



COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

How to Deal with Co-Dependency & “Control Freaks”

“When a person attempts to control someone else’s life, it only reflects the lack of control they have on their own.” ~Daniel Chidiac

The definition of co-dependency is simple enough: having emotional or psychological reliance on others. Recognizing co-dependency, however, can be far more difficult, despite the fact that it is all around us. We physically, emotionally, and mentally need relationships in order to survive. The importance of relationships is what drove us to develop language around 100,000 years ago. Healthy inter-dependence is what keeps our existence as humans going. Often times, when something is that important, we subconsciously fear losing it. It’s no surprise that for some, the importance of relationships with others triggers a fear of loss. That fear, unfortunately, can drive the belief that we have to control those relationships. When we are in situations that trigger anxiety or low self-esteem, we are particularly vulnerable to feel the need to control the people or circumstances around us.

Those of us who feel anxious or fearful usually have painful, incessant mental chatter that we want to sooth. When our inner critic is constantly torturing us, and we worry about everything “under the sun” (What will people think? How is this going to work? Will it be good enough?), we look outside ourselves to find a scapegoat for our discomfort. That scapegoat takes the form of the people around us and the circumstances we find ourselves in. Rather than confronting what is going on “within” us, such as the mental chatter, we look outside ourselves and blame whatever is going on around us for our discomfort, making ourselves believe that the temper tantrum our child is throwing or the unprofessional behavior of opposing counsel is the cause of our discomfort. If we weren’t already upset in some way, however, we would have different reactions to those external incidents. We would have compassion for the other parties’ discomfort, for example, rather than be irritated by it.

Incidentally, narcissism, perfectionism and co-dependency share several traits, including: believing that if we can control the environment or people around us, we will feel better; believing it’s “all about appearances” rather than substance; having a low tolerance for uncomfortable emotions; and feeling a compulsion either to do everything ourselves or to criticize those we delegate tasks to because they didn’t do it the “right” way.

Research suggests that what triggers perfectionism, stress, anxiety, and the subsequent co-dependent behavior is uncertainty. In general, we all deal with uncertainty in life on a

regular basis, but those of us who practice law face uncertainty on a daily basis: will the client pay us? Will the client grieve us? How will the judge rule or the jury decide? The list of unknowns goes on and on, and regardless of how well we know the law or how experienced we are, things might not “go our way.” That uncertainty, combined with the uncertainty of many factors in our personal life, makes us very susceptible to engaging in co-dependent behaviors. For example, chances are you can identify with at least one of the following co-dependent behaviors.

Do you or someone you know:

- Get upset when someone refuses your help?
- Give advice or your opinion without being asked for it?
- Feel resentful because (or wonder why) the people you take care of aren't returning the favor?
- Say or think “Why do I have to do everything?”
- Spend time taking care of other people's problems despite lacking the energy to do so?
- Take care of other adults who can't seem to take care of themselves while neglecting your own needs?
- Do more than is expected in order to gain approval or kudos?
- Because “their” mood dictates your mood, you try to control “their” mood by cracking jokes, patronizing them, complimenting them, or any other strategy to change their mood?
- Allow your mood to depend on how other people are responding to you or on what other people are doing around you?
- Offer time, intellect, or emotional support out of fear of the alternative outcome? (abandonment, getting fired, rejection, failure, etc.)

Simply stated, codependency is the need to control the external world in the hopes that it will change how we feel internally. That can mean that we try to change the people or the circumstances in order to feel better about ourselves. The practice of law itself is often about trying to change external circumstances so our clients, or society, feels better about the situation, which is why the law is systematically codependent in nature. After all, how many clients think that attorney's have “magic wands” that can make everything better for them? For some clients, even when you have won the case, they might still not be happy with the outcome. That is because the problem was never about the case, but rather that the client has an addiction to feeling angry, betrayed, or being a victim, and nothing you can do will

change that. It is especially important for attorneys to remember that we don't have magic wands, and we can't change how another person feels or what they think about us.

When we engage in co-dependent behavior, we become resentful of those around us because either they aren't doing what we want them to do, or we sacrifice our own well-being in order to win their approval, subconsciously believing that if they approve of us, they won't ever leave us. Either way, the relationships suffer and interactions are based on unhealthy dynamics: passive aggression, aggression, manipulation, suspicion, judgement, controlling, etc. The goal is to form healthy, inter-dependent relationships with others.

