

Overcoming Codependency

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When is he coming home tonight? Will he remember to pick up Jerry from school? Will he wind up at the bar again? Why can't he be at least a little responsible? Doesn't he know what he's doing to our family? These and similar anxious thoughts repeatedly run through Martha's mind as she thinks about her alcoholic husband, Mark. Martha spends most of her waking moments obsessing over his alcohol problem and how to fix it, or at least how to pick up the pieces in the wake his irresponsible behavior.

Martha devotes herself to being a good wife and mother and taking care of her children and husband. However, she is out of touch with her own needs and feelings. Inwardly, she is resentful that all of her efforts seem to be taken for granted; no one seems concerned about *her* needs. But at the same time, she feels guilty for having these "selfish" feelings. She believes that if she were a "good Christian," she would be able to serve and love Mark in a more unconditional way. In reality, however, Martha has a difficult time believing that her own needs and feelings are important. Instead of attending to her own needs, hurt, and confusion, she directs her efforts toward trying to get Mark under control and straightened out.

Joe describes himself as a people pleaser. He tells his counselor, "I'm not really sure why I am here, or if I need to be. The family I grew up in was pretty normal. Nobody was alcoholic or abusive, and nothing really dramatic happened in my family. All I know is that something important seems to be missing in my life." Joe went on to say that he is good at detecting what people around him want, adjusting himself to fit into their expectations. But at the same time, he isn't really sure of what *he* needs or feels or wants. He often feels empty and disconnected from himself and others. As he put it, "Sometimes I feel like a robot on autopilot."

Don spends most of his vacation with his in-laws even though he doesn't want to. He knows it will upset his wife and her parents if he chooses to do something different, so he doesn't say anything in order to keep peace in the family. Although many people occasionally hide their real thoughts and feelings, for Don this has become a way of life. He often winds up feeling frustrated and resentful toward his wife for not being more sensitive to his needs. At the same time, he avoids dealing with his fear of being more open about his real feelings and wishes.

Martha, Joe, and Don all struggle with codependency, a phenomenon that initially attracted the attention of professionals who were treating alcoholics. Counselors noticed that alcoholics often had spouses or partners with significant psychological struggles that interacted with the problems of the alcoholic. These partners were often consumed with trying to fix, rescue, or "pick up the pieces" for the alcoholic, but their efforts only helped to perpetuate the problem. The term *co-alcoholic* was initially given to the partners of alcoholics.

Martha fits the classic description of the co-alcoholic because she is caught up in a pattern of rescuing behaviors that actually help Mark continue his alcoholic lifestyle. She calls his boss with excuses for his tardiness and takes on extra evening jobs because Mark hasn't maintained steady employment. Rather than setting limits on what she will put up with or making clear to Mark that he needs to seek treatment if he wants her to live with him, Martha keeps bailing him out of his irresponsible choices.

Even though Martha resents "needing" to rescue Mark, on a deeper level she apparently wants to do so or she wouldn't continue. Taking the role of helper and responsible caretaker provides her with some sense of identity, wards off her fear of being left alone, and maintains the illusion that if she just does the right things, she will eventually help Mark get his act together. The thought of giving up her rescuing role or telling Mark that she will not put up with his irresponsible alcoholic behavior is scarier to her than continuing to live in their dysfunctional

relationship. Martha's misunderstanding of Christian virtues, such as turning the other cheek, having a servant attitude, and being unselfish, makes it even more difficult for her to draw a line and establish boundaries that would help both her and her husband.

In the mid-1980s addiction counselors began to expand their focus from alcohol and cocaine addictions to potentially addictive activities such as sex, work, shopping, and gambling, to name a few. The term *codependent* replaced co-alcoholic. As psychotherapists studied codependent people, they soon realized that these people actually have their own recognizable, dysfunctional compulsions. Their problems are not just a by-product of being in a relationship with an addict. Nancy Groom, in her book *From Bondage to Bonding: Escaping Codependency, Embracing Biblical Love*¹, writes that codependents are addicted too, not to a destructive substance, but to a *destructive pattern of relating* to other people. These destructive relationship patterns can typically be traced back to what they learned as children growing up in dysfunctional families.

