

Recovering from Codependency: The Truth About People-Pleasing

The term “codependency” can mean different things to different people. Over the years, a number of authors have offered a variety of definitions for this difficult dynamic that seems to affect more people than we can imagine.

My definition is a very simple one: “codependency” occurs when we put other people’s needs ahead of our own on a fairly consistent basis. In truth, when we are codependent, we are also people-pleasers who will go to virtually any lengths to avoid unpleasant conflict with others.

DOES THIS SOUND LIKE YOU?

You are tired of giving and giving to other people, without getting much in return.

You are concerned about the pain and /or abuse that you are experiencing in your relationships.

You feel sorry for yourself, baffled about why this is happening to you but not knowing what to do about it.

You try to convince yourself that the problems you are experiencing aren’t really that bad.

“BUT I’M SUCH A NICE PERSON!”

Because codependents consistently put others’ needs ahead of their own, they often believe that they are “nice” people.

“I’m doing what everybody wants me to do,” you tell yourself, “so why do I get mistreated so much of the time?” Indeed, this will be a real dilemma for you as a people-pleaser. If you are codependent, it probably doesn’t make sense to you that you are being treated abusively by the very people you are trying so hard to accommodate!

But the truth may be that you are not really as “nice” as you would like to believe you are, because you are not saying yes to everyone else just to be kind to them. Nor do you

do more than your fair share of tasks because you truly want to be of service over and over without any kind of reciprocal arrangement.

When you say yes (especially when you really want to say NO), you are actually protecting yourself from having to face the potentially painful consequences that can result when someone is angry or disappointed with you for not agreeing to do what they want you to do.

Even though you are really trying to look out for yourself by side-stepping these negative outcomes, which could be seen as a self-caring intention, it is unfortunately not a healthy form of self-care when it is done out of resistance to unpleasantness.

WE TEACH OTHER PEOPLE HOW TO TREAT US

In order for codependence to be part of any relationship, two things have to happen ~ the people-pleaser has to say yes a lot more often than no, and the other person has to not only accept this but also begin to expect it in the relationship. Once that dynamic is in place, it is difficult to break the cycle.

When you say yes consistently to another person, and when you accept any form of abuse as part of any of your relationships, you are essentially teaching the other people that it is all right for them to treat you that way. Although you might not be aware of it, you actually do have as much power and control as the other person does, because all of us can really only control ourselves.

It is only when you *choose* to give your power and control to another person that you begin to feel the sting of codependency, because the truth is that no one can disrespect you without your permission.

SHIFTING OUT OF PEOPLE-PLEASING INTO HEALTHY ASSERTIVENESS ~ HOW TO BEGIN

If you are experiencing codependency and people-pleasing in any of your significant relationships (which can include those with parents, children, siblings, spouses, partners, friends, bosses or co-workers), then there has likely been a cycle established in which you have been reacting in a “passive” manner while the other person has been acting “aggressively” toward you.

The healthy balance is one of “assertiveness.” This occurs when both people speak and behave toward each other in respectful ways, taking full responsibility for themselves and their own choices without resorting to blaming, shaming or threatening each other in any way.

But change always has to start with oneself. If you are in relationships that are already entrenched in codependent dynamics, you will need to make some important changes *within yourself* before you can expect to see any change in the behaviour of those around you.

You can begin by deciding that it is time to learn new ways of being in relationship with yourself, such as treating yourself more respectfully and saying yes to yourself more often. You will also need to become willing to learn how to deal with the negative reactions you might encounter when you stop being so accommodating and available to the others in your life. This will prevent you from reacting from a place of fear in your relationships.

When you are starting the journey away from people-pleasing and seeking a new level of emotional health, you may find that self-help books about codependency can be a great aid. You may also want to check out some self-help groups such as Codependents Anonymous or 16 Steps for Discovery and Empowerment, to find others who are on the same journey as you are. As well, you might want to reach out to a skilled counsellor for help, as you begin to test out new boundaries and healthier ways of relating to others.

THE GIFT OF ASSERTIVENESS

Becoming more real and genuine in your relationships is a gift you give to both yourself and to the others in your life. Learning how to tell people the truth about how you feel, as well as about what you are (and aren't) willing to do for them is an act of love, honesty and personal integrity.

As you learn how to deal with potentially unpleasant reactions from others, you can begin to change your people-pleasing patterns. This is the key to unlocking a whole new world of being a self-respecting, authentic and genuine person in your relationships.

