

Co-Dependency- Our Social Disease

1. Do you have difficulty saying no?
2. Do you make silently hope or make subtle efforts to help your loved ones to change?
3. Are you subject to critical voices in your head at least daily?

If you answered yes to any one of these questions, then yes, you grew up in America and have taken on some of this social disease. I'm sorry AND there is help. Here, right now you can shed some of that old baggage. You can learn to take it easy on yourself and on those you love.

If I told you that you, me, all of us were raised to practice co-dependency and that there are ways to be more authentic and loving, would you wonder how? Or simply deny that such things exist...you can, but pretending never makes things go away.

Popular definitions of co-dependency would have us believing that it is something that is specific to alcoholism or addiction; that it is some 'by-product' of a diseased person or family. It is not. Co-dependency is an inbred part of what we in our Western culture have come to describe as normal...

The rock band Dire Straits sings about our Industrial Disease; Pink Floyd has an entire album about how we, as children, are taught to build walls to protect ourselves... instead of being ourselves. And it's not just the rock bands that are talking about it.

In 1937 Karen Horney writes of "The Neurotic Personality of Our Time"; over the last 40 years countless experts such as Pia Mellody, Dr. Charles Whitfield, and John Bradshaw (see bibliography) have written about our social disease. Even the presuppositions of Sigmund Freud exhibit the cultural myths of the need to "repress those instinctual drives"... hogwash... tis the drives that help us reach our dreams!

Co-dependency is quite simply "any suffering or dysfunction that is associated with or results from focusing on the needs and behaviors of others." (Whitfield)

Dr. Charles Whitfield in his work: *Co-Dependence: Healing the Human Condition* has coined the phrase "A Disease of Lost Selfhood;" as he describes co-dependence:

"We become co-dependent when we turn our responsibility for our life and happiness over to our ego (our false self) and to other people."

**I offer several expanded definitions of co-dependency at the end of this article.

At the heart of co-dependence is a mixture of blame and need, the idea that you must get someone else to change in order to be happy or free or successful or whatever you want to be. Many people spend years in the crazy making attempt to get their other to love them as they wish their parents had. They try to change others to be that ideal object instead of developing their own ways to self-love and changing within.

The more we try, hostility builds and separation widens. You lose touch with the love you once had. You continue blaming and start justifying reasons to walk away from the relationship. While at the same time, you may be justifying reasons to stay in an unhealthy relationship with the false hope that “THIS time” it will be different.

Just like a fish is unaware that it lives in water, we cultural beings for the most part are ‘unaware’ of this co-dependent water that we swim in. In 1937 the esteemed scholar Karen Horney wrote: “The Neurotic Personality of Our Time”... referring to the cultural perpetuation of neurosis:

“When we focus our attention on the actual neurotic difficulties we recognize that neuroses are generated not only by incidental individual experiences, but also by the specific cultural conditions under which we live.” Horney p. viii

Just as the neurosis is developed in and through culture, what we consider ‘normal’ is also defined by the same culture.

“Our conception of normality is arrived at by the approval of certain standards of behavior and feeling within a certain group which imposes these standards upon its members. But the standards vary with culture, period, class and sex.” Horney P. 18

The social perpetuation of co-dependency is also noted by Whitfield:

“In fact, we learn to be co-dependent from others around us. It is in this sense not only an addiction but a contagion acquired illness. From the time we are born, we see co-dependent behavior modeled and taught by a seemingly endless string of important people: parents, teachers, siblings, friends, heroes and heroines. Co-dependence is reinforced by the media, government, organized religion and the helping professions.”

Did you know that within this century that being “homosexual or lesbian” was considered a disorder? If that surprises you, recall that it was within the same time period that woman started to vote. Prior to these changes, it was “normal” for women not to vote...just as it is “normal” today that many folks have a hard time saying no or so many folks are still working to change their spouses so THEY are happy...

It’s the water, we’re in it... and we can gain perspective!

In her groundbreaking book: “Facing Co-Dependency” Pia Melody makes the distinction between “dysfunctional” and “unhealthy”. Co-dependency “is” functional in its own way, it is simply not healthy. She also devotes specific attention in her identification of co-dependent “symptoms” that sabotage our lives. They are:

- “Negative control: we give ourselves permission to determine someone else’s reality for our own comfort.”
- “Resentment: we have a need to get even or punish someone for perceived blows to our self-esteem that cause us shame about ourselves
- Distorted or nonexistent spirituality: we have difficulty experiencing connection to a power greater than ourselves.
- Avoiding reality: we use addictions, physical illness, or mental illness to avoid facing what is going on with us and other important people in our lives. (The addictions can include: work, drama, adrenaline, blame and co-dependency. Addition in parenthesis mine ja).
- Impaired ability to sustain intimacy: we have difficulty sharing who we are with others and hearing others as they share who they are with us without interfering with their sharing process or what they share. “

What can you **do**?

1. Identify the signs of co-dependency. I have included articles related to signs of co-dependency also labeled as emotional abuse. The 3rd article includes ways to handle these insidious actions.
 - a. [What is Emotional Abuse](#)
 - b. [For You...With Love](#)
 - c. [The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Lethal Communication Patterns and their Antidotes](#)
2. Seek professional assistance: Co-dependency is something that is inherent in how we have learned to relate to other people. There is no shame in this! It’s much the same as how we learned our language. There are experts in your area and many of us coaches around the world who can help via phone. You can write to schedule a free consultation at Jim@TrulyHumanCoaching.com.
3. Set Boundaries! You have a voice, you matter! State what you want, make requests and/or negotiate. Do not tolerate co-dependent or abusive behavior from others! And if that doesn’t work, see #4.
4. Leave. You can leave, you don’t have to stay. You can’t change them and you have trouble saying no. Leave—find a place where you can love and nourish your beautiful self!

Here are several expanded definitions of Co-Dependency copied from: Co-Dependence: Healing the Human Condition by Charles L. Whitfield, M.D.

1. A multidimensional (physical, mental, emotional and spiritual) condition manifested by any suffering and dysfunction that is associated with or due to focusing on the needs and behavior of others. It may be mild to severe and most people have it. It can mimic, be associated with or aggravate many physical, psychological and spiritual conditions. It develops from turning responsibility for our life and happiness over to our ego (false self) and to others. It is treatable and recovery is possible. (Whitfield 1987, 1990). This is my expanded and current definition.
2. 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 rules – rules that prevent the open expression of feeling, as well as the direct discussion of personal and interpersonal problems (Subby 1984, 1987).
3. A personality disorder based on: a need to control in the face of serious adverse consequences; neglecting one's own needs; boundary distortions around intimacy and separation; enmeshment with certain dysfunctional people; and other manifestations such as denial, constricted feelings, depression and stress-related medical illness (paraphrased from Cermak 1986).
4. [A disease wherein a person has difficulty]: (1) experiencing appropriate levels of self-esteem; (2) setting functional boundaries; (3) owning and expressing their own reality; (4) taking care of their adult needs and wants; (5) experiencing and expressing their reality moderately (Melody 1989).
5. A stressful learned behavior associated with an unhealthy focus on the needs of others and/or attempting to take responsibility for or control the thoughts, feelings or behavior of others . . . motivated by a need for safety, acceptance and self-worth (Des Roches 1990)
6. A spiritual condition, the shadow side of our love nature. . . . a “dis-ease” of unequal relationships being acted out, of giving our power away (Small 1991).

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The first three are resources quoted from directly in this article. Following the first 3 are resources listed alphabetically by author.

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