

What Is Codependency?

By Daniel Ploskin, MD

Last updated: 8 Oct 2018

While not recognized as a diagnosable illness in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders (a professional reference used to make diagnoses), codependence generally refers to the way past events from childhood "unknowingly affect some of our attitudes, behaviors and feelings in the present, often with destructive consequences," according to the National Council on Codependence. Certain signs can help us identify a tendency toward codependence.

Self-worth comes from external sources

Codependent people need external sources, things or other people to give them feelings of self-worth. Often, following destructive parental relationships, an abusive past and/or self-destructive partners, codependents learn to react to others, worry about others and depend on others to help them feel useful or alive. They put other people's needs, wants and experiences above their own.

In fact, codependence is a relationship with one's self that is so painful a person no longer trusts his or her own experiences. It perpetuates a continual cycle of shame, blame and self-abuse. Codependent people might feel brutally abused by the mildest criticism or suicidal when a relationship ends. In his 1999 book, *Codependence: The Dance of Wounded Souls*, author Robert Burney says the battle cry of codependence is: "I'll show you! I'll get me!"

Examples of codependency

Health professionals first identified codependence in the wives of alcoholic men. Through family treatment, they discovered that spouses and family members were codependent, or also had addictive tendencies. Co-addiction occurs when more than one person, usually a couple, has a relationship that is responsible for maintaining addictive behavior in at least one of the persons.

For example, co-addicted people might believe that, at some level, getting a partner or family member to become sober or drug-free might seem like the one goal, which, if achieved, would bring them happiness. But on another level, they might realize they are behaving in a way that enables the addict with whom they live to maintain their addictions.

For instance, they might never confront the addict about her behavior. Or they might become her caretaker, spending limitless time worrying about her. They might assume it's their responsibility to clean up after and apologize for their loved one's behavior. They might even help her continue to use alcohol or drugs by giving her money, food or even drugs and alcohol, for fear of what would happen to her if they did things differently. Many codependents come to believe they are so unlovable and unworthy that to stay in a dysfunctional, destructive relationship is the best and safest way to live.

Codependent people who believe they can't survive without their partners do anything they can to stay in their relationships, however painful. The fear of losing their partners and being abandoned overpowers any other feelings they might have. The thought of trying to address any of their partner's dysfunctional behaviors makes them feel unsafe. Excusing or denying a problem like addiction means they avoid rejection by their partners.

Instead, as in the example above, co-addicted people often will try to adapt themselves and their lives to their partners' dysfunction. They might have abandoned hope that something better is possible, instead settling for the job of maintaining the status quo. The thought of change might cause them great pain and sadness.

Codependence works the same way, whether the addiction is drugs, alcohol or something else, such as sex, gambling, verbal or physical abuse, work or a hobby. If the addicts' behavior causes worry, forcing the partners to adjust to and deny the problem, they are at great risk of becoming codependent. Those who were abused as children face an even greater risk.

Symptoms of Codependency

By Darlene Lancer, JD, MFT

Last updated: 8 Oct 2018

~ 5 MIN READ

Codependency is characterized by a person belonging to a dysfunctional, one-sided relationship where one person relies on the other for meeting nearly all of their emotional and self-esteem needs. It also describes a relationship that enables another person to maintain their irresponsible, addictive, or underachieving behavior.

Do you expend all of your energy in meeting your partner's needs? Do you feel trapped in your relationship? Are you the one that is constantly making sacrifices in your relationship? Then you may be in a codependent relationship.

The term *codependency* has been around for decades. Although it originally applied to spouses of alcoholics (first called co-alcoholics), researchers revealed that the characteristics of codependents were much more prevalent in the general population than had previously imagined. In fact, they found that if you were raised in a dysfunctional family or had an ill

parent, you could also be codependent.

Researchers also found that codependent symptoms got worse if left untreated. The good news is that they're reversible.

Symptoms of Codependency

The following is a list of symptoms of codependency and being in a codependent relationship. You don't need to have them all to qualify as codependent.

Low self-esteem. Feeling that you're not good enough or comparing yourself to others are signs of low self-esteem. The tricky thing about self-esteem is that some people think highly of themselves, but it's only a disguise — they actually feel unlovable or inadequate. Underneath, usually hidden from consciousness, are feelings of shame. Guilt and perfectionism often go along with [low self-esteem](#). If everything is perfect, you don't feel bad about yourself.

People-pleasing. It's fine to want to please someone you care about, but codependents usually don't think they have a choice. Saying "No" causes them [anxiety](#). Some codependents have a hard time saying "No" to anyone. They go out of their way and sacrifice their own needs to accommodate other people.

Poor boundaries. Boundaries are sort of an imaginary line between you and others. It divides up what's yours and somebody else's, and that applies not only to your body, money, and belongings, but also to your feelings, thoughts and needs. That's especially where codependents get into trouble. They have blurry or weak boundaries. They feel responsible for other people's feelings and problems or blame their own on someone else. Some codependents have rigid boundaries. They are closed off and withdrawn, making it hard for other people to get close to them. Sometimes, people flip back and forth between having weak boundaries and having rigid ones.

Reactivity. A consequence of poor boundaries is that you react to everyone's thoughts and feelings. If someone says something you disagree with, you either believe it or become defensive. You absorb their words, because there's no boundary. With a boundary, you'd realize it was just their opinion and not a reflection of you and not feel threatened by disagreements.

Caretaking. Another effect of poor boundaries is that if someone else has a problem, you want to help them to the point that you give up yourself. It's natural to feel empathy and sympathy for someone, but codependents start putting other people ahead of themselves. In fact, they need to help and might feel rejected if another person doesn't want help. Moreover, they keep trying to help and fix the other person, even when that person clearly isn't taking their advice.

