior. It doesn’t necessarily stem from the home environment, however. Children who suffer sexual abuse, for example, may never form their own sense of sexual identity and satisfaction and thus become highly susceptible to putting the needs and demands of a sexually manipulative and controlling partner before their own.

*BREAKING THE PATTERN  
OF CODEPENDENCY*

Treatment can involve individual therapy, group therapy and/or family or couples therapy. Because codependent behaviors typically form when a person is young, individual therapy often focuses on early childhood issues and their relationship to current destructive behavior patterns. Identifying and understanding behaviors is the necessary first step in transforming them. Psychotherapies that address emotional reactions and behaviors, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), have proved very effective in that regard. Co-dependency has been likened to addiction, so some people have had success overcoming their symptoms through a 12-step program similar to those used by Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. Medication to treat a concurrent mental disorder such as depression or anxiety may also be helpful.

Healing takes hard work. It happens incrementally and it's not unusual to fall back into old habits and behaviors on occasion. But the peace of mind and self-esteem that come with successful change are truly liberating – not just for the codependent, but for the people who really do care about them.

For more information, visit [www.EastMountainHospital.com](http://www.EastMountainHospital.com)