

## Symptoms of Codependency

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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 and 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 to 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.

## Recovery from Codependency

Codependency is often thought of as a relationship problem and considered by many to be a disease. In the past, it was applied to relationships with alcoholics and drug addicts. It is a relationship problem; however, the relationship that's the problem is not with someone else — it's the one with yourself. That is what gets reflected in your relationships with others.

Codependency underlies all addictions. The core symptom of "dependency" manifests as reliance on a person, substance, or process (i.e. activity, such as gambling or sex addiction). Instead of having a healthy relationship with yourself, you make something or someone else more important. Over time, your thoughts, feelings, and actions revolve around that other person, activity, or substance, and you increasingly abandon your relationship with yourself.

Recovery entails a 180-degree reversal of this pattern in order to reconnect with, honor, and act from your core self. Healing develops the following characteristics:

- Authenticity
- Autonomy
- Capability of being intimate
- Integrated and congruent values, thoughts, feelings, and actions

Change is not easy. It takes time and involves the following four steps:

**1) Abstinence.** Abstinence or sobriety is necessary to recover from codependency. The goal is to bring your attention back to yourself, to have an internal, rather than external, "locus of control." This means that your actions are primarily motivated by your values, needs, and feelings, not someone else's. You learn to meet those needs in healthy ways. Perfect abstinence or sobriety isn't necessary for progress, and it's impossible with respect to codependency with people. You need and depend upon others and therefore give and compromise in relationships. Instead of abstinence, you learn to detach and not control, people-please, or obsess about others. You become more self-directed and autonomous.

If you're involved with an abuser or addict or grew up as the child of one, you may be afraid to displease your partner, and it can require great courage to break that pattern of conceding our power to someone else.

**2) Awareness.** It's said that denial is the hallmark of addiction. This is true whether you're an alcoholic or in love with one. Not only do codependents deny their own addiction — whether to a drug, activity, or person — they deny their feelings, and especially their needs, particularly emotional needs for nurturing and real intimacy. You may have grown up in a

family where you weren't nurtured, your opinions and feelings weren't respected, and your emotional needs weren't adequately met. Over time, rather than risk rejection or criticism, you learned to ignore your needs and feelings and believed that you were wrong. Some decided to become self-sufficient or find comfort in sex, food, drugs, or work. All this leads to low self-esteem. To reverse these destructive habits, you first must become aware of them. The most damaging obstacle to self-esteem is negative self-talk. Most people aren't aware of their internal voices that push and criticize them — their "Pusher," "Perfectionist," and "Critic."

**3) Acceptance.** Healing essentially involves self-acceptance. This is not only a step, but a life-long journey. People come to therapy to change themselves, not realizing that the work is about accepting themselves. Ironically, before you can change, you have to accept the situation. As they say, "What you resist, persists." In recovery, more about yourself is revealed that requires acceptance, and life itself presents limitations and losses to accept. This is maturity. Accepting reality opens the doors of possibility. Change then happens. New ideas and energy emerge that previously stagnated from self-blame and fighting reality. For example, when you feel sad, lonely, or guilty, instead of making yourself feel worse, you have self-compassion, soothe yourself, and take steps to feel better. Self-acceptance means that you don't have to please everyone for fear that they won't like you. You honor your needs and unpleasant feelings and are forgiving of yourself and others. This goodwill toward yourself allows you to be self-reflective without being self-critical. Your self-esteem and confidence grow, and consequently, you don't allow others to abuse you or tell you what to do. Instead of manipulating, you become more authentic and assertive, and are capable of greater intimacy.

**4) Action.** Insight without action only gets you so far. In order to grow, self-awareness and self-acceptance must be accompanied by new behavior. This involves taking risks and venturing outside your comfort one. It may involve speaking up, trying something new, going somewhere alone, or setting a boundary. It also means setting internal boundaries by keeping commitments to yourself, or saying "no" to your Critic or other old habits you want to change. Instead of expecting others to meet all your needs and make you happy, you learn to take actions to meet them, and do things that give you fulfillment and satisfaction in your life. Each time you try out new behavior or take a risk, you learn something new about yourself and your feelings and needs. You're creating a stronger sense of yourself, as well as self-confidence and self-esteem. This builds upon itself in a positive feedback loop vs. the downward spiral of codependency, which creates more fear, depression, and low self-esteem.