Joe and Don provide examples of codependency in this broader sense of the term. There is no addiction to a physical substance in Joe's life, yet he is exceedingly dependent on the approval of others. He is so addicted to meeting others' expectations that he has serious difficulties taking care of his own God-given needs and connecting with his independent thoughts and feelings. His loss of self-awareness and failure to attend to his personal needs as he seeks to please others reflect his psychological dependency.

Don's fear of upsetting his wife and her parents by telling them he would like to spend some vacation time separate from his in-laws is a sign of his codependency. Don doesn't want to be responsible for the disappointment and anger his wife and parents-in-law might feel if he expressed his real preferences, so he keeps quiet. He keeps peace at any price. If he wasn't codependent, he could let his wife know that he wants to spend vacation time with her and the children alone or with *his* family. That would force his wife and in-laws to take responsibility for their decisions and role in having good family relationships, rather than Don shouldering a feeling of responsibility for their insensitivity to his feelings.

This booklet will help you understand Martha, Joe, and Don, and millions of people like them. In fact, most of us probably struggle with a few tendencies common to codependent people.

Understanding Codependency

Leaders in the study and treatment of codependency have been unable to agree on one mutually acceptable definition of codependency. Each offers a slightly different understanding. However, the characteristics below are commonly found in descriptions of codependent people.

- Excessive dependence on things or other people
- Accept responsibility for others' feelings or actions
- Constant efforts to try to please others
- Allow others to dominate or abuse
- Neglect personal needs
- Difficulty knowing personal feelings and wishes
- Weak sense of personal identity and loss of touch with one's real self
- Difficulty setting realistic personal boundaries
- Difficulty admitting being in a dysfunctional relationship

- Excessive efforts to control or change one's environment and/or people
- Frequent feelings of resentment
- Fear of rejection or being left alone
- Relationship problems

There is no “one-size-fits-all” codependency. As you might realize from reading the list of codependency characteristics, nearly everyone has struggled at least occasionally with identity, wanting to control others, setting boundaries, or trying to please. The almost universal presence of some of these symptoms in most people has led some to question the helpfulness of the label *codependent*. But codependents don't just struggle with a couple of these occasionally. They consistently rely on a codependent style as their basic way of relating to others and viewing themselves.

I suggest you apply the information about codependency in a thoughtful, personalized manner. Many people have found the label helpful in better understanding how and why they relate in dysfunctional ways. If the label helps you to observe these dynamics in yourself and find ways to overcome them, then it is useful. Let's look at several in more depth.

Excessive Dependency On External Cues

Codependent people are fearful of being abandoned, ignored, or shamed, so they continually look to others or to things outside themselves for cues to tell them what they should be like or what they need to do. This is a primary trait of codependency. Although sensitivity to others can be a wonderful trait, codependents take it to the extreme. They become absorbed with adjusting to the cues others give about their desires and wishes. Joe, for example, became an expert at blending into his surroundings. He ended up feeling empty, incomplete, and merely an extension of other people.

Disconnection From Inner Thoughts, Feelings, and Needs

Because codependents are so focused on pleasing and helping others, they tend to lose touch with their own desires, thoughts, and feelings. They have learned to protect themselves by disconnecting from significant portions of their inner emotional lives. Inwardly, they don't feel strong, settled, and confident because they struggle with their basic sense of self. Consequently, they have a hard time knowing what they want. They fear facing themselves and being true to their own feelings and judgments. When they are aware of their emotions, painful feelings of emptiness, shame, and anger often come to the surface. Healthy desires and their potential for good judgments are often hidden beneath fear, guilt, and shame.

Confusion Over Boundaries

Since codependents are so concerned with what others expect and so out of touch with their own needs, it isn't surprising that they are confused about their boundaries. Boundaries are the physical, mental, and emotional limits that set us apart from other people. Internal boundaries enable us to draw a line of distinction and responsibility between our own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and those of others. Healthy people take responsibility for their personal emotions and actions, but codependents often feel responsible for the thoughts and actions of others.