Control. Control helps codependents feel safe and secure. Everyone needs some control over events in their life. You wouldn't want to live in constant uncertainty and chaos, but for codependents, control limits their ability to take risks and share their feelings. Sometimes they have an addiction that either helps them loosen up, like alcoholism, or helps them hold their feelings down, like workaholism, so that they don't feel out of control. Codependents also need to control those close to them, because they need other people to behave in a certain way to feel okay. In fact, people-pleasing and care-taking can be used to control and manipulate people. Alternatively, codependents are bossy and tell you what you should or shouldn't do. This is a violation of someone else's boundary.

Dysfunctional communication. Codependents have trouble when it comes to communicating their thoughts, feelings and needs. Of course, if you don't know what you think, feel or need, this becomes a problem. Other times, you know, but you won't own up to your truth. You're afraid to be truthful, because you don't want to upset someone else. Instead of saying, "I don't like that," you might pretend that it's okay or tell someone what to do. Communication becomes dishonest and confusing when you try to manipulate the other person out of fear.

Obsessions. Codependents have a tendency to spend their time thinking about other people or relationships. This is caused by their dependency, anxieties, and fears. They can also become obsessed when they think they've made or might make a "mistake." Sometimes you can lapse into fantasy about how you'd like things to be or about someone you love as a way to avoid the pain of the present. This is one way to stay in denial, discussed below, but it keeps you from living your life.

Dependency. Codependents need other people to like them to feel okay about themselves. They're afraid of being rejected or abandoned, even if they can function on their own. Others need always to be in a relationship, because they feel depressed or lonely when they're by themselves for too long. This trait makes it hard for them to end a relationship, even when the relationship is painful or abusive. They end up feeling trapped.

Denial. One of the problems people face in getting help for codependency is that they're in denial about it, meaning that they don't face their problem. Usually they think the problem is someone else or the situation. They either keep complaining or trying to fix the other person, or go from one relationship or job to another and never own up the fact that they have a problem. Codependents also deny their feelings and needs. Often, they don't know what they're feeling and are instead focused on what others are feeling. The same thing goes for their needs. They pay attention to other people's needs and not their own. They might be in denial of their need for space and autonomy. Although some codependents seem needy, others act like they're self-sufficient when it comes to needing help. They won't reach out and have trouble receiving. They are in denial of their vulnerability and need for love and intimacy.

Problems with intimacy. By this I'm not referring to sex, although sexual dysfunction often is a reflection of an intimacy problem. I'm talking about being open and close with someone in an intimate relationship. Because of the shame and weak boundaries, you might fear that you'll be judged, rejected, or left. On the other hand, you may fear being smothered in a relationship and losing your autonomy. You might deny your need for closeness and feel that your partner wants too much of your time; your partner complains that you're unavailable, but he or she is denying his or her need for separateness.

Painful emotions. Codependency creates stress and leads to painful emotions. Shame and low self-esteem create anxiety and fear about being judged, rejected or abandoned; making mistakes; being a

failure; feeling trapped by being close or being alone. The other symptoms lead to feelings of anger and resentment, [depression](#), hopelessness, and despair. When the feelings are too much, you can feel numb.

There is help for recovery and change for people who are codependent. The first step is getting guidance and support. These symptoms are deeply ingrained habits and difficult to identify and change on your own. Join a 12-Step program, such as Codependents Anonymous or seek counseling. Work on becoming more assertive and building your self-esteem.

What Is Codependency?

By Daniel Ploskin, MD

Last updated: 8 Oct 2018

While not recognized as a diagnosable illness in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders (a professional reference used to make diagnoses), codependence generally refers to the way past events from childhood "unknowingly affect some of our attitudes, behaviors and feelings in the present, often with destructive consequences," according to the National Council on Codependence. Certain signs can help us identify a tendency toward codependence.

Self-worth comes from external sources

Codependent people need external sources, things or other people to give them feelings of self-worth. Often, following destructive parental relationships, an abusive past and/or self-destructive partners, codependents learn to react to others, worry about others and depend on others to help them feel useful or alive. They put other people's needs, wants and experiences above their own.

In fact, codependence is a relationship with one's self that is so painful a person no longer trusts his or her own experiences. It perpetuates a continual cycle of shame, blame and self-abuse. Codependent people might feel brutally abused by the mildest criticism or suicidal when a relationship ends. In his 1999 book, *Codependence: The Dance of Wounded Souls*, author Robert Burney says the battle cry of codependence is: "I'll show you! I'll get me!"

Examples of codependency

Health professionals first identified codependence in the wives of alcoholic men. Through family treatment, they discovered that spouses and family members were codependent, or also had addictive tendencies. Co-addiction occurs when more than one person, usually a couple, has a relationship that is responsible for maintaining addictive behavior in at least one of the persons.

For example, co-addicted people might believe that, at some level, getting a partner or family member to become sober or drug-free might seem like the one goal, which, if achieved, would bring them happiness. But on another level, they might realize they are behaving in a way that enables the addict with whom they live to maintain their addictions.

For instance, they might never confront the addict about her behavior. Or they might become her caretaker, spending limitless time worrying about her. They might assume it's their responsibility to clean up after and apologize for their loved one's behavior. They might even help her continue to use alcohol or drugs by giving her money, food or even drugs and alcohol, for fear of what would happen to her if they did things differently. Many codependents come to believe they are so unlovable and unworthy that to stay in a dysfunctional, destructive relationship is the best and safest way to live.

Codependent people who believe they can't survive without their partners do anything they can to stay in their relationships, however painful. The fear of losing their partners and being abandoned overpowers any other feelings they might have. The thought of trying to address any of their partner's dysfunctional behaviors makes them feel unsafe. Excusing or denying a problem like addiction means they avoid rejection by their partners.

