

# Understanding Codependency

Many people care deeply about someone with a chemical dependency, whether the person is a friend, parent, spouse or child. They may not realize it, but their own behavior has probably changed. Many people become codependent. They compulsively react to the chemically dependent person's behavior and try to control it. Codependent habits often go unrecognized and cause great damage. They may actually help the chemically dependent person stay addicted and prevent the codependent person from living a fulfilling life, sometimes for years after the original relationship is gone. If you believe you might have codependent habits, learning about codependency is the first step toward making a happier life for yourself. And, although no one can force another person to choose recovery, this knowledge can also help you create an environment in which a chemically dependent person can get healthy and stay that way.

## Characteristics and Consequences

Codependency has many characteristics, which vary dramatically from person to person, but the central characteristic is the same. The codependent pays tremendous attention to the actions and feelings of others and neglects his or her own needs. The codependent is always reacting to another, rather than acting for himself. Some common characteristics of codependency include: worrying and anxiety, "bending over backward" to take care of others, not knowing or not trusting one's own feelings, feeling guilty for "not doing enough," feeling isolated or depressed, staying in bad relationships (or even sabotaging potentially good ones), trouble with emotional intimacy or sex, workaholism, lack of energy and low self-esteem.

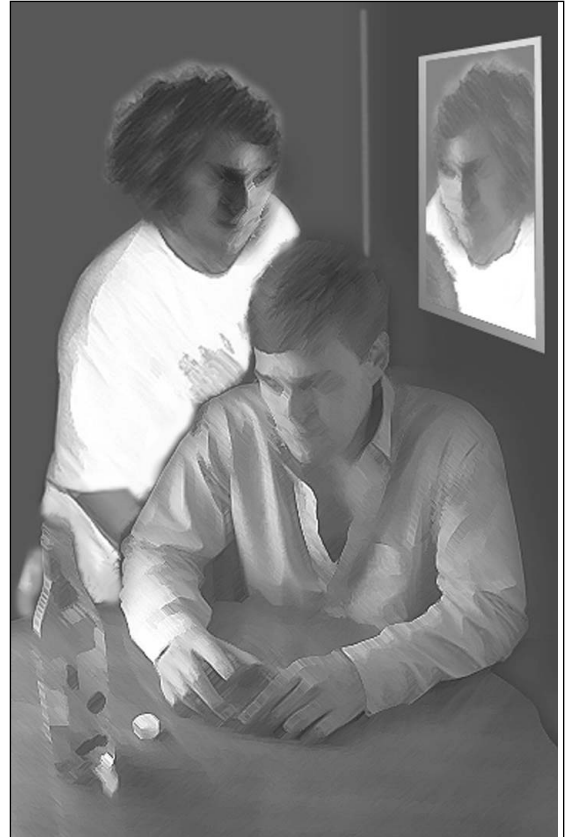
Codependent people often "rescue" the chemically dependent from the consequences of their actions by lying for them, lending them money or taking over their responsibilities. This makes it easier for the abuser to keep on using.

The codependent may try to control the habits of the abuser by nagging, pleading or hiding the alcohol or other drug. Although the codependent may be motivated by love, and struggle heroically to get the abuser to change, the only person you can change or control is yourself. And whether the abuser chooses recovery or not, codependent people can work, learn and make choices that will bring peace and enjoyment into their lives.

## The Recovery Process

The recovery process for a codependent person is simple to state, but takes time and effort to bear fruit. The essence of it is learning to take good care of oneself, and to let others take care of themselves. To do this, the codependent needs to find out how he or she is feeling and behaving, to become detached from involvement in other people's problems, to learn to love oneself, and to take responsibility for attending to one's own needs. Detachment doesn't mean indifference, or avoiding responsibility. It simply means putting that energy to better use.

Loving a chemically dependent person can be terribly painful and can affect your life for years after that person is gone. Recovering from codependency is a process of acknowledging and then letting go of pain, and finding ways to build a happy life.



*For more information on recovering from codependency, contact your local chapter of Al-Anon. Your Employee Assistance Program can refer you to this and other helpful organizations.*