

## Unwinding Codependency

*Did you hear about the codependent who flunked geography? He couldn't distinguish any boundaries.*

*You're codependent for sure if, when you die, someone else's life flashes in front of your eyes.*

*Q. What does a codependent have in common with God?*

*A. They both have a plan for your life.*

### Codependency and Chocolate.

When I was in my late twenties, chocolate was like a magic wand. I was an emotional sponge and if my roommate was anxious, upset or angry, I'd be so uncomfortable I could barely stand to be in my own skin. I felt like I was going to die and thought that my survival depended on making *her* feel OK. I knew that she loved chocolate, so I'd make a run to the convenience store down the street and buy a bag of whatever they had. I never ate it myself. I just got it for her and it always did the trick. She calmed down and I felt better.

I was so disconnected from myself that I didn't realize that I was terrified. I didn't check in with myself to see what I needed. I just tried to "fix" her. It's hard to get more codependent than this.

A lot of codependent behavior isn't quite as obvious as this. Sometimes the line between healthy interdependence and not so healthy codependence is blurry. And even when codependent behavior is obvious to everyone else, denial can be a powerful force. I was in therapy for years before I realized that not only did I struggle with codependency in all of my significant relationships, I could be the poster child for Codependents Anonymous.

### Signs of Codependency

You may be codependent if you tend to:

- Feel an exaggerated sense of responsibility for or need to control other people's behavior
- Worry that people in your life would go downhill without your constant efforts
- "love" people you can pity and rescue
- Do more than your share, all of the time
- Feel hurt when people don't recognize your efforts
- Do anything to hold on to a relationship including keeping quiet to avoid arguments
- Are willing to do just about anything to keep someone from leaving you
- Have ever lived with someone with an alcohol or drug problem or who hit or belittled you
- Desperately need approval and recognition
- Feel guilty when you actually state your own thoughts or express your needs

- Struggle with trust issues, with either with yourself and/or others
- Have a hard time knowing what you are feeling or recognizing when you are angry, sad or scared.
- Have a hard time adjusting to change
- Feel like a "bad person" when you make a mistake or feel humiliation when your child or partner makes a mistake
- Have a hard time taking compliments or gifts
- Have a hard time recognizing or accepting someone else's boundaries
- Have a hard time recognizing your own boundaries
- Have a hard time making decisions
- Feel angry all the time (whether you express it by constantly blaming others, snapping or yelling at others, fighting with others, taking little pot shots at others or making snide or sarcastic remarks)
- Struggle with telling the truth
- Have a hard time expressing your thoughts and needs to others
- Spend a lot of time worrying about others' opinions of you
- Have trouble saying "no" when asked for help
- Have trouble asking for help

If you think you might struggle with codependency, the following questions will help you sort out whether or not you are in a codependent relationship\*.

1. Is this relationship more important to me than *I* am [to myself]?

Compromise and sacrifice are part of every relationship. If the relationship revolves around the other person or if you have to lose yourself to be in relationship with them, you've crossed a line from interdependent to codependent.

2. What price am I paying for being with this person?

What do you have to give up in order to maintain this relationship: friendships? hobbies and activities you are passionate about? free-time? money? a job promotion? a sense of who you are? beliefs and points of view? self-esteem?

3. Am I the only one putting energy into this relationship?

Is the other person meeting you half-way or are you doing all the work to make sure the relationship chugs along? If the other person is sick or unable to meet you half-way for some reason, do they appreciate your efforts and express a desire to put more energy into the relationship?

Given the fact that codependent behavior is built into our culture, it's likely that you are someone you know is codependent, at least in some relationships. If you happen to be a member of Club Codependency, be gentle with yourself. As hurtful as it can be (especially if it leads you to stay in an abusive relationship or to lose yourself), codependent behavior is just a strategy you unconsciously developed to manage anxiety and fear. And to some degree, it works. There's no quicker fix (that doesn't involve chemicals) for anxiety or fear than getting a sense of control. Codependent patterns

help you feel like you are in control (or that you would be in control if only the other person would cooperate). Another bonus is that as long as you are focusing your attention on someone else, you don't have to face your own painful feelings.

Unfortunately, the downsides can be serious. First and foremost, control doesn't work. People tend to get pissed off and defiant. *"You don't want me to drink more wine? I'll show you! I'll drink the whole damned bottle!"* Second, codependent patterns set you up to feel anger and resentment because in order to focus on someone else's needs, you have to abandon your own. If you don't acknowledge your needs, no one else is going to and your needs aren't going to get met. Third, because codependency as a strategy focuses on finding things outside of you to make you feel better, you are likely to resort to drinking alcohol, using drugs, gambling, engaging in risky sex, compulsive eating or compulsive shopping, or other addictive behaviors that ultimately get you into trouble. Fourth, your excessive caretaking of someone else may lead to their downfall. Many people don't recognize that their behavior is problematic until they face physical, emotional, relational, or financial consequences. If you rescue or enable them, they won't have to face any significant consequences until their behavior patterns are well entrenched and it's even more difficult for them to change their ways. Finally, it's hard to have an honest, authentic relationship with someone when you are vigilant about fixing them.

### **Help is available!**

If you are codependent, help is available. First off, it might be helpful to work through your issues with a trained therapist or mental health counselor – someone you feel comfortable with and who understands how to work with codependency. In addition, there are a number of useful books on the subject, including *Codependent No More* (Melodie Beattie), *Love is a Choice* (Robert Hemfelt, Frank Minirth and Paul Meier), and *Facing Codependence* (Pia Mellody). These will help you sort out your behavior and see if you need to seek further help. You might also check out a Codependency Anonymous (CoDA) meeting. You can find out more about CoDA and find local meetings on their website: <http://www.coda.org/index.php> .

\*This is a list of questions I found on WebMD

To ask Regina a question, propose a column topic, read about her approach to counseling, or check out her books and other writing, go to: [www.ReginaSewell.com](http://www.ReginaSewell.com) . You can read her blogs at [www.ReginaSewell.Wordpress.com](http://www.ReginaSewell.Wordpress.com), <http://visionscounseling.wordpress.com>, and <http://possumcrossing.wordpress.com>. Her most recent publication, *"Sliding Away"* can be found in **Knowing Pains: Women on Love, Sex and Work in Our 40s**, edited by Molly Rosen.