Instead, as in the example above, co-addicted people often will try to adapt themselves and their lives to their partners' dysfunction. They might have abandoned hope that something better is possible, instead settling for the job of maintaining the status quo. The thought of change might cause them great pain and sadness.

Codependence works the same way, whether the addiction is drugs, alcohol or something else, such as sex, gambling, verbal or physical abuse, work or a hobby. If the addicts' behavior causes worry, forcing the partners to adjust to and deny the problem, they are at great risk of becoming codependent. Those who were abused as children face an even greater risk.

Symptoms of Codependency

By Darlene Lancer, JD, MFT

Last updated: 8 Oct 2018

~ 5 MIN READ

Codependency is characterized by a person belonging to a dysfunctional, one-sided relationship where one person relies on the other for meeting nearly all of their emotional and self-esteem needs. It also describes a relationship that enables another person to maintain their irresponsible, addictive, or underachieving behavior.

Do you expend all of your energy in meeting your partner's needs? Do you feel trapped in your relationship? Are you the one that is constantly making sacrifices in your relationship? Then you may be in a codependent relationship.

The term *codependency* has been around for decades. Although it originally applied to spouses of alcoholics (first called co-alcoholics), researchers revealed that the characteristics of codependents were much more prevalent in the general population than had previously imagined. In fact, they found that if you were raised in a dysfunctional family or had an ill

parent, you could also be codependent.

Researchers also found that codependent symptoms got worse if left untreated. The good news is that they're reversible.

Symptoms of Codependency

The following is a list of symptoms of codependency and being in a codependent relationship. You don't need to have them all to qualify as codependent.

Low self-esteem. Feeling that you're not good enough or comparing yourself to others are signs of low self-esteem. The tricky thing about self-esteem is that some people think highly of themselves, but it's only a disguise — they actually feel unlovable or inadequate. Underneath, usually hidden from consciousness, are feelings of shame. Guilt and perfectionism often go along with [low self-esteem](#). If everything is perfect, you don't feel bad about yourself.

People-pleasing. It's fine to want to please someone you care about, but codependents usually don't think they have a choice. Saying "No" causes them [anxiety](#). Some codependents have a hard time saying "No" to anyone. They go out of their way and sacrifice their own needs to accommodate other people.

Poor boundaries. Boundaries are sort of an imaginary line between you and others. It divides up what's yours and somebody else's, and that applies not only to your body, money, and belongings, but also to your feelings, thoughts and needs. That's especially where codependents get into trouble. They have blurry or weak boundaries. They feel responsible for other people's feelings and problems or blame their own on someone else. Some codependents have rigid boundaries. They are closed off and withdrawn, making it hard for other people to get close to them. Sometimes, people flip back and forth between having weak boundaries and having rigid ones.

Reactivity. A consequence of poor boundaries is that you react to everyone's thoughts and feelings. If someone says something you disagree with, you either believe it or become defensive. You absorb their words, because there's no boundary. With a boundary, you'd realize it was just their opinion and not a reflection of you and not feel threatened by disagreements.

Caretaking. Another effect of poor boundaries is that if someone else has a problem, you want to help them to the point that you give up yourself. It's natural to feel empathy and sympathy for someone, but codependents start putting other people ahead of themselves. In fact, they need to help and might feel rejected if another person doesn't want help. Moreover, they keep trying to help and fix the other person, even when that person clearly isn't taking their advice.

Control. Control helps codependents feel safe and secure. Everyone needs some control over events in their life. You wouldn't want to live in constant uncertainty and chaos, but for codependents, control limits their ability to take risks and share their feelings. Sometimes they have an addiction that either helps them loosen up, like alcoholism, or helps them hold their feelings down, like workaholism, so that they don't feel out of control. Codependents also need to control those close to them, because they need other people to behave in a certain way to feel okay. In fact, people-pleasing and care-taking can be used to control and manipulate people. Alternatively, codependents are bossy and tell you what you should or shouldn't do. This is a violation of someone else's boundary.

Dysfunctional communication. Codependents have trouble when it comes to communicating their thoughts, feelings and needs. Of course, if you don't know what you think, feel or need, this becomes a problem. Other times, you know, but you won't own up to your truth. You're afraid to be truthful, because you don't want to upset someone else. Instead of saying, "I don't like that," you might pretend that it's okay or tell someone what to do. Communication becomes dishonest and confusing when you try to manipulate the other person out of fear.

Obsessions. Codependents have a tendency to spend their time thinking about other people or relationships. This is caused by their dependency, anxieties, and fears. They can also become obsessed when they think they've made or might make a "mistake." Sometimes you can lapse into fantasy about how you'd like things to be or about someone you love as a way to avoid the pain of the present. This is one way to stay in denial, discussed below, but it keeps you from living your life.

Dependency. Codependents need other people to like them to feel okay about themselves. They're afraid of being rejected or abandoned, even if they can function on their own. Others need always to be in a relationship, because they feel depressed or lonely when they're by themselves for too long. This trait makes it hard for them to end a relationship, even when the relationship is painful or abusive. They end up feeling trapped.

Denial. One of the problems people face in getting help for codependency is that they're in denial about it, meaning that they don't face their problem. Usually they think the problem is someone else or the situation. They either keep complaining or trying to fix the other person, or go from one relationship or job to another and never own up the fact that they have a problem. Codependents also deny their feelings and needs. Often, they don't know what they're feeling and are instead focused on what others are feeling. The same thing goes for their needs. They pay attention to other people's needs and not their own. They might be in denial of their need for space and autonomy. Although some codependents seem needy, others act like they're self-sufficient when it comes to needing help. They won't reach out and have trouble receiving. They are in denial of their vulnerability and need for love and intimacy.

