

What Is Co-dependency?

The term **co-dependency**, also known as "relationship addiction," started as a way to define the relationship of people who lived with alcoholics or substance abusers. This definition has expanded to include any person who is not in a healthy, mutually satisfactory relationship.

There are many definitions of **co-dependency**, but the most common definition describes *an individual who has learned a set of maladaptive, compulsive behaviours in order to survive in a family which is experiencing great emotional pain and stress.*

Maladaptive refers to a person's inability to develop behaviours that get his/her needs met. *Compulsive* describes the individual's psychological state when acting against his/her own will or conscious desires in order to behave.

Sources of great emotional pain and stress for a family can include, but are not limited to:

- divorce
- hypercritical or non-loving environment
- lack of emotional validation
- military deployment
- chemical dependency
- chronic mental illness
- chronic physical illness
- physical abuse
- sexual abuse
- emotional abuse

People with co-dependency tend to seek or maintain relationships which are one-sided, and emotionally destructive or abusive. Co-dependent individuals usually exhibit low self-esteem and look for ways to "feel better," outside of themselves, in ways that are not always healthy, such as substance abuse.

What Causes Codependency?

A widely accepted belief is that co-dependency is caused by familial relationships that hamper the development of healthy relationships. Some rules, spoken or unspoken, within these families may include:

- It's not okay to talk about problems or feelings. Feelings should be kept to yourself.
- Open communication is not encouraged; messengers between two people are best (also known as triangulation).
- Be strong/good/right/perfect and make us proud beyond a realistic expectation.
- Don't be selfish.
- Do as I say, not as I do.
- It's not okay to be playful.
- Don't rock the boat.
- Act for the "greater good" of the family.

Characteristics of Co-dependent Individuals:

There are certain characteristics that a co-dependent person may exhibit. These fall into groupings of characteristics that include, low self-esteem, denial, compliance, control and avoidance.

Patterns of Low Self-Esteem in Co-dependents:

- Do not see oneself as "loveable" or "worthwhile."
- Seek recognition the individual feels he or she deserves
- Have trouble admitting mistakes.
- Uses others as gauge of safety.
- Need to appear right in the eyes of other people - even going as far as lying to look good.
- Inability to ask others to meet needs or desires.
- Difficulty starting, meeting deadlines, or finishing projects
- Difficulties setting healthy priorities.
- Trouble with decision-making
- Judging own thoughts and actions harshly, or "not good enough."
- Embarrassed by gifts, praise or recognition
- Places higher value upon the way others approve of thoughts, feelings, and behaviour.

Patterns of Denial in Co-dependents:

- Great difficulty identifying true feelings
- Refusal to recognize unavailability of the people one is attracted to.
- Going so far as to alter - or deny - the way the individual truly feels.
- Lack empathy for feelings and needs of other people.
- Label others with own negative traits and qualities
- Perception of self as unselfish and dedicated toward well-being of other people.
- Belief that he/she can care for self WITHOUT help from others.
- Mask pain with indirect ways, such as anger, humour or isolation.
- Negativity or aggression is expressed indirectly or passively.

Patterns of Controlling Behaviours in Co-dependents:

- Strong-held belief that most people are unable to care for themselves.
- Lavishes gifts and favours upon those who he or she wants to influence
- Attempts to convince others what to do, think, or feel.
- Offer advice and direction without being asked, and become resentful when others don't follow the given advice or direction.
- Uses sexual attention for approval and/or acceptance
- Need to be needed to have a relationship with another person.
- Demanding that needs be met by others.
- Uses blame and shame to emotionally exploit others.
- Displays charm and charisma to assure others of his or her capacity to be compassionate and caring.

Emotional Resilience

BE AGILE, ADAPTABLE AND PERFORM AT YOUR BEST

- Refuses to cooperate, negotiate, or compromise with others.
- Adopts attitudes of helplessness, authority, indifference, or rage to manipulate the outcomes of a situation.
- Uses terms of recovery in an attempt to control behaviours of others.
- Pretends to agree with others to get what he or she desires.

Patterns of Compliance in Co-dependents:

- Is extremely loyal, remains in harmful, unhealthy situations for far too long.
- Compromises values and integrity in hopes of avoiding rejection and/or anger.
- Puts aside own interests to do what others want.
- Hyper-vigilant about the feelings of others - may take on those feelings.
- Fearful to express beliefs, opinions, and feelings IF they differ from others.
- When looking for love, will accept sexual attention instead.
- Makes decisions without regard for consequences.
- Give up own truth to gain approval of others as well as to avoid change.

Patterns of Avoidance in Co-dependents:

- Act in manner that invites others to shame, reject or express feelings of anger toward the individual.
- Harsh judge of what others think, say or do.
- Avoids emotional, physical, or sexual intimacy to maintain distance.
- Suppresses feelings or needs to avoid feeling vulnerable.
- Pulls people toward him or her, then pushes them away when they get "too close."
- Withholds expressions of appreciation
- Believes displays of emotions are signs of weakness.
- Allows addictions to people, places, and things to distract him or her from actual intimacy in relationships.
- Uses indirect or evasive patterns of communication to avoid conflicts or confrontations.

Signs and Symptoms of Co-dependency:

Co-dependent behaviours are often self-destructive.

Co-dependent individuals react to people who are destroying themselves, with the erroneous belief that they are helping them. However, these co-dependent individuals are putting themselves in relationships that are toxic and dysfunctional. It is impossible for a co-dependent person to find inner peace or happiness within themselves because all of their energy is put towards fuelling a relationship that is destructive.

Co-dependents often have very low self-esteem, self-image, and may be depressed or anxious. They will blame themselves for everything that goes wrong in a relationship and feel a lot of guilt. Their appearance may seem rigid and controlled because they are afraid of letting someone see who they really are inside.

How Is Codependency Treated?

[Counselling](#) is an effective way to learn to break the co-dependent cycle. With counselling, a person can learn the tools needed to change the behaviours of being co-dependent. A caveat to counselling is the patient may develop a co-dependent relationship with the counsellor.

A 12-step program is also available through [Co-dependents Anonymous](#). (If no meetings are close, [Adult Children of Alcoholics](#) is also recommended, as ACA deals with the same types of issues).

How Do I Practice Interdependence?

Interdependence is building healthy relationships, forming partnerships and giving someone else power over our feelings and well-being. In order to have a happy and healthy life, interdependence is necessary. We must share our feelings and our thoughts with others in order to be made happy.

It's a give-take type of relationship. You must *give* some of yourself and turn over some of your feelings in order to be able to *take* love and support in. Only giving or only taking is a big sign of co-dependency.

Interdependence takes practice to learn if you've been in a co-dependent relationship for years but it can be learned.

Related Resource Pages on “Band Back Together”

[Abuse](#)

[Addiction](#)

[Alcoholism](#)

[Adult Children of Addicts](#)

[Adult Children of Those With Mental Illness](#)

[Anger](#)

[Anxiety](#)

[Chronic Illness](#)

[Depression](#)

[Divorce](#)

[Feelings](#)

[Mental Illness](#)

Additional Codependents Resources:

[CoDA \(Co-dependents Anonymous\)](#): Links to find a meeting closest to you, as well as buy literature; sign up for email lists and learn of news and events.

[All About Counseling's Co-dependency page](#): A site with many resources for all types of emotional and behavioral issues.

[Mental Health America](#): Wonderful site with a questionnaire for identifying whether or not you, or someone you love, is co-dependent.

[Healthy Relationships](#): Great information on co-dependency and interdependency and how to have healthy relationships, romantic or otherwise.