Remember Don? He dislikes spending every vacation with his in-laws but is afraid to tell his wife how he feels. Don is afraid to set a boundary but isn't happy about it. In fact, he inwardly blames his wife for not being more sensitive or considerate of his needs. But since Don isn't clear about his needs, how can she know? Instead of waiting until his anger builds up and spills out, Don could simply sit down with his wife and express his needs. He could seek a way of spending vacations that would be acceptable to both of them. His wife might not like it initially and she might become angry. But if their relationship is to become healthier and more mature, both Don and his wife need to learn to be honest with each other and find mutually agreeable compromises when they differ. This will never happen unless Don sets a boundary by expressing his needs.

External boundaries enable us to set limits on how we allow others to treat us. Codependents often allow others to hurt or abuse them or talk them into taking on too many responsibilities or activities. They are afraid to say no. This inability has been described like being in a room where the doorknob is only on the outside of the door – the codependent is on the inside, powerless to control the door and set any protective limits. Anyone who wants to may come in.

Martha puts up with her alcoholic husband's verbal and sometimes physical abuse during his bouts of drinking because she is confused about her own right to set limits and decide what she will tolerate. Although she knows she shouldn't be treated abusively, she doesn't really believe that her own needs are valid enough for her to take care of herself. Like many codependents, Martha is so accustomed to seeing things through her partner's eyes that she is out of touch with the depth of her own needs, her right to say no, and her need to set appropriate boundaries.

Excessive Need For Control

Codependents often have a deep sense of powerlessness because they live with those who are out of control or grew up with such people. They may feel victimized or controlled by others because they feel such a need to meet others' needs. Ironically, codependents can also be quite controlling themselves. While they take excessive responsibility for keeping the peace or pleasing others, they may also expend incredible energy trying to change them. Since codependents blame the other person for their unhappiness, they assume they have a right to try to change that person. They reason, *If only he would get his drinking under control, my life would be better. If only she were a more considerate person, our marriage would be better.*

Such conclusions justify a codependent's efforts to help, control, or "fix" the other person. The codependent's view of responsibility goes like this: *My spouse is responsible for my unhappiness, and I am responsible to try to change my spouse or act in ways that don't upset him or her.* But this is backwards. We must take responsibility for our own happiness or unhappiness. Each person in a relationship must take responsibility for changing his or her own feelings and actions.

On the surface, it appears that Martha, Joe, and Don are very accommodating in their relationships. They seem to allow others to be themselves, but often to an extreme. They go to great lengths to please people around them, and they are, for the most part, nonassertive about their own wants and desires. But internally, they are resentful; they cling to an internal demand that their significant others change. In *From Bondage to Breaking*¹, Groom points out that there is a profound difference between normal desires that other people change, and demands that they change. Most of the efforts of Martha, Joe, and Don to appease their spouses are linked to their own unspoken demands that their spouses capitulate to their expectations. When this doesn't happen, their unfulfilled demands turn into resentment and bitterness. Because of this, they periodically blurt out their real expectations and anger. They may tell their friends what victims they are of their spouse's irresponsibility. Many codependents alternate between periods of trying to please their spouse, subtly attempting to change them, and brief outbursts of frustration when they directly express their resentments or expectations.

Relational Difficulties

Given their lack of awareness of their own needs, problems with boundaries, excessive dependency, and tendencies to try to change or control others, it is not surprising that codependents experience significant relationship difficulties. Sometimes their relationships feel one-sided. They are constantly caretaking or adjusting to the people around them while remaining out of touch with what is going on inside them. These one-way relationships make healthy mutuality and intimacy impossible.

While many codependents fervently desire to soothe the deep loneliness and wounding they feel in close relationships, most do not really understand some of the most basic aspects of interpersonal intimacy. One cornerstone for intimacy and, more generally, for healthy interpersonal relationships is a basic respect for one another's freedom, that is, to be who one really is and to take responsibility for that. Since codependents struggle deep down with respecting themselves, and since they are often trying to change their partners, there is a lack of this type of mutual respect for themselves and their mates. Codependent persons may either be intimidated or threatened by their spouses, or they may look down on their spouses as needy or having a problem. But in either case, codependents do not see themselves and their partners as peers. Someone is always in either an up or down position.

