



Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program

Know Someone Who Is Co-Dependent?

“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.

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 even when you are exhausted?
- Take care of other adults who can’t seem to take care of themselves while neglecting your own needs?
- Do more than is expected of you 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 your time, intellect, or emotional support because you are afraid of the alternative outcome? (you’ll be abandoned, get fired, be rejected, “fail,” etc.)

When we behave in co-dependent ways, we either try to change other people's decisions, behaviors, or even language ("don't say that") or we change our own decisions, behaviors, or language in order to manipulate other opinions of us. When we try to change others, we might give advice without being asked for it, and get upset when people don't do what we want them to do. When we change ourselves in order to gain the approval of others, we might regularly do more than is expected of us, help others even when we are exhausted, and jeopardize our own well-being in order to help others who don't take care of themselves. Either way, the relationships suffer and interactions are based on unhealthy dynamics: passive aggression, aggression, manipulation, suspicion, judgment, 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 law students since you are learning how to problem solve legal issues for your clients. 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 school, with your friends, or at home with your family, you will at some point engage in these type of rescue missions for others because it affects your own well-being. It is like choosing “the lesser of two evils,” so don’t be hard on yourself if you find you are 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.

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/needy-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

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