

## Codependency: People that care too much

Codependency is a dependency on people and things outside of yourself and a neglect of the inner self. Dependency includes behavior, beliefs and feelings that make life painful. Such dependence includes relationships, eating disorders, addiction to work or shopping or a form of substance use.

Many of these behaviors were learned in unhealthy families. When problems are not dealt with directly, family members feel smothered and angry. Thus, their need for self-esteem building, independence and autonomy are unmet. Members of unhealthy families focus exclusively on caring for family members and perpetuating unhealthy lifestyles rather than caring for themselves and confronting patterns of living.

Suppressing their own needs, children often become codependent adults. In order to mask deep fears, these adults tend to select strong helper roles.

### **Codependent behavior**

An individual who gives more of themselves than is essential through caretaking, perfectionism, refusing to acknowledge problems and poor communication exhibits classic characteristics of codependency.

**Caretaking** of others' needs to the point of neglecting your own is characteristic. An individual with codependency feels responsible for all aspects of another's life. A codependent person feels most secure when giving to others but feels guilty when others try to give to him. Most often someone who is codependent feels sad because she gives so much and receives so little.

Overcommitted and overworked, the codependent person feels driven to offer unsolicited advice and to act on behalf of others. If this help is refused, the codependent person feels angry. The codependent person's needs for love, attention and security have been unmet for years. To compensate, he puts forth a powerful, capable front while looking for opportunities for caretaking and denying his own needs.

**Perfectionism** stems from the desire to keep every aspect of life under control even when life is unhappy and uncontrollable. A codependent person

constantly criticizes herself, fears others view her negatively and has low self-esteem. Often times a person feels unworthy and rejects any praise she receives. She thrives on feeling needed.

**Denial** through refusing to acknowledge painful life events and repressing problems and difficulties – is a strong coping mechanism.

**Poor communication** is a hallmark of a codependent individual who talks freely about others while withholding information about him. The communication style is manipulative, threatening and blaming. Talk is focused on what he perceives others want to hear.

### **Breaking the cycle**

The first step toward learning to live a healthy, happy life without depending on others is to recognize unhealthy codependent behavior.

Determination to change these behaviors is the second step.

Thirdly, codependent people need to break through their denial and get in touch with their feelings in order to sort out life events and enact change.

Another step after becoming aware of feelings is to begin to relate past experiences to present actions and decisions.

Breaking the cycle may include outside help such as participating in self-help groups or meeting with a therapist. For emergencies, help is available through GHS' Crisis Services 24 hours a day at (810) 257-3740 or toll free at (877) 346-3648. TTY users call (810) 232-6310.

Reaching out to professionals or a self-help group is a sign of recovery. As a codependent person begins to build self-esteem, she or he will find themselves better prepared to meet their own needs.

Other Genesee Health System handouts include *Good night, sleep well* and *Pathways to self-esteem*. © [www.genhs.org](http://www.genhs.org)