Confused Spiritual Understandings

The distorted relationships associated with codependency can also extend into the spiritual realm. Martha consciously believes that God is loving, forgiving, and full of grace. But on an emotional level, her image of God is quite different – more like the demanding, judgmental, perfectionistic parents who raised her. Some codependents have experienced a stern, pressuring God as portrayed in some legalistic churches.

Martha has occasionally experienced the reality of God's grace – like when she first received Christ as a teenager. But over the years, her initial joy and enthusiasm being a Christian have been replaced with a view of a legalistic, demanding God and a faith that seems like a never-ending list of dos and don'ts. She tries to please God and meet his approval but she lacks any real joy in her Christian life. The same codependent barriers that impair intimacy in her human relationships hinder her intimacy with God.

How Does Codependency Develop?

Codependency can develop for many reasons. In a classic example of a dysfunctional family of origin, one member of the family has a serious problem like alcoholism or some other chemical addiction. Each family member develops a role that helps compensate for, or avoids confronting, the dysfunctional person's deficits. In short, they try to cover for the addicted member.

Many codependents do not grow up in this type of home, however. The causes of their codependency are subtler. For example, codependency may develop when one family member is chronically ill or depressed or has an explosive temper, or when there is physical, sexual, or emotional abuse and neglect in the home. Anything that forces an individual to give up his or her own emotional health in order to keep peace, satisfy, or attempt to cover for or "cure" another family member can be a setup for a codependent style.

Codependent children usually lack an emotionally safe environment where they can express their emotions, thoughts, needs, and desires. They learn that it is dangerous or painful to be honest about their thoughts and feelings. Rather than leading to a resolution, openness seems to make matters worse. Their parents or other

authorities can't handle the truth or only get more upset or abusive. As a result, these children begin to focus on pleasing their dysfunctional parents or being sure they don't upset them. This is the only way they have of coping. But in the process, they lose touch with their own needs, desires, thoughts, and feelings. They become less than whole persons emotionally. They may choose a marriage partner out of their caretaking or dependent role rather than from a perspective of seeking mutual love and emotional maturity. Consequently, they pick relationships fraught with unmet childhood needs.

Another way of understanding the causes of codependency is from the point of view of the child's advancement from the dependency of infancy to mature adult independency. Anything that interferes with this process predisposes a growing child to codependency. If a baby's emotional needs are not satisfied sufficiently, the child may go through life trying to please others in order to gain the love that wasn't received in the early years. If a parent is overprotective, a child may become overly dependent and never learn to stand on his or her own feet emotionally and intellectually. If parents are perfectionistic, the growing child learns to focus on pleasing them with a concomitant loss of recognition and awareness of his or her own needs and feelings. And if the parents rely excessively on guilt and shame motivation, the child learns to feel selfish for trying to have personal needs met. Any of these patterns can leave a developing child without confidence and a healthy sense of personal identity, worth, and self-esteem.

By contrast, individuals who establish a healthy sense of self during their developmental years know who they are as individuals. They have a good measure of autonomy and they are able to function without fearing they will lose themselves or be overwhelmed. They are able to engage in appropriate self-care while also caring for others. In the face of criticism or failure they are still able to maintain a basic core sense of self-worth. They maintain their psychological and spiritual balance in the midst of life's stresses and strains.

Codependent people have not been able to develop this psychological autonomy and are significantly impaired in their ability to function as healthy, reasonably autonomous individuals. This creates problems in many areas of their lives.

If you are codependent and struggle with your basic sense of self-worth, it can be easy to believe that you are inherently defective. Taking time to look beyond that lie to really understand how you personally learned your codependent patterns is a significant step in learning to respect yourself more. Every person, including you, has a story that is worth listening to and understanding. As you begin to understand how you have been impacted by your experiences, you will recognize that your codependent patterns are understandable ways of trying to cope with difficult situations and not signs of inherent defectiveness. Your insights will lead you to less self-blame and more compassion for yourself. You also will experience restored hope that you really can learn healthier ways of viewing yourself and relating to others.

The Recovery Process

It takes time to overcome lifelong patterns of codependency. The process often feels like "two steps forward, one step back." But here are several specific steps you can take to break out of an ingrained codependent style.

