

Codependence: The Dance of Self-Denial

The meaning of the word “codependence” has evolved, broadened, and been argued about by experts in the health field since it was coined a few decades ago. In its original, stricter definition, “codependence” described the maladaptive, caretaking behavior of family members who were affected by a loved one’s abuse of alcohol. Nowadays, in its broadest definition it refers to anybody who is excessively preoccupied with other people’s needs, to the exclusion of their own.

No matter from which end of the spectrum we look at codependence, at the other end is someone whose dysfunctional behavior is being allowed or enabled and unintentionally supported by the codependent person. Most commonly, it is some form of addiction: substance abuse, eating, shopping, or sex, to name a few. The codependent’s own “addiction” is their sense of responsibility for—and yet their emotional reliance upon—the addicted person. They each fill one another’s needs. And both are in denial about the debilitating dance in which they are engaged.

Codependency is usually learned in childhood from watching and imitating family behavior. The painful cycle is unknowingly passed from generation to generation until the participants recognize and change their behavior.

How do you begin to recognize this behavior?

The symptoms of codependence—adapted from Melody Beattie’s book, *Codependent No More*—are:

- You feel responsible for other people—their feelings, actions, needs, well-being and destiny.
- You feel compelled to help people solve their problems or try to take care of their feelings.
- You find it easier to feel and express anger about injustices done to others than about injustices done to you.

- You feel most comfortable when you are giving to others, and feel insecure and guilty when someone gives to you.
- You feel empty and worthless if you don’t have someone else to take care of or a crisis to deal with.
- You are often unable to stop worrying about other people and their problems.
- You lose interest in your own life when you are in love, and stay in abusive relationships in order to keep people loving you.

How do you begin to change the behavior?

Since codependency is a learned condition this means it can also be unlearned. Here are some ways to begin:

- 1) Most important is the need to recognize your codependence—to become aware that you are so fixated on others’ needs that your own wants and needs do not feel valid—and, in fact, you may not even know what they are. Let yourself feel the pain of this; it will be the beginning of healing.
- 2) Start focusing on your own needs and on developing a sense of your worth. This is not an overnight process. A loving support system, and a good therapist, will be of great help in your journey toward wholeness. Simple affirmations can help, too. Make up your own, or get some from your therapist: “I am okay just as I am.” “It is all right to want something.” “I am powerful.” Say them regularly, and notice when you start to believe them!
- 3) Accept your own limits. You are not responsible for anyone’s recovery but your own. Sometimes, the most loving thing we can do is let someone learn by their own dysfunctional behavior, letting them make their own mistakes and find their own way to help.

With time, support, and many small, courageous steps, you will break the chains of codependence. *

10 Ways to Offer Support

When someone you care about is going through a difficult time, knowing how to offer support can be challenging. Here are 10 gestures that can help.

- 1. Listen.** Sit with your loved one and let him or her talk about the problem.
- 2. Don’t try to fix the problem.** When we’re suffering, we often just want to be heard. Also, it’s better if we come up with our own solutions.
- 3. Be there. Don’t pull away.** Even if your loved one can’t talk about what’s going on, your caring presence will help.
- 4. Trust your intuition.** You can even ask yourself, “How can I best support my loved one?”
- 5. Talk about it.** Don’t be afraid to bring up the subject gently. Your loved one may be relieved that you’re willing to listen.
- 6. Respect the person’s wishes.** If the person wants time alone, let him or her have it, and find another way to offer support.
- 7. Take action when necessary.** For instance, if your loved one needs medical intervention, pursue it.
- 8. Don’t sugarcoat the situation or offer platitudes.** Optimism is helpful; denial of the problem is not.
- 9. Accept the person’s feelings.** He or she may not be able to receive your assistance graciously. Don’t take it personally.
- 10. Bring food.** Something warm and nurturing, like soup, is always welcome. *

A Letter From

Margaret Hood Black



By example, many people were taught codependent behavior, the subject of the article on page 1. If you exhibit codependent behavior, you tend to take care of others at the expense of yourself, thus setting the stage for resentment and unfulfilling relationships. However, as the article attests, it is possible to free yourself from codependent behavior, recognize your own needs, take care of yourself first and increase your self-esteem.

Improper parenting, the subject of the page 3 article, is another set of behaviors that can be unlearned. Experiences such as abuse, neglect or lack of discipline can not only harm the child, but its effects are passed down for generations. The article offers a path for healing from the impact of improper parenting and breaking that cycle for the future.