If we've had a lifetime of either being co-dependent, or being around others who are, changing our approach to relationships might take some time. One of the easiest ways to start developing inter-dependent rather than co-dependent tendencies in relationships is to live by the following mottos:

1. ***“What you think about me is none of my business.”*** When we stop caring what other people think about us, and we stop allowing other people's moods or behaviors to affect the way we feel about ourselves, we won't feel the compulsion to try to control other people, nor will we try to bend over backwards for people in order to win their approval.
2. ***“If someone wants my help or advice, they will ask me.”*** When we are used to co-dependent behavior, we believe that we have to do things for the people around us because they aren't capable of doing things themselves. Often, this plays out by pointing out problems that we see and then offering solutions to the problems we have just identified for the other person. This is an occupational hazard for attorneys since we solve problems for people on a daily basis. There is, however, a difference between being paid to solve a problem for someone, and offering unsolicited advice to friends, loved ones, or even strangers because we want to control the environment or people around us. When we stop trying to “fix” everyone around us, or do things for others because we believe we do them “better,” we can create relationships built on equality and a healthy exchange of give and take.
3. ***“Just because I did something nice for someone doesn't mean they have to do something nice for me.”*** Co-dependency looks a lot like “tit-for-tat” mentality. If you decide to help someone, or to do something kind for another person, do not expect anything in return. Or, if you do expect something in return, be sure to let the other person know that your gift comes with “strings” so they can decide whether or not they want to accept it in the first place. This way, you won't feel resentful down the road for your efforts when they aren't returned.

4. ***“I am not a victim.”*** Oftentimes, those of us who engage in co-dependent behaviors end up sacrificing much of our well-being in order to take care of everyone around us. Unfortunately, this can leave us feeling like a victim because no one is taking care of us the way we take care of them. If an adult cannot take care of themselves, or figure out how to be successful in life, they don’t have the capacity to “return the favor” after we direct or help them. Therefore, it should be no surprise when the people who have become reliant on us can’t help us when we might need it.
5. ***“Let them fall down if they need to.”*** When a baby is learning to walk, he or she will fall down on occasion. If, however, we pick up the baby every time they are about to fall because it’s too painful for us to imagine them in pain, our children would never learn to walk. Likewise, when adults we know sabotage their lives or go through hard times, there is only a certain level of assistance we should be providing to them. If someone is perpetually creating drama in their life, for example, we are only enabling that behavior if we provide the metaphorical crutch for them to lean on over and over again. Be there for your friends and family as a compassionate and positive influence, but don’t take over their lives for them. They won’t thank you in the long run because they need to learn to “walk” on their own.
6. ***“I am choosing to be co-dependent.”*** The truth is, there are times when other people’s choices or behaviors affect us, and it is simply easier for us in the long run to intervene. For example, your roommate or spouse is in charge of the bills, but he or she didn’t pay the mortgage or rent this month. If you don’t pay it, you will have to pay the late fee. While this is still a form of enabling and co-dependency, we make things psychologically easier on ourselves if we are willing to acknowledge it to ourselves. Whether it is at work, with our friends, or at home with our family, we will at some point engage in these type of rescue missions for others because it affects our own well-being. It is like choosing “the lesser of two evils,” so don’t be hard on yourself if you find yourself doing this once in a while. If, however, you do this often, then you are probably trying to metaphorically “rule the world,” and you need to examine the compulsion to control the people or circumstances around you.

When you spot codependent behavior in yourself or in others, repeat the seven mottos above and work towards inter-dependence. There are many articles about co-dependency and how to create healthier relationships. If you would like more information about the topic, check out some of these links:

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/terry-gaspard-msw-licsw/overcoming-codependency_b_4179666.html

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/fearless-you/201410/need-y-5-tips-stop-codependent-people-pleasing>

<http://psychcentral.com/lib/being-good-vs-being-codependent/>

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ross-a-rosenberg/codependents-also-hurt-th_b_9775098.html

By Sarah Myers, JD, LMFT, LAC
Clinical Director, Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program
June 2016
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