

How Addiction Hurts Relationships

Do you tend to date people who are out of control—compulsive gamblers, overeaters, workaholics or substance abusers? Does your partner abuse you? Do you make excuses for your partner's irresponsible behavior related to his partying? If so, you may be in a codependent relationship.

Many people have a sense that their relationship is unhealthy, but do not fully understand why. They see that their partner has behavioral or emotional problems. However, they may not realize that they themselves suffer from a problem called *codependency*.

Definition of codependency

A codependent person is one who lets another person's behavior negatively affect her, who is preoccupied with controlling or fixing that person's behavior, and who is emotionally dependent on sources outside herself for feelings of self-esteem and self-worth.

Codependent persons often get into relationships with other codependents or with persons who have addictions. Codependent relationships are all dysfunctional to some degree, some more so than others. Frequently, codependents grow up in unhealthy families—wrought with alcoholism, drug addiction or physical, emotional or sexual abuse.

Not enough boundaries

Boundaries are our sense of ourselves in relation to others. They relate to our perception of how we are different and separate from others. They exist for our own identity development and for our protection against being abused by others. We need boundaries to get close to others while at the same time maintaining our sense of self. Boundaries are often underdeveloped, abused or confused in codependent people.

Codependents are caretakers and rescuers. They do so to feel good about themselves. They attempt to rescue others from their responsibilities. They become angry and hurt when the other person doesn't take responsibility for herself. This leads to feelings of helplessness, resentment and victimization. This is the destructive pattern in codependent relationships.

Example of a codependent relationship

Garrett and Shannon have been married for four years. They met in college at a fraternity party. They have two young children, mostly due to Shannon's insistence. Garrett is a salesman; Shannon quit her job to care for the children. Garrett spends three evenings a week out with his co-workers drinking and watching sports. He plays golf on weekends, where he drinks more. Even though Shannon is exhausted from

caring for their children alone, she suppresses her resentment toward Garrett to avoid arguments. After all, she is the one who chose to become a stay-at-home mom.

She is worried about Garrett's increasing alcohol consumption, his driving while intoxicated, and his decreasing ability to be at work due to hangovers. She is fearful that he will lose his job, so she calls into work for him and lies about the reason for his absences. She makes excuses to their family members about his absence at family events. She covers up for him when the children ask questions. She makes him promise he will cut back, and becomes furious when he does not. Shannon feels trapped: She is depressed, angry, hurt and scared.

This is only one example of how addictive disease damages relationships. When a person is chemically dependent and her partner is codependent, they both suffer negative consequences. If the codependent person lets go of the faulty belief that he is responsible for fixing his partner's problems, the relationship dynamic will change. The abuser may still not take responsibility for her own behaviors, but the codependent person can turn his energy toward taking responsibility for his own happiness, which may involve setting limits around his partner's behavior.

In other words, the codependent says: "If you don't change your behavior, I will continue to suffer pain from trying to change it for you." The healthy person says: "If you don't change your behavior, I will leave."

Addiction is a terrible disease—it is debilitating to the addict as well as to his loved ones. The best way to help someone with an addiction is to stop taking responsibility for him. Codependents must learn to love themselves as much as they love others. Treatment is often needed to break free of old patterns. If you need help with codependency, please seek professional help. The toll-free telephone number on this site is a good place to start.

Resources

Codependent No More by Melanie Beattie. Harper & Row, 1987.

Al-Anon (self-help groups)
www.al-anon.org

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