Talking about money with loved ones has the potential to enhance relationships, yet, too often, the discussion becomes an argument instead. The article on page 4 offers some suggestions for how you can have a productive and caring conversation about money.

Also in this issue, the quiz asks if sleep deprivation is getting in your way, and the Top 10 suggests healthy ways to offer support to loved ones.

If you have questions about the articles or would like more copies, please don't hesitate to call.

May this season bring you healing, better boundaries and improved communication.

Is Not Getting Enough Sleep Getting In Your Way?

Quality sleep is as important to our health as food and water. Yet, we often cut back on sleep in favor of "getting more done." Chronic lack of sleep can cause a wide range of symptoms, including impaired brain function, memory loss, depression, weight gain and irritability. Long-term health issues include increased risk for heart attack and stroke. Answer the following true/false questions to discover whether lack of sleep is getting in your way:



True False

- 1. Instead of feeling refreshed when I wake up, I still feel tired.
- 2. I have to have coffee to get going in the morning and often depend upon other caffeine or sugar boosts to get through the day.
- 3. I feel easily irritated, impatient and/or moody, and my relationships are being affected.
- 4. I feel depressed sometimes, but don't have the time to deal with it.
- 5. I have a hard time controlling my emotions—and find myself at the point of tears without really knowing why.
- 6. I often feel overwhelmed, and my ability to handle stress is diminished.
- 7. I have difficulty concentrating and sometimes have to ask people to repeat what they just said.
- 8. My memory, in general, isn't as good as it used to be.
- 9. I have a hard time staying awake when I read or watch television.
- 10. I doze off easily.
- 11. I don't have the energy to do fun things with my partner, and that is creating stress in our relationship.
- 12. I get sleepy when I drive and have to do things to keep myself alert, such as drinking a soda or keeping the windows open to get more fresh air.
- 13. My reaction time when I drive isn't as fast as it once was.
- 14. I'm not performing as well at work; everything takes longer than it used to.
- 15. I've been dropping the ball at work and at home, not following through with simple tasks.
- 16. I don't feel very motivated—I just don't have the energy.
- 17. I've been eating more to boost my energy and my weight has been creeping up.
- 18. I get sick often.
- 19. People tell me that I look tired.

If you answered true to several of these statements, your sleep deprivation may be harming your overall health and well-being. Please call me if you'd like support in exploring ways to remedy this issue. *

Parenting Yourself: Becoming the Parent You Always Wanted

Our parents are usually the primary influence in our lives. What we learn—or do *not* learn—from them when we're young can have lasting repercussions. Many of the ills of society, along with individual suffering, are the effects of inadequate parenting.

If not addressed, these effects—which include low self-esteem, being drawn into abusive or unfulfilling relationships, unhealthy addictions or inhibitions and poor coping skills—can overshadow productive and joyful expression throughout your lifetime.

Improper parenting can include physical, sexual and verbal abuse, excessive criticism, physical and emotional neglect, rejection, the favoring of one sibling over another, lack of discipline, forcing choices on children and being overly protective or indulgent.

Because we often parent as we were parented, it's important to heal our own wounds and learn proper parenting techniques so that we don't perpetuate the cycle.

As P.D. James wrote in *Time to Be in Earnest*, "What a child doesn't receive, he can seldom later give."

How, then, can we heal from improper parenting, thereby making ourselves whole, fulfilled members of society as well as loving, respectful and nurturing parents to the next generation?

First, it is important to understand that, as grown up as you may be, there is still a part of you that thinks, feels and reacts like a child. It is this tender and vulnerable part of you that needs to be recognized, heard, taught new behaviors, and given new choices.

Time alone does not heal childhood wounds. Healing requires focus and commitment, and a strong support system. Here are some steps you can take to learn how to nurture and heal the child within:

Embrace the recovery process. Whether you decide to seek professional therapy or learn coping techniques on your own, realize that the process will take time and effort on your part. Be patient with yourself and celebrate each new step of growth along the way.

Don't blame others. We cannot thrive in the present if we are living in the past or blaming others for our problems and conflicts. Even though we could not control the early years of our life, it

does not serve us to blame others for the choices and decisions we made. Taking responsibility for our lives is a powerful step towards well-being.

Identify and release mental and emotional blocks. Through therapy, journaling or other supportive practices that facilitate self-discovery, explore the issues from childhood that continue to negatively impact you and block you from leading the life you want. Be willing to let go of beliefs and behaviors that no longer serve you.

