

10 Things You Need to Know About Codependency

Codependency is often misunderstood. It's not just a label to slap on the spouse of every alcoholic. It encompasses a wide-range of behavior and thought patterns that cause people distress to varying degrees. I hope this article will help clear up some of the misconceptions about codependency and help you to understand codependency better.

1. **Codependency is a response to trauma.** You probably developed codependent traits starting in your childhood as a way to deal with an abusive, chaotic, dysfunctional, or codependent family. As a child in an overwhelming situation, you learned that keeping the peace, taking care of others, denying your feelings, and trying to control things were ways to survive and cope with a scary and out of control home life. For some people, the trauma was subtle, almost unnoticeable. Even if your childhood was fairly "normal", you may have experienced [generational trauma](#), meaning your parents or close relatives passed some of their trauma responses down to you.
2. **Codependency feels shameful.** The foremost shame researcher, [Brené Brown](#) defines shame as "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging." Children who grow up in dysfunctional families learn early on that there is something fundamentally wrong with them. Your parents may have explicitly told you this by calling you stupid or worthless or you might have gotten this message when your parents blamed you for their marital problems, addiction, or unemployment. We all know that there's still a huge stigma around addiction, abuse, and mental illness, so we're afraid to talk about having these problems ourselves or in our families. Shame grows when we can't tell people about our problems; we feel alone and inadequate as if these struggles are our fault and the direct result of our flaws. We come to believe that we're not as good as everyone else and this belief is reinforced further when people mistreat, reject, or abandon us.
3. **Codependency is an unhealthy focus on other people's problems, feelings, and needs.** Focusing on other people is a way to feel needed and to avoid or distract ourselves from our own pain. We become so focused on others that we lose ourselves in the process. Many codependents describe feeling addicted to another person; the relationship has an obsessive quality that's hard to quit even when you know it's unhealthy. Your self-worth and identity are

based on this relationship. You might ask yourself, “Who am I and what would I do without my spouse (or child or parent)?” This relationship gives you a sense of purpose without which, you’re not sure who you are. And your loved one needs you and depends on you to do things for them. You’re both dependent on each other in an unhealthy way (this is the “co” in codependent).

4. **Codependents are very sensitive to criticism.** Codependents tend to be a sensitive bunch. Our feelings are easily hurt; we’ve dealt with a lot of hurt, blame, and criticism in our lives. We do everything we can to avoid displeasing others. We’ll bend over backward to keep other people happy and divert attention away from ourselves. Sometimes we try to stay “small and quiet” so we don’t draw any attention to ourselves.
5. **Codependents are super responsible.** Codependents are the glue that keeps a family going. We make sure the rent gets paid, the kids get to baseball practice, and the windows are shut so the neighbors don’t hear the yelling. Most of us were very responsible children who, out of necessity, became responsible for taking care of parents, siblings, household chores, and school work without parental assistance. We find it easier to care for others than ourselves and we gain self-esteem from being responsible, dependable, and hard working. But we pay the price when we over extend ourselves, become workaholics, or grow resentful when we do more than our share.
6. **Codependents wall off their own feelings.** Avoiding painful feelings is another coping strategy that codependents often employ. However, we can’t wall off only the painful feelings; we end up disconnected from all our feelings, making it harder to fully enjoy life’s joys, as well. Even the painful and uncomfortable feelings give us important clues about what we need. For example, if your coworker takes credit for your work in an important meeting, it would be natural to feel hurt, disappointed, and/or angry. These feelings tell you that you’ve been mistreated, which isn’t OK, and then you can figure out how to deal with it. If you pretend or convince yourself that you’re not hurt or angry, you’ll continue to allow people to take credit for your work or mistreat you in other ways.
7. **Codependents don’t ask for what they need.** One of the offshoots of suppressing our feelings is that without attuning to and understanding our feelings, we don’t know what we need. And it’s impossible to meet your own needs or ask others to meet them when you don’t even know what they are. And because of our low self-esteem, we don’t feel worthy to ask our partner,

friends, or employer for what we need from. The reality is that everyone has needs and the right to ask for them to be met. Of course, asking doesn't guarantee that they'll be met, but it's much more likely when we ask assertively rather than staying passive (or waiting until we're full of rage).

8. **Codependents give, even when it hurts.** Caretaking and enabling are hallmarks of codependency. What makes it unhealthy is that codependents will put their time, energy, and money into helping or doing for others even when it causes them distress or hardship. This caring nature also makes us susceptible to being mistreated or taken advantage of. We struggle to set boundaries and need to strive for a balance between helping others and taking care of ourselves.
9. **Codependency isn't a mental health diagnosis.** Many people with codependency have clinical levels of anxiety, depression, and PTSD due to trauma and genetics, but codependency itself isn't a mental disorder. Also, remember that going to counseling or psychotherapy doesn't mean there is something wrong with you; you may feel empty and defective, but that doesn't mean you are!
10. **You can change your codependent patterns.** People can recover from codependency. I'm not going to lie and tell you it's easy, but I do know it's possible. Change is a gradual process that requires lots of practice and an openness to try new things and to feel a little uncomfortable in the process. You may find that professional therapy is very helpful in addition to self-help resources such as [books](#) or 12-step programs (Al-Anon, Adult Children of Alcoholics, and Codependents Anonymous are popular choices). **Codependency is not your fault, but you are the only one who can change it.**

I hope this article sheds light onto some of the aspects of codependency, reminds you that you're worthy of healthy love and relationships, and inspires you to move toward greater self-compassion and understanding.