Problems with intimacy. By this I'm not referring to sex, although sexual dysfunction often is a reflection of an intimacy problem. I'm talking about being open and close with someone in an intimate relationship. Because of the shame and weak boundaries, you might fear that you'll be judged, rejected, or left. On the other hand, you may fear being smothered in a relationship and losing your autonomy. You might deny your need for closeness and feel that your partner wants too much of your time; your partner complains that you're unavailable, but he or she is denying his or her need for separateness.

Painful emotions. Codependency creates stress and leads to painful emotions. Shame and low self-esteem create anxiety and fear about being judged, rejected or abandoned; making mistakes; being a

failure; feeling trapped by being close or being alone. The other symptoms lead to feelings of anger and resentment, [depression](#), hopelessness, and despair. When the feelings are too much, you can feel numb.

There is help for recovery and change for people who are codependent. The first step is getting guidance and support. These symptoms are deeply ingrained habits and difficult to identify and change on your own. Join a 12-Step program, such as Codependents Anonymous or seek counseling. Work on becoming more assertive and building your self-esteem.

What Is Codependency?

By Daniel Ploskin, MD

Last updated: 8 Oct 2018

While not recognized as a diagnosable illness in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders (a professional reference used to make diagnoses), codependence generally refers to the way past events from childhood "unknowingly affect some of our attitudes, behaviors and feelings in the present, often with destructive consequences," according to the National Council on Codependence. Certain signs can help us identify a tendency toward codependence.

Self-worth comes from external sources

Codependent people need external sources, things or other people to give them feelings of self-worth. Often, following destructive parental relationships, an abusive past and/or self-destructive partners, codependents learn to react to others, worry about others and depend on others to help them feel useful or alive. They put other people's needs, wants and experiences above their own.

In fact, codependence is a relationship with one's self that is so painful a person no longer trusts his or her own experiences. It perpetuates a continual cycle of shame, blame and self-abuse. Codependent people might feel brutally abused by the mildest criticism or suicidal when a relationship ends. In his 1999 book, *Codependence: The Dance of Wounded Souls*, author Robert Burney says the battle cry of codependence is: "I'll show you! I'll get me!"

Examples of codependency

Health professionals first identified codependence in the wives of alcoholic men. Through family treatment, they discovered that spouses and family members were codependent, or also had addictive tendencies. Co-addiction occurs when more than one person, usually a couple, has a relationship that is responsible for maintaining addictive behavior in at least one of the persons.

For example, co-addicted people might believe that, at some level, getting a partner or family member to become sober or drug-free might seem like the one goal, which, if achieved, would bring them happiness. But on another level, they might realize they are behaving in a way that enables the addict with whom they live to maintain their addictions.

For instance, they might never confront the addict about her behavior. Or they might become her caretaker, spending limitless time worrying about her. They might assume it's their responsibility to clean up after and apologize for their loved one's behavior. They might even help her continue to use alcohol or drugs by giving her money, food or even drugs and alcohol, for fear of what would happen to her if they did things differently. Many codependents come to believe they are so unlovable and unworthy that to stay in a dysfunctional, destructive relationship is the best and safest way to live.

Codependent people who believe they can't survive without their partners do anything they can to stay in their relationships, however painful. The fear of losing their partners and being abandoned overpowers any other feelings they might have. The thought of trying to address any of their partner's dysfunctional behaviors makes them feel unsafe. Excusing or denying a problem like addiction means they avoid rejection by their partners.

Instead, as in the example above, co-addicted people often will try to adapt themselves and their lives to their partners' dysfunction. They might have abandoned hope that something better is possible, instead settling for the job of maintaining the status quo. The thought of change might cause them great pain and sadness.

Codependence works the same way, whether the addiction is drugs, alcohol or something else, such as sex, gambling, verbal or physical abuse, work or a hobby. If the addicts' behavior causes worry, forcing the partners to adjust to and deny the problem, they are at great risk of becoming codependent. Those who were abused as children face an even greater risk.

Symptoms of Codependency

By Darlene Lancer, JD, MFT

Last updated: 8 Oct 2018

~ 5 MIN READ

Codependency is characterized by a person belonging to a dysfunctional, one-sided relationship where one person relies on the other for meeting nearly all of their emotional and self-esteem needs. It also describes a relationship that enables another person to maintain their irresponsible, addictive, or underachieving behavior.

Do you expend all of your energy in meeting your partner's needs? Do you feel trapped in your relationship? Are you the one that is constantly making sacrifices in your relationship? Then you may be in a codependent relationship.

The term *codependency* has been around for decades. Although it originally applied to spouses of alcoholics (first called co-alcoholics), researchers revealed that the characteristics of codependents were much more prevalent in the general population than had previously imagined. In fact, they found that if you were raised in a dysfunctional family or had an ill

parent, you could also be codependent.

Researchers also found that codependent symptoms got worse if left untreated. The good news is that they're reversible.

Symptoms of Codependency

The following is a list of symptoms of codependency and being in a codependent relationship. You don't need to have them all to qualify as codependent.

Low self-esteem. Feeling that you're not good enough or comparing yourself to others are signs of low self-esteem. The tricky thing about self-esteem is that some people think highly of themselves, but it's only a disguise — they actually feel unlovable or inadequate. Underneath, usually hidden from consciousness, are feelings of shame. Guilt and perfectionism often go along with [low self-esteem](#). If everything is perfect, you don't feel bad about yourself.

People-pleasing. It's fine to want to please someone you care about, but codependents usually don't think they have a choice. Saying "No" causes them [anxiety](#). Some codependents have a hard time saying "No" to anyone. They go out of their way and sacrifice their own needs to accommodate other people.