Learn new strategies. The process of healing consists of learning self-honoring behaviors and discovering new choices. Experimenting with new behaviors may also include taking reasonable risks that build your confidence and self-esteem.

Share your story. Support groups are an excellent way to have your story heard by others in a safe environment. It can be helpful to reach out to others who are suffering and can understand your pain and support you in your journey of becoming whole.

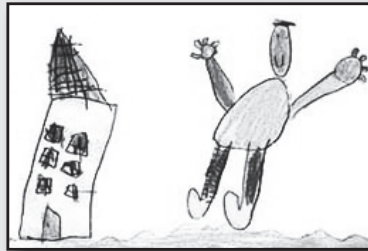
Feel all the feelings. Allow and express whatever arises: grief, anger, resentment—it is all part of the healing process. You can be sure that *wonderful* new feelings will arise, too!

Grow up all over again. Healing from inadequate parenting requires, in a sense, going through the growing up process again. But this time you will be developing the "inner parent"—becoming (for yourself) the parent that you always needed. You learn to rely on yourself to give yourself what you need.

Forgive. Forgiveness can be a controversial issue. Some regard it as necessary for healing; others say it is not. But what is important is that forgiveness frees *you*. Understanding the roots of your parents' behavior—and that they, too, probably received inadequate parenting—does not mean condoning it. Whether or not you forgive your parents, do forgive yourself for any past choices or behaviors you regret. Let go and move on. A *whole* new self is waiting for you.

When you begin to heal by giving to yourself what you needed—and didn't receive—as a child, you will begin to know yourself as a capable, valuable, lovable and loving person.

When we truly learn how to love and accept ourselves, we can pass that love and acceptance on to others. ✱



How to Talk to Your Loved Ones about Money

Being in any adult relationship—whether with a spouse, partner, parent or friend—usually involves dealing with money at one time or another. However, talking about money can bring up uncomfortable feelings. And, sometimes, the closer you are with someone the harder it is to start the conversation.

The key to discussing money concerns with loved ones is to create an ongoing, open and honest communication about it. That can be challenging if your loved one resists talking about money, or will only talk about it when faced with dire circumstances, such as, for instance, when the bill collectors call, or you're about to lose your home.

It is possible for loved ones to broach the subject of money without getting into a confrontation or creating hard feelings. Here are some pointers that can help:

Initiate the conversation. Don't wait for the other person to bring it up. He or she may not even be

aware of the need.

Be sensitive. Not everyone is comfortable discussing money concerns, so be open, as clear and honest as you can, and most of all, patient.

Be clear. It's helpful in the beginning of a relationship to determine who has financial responsibility for what. If you haven't had that discussion yet, do bring up the subject. You can start the process by trying to uncover any assumptions that each of you has made.

That way you can truly understand what the other person feels and thinks.

Listen and be heard.

Take the time to formulate your ideas in advance, and really listen with an open mind to your loved one's concerns.

Be prepared to negotiate. Don't assume you'll get everything your way. Stand up for what you really need and negotiate the rest.

Be flexible. There is no right or

wrong; however, if one person remains rigid and won't consider the other's position, nothing will get accomplished.

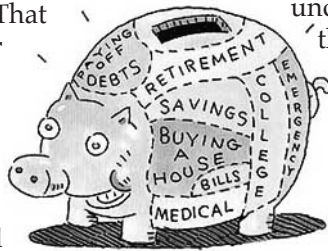
Set goals. Each person should have a say when determining any joint goals, and then as a team, you can work to achieve them. Set up a vision board or tape your combined goals on the refrigerator.

Be creative. Come up with interesting, out-of-the box solutions for achieving financial goals. That way your conversations about money will not only be productive but also enjoyable.

Know when to get help. If you reach an impasse, call in a professional, such as an accountant, financial advisor or counselor.

Finally, don't expect everything to be worked out in one session. The good news is that once you've had one successful conversation about money, your next discussion will be much easier.

Build on that, and then keep talking! Include the discussion of money as part of your ongoing communication with your loved one. *



For more information on her services, please feel free to call: 713-562-7819.

Margaret has two offices conveniently located at: 1960 & SH 249 (NW Houston) and in Bellaire (Galleria Area).
In addition to working with adolescents and young adults, Margaret has a special interest in marriages, families and women's issues.
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