

What is Codependency?

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

There has been some discussion lately that the concept of “codependency” has lost its utility due to its ever-widening application, across many domains of clinical, research, and scholarly description. Although there is some merit to this critique (i.e., the list of definitions below), “codependency” as a concept still describes the impact that early family dysfunction has on the development of individuals. The “codependence syndrome” is very much a part of the intergenerational transmission process of addiction. Codependency is part and parcel of how addiction is perpetuated and maintained within families across generations. Most alcoholics and addicts are also codependent. As part of ongoing treatment for addiction, codependency issues is commonly a target for counseling and recovery. Codependency is also often a big part of relapse back into active substance addiction, if not adequately addressed.

As indicated, there are many different definitions and applications of the concept of “codependency”. Examples below are just a few:

- "Codependency is an exaggerated dependent pattern of learned behaviors, beliefs, and feelings that make life painful. It is a dependence on people and things outside the self, along with neglect of the self to the point of having little self identity." *Sondra Smalley*
- "Codependency is preoccupation and extreme dependency (emotionally, socially, and sometimes physically) on a person or object. Eventually, this dependence on another person becomes a pathological condition that affects the codependent in all other relationships. This may include all persons who (1) are in a love or marriage relationship with an alcoholic; (2) have one or more alcoholic parents or grandparents; or (3) grew up in an emotionally repressive family....it is a primary disease and a disease within every member of an alcoholic family." *Sharon Wegscheider Cruse*
- "Codependency is ill health, maladaptive or problematic behavior that is associated with living with, working with, or otherwise being close to, a person with alcoholism (other chemical dependence or other chronic impairment). It affects not only individuals, but families, communities, businesses, and other institutions, and even whole societies." *Charles Whitfield*
- "Codependency is an emotional, psychological, and behavioral pattern of coping that develops as a result of an individual's prolonged exposure to, and practice of, a set of oppressive rules--rules which prevent the open expression of feelings, as well as the direct discussion of personal and interpersonal problems." *Robert Subby*

- "Codependency is a disease that has many forms and expression and that grows out of a disease process that...I call the addictive process...the addictive process is an unhealthy and abnormal disease process whose assumptions, beliefs, behaviors, and lack of spiritual awareness lead to a process of nonliving which is progressive." *Anne Wilson Schaefer*
- "Codependency is a recognizable pattern of personality traits predictably found within most members of chemically dependent families, which are capable of creating sufficient dysfunction to warrant the diagnosis of Mixed Personality Disorder as outlined in DSM III." *Timmen Cermak*

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