Poor boundaries. Boundaries are sort of an imaginary line between you and others. It divides up what's yours and somebody else's, and that applies not only to your body, money, and belongings, but also to your feelings, thoughts and needs. That's especially where codependents get into trouble. They have blurry or weak boundaries. They feel responsible for other people's feelings and problems or blame their own on someone else. Some codependents have rigid boundaries. They are closed off and withdrawn, making it hard for other people to get close to them. Sometimes, people flip back and forth between having weak boundaries and having rigid ones.

Reactivity. A consequence of poor boundaries is that you react to everyone's thoughts and feelings. If someone says something you disagree with, you either believe it or become defensive. You absorb their words, because there's no boundary. With a boundary, you'd realize it was just their opinion and not a reflection of you and not feel threatened by disagreements.

Caretaking. Another effect of poor boundaries is that if someone else has a problem, you want to help them to the point that you give up yourself. It's natural to feel empathy and sympathy for someone, but codependents start putting other people ahead of themselves. In fact, they need to help and might feel rejected if another person doesn't want help. Moreover, they keep trying to help and fix the other person, even when that person clearly isn't taking their advice.

Control. Control helps codependents feel safe and secure. Everyone needs some control over events in their life. You wouldn't want to live in constant uncertainty and chaos, but for codependents, control limits their ability to take risks and share their feelings. Sometimes they have an addiction that either helps them loosen up, like alcoholism, or helps them hold their feelings down, like workaholism, so that they don't feel out of control. Codependents also need to control those close to them, because they need other people to behave in a certain way to feel okay. In fact, people-pleasing and care-taking can be used to control and manipulate people. Alternatively, codependents are bossy and tell you what you should or shouldn't do. This is a violation of someone else's boundary.

Dysfunctional communication. Codependents have trouble when it comes to communicating their thoughts, feelings and needs. Of course, if you don't know what you think, feel or need, this becomes a problem. Other times, you know, but you won't own up to your truth. You're afraid to be truthful, because you don't want to upset someone else. Instead of saying, "I don't like that," you might pretend that it's okay or tell someone what to do. Communication becomes dishonest and confusing when you try to manipulate the other person out of fear.

Obsessions. Codependents have a tendency to spend their time thinking about other people or relationships. This is caused by their dependency, anxieties, and fears. They can also become obsessed when they think they've made or might make a "mistake." Sometimes you can lapse into fantasy about how you'd like things to be or about someone you love as a way to avoid the pain of the present. This is one way to stay in denial, discussed below, but it keeps you from living your life.

Dependency. Codependents need other people to like them to feel okay about themselves. They're afraid of being rejected or abandoned, even if they can function on their own. Others need always to be in a relationship, because they feel depressed or lonely when they're by themselves for too long. This trait makes it hard for them to end a relationship, even when the relationship is painful or abusive. They end up feeling trapped.

Denial. One of the problems people face in getting help for codependency is that they're in denial about it, meaning that they don't face their problem. Usually they think the problem is someone else or the situation. They either keep complaining or trying to fix the other person, or go from one relationship or job to another and never own up the fact that they have a problem. Codependents also deny their feelings and needs. Often, they don't know what they're feeling and are instead focused on what others are feeling. The same thing goes for their needs. They pay attention to other people's needs and not their own. They might be in denial of their need for space and autonomy. Although some codependents seem needy, others act like they're self-sufficient when it comes to needing help. They won't reach out and have trouble receiving. They are in denial of their vulnerability and need for love and intimacy.

Problems with intimacy. By this I'm not referring to sex, although sexual dysfunction often is a reflection of an intimacy problem. I'm talking about being open and close with someone in an intimate relationship. Because of the shame and weak boundaries, you might fear that you'll be judged, rejected, or left. On the other hand, you may fear being smothered in a relationship and losing your autonomy. You might deny your need for closeness and feel that your partner wants too much of your time; your partner complains that you're unavailable, but he or she is denying his or her need for separateness.

Painful emotions. Codependency creates stress and leads to painful emotions. Shame and low self-esteem create anxiety and fear about being judged, rejected or abandoned; making mistakes; being a

failure; feeling trapped by being close or being alone. The other symptoms lead to feelings of anger and resentment, [depression](#), hopelessness, and despair. When the feelings are too much, you can feel numb.

There is help for recovery and change for people who are codependent. The first step is getting guidance and support. These symptoms are deeply ingrained habits and difficult to identify and change on your own. Join a 12-Step program, such as Codependents Anonymous or seek counseling. Work on becoming more assertive and building your self-esteem.

What Is Codependency?

By Daniel Ploskin, MD

Last updated: 8 Oct 2018

While not recognized as a diagnosable illness in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders (a professional reference used to make diagnoses), codependence generally refers to the way past events from childhood "unknowingly affect some of our attitudes, behaviors and feelings in the present, often with destructive consequences," according to the National Council on Codependence. Certain signs can help us identify a tendency toward codependence.

Self-worth comes from external sources

Codependent people need external sources, things or other people to give them feelings of self-worth. Often, following destructive parental relationships, an abusive past and/or self-destructive partners, codependents learn to react to others, worry about others and depend on others to help them feel useful or alive. They put other people's needs, wants and experiences above their own.

In fact, codependence is a relationship with one's self that is so painful a person no longer trusts his or her own experiences. It perpetuates a continual cycle of shame, blame and self-abuse. Codependent people might feel brutally abused by the mildest criticism or suicidal when a relationship ends. In his 1999 book, *Codependence: The Dance of Wounded Souls*, author Robert Burney says the battle cry of codependence is: "I'll show you! I'll get me!"

