

## **The Role of Codependency in Interpersonal Communication**

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COMS 135: Interpersonal Communications

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November 14<sup>th</sup>/2023

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### **Introduction**

Lisa was a professional woman with a seemingly perfect life. However, behind closed doors, she lived with a constant sense of anxiety, always walking on eggshells. Her husband, Tom, was an alcoholic. Over the years, Lisa found herself constantly making excuses for Tom's behavior, covering for his mistakes at work, and managing the household's finances single-handedly due to Tom's spending on alcohol. Friends praised Lisa for her resilience and dedication, but inside, she was slowly losing herself, always prioritizing Tom's needs over her own. It was only during a support group meeting for families of alcoholics, inspired by Melody Beattie's work, that Lisa realized she wasn't just being supportive; she was trapped in a cycle of codependency. (Beattie, 1987)

In a world where obvious addictions include drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, gambling, sex, and — to a lesser extent but still widespread — coffee and fitness, many of us grapple to find balance. Some seek escape from pain by pursuing pleasure. Yet, it can be challenging to recognize one of the most insidious addictions our society faces: our addiction to each other. This dependency has subtly woven its tentacles through time and space, ensnaring every facet of our society. Many addicts, only after years of therapy and 12 step programs realize codependency to be their primary addiction. Codependency awareness is only beginning to come into the mainstream – with the main issue being our lack of awareness around what codependency is, what it means, how to spot it in our lives, and what to do about it.

## **Research Question**

This paper delves into the concept of codependency, examining its role both in our individual lives and its broader implications for society. It will explore the patterns and characteristics of codependency and paint a portrait of what recovery from such a state might look like. Central to our exploration is the question: How can one foster healthy relationships through heightened awareness of codependency?

## **Literature Review**

Through technology-based mechanisms, our society continues transitioning extremely quickly. Our ability to send and receive information at unparalleled speeds reveals some positives results - like our societies growing awareness around mental health issues. But with every emerging trend, there's always unregulated areas in which we need to use caution. Social media is one of these areas that is ripe for individuals to share stories and develop personal growth. It is also a hotbed for self-esteem issues and manipulation. We also must deal with the fact that there is a lack of literature, research, and awareness around codependency. So, as we enter the topic it is important to start at the beginning with its actual dictionary definition as a grounded baseline for discussion. Websters Dictionary describes Codependency as follows: *a psychological condition or a relationship in which a person manifesting low self-esteem and a powerful desire for approval has an unhealthy attachment to another often controlling or manipulative person (such as a person with an addiction to alcohol or drugs.)* (Webster's, 2023).

Realizing this definition is only part of the story, the CODA.org website attempts to make codependency a little bit more accessible. This nonprofit dedicated to codependent healing defines codependence by patterns of dysfunctional relationships, where individuals often form

or maintain relationships that are one-sided, emotionally destructive, or abusive. (Co-Dependents Anonymous, n.d.). This is a terrific addition to the definition, but the scope of codependency becomes much clearer when we add in the description from master therapist Darlen Lancer:

"While codependency is characterized by a loss of self, an over-reliance on others for identity or decision-making, and a tendency to place others' needs above one's own to the detriment of oneself, interdependency is the hallmark of a healthy relationship where two people, with clear boundaries and identities, mutually support and complement each other." ((Lancer, 2022) as Lancer points out, Codependency is lost in this ambiguity, until it's tied to its healthy counterpart, interdependence. Unfortunately. It's clear after reading the literature that we don't grow up learning how to build healthy relationships. More often we are just a byproduct of nurture and nature that were raised within and around.

Codependency is akin to an insidious disease, a parasite, that eats its Host from the inside. In the book *adult children of emotionally, immature parents* by Lindsay Gibson: Discussed the consequences of growing up with emotionally unavailable parents. This often results in patterns like seeking external validation and struggling with self-identity, which are intrinsically tied to codependent behaviors. (Gibson, (2015). Being able to spot the patterns and characteristics of codependency is vital. Returning to coda.org, The website highlights several characteristics, such as an exaggerated sense of responsibility for others' actions, confusion between love and pity, and feeling trapped in one's relationship (Co-Dependents Anonymous, n.d.). One of the things that the research shows that's so insidious about codependency is the trauma that is handed down from our parents. Often, even highly successful children feel used,

