

# WHAT IS CODEPENDENCY?

Once attended a church where we prayed repeatedly for a family with an alcoholic father and husband. We rejoiced when the man turned from his drinking and got involved in the church, but our joy was short lived because his wife soon plunged into depression. Maybe it was her despondency that started the husband drinking again, but as soon as he hit the bottle, she sprang back from her depression.

What was going on? This woman was distressed by her husband's drinking, but when he stopped and resumed his normal roles in the family, she had no purpose in life and no one to control or care for, so she got depressed. It appeared that she could only stay free of depression if she had a husband or another family member weighed down with a problem and in need of her care. Counselors would say that this woman had a codependency problem. *Codependency* refers to the behavior of two people who are so dependent on each other that one person has a strong need to control, care for, or manipulate the other. In turn, the other person—who often has a problem like alcoholism, physical illness, insecurity, anxiety, or some other need—remains dependent and controlled, even though he or she might complain about this.

## How Do You Know If You're Codependent?

We have already mentioned several codependency traits. These include:

- *Control.* Alcoholics, for example, are controlled by alcohol, but their family members also live under the constant shadow, and hence the control, of the problem drinker's alcoholism. These family members often are deeply affected by the drinker's lifestyle and try continually to control the drinking and its impact on their own lives.
- *Manipulation.* Codependent people often are the products of manipulation, anger, and abuse. In response, they tend to manipulate others, often using anger, self-pity, and criticism to get what they want.
- *Caretaking.* When we see people in need, most of us are inclined to give help and show compassion. But for codependent individuals, caretaking becomes a way of life.
- *Low self-esteem and a desire to be people pleasers and rescuers.* These give the codependent person temporary feelings of self-worth, respect, usefulness, and sometimes power over others.
- *Other characteristics.* Often codependents become obsessed with the needs of others, dependent on the people they try to help, unable to tolerate change, and filled with resentment, guilt, and loneliness.

## Doing Something About It

Codependency usually takes a long time to build and recovery can be slow. Most often it includes some or all of the following.

- *Clarification.* Since codependency tends to destroy objectivity and clear perception, we need the help and objective perspectives of others to spot codependent behaviors, feelings, thoughts, words, and actions in ourselves.
- *Detachment.* Since codependent people are overly attached to others, they need to detach. This means to mentally, emotionally, and sometimes physically disengage themselves from unhealthy entanglements with another person's life and from problems they cannot solve. Detachment involves accepting the sometimes painful fact that people are responsible for their own problems, that we can't solve problems that aren't ours, and that worrying doesn't help. Often detachment means leaving the problems of others in the hands of God, who alone knows what to do and is able to intervene.
- *Responsibility.* The codependent person can learn to take responsibility for making his or her own decisions, can set goals and seek to reach them, can set limits on the controlling demands of others, and can abandon the constant efforts to control others—especially since attempts to control rarely succeed.
- *Community.* Lasting help comes when we have encouraging and caring friends with whom we can be honest and who model healthy living that is not entrapped by codependency. Sometimes a counselor provides that help; often the help is found in the local church, where believers can love and build up one another.

## Conclusion

Jesus left us instructions to love one another (John 13:34-35), and his whole life modeled compassion for and sensitivity to the needs of others. The epistles encourage caring and urge us not to be weary in doing good (Gal. 6:9). Clearly, caring, self-denying behaviors are Christ-honoring and biblical, but codependency is not. Unlike codependent caring, the compassion that Scripture urges is not characterized by manipulation, dependency on people in need, efforts to control others, or striving for approval. The Christian finds his or her identity in being loved, accepted, forgiven, and redeemed by Jesus Christ, not in compulsive, all-encompassing caregiving activity. Our actions should be compelled by the love of Christ and not by attempts to prove ourselves (2 Cor. 5:12-14). Codependent controlling and caring are neither biblical nor healthy. ♦



## Are You Codependent?

Check the statements from the following list that fit your life.

1. \_\_\_\_ I can't stand to be alone.
2. \_\_\_\_ I am a perfectionist.
3. \_\_\_\_ I am driven by the approval of others.
4. \_\_\_\_ I feel desperate when I cannot gain the approval of other people.
5. \_\_\_\_ I find myself making decisions based on how they will affect other people and rarely consider myself.
6. \_\_\_\_ Many times I feel obsessed by a need for total order in my life.
7. \_\_\_\_ I put work first, above anything.
8. \_\_\_\_ I find myself adjusting to my spouse's needs rather than communicating my feelings.
9. \_\_\_\_ I do not experience anger.
10. \_\_\_\_ I overeat often.
11. \_\_\_\_ I am constantly wondering what other people think of me.
12. \_\_\_\_ I cover up my feelings so others won't realize what I really think.
13. \_\_\_\_ I am afraid that if others really knew me they would run and hide.
14. \_\_\_\_ I am constantly trying to figure how to stay ahead in my relationships.
15. \_\_\_\_ I cover up my feelings of self-doubt with drug or alcohol use.
16. \_\_\_\_ I can't say no when I am asked to do a favor or serve on a committee.
17. \_\_\_\_ When I begin to feel sad or angry I go shopping, work harder, or eat.
18. \_\_\_\_ I tell myself it shouldn't hurt so much when others let me down.
19. \_\_\_\_ I need to control those close to me.
20. \_\_\_\_ I need everyone to be happy with me so that I can feel good about myself.
21. \_\_\_\_ I need others to be strong for me without requiring anything from me in return.