Examples of codependency

Health professionals first identified codependence in the wives of alcoholic men. Through family treatment, they discovered that spouses and family members were codependent, or also had addictive tendencies. Co-addiction occurs when more than one person, usually a couple, has a relationship that is responsible for maintaining addictive behavior in at least one of the persons.

For example, co-addicted people might believe that, at some level, getting a partner or family member to become sober or drug-free might seem like the one goal, which, if achieved, would bring them happiness. But on another level, they might realize they are behaving in a way that enables the addict with whom they live to maintain their addictions.

For instance, they might never confront the addict about her behavior. Or they might become her caretaker, spending limitless time worrying about her. They might assume it's their responsibility to clean up after and apologize for their loved one's behavior. They might even help her continue to use alcohol or drugs by giving her money, food or even drugs and alcohol, for fear of what would happen to her if they did things differently. Many codependents come to believe they are so unlovable and unworthy that to stay in a dysfunctional, destructive relationship is the best and safest way to live.

Codependent people who believe they can't survive without their partners do anything they can to stay in their relationships, however painful. The fear of losing their partners and being abandoned overpowers any other feelings they might have. The thought of trying to address any of their partner's dysfunctional behaviors makes them feel unsafe. Excusing or denying a problem like addiction means they avoid rejection by their partners.

Instead, as in the example above, co-addicted people often will try to adapt themselves and their lives to their partners' dysfunction. They might have abandoned hope that something better is possible, instead settling for the job of maintaining the status quo. The thought of change might cause them great pain and sadness.

Codependence works the same way, whether the addiction is drugs, alcohol or something else, such as sex, gambling, verbal or physical abuse, work or a hobby. If the addicts' behavior causes worry, forcing the partners to adjust to and deny the problem, they are at great risk of becoming codependent. Those who were abused as children face an even greater risk.

Symptoms of Codependency

By Darlene Lancer, JD, MFT

Last updated: 8 Oct 2018

~ 5 MIN READ

Codependency is characterized by a person belonging to a dysfunctional, one-sided relationship where one person relies on the other for meeting nearly all of their emotional and self-esteem needs. It also describes a relationship that enables another person to maintain their irresponsible, addictive, or underachieving behavior.

Do you expend all of your energy in meeting your partner's needs? Do you feel trapped in your relationship? Are you the one that is constantly making sacrifices in your relationship? Then you may be in a codependent relationship.

The term *codependency* has been around for decades. Although it originally applied to spouses of alcoholics (first called co-alcoholics), researchers revealed that the characteristics of codependents were much more prevalent in the general population than had previously imagined. In fact, they found that if you were raised in a dysfunctional family or had an ill

parent, you could also be codependent.

Researchers also found that codependent symptoms got worse if left untreated. The good news is that they're reversible.

Symptoms of Codependency

The following is a list of symptoms of codependency and being in a codependent relationship. You don't need to have them all to qualify as codependent.

Low self-esteem. Feeling that you're not good enough or comparing yourself to others are signs of low self-esteem. The tricky thing about self-esteem is that some people think highly of themselves, but it's only a disguise — they actually feel unlovable or inadequate. Underneath, usually hidden from consciousness, are feelings of shame. Guilt and perfectionism often go along with [low self-esteem](#). If everything is perfect, you don't feel bad about yourself.

People-pleasing. It's fine to want to please someone you care about, but codependents usually don't think they have a choice. Saying "No" causes them [anxiety](#). Some codependents have a hard time saying "No" to anyone. They go out of their way and sacrifice their own needs to accommodate other people.

Poor boundaries. Boundaries are sort of an imaginary line between you and others. It divides up what's yours and somebody else's, and that applies not only to your body, money, and belongings, but also to your feelings, thoughts and needs. That's especially where codependents get into trouble. They have blurry or weak boundaries. They feel responsible for other people's feelings and problems or blame their own on someone else. Some codependents have rigid boundaries. They are closed off and withdrawn, making it hard for other people to get close to them. Sometimes, people flip back and forth between having weak boundaries and having rigid ones.

Reactivity. A consequence of poor boundaries is that you react to everyone's thoughts and feelings. If someone says something you disagree with, you either believe it or become defensive. You absorb their words, because there's no boundary. With a boundary, you'd realize it was just their opinion and not a reflection of you and not feel threatened by disagreements.

Caretaking. Another effect of poor boundaries is that if someone else has a problem, you want to help them to the point that you give up yourself. It's natural to feel empathy and sympathy for someone, but codependents start putting other people ahead of themselves. In fact, they need to help and might feel rejected if another person doesn't want help. Moreover, they keep trying to help and fix the other person, even when that person clearly isn't taking their advice.

Control. Control helps codependents feel safe and secure. Everyone needs some control over events in their life. You wouldn't want to live in constant uncertainty and chaos, but for codependents, control limits their ability to take risks and share their feelings. Sometimes they have an addiction that either helps them loosen up, like alcoholism, or helps them hold their feelings down, like workaholism, so that they don't feel out of control. Codependents also need to control those close to them, because they need other people to behave in a certain way to feel okay. In fact, people-pleasing and care-taking can be used to control and manipulate people. Alternatively, codependents are bossy and tell you what you should or shouldn't do. This is a violation of someone else's boundary.

Dysfunctional communication. Codependents have trouble when it comes to communicating their thoughts, feelings and needs. Of course, if you don't know what you think, feel or need, this becomes a problem. Other times, you know, but you won't own up to your truth. You're afraid to be truthful, because you don't want to upset someone else. Instead of saying, "I don't like that," you might pretend that it's okay or tell someone what to do. Communication becomes dishonest and confusing when you try to manipulate the other person out of fear.

