

Codependence

The Label

Codependence. Another term shrouded in mystery. If someone leans towards you over a cup of coffee and quietly tells you they're codependent you probably have no idea what to say.

Let's Get (briefly) Technical – A Formal Definition

What is codependence? The term refers to an emotional disorder where one person perpetuates the psychological problems of someone close to them. The codependent enables their cohort to continue their maladaptive ways both by protecting them from the consequences of their bad choices and by avoiding conflict with them at almost any cost. This behavior is often directed towards an addict.

At First Glance

A codependent feels helpless. Their frantic attempts to control their partner's hurtful choices fail again and again, leaving them frustrated that they can't modify the situation and shamed at their continued inability to meet the other's perfectionistic standards. They often see themselves as failures. Self-doubt and a sense of worthlessness are common. Bouts of self-loathing may occur. The codependent typically has an ill-defined sense of individuality and an even poorer sense of self-worth. They question their own perceptions, deny their feelings, and alter their standards.

While they demean and doubt themselves, codependents, at least for a while, tend to glorify their partner. They see him (or her) almost as a god. What a mistake. The real God loves and serves others, but the codependent's phony god doesn't have a clue about such things. Instead their "god" justifies his or her self-serving style and arrogantly assumes the right to punish the codependent for any uncooperative or unacceptable behavior.

What else does a codependent experience? Hypervigilance, depression, and stress. And then there's the fear, lots of fear. Fear of what the "god" will say or do. Fear of intimacy and fear of being alone. Fear of being hurt. Fear of being helpless. And buried beneath all this? Deep smoldering anger.

These are the interpersonal issues, and these must be dealt with. But deeper issues exist. Core healing won't occur until the codependent wrestles with the deep issues they have with God.

Deeper Issues

What are the God-issues in codependence?

To start with there's idolatry of another person. It's not just seeing that person as a god, but relying on them to do what only the actual God can do. Then there's self-idolatry. The codependent relies on self to do what only God can do. Let's get specific:

- God knows what's right and what's wrong. The codependent needs to let God, not people, guide their choices.

- God has control – people don't. The codependent must neither give another person god-like control nor try to exercise such control themselves. (No wonder codependents feel inept– they're trying to do something they have no ability to do.)
- God loves and values us. He never shames us or calls us worthless. The codependent must stop believing a partner who finds them unlovable or unworthy, because that partner is contradicting God.
- God never asks us to perform to earn His esteem. In His eyes our worth never fluctuates: no failure can diminish it and no success can increase it. Worth is just there – it's a gift from God. The codependent needs to abandon pleasing people in order to feel worthwhile.
- God is the only true necessity in life. The codependent's mistaken belief that they need their partner keeps them in bondage. When they are free of that need they will be able to relate to their partner with wisdom and courage

(By the way, these ideas apply not only to codependents. They apply to everyone – including addicts.)

The Way Out

The codependent is intimately familiar with humiliation, but knows little about humility. It never occurs to them that they're disagreeing with God, or that contradicting Him is an attempt to replace Him. I'm smarter than God! What an arrogant position. What an idolatrous stance. For deep change to occur that arrogance must be addressed; deep issues, like arrogance, require repentance.

The deep issue in codependence is idolatry. I discovered this one day when I was singing along with country-western songs on the car radio. This music reeks of codependence; the words describe hugely dysfunctional relationships. Even the thought of saying them to another person makes me flinch.

I didn't want to give up the music (I love its repetitive twang-twang), but something had to change. One day on a whim I started singing one of those songs to God: "I need you. You are my life. Without you I am lost." Perfect. When I applied those codependent lyrics to the Lord they sounded really good...and the mystery of codependence faded away.

A Redefinition

What is codependence? Codependence is depending on people for things which only God can reliably provide. If you rely on your spouse for a sense of significance, what do you do when they put you down? What do you do if they have a heart attack and leave you bereft? But God? Ah yes. God will never insult you and He won't ever leave you. People – even those that love us – repeatedly fail us; God never does. You'll find it safe to "co-depend" on Him.

Responding Wisely

Let's get back to that conversation over coffee. How do you respond to someone who calls themselves codependent? It's not hard but it takes time, often a lot of time. Listen carefully to the words they use and notice the particular forms their idolatry takes. Explore with them their beliefs about their relationships. Find out their views of God – it will help you learn why they find it so necessary to substitute people for Him.

But take the time. Keep listening and exploring and offering perspective. Act with courage (you're likely to meet resistance). And pray for them. Pray that the Lord will open their eyes and move them to repent.

Codependence
© Lynne Fox, 2010
biblegrapes.com