Words are actions. They have power and reflect your self-esteem. Becoming assertive is a learning process and is perhaps the most powerful tool in recovery. Assertiveness requires that you know yourself and risk making that public. It entails setting limits. This is respecting and honoring yourself. You get to be the author of your life — what you'll do and not do and how people will treat you.<sup>2</sup>

The four A's are a roadmap. Learn all you can about recovery. Join a 12-step program and begin keeping a journal to know yourself better. Codependency for Dummies lays out a detailed recovery plan with self-discovery exercises, tips, and daily reminders. Your recovery must be your priority. Most important, be gentle with yourself on your journey.



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## Recovery Patterns of Codependence

	Codependents often...	In Recovery...
<b>Denial Patterns</b>	Have difficulty identifying what they are feeling	I am aware of my feelings and identify them, often in the moment. I know the difference between my thoughts and feelings.
	Minimize, alter, or deny how they truly feel.	I embrace my feelings; they are valid and important.
	Perceive themselves as completely unselfish and dedicated to the well-being of others	I know the difference between caring and caretaking. I recognize that caretaking others is often motivated by a need to benefit myself.
	Lack empathy for the feelings and needs of others.	I am able to feel compassion for another's feelings and needs.
	Label others with their negative traits.	I acknowledge that I may own the negative traits I often perceive in others.
	Think they can take care of themselves without any help from others.	I acknowledge that I sometimes need the help of others.
	Mask pain in various ways such as anger, humor, or isolation.	I am aware of my painful feelings and express them appropriately.
	Express negativity or aggression in indirect and passive ways.	I am able to express my feelings openly, directly, and calmly.
	Do not recognize the unavailability of those people to whom they are attracted.	I pursue intimate relationships only with others who want, and are able to engage in, healthy and loving relationships.
	<b>Low Self-esteem Patterns</b>	Codependents often...
Have difficulty making decisions.		I trust my ability to make effective decisions.
Judge what they think, say, or do harshly, as never good enough.		I accept myself as I am. I emphasize progress over perfection.
Are embarrassed to receive recognition, praise, or gifts.		I feel appropriately worthy of the recognition, praise, or gifts I receive.
Value others' approval of their thinking, feelings, and behavior over their own.		I value the opinions of those I trust, without needing to gain their approval. I have confidence in myself.
Do not perceive themselves as lovable or worthwhile persons.		I recognize myself as being a lovable and valuable person.
Seek recognition and praise to overcome feeling less than.		I seek my own approval first, and examine my motivations carefully when I seek approval from others.
Have difficulty admitting a mistake.		I continue to take my personal inventory, and when I am wrong, promptly admit it.

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<b>Low Self-esteem Patterns</b>	Need to appear to be right in the eyes of others and may even lie to look good.	I am honest with myself about my behaviors and motivations. I feel secure enough to admit mistakes to myself and others, and to hear their opinions without feeling threatened.
	Are unable to identify or ask for what they need and want.	I meet my own needs and wants when possible. I reach out for help when it's necessary and appropriate.
	Perceive themselves as superior to others.	I perceive myself as equal to others.
	Look to others to provide their sense of safety.	With the help of my Higher Power, I create safety in my life.
	Have difficulty getting started, meeting deadlines, and completing projects.	I avoid procrastination by meeting my responsibilities in a timely manner.
	Have trouble setting healthy priorities and boundaries.	I am able to establish and uphold healthy priorities and boundaries in my life.
<b>Compliance Patterns</b>	Codependents often...	In Recovery...
	Are extremely loyal, remaining in harmful situations too long.	I am committed to my safety and leave situations that feel unsafe or are inconsistent with my goals.
	Compromise their own values and integrity to avoid rejection or anger.	I am rooted in my own values, even if others don't agree or become angry.
	Put aside their own interests in order to do what others want.	I consider my interests and feelings when asked to participate in another's plans.
	Are hypervigilant regarding the feelings of others and take on those feelings.	I can separate my feelings from the feelings of others. I allow myself to experience my feelings and others to be responsible for their feelings.
	Are afraid to express their beliefs, opinions, and feelings when they differ from those of others.	I respect my own opinions and feelings and express them appropriately.
	Accept sexual attention when they want love.	My sexuality is grounded in genuine intimacy and connection. When I need to feel loved, I express my heart's desires. I do not settle for sex without love.
	Make decisions without regard to the consequences.	I ask my Higher Power for guidance, and consider possible consequences before I make decisions.
Give up their truth to gain the approval of others or to avoid change.	I stand in my truth and maintain my integrity, whether others approve or not, even if it means making difficult changes in my life.	