# **THE TEN TRAITS OF A CODEPENDENT**

1. The codependent is driven by one or more compulsions.
2. The codependent is bound and often tormented by the way things were in the dysfunctional family of origin.
3. The codependent's self-esteem (and, frequently, maturity) is very low.
4. A codependent is certain his or her happiness hinges on others.
5. Conversely, a codependent feels inordinately responsible for others.
6. The codependent's relationship with a spouse or Significant Other Person (SOP) is marred by a damaging, unstable lack of balance between dependence and independence.
7. The codependent is a master of denial and repression.
8. The codependent worries about things he or she can't change and may well try to change them.
9. A codependent's life is punctuated by extremes.
10. A codependent is constantly looking for the something that is missing or lacking in life.



# **FRIEL CO-DEPENDENCY ASSESSMENT INVENTORY**

**INSTRUCTIONS:** Below are a number of questions dealing with how you feel about yourself, your life and those around you. Be certain to answer honestly, but do not spend too much time dwelling on any one question. There are no right or wrong answers. Take each question as it comes and respond as you usually feel.

1. I make enough time to do things just for myself each week. T F
2. I spend lots of time criticizing myself after an interaction with someone. T F
3. I would not be embarrassed if people knew certain things about me. T F
4. Sometimes I feel I just waste a lot of time and don't get anywhere. T F
5. I take good enough care of myself. T F
6. It is usually best not to tell someone they bother you; it only causes fights and gets everyone upset. T F
7. I am happy about the way my family communicated when I was growing up. T F
8. Sometimes I don't know how I really feel. T F
9. I am very satisfied with my intimate love life. T F
10. I've been feeling tired lately. T F
11. When I was growing up, my family liked to talk openly about problems. T F
12. I often look happy when I am sad or angry. T F
13. I am satisfied with the number and kind of relationships I have in life. T F
14. Even if I had the time and money to do it, I would feel uncomfortable taking a vacation by myself. T F
15. I have enough help with everything that must be done each day. T F
16. I wish that I could accomplish a lot more than I do now. T F
17. My family taught me to express feelings and affections openly when I was growing up. T F
18. It is hard for me to talk with someone in authority ( boss, teachers, etc.). T F
19. When I am in a relationship that becomes too confusing and complicated, I have no trouble getting out of it. T F



20. I sometimes feel pretty confused about who I am and where I want to go with my life. T F
21. I am satisfied with the way that I take care of my own needs. T F
22. I am not satisfied with my career. T F
23. I usually handle my problems calmly and directly. T F
24. I hold back my feelings much of the time because I don't want to hurt other people or have them think less of me. T F
25. I don't feel like I'm "in a rut" very often. T F
26. I am not satisfied with my friendships. T F
27. When someone hurts my feelings or does something that I don't like, I have little difficulty telling them about it. T F
28. When a close friend or relative asks for my help more than I'd like, I usually say "yes" anyway. T F
29. I love to face new problems and am good at finding solutions to them. T F
30. I do not feel good about my childhood. T F
31. I am not concerned about my health a lot. T F
32. I often feel like no one really knows me. T F
33. I feel calm and peaceful most of the time. T F
34. I find it difficult to ask for what I want. T F
35. I don't let people take advantage of me more than I'd like. T F
36. I am dissatisfied with at least one of my close relationships. T F
37. I make major decisions quite easily. T F
38. I don't trust myself in new situations as much as I'd like. T F
39. I am very good at knowing when to speak up and when to go along with others' wishes. T F
40. I wish I had more time away from my work. T F
41. I am as spontaneous as I'd like to be. T F
42. Being alone is a problem for me. T F
43. When someone I love is bothering me, I have no problem telling them so. T F
44. I often have so many things going on at once that I'm really not doing justice to