Break Through Your Denial

The first step is to face the problem honestly. Chances are you have rationalized, justified, and even spiritualized your codependent style. Now is the time to face it head-on. For someone who has spent a lifetime using denial to ward off pain, shame, or fear of rejection, this can be terrifying. You will need support from people who provide safe relationships that allow you to be emotionally honest on your journey. These supportive relationships might be found with friends, support groups, or a professional counselor.

Support groups with other people on a similar road of recovery often provide more help for codependency recovery than family and friends because group members know what it is like to struggle with the same or similar issues. Your relationship with God can be a tremendous asset to your recovery. But it is important to be completely honest with God as well. Only then will you see that God accepts you exactly as you are, and that he made you to have your own thoughts, feelings, and desires. He does not expect you to shape your life solely to those around you. As you grow, you will gain courage to be more aware of your own needs and feelings, leading you to more authentic connections with God and others.

Face Your Childhood Issues

One way of breaking through denial is to seriously consider the experiences that have contributed to your codependency. This usually involves exploring significant aspects of your family history. Since codependents have learned to cope by disconnecting from their inner emotions, this exploration cannot simply be an intellectual exercise. It must involve a process of coming to terms with your actual feelings as a child. It also means being completely honest about your family of origin.

You may feel incredibly guilty if you admit that you were wounded in your developmental years. You may have protected your family for decades. But you cannot change unless you are honest about the negative as well as the positive aspects of your childhood experiences in your family. This type of work is not easy; it usually takes time and is often accomplished best in a safe, therapeutic relationship.

Detach From Unhealthy Involvements

Detachment refers to separating yourself from whatever you are obsessed with so that you can begin working on yourself. Since a codependent person is typically overly involved or attached to some problem or person outside himself or herself, growth involves giving up the preoccupation with trying to change, control, or please someone else. This requires letting go of the energy you are expending as you worry about the other person. This is not hostile withdrawal, indifference, or avoiding your responsibilities to others. Rather, it is giving up your efforts to take other peoples' responsibilities; it is allowing them to take responsibility for themselves. We cannot fix problems that are not ours to fix. Your worrying, obsessing, or trying to help only perpetuates the problem. Remember, as long as you are trying to fix someone else, they don't need to fix themselves. This may mean staying out of the way as your alcoholic spouse or friend loses his job. It may mean getting a separate bank account and letting your mate suffer the consequences of financial irresponsibility. It may mean giving up your role as a people pleaser. And it may mean saying no when you are asked to take on one more responsibility at your church or your children's school. These can be frightening steps, but you will never break the cycle of codependency unless you take them. You must disengage from your codependent ways.

Learn healthy self-care

It is not enough to give up your excessive efforts to please others. You must also become more aware of your own feelings, thoughts, and needs, and learn how to communicate them in relationships. Remember, you aren't being selfish; you are learning to be honest about your needs so that you can develop mature, mutual relationships. You will also want others to communicate their thoughts, feelings, and needs to you.

Know God's Plan

Christians who are codependent are often afraid to learn healthy self-care because they believe that would be selfish or unspiritual. Remember Martha? In addition to having an alcoholic husband, Martha has two elementary-age children and rushes around from dawn to bedtime taking care of everyone's needs but her own—worrying about her husband, making meals, chauffeuring the kids to soccer practice, preparing to teach Sunday school, and trying to be a godly wife and mother. The list goes on and on. Inwardly, however, Martha feels empty, burned out, and increasingly resentful of the never-ending list of demands. Yet, she feels helpless to do anything about it because she is only doing what she thinks a “good Christian” should do.

In this frazzled state, imagine how Martha responds to a biblical passage like Philippians 2:3-5, 7: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also the interests of the others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: who...made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant” (New International Version).