Obsessions. Codependents have a tendency to spend their time thinking about other people or relationships. This is caused by their dependency, anxieties, and fears. They can also become obsessed when they think they've made or might make a "mistake." Sometimes you can lapse into fantasy about how you'd like things to be or about someone you love as a way to avoid the pain of the present. This is one way to stay in denial, discussed below, but it keeps you from living your life.

Dependency. Codependents need other people to like them to feel okay about themselves. They're afraid of being rejected or abandoned, even if they can function on their own. Others need always to be in a relationship, because they feel depressed or lonely when they're by themselves for too long. This trait makes it hard for them to end a relationship, even when the relationship is painful or abusive. They end up feeling trapped.

Denial. One of the problems people face in getting help for codependency is that they're in denial about it, meaning that they don't face their problem. Usually they think the problem is someone else or the situation. They either keep complaining or trying to fix the other person, or go from one relationship or job to another and never own up the fact that they have a problem. Codependents also deny their feelings and needs. Often, they don't know what they're feeling and are instead focused on what others are feeling. The same thing goes for their needs. They pay attention to other people's needs and not their own. They might be in denial of their need for space and autonomy. Although some codependents seem needy, others act like they're self-sufficient when it comes to needing help. They won't reach out and have trouble receiving. They are in denial of their vulnerability and need for love and intimacy.

Problems with intimacy. By this I'm not referring to sex, although sexual dysfunction often is a reflection of an intimacy problem. I'm talking about being open and close with someone in an intimate relationship. Because of the shame and weak boundaries, you might fear that you'll be judged, rejected, or left. On the other hand, you may fear being smothered in a relationship and losing your autonomy. You might deny your need for closeness and feel that your partner wants too much of your time; your partner complains that you're unavailable, but he or she is denying his or her need for separateness.

Painful emotions. Codependency creates stress and leads to painful emotions. Shame and low self-esteem create anxiety and fear about being judged, rejected or abandoned; making mistakes; being a

failure; feeling trapped by being close or being alone. The other symptoms lead to feelings of anger and resentment, [depression](#), hopelessness, and despair. When the feelings are too much, you can feel numb.

There is help for recovery and change for people who are codependent. The first step is getting guidance and support. These symptoms are deeply ingrained habits and difficult to identify and change on your own. Join a 12-Step program, such as Codependents Anonymous or seek counseling. Work on becoming more assertive and building your self-esteem.

What Is Codependency?

By Daniel Ploskin, MD

Last updated: 8 Oct 2018

While not recognized as a diagnosable illness in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders (a professional reference used to make diagnoses), codependence generally refers to the way past events from childhood "unknowingly affect some of our attitudes, behaviors and feelings in the present, often with destructive consequences," according to the National Council on Codependence. Certain signs can help us identify a tendency toward codependence.

Self-worth comes from external sources

Codependent people need external sources, things or other people to give them feelings of self-worth. Often, following destructive parental relationships, an abusive past and/or self-destructive partners, codependents learn to react to others, worry about others and depend on others to help them feel useful or alive. They put other people's needs, wants and experiences above their own.

In fact, codependence is a relationship with one's self that is so painful a person no longer trusts his or her own experiences. It perpetuates a continual cycle of shame, blame and self-abuse. Codependent people might feel brutally abused by the mildest criticism or suicidal when a relationship ends. In his 1999 book, *Codependence: The Dance of Wounded Souls*, author Robert Burney says the battle cry of codependence is: "I'll show you! I'll get me!"

Examples of codependency

Health professionals first identified codependence in the wives of alcoholic men. Through family treatment, they discovered that spouses and family members were codependent, or also had addictive tendencies. Co-addiction occurs when more than one person, usually a couple, has a relationship that is responsible for maintaining addictive behavior in at least one of the persons.

For example, co-addicted people might believe that, at some level, getting a partner or family member to become sober or drug-free might seem like the one goal, which, if achieved, would bring them happiness. But on another level, they might realize they are behaving in a way that enables the addict with whom they live to maintain their addictions.

For instance, they might never confront the addict about her behavior. Or they might become her caretaker, spending limitless time worrying about her. They might assume it's their responsibility to clean up after and apologize for their loved one's behavior. They might even help her continue to use alcohol or drugs by giving her money, food or even drugs and alcohol, for fear of what would happen to her if they did things differently. Many codependents come to believe they are so unlovable and unworthy that to stay in a dysfunctional, destructive relationship is the best and safest way to live.

Codependent people who believe they can't survive without their partners do anything they can to stay in their relationships, however painful. The fear of losing their partners and being abandoned overpowers any other feelings they might have. The thought of trying to address any of their partner's dysfunctional behaviors makes them feel unsafe. Excusing or denying a problem like addiction means they avoid rejection by their partners.

Instead, as in the example above, co-addicted people often will try to adapt themselves and their lives to their partners' dysfunction. They might have abandoned hope that something better is possible, instead settling for the job of maintaining the status quo. The thought of change might cause them great pain and sadness.

Codependence works the same way, whether the addiction is drugs, alcohol or something else, such as sex, gambling, verbal or physical abuse, work or a hobby. If the addicts' behavior causes worry, forcing the partners to adjust to and deny the problem, they are at great risk of becoming codependent. Those who were abused as children face an even greater risk.

Symptoms of Codependency

By Darlene Lancer, JD, MFT

Last updated: 8 Oct 2018

~ 5 MIN READ

Codependency is characterized by a person belonging to a dysfunctional, one-sided relationship where one person relies on the other for meeting nearly all of their emotional and self-esteem needs. It also describes a relationship that enables another person to maintain their irresponsible, addictive, or underachieving behavior.

Do you expend all of your energy in meeting your partner's needs? Do you feel trapped in your relationship? Are you the one that is constantly making sacrifices in your relationship? Then you may be in a codependent relationship.