run down, and unfulfilled despite their success. Because they are in a codependent relationship with their parents. The parents' passed trauma leaves them emotionally immature to their children. Despite them being both adults, old patterns still exist. Poor communication, unspoken expectations create toxic familial dynamics. Many of us can relate to feeling guilt tripped into obligatory behavior by a relative we feel obliged to just because their family. Some Emotionally immature adults can even use religious guilt or tradition to have their children stuck and enmeshed in unhealthy relationships. Therefore, spotting the patterns and characteristics of codependent behavior becomes even more important. Beattie (1986) describes codependents as individuals who let another's behavior affect them excessively and become obsessed with controlling that person's behavior. While Gibson (2015) discusses the consequences of growing up with emotionally unavailable parents. This often results in patterns like seeking external validation and struggling with self-identity, which are intrinsically tied to codependent behaviors. As we find Support again in codependency for dummies, Lancer (2015) elaborates on the recognizable symptoms of codependency, such as difficulties in setting and maintaining boundaries, denial of one's own needs and feelings, and chronic low self-esteem. The literature continues to address the idea of the individual losing oneself in relationships. GS Youngblood, An Indigenous author focused on healthy masculinity brings in some interesting context. In his book Masculine in Relationship, Youngblood (2019) touches upon the aspect of losing oneself in relationships, especially from a masculine perspective. This includes sacrificing personal needs and boundaries to maintain peace or to avoid conflicts. One of the core patterns and characteristics of codependence is people pleasing. It's clear that one aspect of codependency that becomes immediately relatable to those completely unfamiliar

with the topic -- Is the idea of agreeing to these frivolous societal engagements out of interpersonal obligation rather than the actual desire to do so. You would rather stay in bed tonight and watch a movie, but your company is having a networking event, and you would feel guilty if you did not show up, put on a hello name tag, and have a glass of wine to take the edge off. Codependency does not discriminate. The research shows that individuals of all backgrounds can enter toxic and codependent relationships without thoroughly investigating their own intentions and expectations, prior to doing so. As a society, we are not taught to investigate our mental health to the extent that developing healthy interpersonal relationships requires. In her book *Facing Codependency*, Mellody, along with Miller & Miller (1989), outlines the dysfunctional patterns that codependents often exhibit, such as avoidance of feelings, difficulties adjusting to change, and an excessive sense of loyalty even in harmful situations. While Amir LeVine's book *Attached* focuses on attachment styles, the anxious attachment style they discuss parallels codependent patterns. This includes an overwhelming fear of abandonment and constantly seeking reassurance from partners. This fear of being alone reinforces Pia Mellody's point that codependents have an excessive sense of loyalty. As we add in Levine's point about abandonment issues, we get some insight into why codependents would confuse loyalty in a way as to stay in a harmful situation.

Now that we have a grasp on the patterns and characteristics of codependency, it's important to identify the factors leading to codependency in the first place. Codependency is a complex relational pattern, often stemming from a combination of individual experiences, societal norms, and learned behaviors. A closer examination of the literature reveals a range of

factors contributing to its development. Codependency is a multifaceted relational phenomenon, deeply rooted in individual and collective experiences spanning from childhood to adulthood. Tracing its origins, one cannot ignore the influence of one's formative years. Gibson (2015) articulates the pivotal role of emotionally unavailable parents. Such an environment leaves a lasting imprint on the child, fostering a void that pushes them to perpetually seek validation in adult relationships.

Yet, while the family serves as the primary socialization agent, societal constructs further compound these early influences. Youngblood (2019) sheds light on the pressure for men to conform to societal norms that advocate emotional suppression, unwittingly driving them towards codependent patterns in relationships. This societal paradigm intersects with Beattie's (1986) observations of individuals' innate need for control, which can be traced back to unstable childhood environments, emphasizing the intertwining of personal history and societal expectations.

Our internal world, marked by personal defects and a lack of self-awareness, can further precipitate codependent behaviors. As Bill P., Todd W., & Sara S. (2005) opine, avoiding confrontation or seeking validation are behaviors often stemming from an inability or unwillingness to address one's own character defects. Lancer (2015) echoes this sentiment, highlighting the role of an ingrained sense of low self-worth in pushing individuals towards such behavioral patterns. Interpersonal relationships, at their core, are shaped by our fears and anxieties. Casey (2010) touches upon the deep-rooted fear of abandonment, which can result in

individuals clinging to relationships, irrespective of their health. This sentiment finds resonance in the work of Levine & Heller (2010), who discuss the role of anxious attachment styles, developed in childhood, in fostering codependent tendencies during adulthood. Moreover, Mellody, with Miller & Miller (1989), takes this a step further, drawing a connection between unresolved childhood traumas, which might range from emotional to physical abuse, and the emergence of codependency in adult life. Codependency is not a product of isolated incidents or influences but is the culmination of a tapestry of personal histories, societal norms, inner vulnerabilities, and deep-seated fears. Recognizing this interplay is the first step toward understanding and ultimately addressing the issue.