Martha reads this message and concludes that in order to have a Christ-like attitude she must keep putting everyone else's needs ahead of hers. Sometimes, of course, we do need to put others' needs before our own. But recommending this to people who constantly struggle with codependency ignores two more important points. First, codependents like Martha feel like they have *no choice*. They must either do the right, “Christian,” giving thing or be flooded with guilt or shame. They can't do things out of a full cup or good motive because inwardly they feel empty. They lack a healthy sense of self and the healthy boundaries that allow spiritually and emotionally mature people to periodically set their needs aside for the welfare of others. Before codependents like Martha can serve others in a truly Christ-like way, they must first find a balance between their needs and the needs of others. And remember, this passage doesn't say not to look out for your own interests. It reminds us to “look *not only* to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (italics added).

You will find an interesting fact just before Paul admonishes the believers to “do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.” Paul's call to Christ-like servanthood was given to those who already had a grace-filled, restorative experience of Christ. Philippians 2:1-2 says, “If you have any *encouragement* from being united with Christ, if any *comfort* from his love, if any *fellowship* with the Spirit, if any *tenderness* and *compassion*, then make my joy complete by being *like-minded*, having the same love...” (italics added). So it seems that while God invites us to participate in the same loving spirit of servanthood as Christ, we cannot genuinely do that until we first personally know God's encouragement, comfort, fellowship, tenderness, and compassion toward us.

If you are codependent, a crucial step toward your recovery is to allow God to build you up. Open up to his healing grace and love that comes to you completely apart from what you do and imperfect though you are. Realize that the God whom you thought just wanted to use you to serve him and others or was somehow opposed to you being an honest and open person is actually your best supporter!

Codependents need to be less like the biblical Martha – frantically rushing around serving Jesus – and more like Mary who was content to sit at Jesus' feet, soaking in his grace and wisdom (Luke 10:38-42). They need to realize that God wants them to be able to make their own choices in setting boundaries for themselves. They need to know that God wants to meet their deepest needs.

We are told in Psalm 37:4, “Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.” Codependents need to realize that God is their ultimate ally as they become healthy, happy people. During this season in a codependent's development, the more spiritual path may not be compulsive self-sacrifice, but rather allowing God to teach them how to say no to demands or requests without feeling bad about themselves. Have you ever tried to start a campfire on a windy day? Think of how vulnerable that first spark is to every little gust of wind. Our initial tiny “sparks” of realistic expectations or healthy assertiveness or a growing sense of self

are much the same. One way God's hands shelter our sparks is to remind us that he wants us to establish secure boundaries and positive feelings about ourselves.

It also helps to take a look at Jesus' style of living. Jesus didn't run around trying to please or control everyone, and he didn't have a fragile identity or sense of self. Quite the contrary. Christ perfectly modeled a balance between time for himself and time for ministry. He lived thirty years before he began his ministry. He had close friends. He crossed the lake to be alone and relax with his disciples. He knew his mission and what he thought and felt, and he clearly and directly expressed his thoughts and feelings. He also wasn't afraid to say no!

Grow in Relationships and Genuine Love

Having a healthy sense of self is not being selfish. It goes hand in hand with being able to enter into loving relationships. A solid identity and awareness of your personal needs leads to mutual respect and love. You need relationships in which you can work on relating in new and healthier ways. This will mean seeking relationships with mature people with healthy boundaries. Then work on developing mature, mutual relationships instead of dependent ones. Make sure that you and your friends communicate honestly.

Share your thoughts, wishes, and feelings mutually. Learn to make mutual decisions, to give and take, and to compromise equally. This may initially be difficult since you may have developed a "sixth sense" for finding people with poor boundaries who need rescuing. But only the mutuality growing out of a healthy sense of your own identity allows for the development of intimacy and mature closeness. In a wholesome relationship, neither party is demanding or controlling; each person opens up his or her inner self to being loved and to being truly loving.

Exercise Your "No" Muscle

Another practical step is to start setting boundaries that you are comfortably able to live with. You simply cannot learn to care and give of yourself in a healthy manner until you have a basic place of safety for yourself. This includes having the ability to say no. At times, saying no is more important to spiritual growth than saying yes to another activity. If you are growing out of codependency, you don't always need to have a clearly articulated or spiritual sounding reason for saying no. Sure, you may occasionally say no when it may have been good to say yes. But after a lifetime of erring on the yes side, don't be afraid of occasionally missing the perfect ideal! It is far more likely that you will continue to err on the side of compulsively giving and doing.

