

1999, What Does Recovery From Codependency Look Like?  
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

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Recovery from "codependency" is a developmental process that occurs over time. Recovery is not a finite event, but rather an ongoing evolutionary process. People who identify themselves as "codependent" know what they are trying to eliminate and change in their lives, but they may not be so sure about what healthy looks like from a codependent's frame of reference.

Although there are as many definitions of "codependency" as there are people who have written about it since the 1980s, every definition I have ever come across has involved "dependency" as a major area of concern. Early on, codependency was described as the family member's dependence on the alcoholic, like the alcoholic's dependence on alcohol. The definition has continued to evolve over time, and it has come to be used to define the maladaptive dependence on people and things outside of self, to provide a sense of identity, self-esteem and purpose.

Codependency has also become somewhat synonymous with focusing on others to escape one's own feelings or avoiding responsibility for one's own happiness. Early in recovery, codependent people identify some of the origins of their codependency, the problematic behaviors that they wish to eliminate, and gain superficial understanding of some new concepts.

Most codependents come from "dysfunctional" families and have experienced much of their lives in "extremes". Dysfunctional families tend to be notoriously "unbalanced", or prone to extreme positions on any given issue. An example might be what seem to be the polar extremes of "enmeshed" vs. "disengaged". Alcoholic and other dysfunctional families often move between opposite responses, with the advent of a new crisis. While enmeshed and disengaged seem like opposites they are two different faces of inability to be intimate or to cooperatively problem solve.

In keeping with lessons learned from the family, many people in their attempt to recover from codependency move from one extreme to another, thinking that the opposite of what they have been doing constitutes "recovery". Some move from extreme dependency to extreme independence or "counter-dependence". Counter-dependence is not really independence. It is a reaction formation about dependency needs, where you are doing the opposite of what

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you really want to do. Counter-dependency looks very independent on the surface, but in reality is a reaction to fear of dependency needs.

So, what recovery from codependency looks like, is somewhere in the middle on the dependency continuum scale. Recovery from codependency involves gaining the ability to be comfortable with a healthy interdependency. Growth moves across the various points on the continuum line. Recovery means moving from inappropriate caretaking and enabling to respecting the rights of others to solve their own individual problems and to cooperatively and conjointly solve problems within the relationship. Recovery means moving from martyred self-sacrificing and giving to feel safe in the relationship, to giving for the joy of it. Recovery means moving away from obsession and pre-occupation with the feelings and behavior of others into self-awareness and conscious responsibility of one's own reactions, feelings, and behavior. Recovery means moving away from trying to meet the imagined expectations of others to thoughtful self-evaluation of one's own needs and reasonable expectations. Recovery does not mean ignoring the needs of others or withholding affection and reassurance. Recovery involves showing respect for and caring about the needs and feelings of others without taking control or responsibility for them.

Focus shifts from inappropriate caretaking of others to taking responsibility for self. That means being responsible for one's own health, wealth, and happiness. Recovery is not a black/white, either/or proposition. It involves taking care of one's own responsibilities while cooperatively participating in mutual relationships. Cooperation is not acquiescence. It involve flexibility and appropriate boundaries while effectively problem solving.

Recovery from codependency is not about doing the opposite of what you used to do. It involves seeking balance and moderate reactions. Recovery does not mean that your desire to "help" someone is automatically "enabling". Recovery involves being more evaluative and knowing the difference between enabling and helping. Recovery is not "counter-dependent". It involves the ability to engage in cooperative, mutually satisfying relationships. In recovery, acts of giving are free from resentment and hidden expectations.

The ability to be yourself while allowing others to be themselves is a symptom of codependency recovery. Recovery moves from building walls

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for protection to maintaining appropriate boundaries. Walls leave you isolated and lonely; boundaries empower you and others.

Recovery from codependency also means not only that you have developed some healthy personal characteristics, but you are aware of those and are able to give yourself credit for them. Recovery involves the ability to take life's disappointments in stride, without persistent self-pity, or being overwhelmed by emotion. Codependent recovery involves accurate assessment of your abilities, acceptance of your shortcomings, and the ability to tolerate criticism from others without undue distress. In recovery, you actively seek out opportunities to grow and improve. Other characteristics of codependency recovery involve the ability to laugh at yourself, tolerance of others, and the tendency to think and feel positively about others. Fear of rejection is replaced by the anticipation that others will like you and that you will like them. Recovery involves self-efficacy, that you are able to meet the demands of living, and are competent to deal with most situations that may come up. You are not only able to plan ahead, and set realistic goals, while living in today, you are aware of these abilities.



Remember that recovery is a process, not an end state. Recovery is about moving toward these characteristics, abilities, and frames of mind. The process is continuous. It is accomplished through relentless self-care over time. Nobody does it perfectly.

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