

Frequently asked questions:

Unmasking Co-dependency

1. You refer to co-dependency as an addiction' - please can you explain this and highlight how one develops the addiction?

Codependency is a chronic source of internal pain and discomfort. It results from growing up in a dysfunctional family of origin, but increasingly, is reinforced by an unhealthy society. In order to survive our wounding in childhood, we lose our authentic selves and replace it with a pseudo self, which then runs our life. Increasingly this disconnected way of living results in a feeling of deep emptiness that needs to be filled from the outside. The clients I work with report feeling a deep sense of “not enough-ness”. In the same way as an addict needs his/her substance for relief, the co-dependent needs relationships or other people (need to be needed) for relief. Often the compulsivity results in out of control, risky and self-destructive behaviour. They stay in harmful situations too long, but cannot stop, in spite of destructive consequences and several attempts to leave or control unhealthy relationships. This pattern is characteristic of all addictions.

2. What would you say are the top 5 characteristics of a person suffering from co-dependency?

Co-dependency is characterized by denial, low self-esteem, excessive compliance or control patterns. They suffer from:

- Low self-esteem often resulting in relying on others' approval for their sense of self-worth
- Inability to experience and set functional boundaries – including internal boundaries
- Difficulty experiencing life realistically causing reality to be distorted by fantasy, projections and other psychological defense mechanisms
- Inability to take appropriate care of their own needs and wants and often an inability to know what their real needs are
- An inability to express feelings and emotions moderately – often allowing resentment & anger to build until breaking point or illness

3. Does a co-dependent person inevitably attract co-dependents in their key relationships?

Co-dependency can occur in any type of relationship, including family, work, friendship, and also romantic, peer or community relationships. It is often the case that narcissists are considered to be natural magnets for codependents. This is due to one of the patterns of “staying in harmful situations too long” and “being loyal” thinking they can somehow fix or control the behavior of others. The pay off of course, is the need to be needed and validated, which is so important for co-dependents.

4. If you are co-dependent and in a partnership with another co-dependent person who does not recognise the co-dependency, can you achieve a more balanced, healthy relationship with them if you change but they don't?

In my experience a functional relationship requires that both parties look at themselves with honesty. Recovery requires willingness, honesty and humility. Some couples cannot survive the change that occurs as a result of a recovery process, as it alters the “contract” of the relationship. The recovered person is learning to set boundaries, be honest and authentic and many times this is too confronting for the person who has not done the same level of “inner intimacy work”. However, one of the true signs of an intimate relationship is the willingness “to heal each others childhood wounds.” To stay in the fire, as it were, as opposed to escaping into masks and personas. It requires courage to face what needs to be faced. It is a journey worth taking in relationships.

5. What are the main benefits of unmasking and healing co-dependency?

Many codependents have an obsessive quality to their thinking. They report over-analyzing and ruminating. The mind goes round and round, in circles, until the emotional system either wears down or shuts down, as a result of the overwhelming anxiety that is generated. They also tend to “catastrophize”. It’s all or nothing. Recovery is a process, which allows the co-dependent, to reconnect with their authentic selves. They identify their true needs. They learn how to set functional boundaries and start a process of being kinder to themselves by honoring the fact that “progress not perfection” can

heal us. They learn to live with honesty and to integrate and be congruent with their thoughts, values and feelings. They cultivate “inner intimacy” and free themselves, of the need to get approval and affirmation outside of themselves. They learn to let be and trust the flow of life as a result of trusting their own intuition.

6. What are the common signs of relapsing?

When we recognize that we are depleting ourselves and that a degree of intensity and drama is returning to our lives, we know that we are slipping. There is a tendency to be acting compulsively, such as over exercising, over working, over shopping and generally feeling as if we are trying to control outcomes at every turn. We fail to recognize we are tired and simply take on more. The immune system takes a knock and often the body is impacted with colds, IBS or other stress related symptoms. Another sign is an attempt to self-soothe or self-medicate our anxiety and exhaustion with other substances, such as alcohol or painkillers. As a result of not being able to set functional boundaries, resulting in over commitment, deep resentment and anger also cause us to become hyper-reactive. All in all, depletion has set in and we tend to minimize that reality.

7. If a person can take away just one message from your talk, what would you like that to be?

No amount of looking for solutions on the outside will ever fill the emptiness we feel on the inside, at times. Only by slowing down and turning towards our experience, can we learn what really matters. Only we can give ourselves permission to rest, by slowing down and going within. Only we can meet our true needs and in doing that, we begin to feel whole.

8. Is there anything you would like to add?

Mindfulness is deeply beneficial for clients in recovery. In training mindfulness, clients report a greater degree of clarity and spaciousness, where they are able to make better choices and be more compassionate with themselves. It is also non-pathologising, which means that “there is more right with you than wrong with you” as Jon Kabat-Zinn points out. He adds: “as long as you are breathing”. Meditation offers enormous benefits to enable us to learn how to self-regulate skillfully.

Mandy Johnson

www.mindfulinsight.co.za