You will learn by trial and error. In the process, always remember that God wants your genuine love so much that he is not going to coerce you into serving him or others out of compulsion. As you soak up God's grace and love, in time you will be able to give and serve from a healthy caring and loving that comes from your heart, not from fear or duty.

Seek Counseling

Counseling can be another vital resource for recovery. It is especially helpful for those in need of significant healing from emotional wounds from childhood. Ideally, an effective counselor will be someone:

- with whom you feel safe enough to explore painful feelings and experiences.
- with good personal boundaries.

- who is able to help you explore significant unresolved areas from your past.
- who is able to help you learn healthy ways of relating to yourself and others.
- who helps you develop a biblical understanding of yourself and your situation.

Work a twelve-step program

Many codependents have received wonderful help through twelve-step programs such as Codependents Anonymous² and the twelve-step program for Christian living called Celebrate Recovery³. These programs are not run by professionals, and they typically involve meetings organized around principles of recovery commonly referred to as the twelve steps. These and other types of support groups can be helpful.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Aren't there cultural differences in what is considered codependent? Definitely. Some cultures foster more of a group orientation for relating to others that can be mistaken for codependency.
2. Isn't it selfish to put so much emphasis on my needs and my personal boundaries? While there is a valid concern about becoming overly preoccupied with yourself to the exclusion of others, most codependents are on the other extreme of the continuum and feel badly about healthy self-concern. Some codependents may need to go through a period of focusing on themselves and learning to set boundaries before they can develop more balanced interdependent relationships. Melody Beattie advises codependents: "Become free to care and to love in ways that help others and don't hurt ourselves."⁴

Some people, of course, may use the need to "be in touch with themselves," "be honest," or "meet their own needs" as an excuse for selfishness or doing whatever they please. That is obviously unchristian and unhealthy. The goal in overcoming codependency is not to become selfish or to ignore others; it is to become emotionally and spiritually mature by being a responsible person who, in a position of emotional health, encourages others to become responsible adults as well. Only when we stop doing for others what they can do for themselves will they begin to grow.

3. Can someone be a "little codependent"? In my opinion, yes. Real self-understanding does not come from attaching some blanket label on you. But if, as you learn more about codependency, you are able to move towards a deeper understanding of yourself, that is useful knowledge. Codependent ways, like other forms of dysfunction, exist on a continuum with some that are strongly tied to these strategies and others that are a "little codependent." Most of us are probably a bit codependent.
4. Can I work on these codependency issues by myself, or is it necessary to seek professional counseling? This question relates to the previous question. People who are a little codependent may be able to work through their issues as they learn more about codependency and how to overcome them. Others, especially those who have a need to go through a very significant healing process from past trauma or early childhood experiences, may need more extensive support and guidance in

professional counseling. The bottom line is that there is no shame in seeking the help you need.

Additional Resources

The New Codependency: Help and Guidance for Today's Generation by Melodie Beattie. New York. Simon & Schuster, Inc. 2009. This book follows her first book *Codependent No More*, written in 1986, and provides a good introduction to codependency and steps toward recovery. It is compassionately written by an author who identifies as being codependent.

Recovery from Codependency by Dale and Juanita Ryan. This is part of an excellent series of Bible studies, the Life Recovery Guide series, that relate scripture to various recovery issues. It can be a helpful resource for those wanting to work through barriers in their spiritual lives. Information on how to obtain these Bible studies can be found on the website for The National Association for Christian Recovery, <http://www.nacronline.com> as well as through www.amazon.com.

Boundaries by Drs. John Townsend and Henry Cloud. Grand Rapids, Zondervan Publishing House, 2004. This book, along with companion workbooks, can be helpful to codependents struggling with learning how to establish healthy boundaries in their lives.

From Bondage to Bonding: Escaping Codependency, Embracing Biblical Love by Nancy Groom. Colorado Springs, NavPress, 1991. This book provides a nice counterbalancing perspective on the many codependency books that focus too much on self. While establishing a healthy self is important, it explores how to move from codependent strategies of relating to genuine intimacy and biblical love.

Codependents Anonymous: <http://coda.org>

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