

EMOTIONAL WELLNESS MATTERS

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Emerging From Dysfunctional Childhood Experiences Can Lead to a Journey of Self-Discovery and Independence

The households we grew up in can have a powerful influence on the way we deal with life as an adult – often in ways that we never stop to think about. We simply keep on living, repeating the same mistakes and enduring the same conflicts over and over again. We may wonder why the same old patterns keep repeating themselves even when we change friendships, jobs and relationships. The answer may lie in a less-than-nurturing childhood characterized by neglect and other forms of abuse.

Codependence is recognized by the destructive behaviors, attitudes, and feelings which are directly linked to the way we were brought up. Families are described as dysfunctional when the needs of the parents are so overwhelming that the task of raising children is demoted to a secondary role in the life of the family. Codependence in adulthood emerges from these dysfunctional childhood experiences.

When children lack the adequate nurturance and loving guidance they need to function as independent adults, they experience a flawed or incomplete sense of themselves – a pattern which can last throughout one’s entire life. They are prone to enmeshment with a hazy sense of their own personal boundaries – they may not know where they leave off and the other person begins. They may have a need to make other people happy (a pattern they learned in dealing with their parents) and when they are not able to do this, they might feel “less than” other people. They probably see themselves as



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unselfish and compassionate, always there for others – but, lacking a clear sense of themselves, they may resort to the same techniques to get attention they learned in childhood. Thus, they may manipulate, control and try to change others in order to get their own needs met. When they give, it is with strings attached. Those suffering from codependence often are attracted to, and give to, people who show little real interest in them – the same pattern they experienced in childhood in dealing with an emotionally unavailable parent. Because they were not guided in childhood to learn more moderate expressions of emotion, they end up in adulthood on an emotional roller-coaster with moods ranging from extreme despair...to passive sweetness...to uncontrolled anger and anxiety...to nothing at all. Frustration comes easily and interpersonal conflicts are frequent. Their partners are blamed for not coming through at times when they should – the old themes of childhood play themselves out again.

Consider some of the typical characteristics of those who suffer from codependence issues.

Feelings of Self-Worth

People with healthy self-worth know who they are and have a good sense of liking themselves that they can draw on in the face of difficulty. They have a sense of stability within themselves that they can apply in their relationships. They are able to feel appropriate emotions such as compassion, love, anger, and anxiety, but their stable and solid sense of self-worth remains intact.

On the other hand, when we hear messages from our parents that tell us we are unworthy and will never amount to anything, we may begin to define ourselves in these terms. We may feel insecure within and rely, perhaps too heavily, on the opinions of others to determine who we are. Thus, we may come to define ourselves in terms of the clothes we wear, the house we live in, the job we hold, who our friends are, or the car we drive. If we rely too heavily on these externals, which are often beyond our control, we can plummet into a real crisis when, say, we lose a job or a friend. Without our external props, we are left with the old feelings from childhood that say that we are worthless. Sometimes people with self-worth problems try to compensate by believing that they are better than others. This situation can lead to arrogance and difficulty in maintaining healthy relationships.



Reality Testing

Those who grow up in healthy households are given a great deal of support in childhood for exploring the world around them. They are encouraged to know what they like and don't like. They are supported for exposing themselves to life's experiences and acquiring their own tools for dealing with the demands of adulthood.

A dysfunctional upbringing, in contrast, may lead to putting the needs of the parents above those of the child. The family may create myths about how wonderful the family is, even though an alcoholic father or an abusive mother may engender feelings of anger or even hatred in the child. This child is never allowed to express his or her true feelings, which must stay private and unspoken. Thus the child grows up in a state of confusion, where anger is love and love is anger. In their own relationships later in life, these people may harbor unrelenting anger toward the ones they love. They may have difficulty in knowing just what it is they feel. Similarly, when our reality is skewed by the household we grow up in, we may give faulty interpretations to events in our world. Or we may have a poor concept of our own bodies (for example, we may feel overweight when everyone else thinks we are too thin). Or we may have difficulty in judging the impact of our behavior on other people.

Boundaries

Healthy personal boundaries are one of our most adaptive tools for living around other people. They come from having a good sense of our self-worth and a healthy approach toward testing reality. Intact boundaries are flexible – they allow us to get close to others when it is appropriate and to maintain our distance when we might be harmed by getting too close. Good boundaries protect us from abuse and let us achieve true intimacy. They also allow us to separate our own thoughts and feelings from those of others and to take responsibility for what we think, feel and do.