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	Codependents often...	In Recovery...
<b>Control Patterns</b>	Believe people are incapable of taking care of themselves.	I realize that, with rare exceptions, other adults are capable of managing their own lives.
	Attempt to convince others what to think, do, or feel.	I accept the thoughts, choices, and feelings of others, even though I may not be comfortable with them.
	Freely offer advice and direction without being asked.	I give advice only when asked.
	Become resentful when others decline their help or reject their advice.	I am content to see others take care of themselves.
	Lavish gifts and favors on those they want to influence.	I carefully and honestly contemplate my motivations when preparing to give a gift.
	Use sexual attention to gain approval and acceptance.	I embrace and celebrate my sexuality as evidence of my health and wholeness. I do not use it to gain the approval of others.
	Have to feel needed in order to have a relationship with others.	I develop relationships with others based on equality, intimacy, and balance.
	Demand that their needs be met by others.	I find and use resources that meet my needs without making demands on others. I ask for help when I need it, without expectation.
	Use charm and charisma to convince others of their capacity to be caring and compassionate.	I behave authentically with others, allowing my caring and compassionate qualities to emerge.
	Use blame and shame to exploit others emotionally.	I ask directly for what I want and need and trust the outcome to my Higher Power. I do not try to manipulate outcomes with blame or shame.
	Refuse to cooperate, compromise, or negotiate.	I cooperate, compromise, and negotiate with others in a way that honors my integrity.
	Adopt an attitude of indifference, helplessness, authority, or rage to manipulate outcomes.	I treat others with respect and consideration, and trust my Higher Power to meet my needs and desires.
	Use recovery jargon in an attempt to control the behavior of others.	I use my recovery for my own growth and not to manipulate or control others.
	Pretend to agree with others to get what they want.	My communication with others is authentic and truthful.

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**Recovery Patterns of Codependence**

	<b>Codependents often...</b>	<b>In Recovery...</b>
<b>Avoidance Patterns</b>	Act in ways that invite others to reject, shame, or express anger toward them.	I act in ways that encourage loving and healthy responses from others.
	Judge harshly what others think, say, or do.	I keep an open mind and accept others as they are.
	Avoid emotional, physical, or sexual intimacy as a way to maintain distance.	I engage in emotional, physical, or sexual intimacy when it is healthy and appropriate for me.
	Allow addictions to people, places, and things to distract them from achieving intimacy in relationships.	I practice my recovery to develop healthy and fulfilling relationships.
	Use indirect or evasive communication to avoid conflict or confrontation.	I use direct and straightforward communication to resolve conflicts and deal appropriately with confrontations.
	Diminish their capacity to have healthy relationships by declining to use the tools of recovery.	When I use the tools of recovery, I am able to develop and maintain healthy relationships of my choosing.
	Suppress their feelings or needs to avoid feeling vulnerable.	I embrace my own vulnerability by trusting and honoring my feelings and needs.
	Pull people toward them, but when others get close, push them away.	I welcome close relationships while maintaining healthy boundaries.
	Refuse to give up their self-will to avoid surrendering to a power greater than themselves.	I believe in and trust a power greater than myself. I willingly surrender my self-will to my Higher Power.
	Believe displays of emotion are a sign of weakness.	I honor my authentic emotions and share them when appropriate.
	Withhold expressions of appreciation.	I freely engage in expressions of appreciation toward others.

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