The term *codependency* has been around for decades. Although it originally applied to spouses of alcoholics (first called co-alcoholics), researchers revealed that the characteristics of codependents were much more prevalent in the general population than had previously imagined. In fact, they found that if you were raised in a dysfunctional family or had an ill

parent, you could also be codependent.

Researchers also found that codependent symptoms got worse if left untreated. The good news is that they're reversible.

Symptoms of Codependency

The following is a list of symptoms of codependency and being in a codependent relationship. You don't need to have them all to qualify as codependent.

Low self-esteem. Feeling that you're not good enough or comparing yourself to others are signs of low self-esteem. The tricky thing about self-esteem is that some people think highly of themselves, but it's only a disguise — they actually feel unlovable or inadequate. Underneath, usually hidden from consciousness, are feelings of shame. Guilt and perfectionism often go along with [low self-esteem](#). If everything is perfect, you don't feel bad about yourself.

People-pleasing. It's fine to want to please someone you care about, but codependents usually don't think they have a choice. Saying "No" causes them [anxiety](#). Some codependents have a hard time saying "No" to anyone. They go out of their way and sacrifice their own needs to accommodate other people.

Poor boundaries. Boundaries are sort of an imaginary line between you and others. It divides up what's yours and somebody else's, and that applies not only to your body, money, and belongings, but also to your feelings, thoughts and needs. That's especially where codependents get into trouble. They have blurry or weak boundaries. They feel responsible for other people's feelings and problems or blame their own on someone else. Some codependents have rigid boundaries. They are closed off and withdrawn, making it hard for other people to get close to them. Sometimes, people flip back and forth between having weak boundaries and having rigid ones.

Reactivity. A consequence of poor boundaries is that you react to everyone's thoughts and feelings. If someone says something you disagree with, you either believe it or become defensive. You absorb their words, because there's no boundary. With a boundary, you'd realize it was just their opinion and not a reflection of you and not feel threatened by disagreements.

Caretaking. Another effect of poor boundaries is that if someone else has a problem, you want to help them to the point that you give up yourself. It's natural to feel empathy and sympathy for someone, but codependents start putting other people ahead of themselves. In fact, they need to help and might feel rejected if another person doesn't want help. Moreover, they keep trying to help and fix the other person, even when that person clearly isn't taking their advice.

Control. Control helps codependents feel safe and secure. Everyone needs some control over events in their life. You wouldn't want to live in constant uncertainty and chaos, but for codependents, control limits their ability to take risks and share their feelings. Sometimes they have an addiction that either helps them loosen up, like alcoholism, or helps them hold their feelings down, like workaholism, so that they don't feel out of control. Codependents also need to control those close to them, because they need other people to behave in a certain way to feel okay. In fact, people-pleasing and care-taking can be used to control and manipulate people. Alternatively, codependents are bossy and tell you what you should or shouldn't do. This is a violation of someone else's boundary.

Dysfunctional communication. Codependents have trouble when it comes to communicating their thoughts, feelings and needs. Of course, if you don't know what you think, feel or need, this becomes a problem. Other times, you know, but you won't own up to your truth. You're afraid to be truthful, because you don't want to upset someone else. Instead of saying, "I don't like that," you might pretend that it's okay or tell someone what to do. Communication becomes dishonest and confusing when you try to manipulate the other person out of fear.

Obsessions. Codependents have a tendency to spend their time thinking about other people or relationships. This is caused by their dependency, anxieties, and fears. They can also become obsessed when they think they've made or might make a "mistake." Sometimes you can lapse into fantasy about how you'd like things to be or about someone you love as a way to avoid the pain of the present. This is one way to stay in denial, discussed below, but it keeps you from living your life.

Dependency. Codependents need other people to like them to feel okay about themselves. They're afraid of being rejected or abandoned, even if they can function on their own. Others need always to be in a relationship, because they feel depressed or lonely when they're by themselves for too long. This trait makes it hard for them to end a relationship, even when the relationship is painful or abusive. They end up feeling trapped.

Denial. One of the problems people face in getting help for codependency is that they're in denial about it, meaning that they don't face their problem. Usually they think the problem is someone else or the situation. They either keep complaining or trying to fix the other person, or go from one relationship or job to another and never own up the fact that they have a problem. Codependents also deny their feelings and needs. Often, they don't know what they're feeling and are instead focused on what others are feeling. The same thing goes for their needs. They pay attention to other people's needs and not their own. They might be in denial of their need for space and autonomy. Although some codependents seem needy, others act like they're self-sufficient when it comes to needing help. They won't reach out and have trouble receiving. They are in denial of their vulnerability and need for love and intimacy.

Problems with intimacy. By this I'm not referring to sex, although sexual dysfunction often is a reflection of an intimacy problem. I'm talking about being open and close with someone in an intimate relationship. Because of the shame and weak boundaries, you might fear that you'll be judged, rejected, or left. On the other hand, you may fear being smothered in a relationship and losing your autonomy. You might deny your need for closeness and feel that your partner wants too much of your time; your partner complains that you're unavailable, but he or she is denying his or her need for separateness.

Painful emotions. Codependency creates stress and leads to painful emotions. Shame and low self-esteem create anxiety and fear about being judged, rejected or abandoned; making mistakes; being a

failure; feeling trapped by being close or being alone. The other symptoms lead to feelings of anger and resentment, [depression](#), hopelessness, and despair. When the feelings are too much, you can feel numb.

There is help for recovery and change for people who are codependent. The first step is getting guidance and support. These symptoms are deeply ingrained habits and difficult to identify and change on your own. Join a 12-Step program, such as Codependents Anonymous or seek counseling. Work on becoming more assertive and building your self-esteem.