Codependence is often characterized by either poor or nonexistent boundaries or, in contrast, impenetrable walls. A person with poor boundaries may have no sense of being abused by others, nor do they know when they may be abusing others. This person may not be aware of controlling or manipulating other people as a way of getting his or her own needs



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met. Similarly, they may insist on intimate relations when the other person has said no. Or they may blame the other person for their own feelings (as in, “You made me feel this way”). On the other hand, some people put up walls as a way of distancing themselves from others and protecting themselves. Walls lack the flexibility we need to maintain healthy relationships. We may have walls instead of healthy boundaries when we give off cues that we are constantly angry (“So don’t even try to get close!”) or fearful (never opening ourselves up to others). Walls are also seen in the person who talks constantly so that others are not allowed in and real intimacy is never achieved.

Moderate Behavior

One of the hallmarks of wellness is the ability to achieve moderation in our thoughts, feelings and behavior. When we have a stable core in our personalities we are able to weather life’s difficulties better when we don’t overreact. Children brought up in adaptive households learn to trust that they will be able to confront most problems either alone or with the support of others. They know that going to extremes will only serve to complicate their lives.

Those who grow up in dysfunctional families, on the other hand, can be heard only when they raise their voices or show through extreme behavior that their needs are not being met. They may hold in their feelings until the situation becomes so severe that they feel the need to engage in angry outbursts. Their behavior is usually found in extremes. If they are not totally involved with someone, they become detached and withdrawn. If they are not completely happy, they are in utter despair. This tendency toward extremes shows itself in all-or-nothing thinking (“If you are not my loyal friend at all times, you are my enemy and I will end the friendship”). Many people with codependent tendencies feel that they are not alive unless they are involved in a relationship (“I am nothing alone and it is only when I find love that I can come alive”). This tendency toward extremes can also result in alcoholism and other forms of substance abuse.

Embracing the Dysfunction — And Making Life Better

We never completely shed those things we learned in childhood, but we can learn new ways of dealing with ourselves and the world around us. It is probably not sufficient to look on codependence as an illness which can be cured. Rather, codependence is a way of living which comes from a dysfunctional background, a background over which we had no control as we grew up. There is no shame in being codependent, and there is no virtue in blaming those who created this condition. We are all products of the places, forces and experiences which preceded our present lives. Some people have easy

lives and others find living more difficult. This is simply the way of the world — and neither option is necessarily better. Those with difficult lives have the advantage of learning more adaptive ways of living, and in this sense they may be able to experience life more fully and completely. This can lead to integrity and wisdom.

The clue to coming to terms with codependence is to become aware of your own history, your life, your relationships, your needs and feelings. Embrace the dysfunction in your background and accept your codependence. Become an expert on how your history influences the life you live today. You can learn methods of living more as a healthy, independent person with integrity – and to spend less time in the old codependent mode. You are invited to make an appointment to start this wonderful life journey.

The Changing Definition of Codependence

The definition of codependence has changed over the years. It used to be seen as a situation in which the partner of a person who abused alcohol had an overt agenda to get their partner to stop drinking but a covert agenda for the drinking to continue. The codependence symptoms were seen as an outgrowth of living with the alcohol abuser. Over time, however, it was noticed that when the person stopped drinking, the codependent’s behaviors continued or even escalated. A pattern was then identified in which codependency was seen as the product of a dysfunctional background. Codependents have certain identifiable patterns which are independent of being in a relationship with a drug or alcohol abuser.

Recommended Resources



In conjunction with individual psychotherapy, some people may find it useful to look into joining a Codependents Anonymous (CoDA) group, a twelve-step recovery program based on the Alcoholics Anonymous model.

THE BACK PAGE

A CODEPENDENCE CHECKLIST

- My self-worth soars when I can solve other people's problems
- I put the needs of others in front of my own
- I seldom say "no," and when I do I feel guilty
- I don't see myself as worthwhile and lovable
- I feel like I'm different from others
- I feel either less than or better than other people
- I have trouble having fun unless I drink or get high
- It's difficult to be alone without being busy
- I'm not romantically attracted to people who are nice to me
- It's hard to get close to people and to trust them
- I feel incomplete if I'm not in a relationship
- I feel uncomfortable when people compliment me
- I procrastinate a lot because I need to do things perfectly
- I feel lonely even when I'm with other people
- My relationships never seem to work out well
- My feelings are easily hurt when I'm criticized or rejected
- I am my own worst critic – I seldom live up to my own expectations
- I judge people in two categories: right or wrong, good or bad
- I find it difficult to ask for help
- I can't seem to find a good balance between working and having fun
- I fear being out of control
- I resent people who won't let me help them
- I compromise my own values so that I can be accepted by others
- I always come through for other people, even when I don't want to
- I usually don't let people know if I'm angry
- If my partner would change, my problems would be solved
- Sometimes my anger is out of proportion to what is happening
- I feel that I am responsible for how other people feel
- I keep my feelings to myself because of how others might react
- I often pretend that things are fine, even when they're not

If you checked 15 or more of the above statements, you may want to make an appointment to talk about the process of coming to terms with some codependent patterns in your life. This can be the first step on the road to self-discovery and independence.

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