any one of them. T F

45. I am very comfortable letting others into my life and revealing "the real me" to them. T F

46. I apologize to others too much for what I do or say. T F

47. I have no problem telling people when I am angry with them. T F

48. There's so much to do and not enough time. Sometimes I'd like to leave it all behind me. T F

49. I have few regrets about what I have done with my life. T F

50. I tend to think of others more than I do myself. T F

51. More often than not, my life has gone the way that I wanted it to. T F

52. People admire me because I'm so understanding of others, even when they do something that annoys me. T F

53. I am comfortable with my own sexuality. T F

54. I sometimes feel embarrassed by behaviors of those close to me. T F

55. The important people in my life know "the real me," and I am okay with them knowing. T F

56. I do my share of work, and often do quite a bit more. T F

57. I do not feel that everything would fall apart without my efforts and attention. T F

58. I do too much for other people and then later wonder why I did so. T F

59. I am happy about the way my family coped with problems when I was growing up. T F

60. I wish that I had more people to do things with. T F

**TOTAL SCORE:**

**10 TO 20: MILD**

**21 TO 30: MILD/MODERATE**

**31 TO 45: MODERATE-SEVERE**

**46 to 60: SEVERE**



## **OVERCOMING THE SINS OF CODEPENDENCY**

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"Dysfunctional family" and "codependency" are labels with which most of us have become comfortable. The psychology of our day has created these labels to represent a collective group of character traits from which many suffer. The pain the codependent feels is real. The family setting which caused the pain is real, also. There are many books available which can help the codependent to understand his/her problem. Counselors and support groups are invaluable in the healing process. The ultimate counselor for Christians is the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We are so fortunate to know that as we confess our sins God will forgive them and provide His grace to overcome their reoccurrence in our lives. When the sins of the codependent, created through the childhood family system, are confessed, God's grace and love can become a stronger ally during recovery. Strongholds of erroneous thinking and habits of self-hatred can be broken to allow new, healthy growth.

The following is a description of some common patterns of sin found in codependency. Review them. Discuss them with your Christian counselor. Pray for forgiveness, preferably with your counselor, priest or pastor. Trust that through this act of humility God will strengthen you.

**INAPPROPRIATE RESPONSIBILITY:** Becoming the source of other people's happiness is not only futile, it is God's job. By taking on this responsibility you are taking on burdens that are not yours to carry. You may even be getting in God's way of working in another's life.

**IDOLATRY:** The brokenness in codependency is not from God. It creates a sort of worship of people which is sinful. This kind of idolatry seeks to get from man that which is God's to give. The idolatry of codependency causes a reliance on imperfect individuals rather than on the help and guidance of God.

**DENIAL OF GOD'S POWER:** Similar to idolatry, is the sin of denying God's ability, desire and power to help and protect. Hopelessness, which denies God, keeps the codependent stuck in a void.

**PROMISCUITY:** When the codependent uses sexual relationships to try to fill emotional needs, the problems become worse. Emotional devastation increases. In addition, promiscuity involves using another human being for one's own unhealthy emotional gratification.

**SELF-HATRED:** This sin can be subtle. It denies God's life within you and denies His promises that your life can be fulfilling and lovely. The subtlety of self-hatred is that it can be masked as humility. This humility is false.



**SELF-PITY:** Whenever the word "self" is involved, beware. No matter what we tell ourselves, self-pity is sin. It is grounded in pride and selfishness, a desire to have our own way. Self-pity creates a victim mentality which Satan loves. If you are a victim, you have no choice, no responsibility, no hope. When self-pity is allowed to remain, God often gets the blame for problems which He did not create. This is one way in which Satan encourages a wedge between you and your Creator.

**DENIAL OF THE TRUTH:** Codependents will generally make excuses for those who hurt and abuse them. They may enable those who abuse alcohol, drugs or have other addictions. This sin will perpetuate the lies of the relationship and prevent God's healing. Scripture teaches clearly that facing the truth is what sets us free. Denying a painful reality helps no one.

**FANTASY THINKING:** Imagination, hope for the future and having a vision for our lives is not synonymous with fantasy thinking. Fantasy thinking says that life as God created it isn't good enough. Fantasy thinking is fairy tales, in which the hero(ine) doesn't have to work. Fantasy thinking is wanting someone else to be responsible. Fantasy thinking perpetuates victimhood.

**REBELLION:** Codependency is incubated in an environment where those in authority abuse that authority. The abusers must answer to God for their own actions. The codependent must confess any areas in which they are or have been rebellious towards authority. It will take practice to learn to recognize the difference between submitting to rightful authority and giving in to an abuser. The sin of rebellion needs to be confessed and its hold broken so that true strength and discernment can become its replacement.

**DISHONESTY:** I'm not referring to theft, but largely to the dishonesty of hiding the truth of one's own emotions. When you feel angry, admit it. Confess that you have been dishonest with yourself, with others and with God about the pain in your life.

Codependents carry deep, painful scars. They can be generous, sensitive and merciful. With God's help, the assistance of a good, Christian counselor and bravely facing the truth, the character structures of codependency can be transformed. The result will be a healed and compassionate heart with greater capability for loving God and others.

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