Addressing codependency often begins with understanding its roots, and literature presents a multifaceted approach to healing, with strategies ranging from self-help techniques to therapeutic interventions. Central to many of these approaches is the concept of self-care. Beattie (1986) in "Codependent No More" postulates that the journey starts with self-focus. By detaching with love and prioritizing oneself, the individual can shift the paradigm from external validation to self-affirmation. Aligning with this, the 12-Step Program from Co-Dependents Anonymous offers a structured pathway that encourages individuals to recognize and subsequently confront their codependent behaviors. However, the process of healing often involves delving deeper than just the immediate behaviors. It requires addressing the very fabric of one's identity and the influences that molded it. This sentiment is echoed by Youngblood (2019) in "The Masculine in Relationship," emphasizing the restoration of a powerful sense of self as pivotal. Similarly, Gibson (2015) suggests a transformative approach of

're-parenting oneself', a method of self-healing by providing oneself the emotional support and validation that was lacking during formative years. Lancer (2015) takes the conversation to the realm of relationships, emphasizing the importance of setting and maintaining clear boundaries. This resonates with Casey's (2010) teachings on the art of detachment, which emphasizes relinquishing control and fostering mutual respect and freedom. Mellody, with Miller & Miller (1989), brings attention to the shadows of the past, suggesting interventions that target unresolved childhood traumas, while Levine & Heller (2010) present an approach rooted in the science of attachment styles. Recognizing one's style and working on it can effectively sever the patterns leading to codependency. Considering the above, it is evident that overcoming codependency requires an integrative approach—addressing both past traumas and current behaviors. As a practical example, Jane, a 30-year-old woman, successfully navigated her codependency issues by combining therapy that addressed her childhood traumas, attending Co-Dependents Anonymous meetings, and implementing the self-care strategies as proposed by Beattie.

### **Research Study Design**

At 43 years of age, having endured multiple significant traumas in my life, I recognized a predominant goal: to build healthy relationships. Regrettably, during my childhood, I was never equipped with the necessary tools or training to communicate effectively, nor did I possess an understanding of establishing healthy boundaries, crucial for fostering those relationships. The absence of positive role models meant that I frequently found myself bewildered when relationships concluded. I lacked the strategies to articulate my needs or to amicably part ways with relationships that proved detrimental. My recurring pattern of relationships ending

abruptly and traumatically, often leaving me feeling exploited and misapprehended, motivated me to explore the roots of my relational patterns. This exploration led me to literature on attachment styles and subsequently to the concept of codependency, particularly through Melody Beattie's book referenced throughout this essay. This realization spurred me to seek weekly counseling. For the past 17 months, I have also been engaged in a 12-step program affiliated with Coda.org. This journey equipped me to discern the nuances of codependency, its distinct patterns, and characteristics. More crucially, through fellowship and shared experiences, I learned and upheld self-care routines vital for recuperation from what many perceive as a disease. This program, combined with counseling, necessitated extensive journaling and introspection. Every step of the program demanded profound self-reflection and presented a corresponding tradition for contemplation. These steps not only urged inner exploration but also confronted me with broader questions about the sincerity of my intentions and the repercussions of my actions on others.

### **Research Study Results**

Seventeen months into this journey, I have completed three-quarters of the 12-step program. Concurrently, I have been attending weekly counseling sessions and fostering a wholesome relationship with my sponsor, a recovered codependent with over two decades of insight. The transformation I've experienced in my life is profound, and words scarcely capture the essence of the metamorphosis. Initially, I surmised my addiction was solely linked to cannabis. However, after a tumultuous breakup during a two-year hiatus from smoking and drinking, I discerned a deeper, underlying issue. When I hit rock bottom and identified codependency as the core challenge, I finally saw a ray of hope and a path upwards. Grasping

the intricacies of codependency and the multifaceted nature of healthy relationships is an ongoing expedition. Yet, the insights I have garnered and the effort I've devoted to my healing is irrefutable. Since embarking on this journey, I have migrated to a new country, earned my high school diploma, enrolled in college, joined the basketball team, and rejuvenated my career as a fashion model after a decade-long hiatus. This transformative phase was catalyzed by the supportive community and the nourishing relationships I cultivated as an outcome of this research and my goal to be healthy.

### **Conclusion**

Codependency, often veiled beneath the surface of relationships, is an intricate and multi-dimensional challenge that numerous individuals face, many without even realizing it. This exploration into the realm of codependency has illuminated the depth and breadth of its impact on individual lives and its widespread prevalence in our society. Through a combination of thorough literature review and personal introspection, a comprehensive understanding of codependency's nuances, patterns, and effects has been established. More importantly, this journey underscores the significance of awareness, education, and proactive intervention in mitigating the adverse effects of codependency. My personal voyage, from the depths of misunderstanding and pain to a path of enlightenment and healing, serves as a testament to the transformative power of knowledge and the human spirit's resilience. Through continuous learning, counseling, community support, and self-reflection, one can not only identify and comprehend the shadows of codependency but also chart a path towards healthier, more fulfilling relationships. As individuals and as a society, recognizing and addressing

codependency is not just about mending broken connections; it's about forging a future where relationships are the bedrock of mutual understanding, growth, and genuine connection.

























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