

## THE DANCE OF CODEPENDENCY

A person reared in a dysfunctional environment where family members appear to need fixing, rescuing, or controlling often grows up to be an adult who loves others who seem to need fixing, rescuing, or controlling. Let's face it – we are most comfortable with what we already know. Codependency, then, requires another who seems to need us – it is a dance that takes two.

### **The Need to be Needed**

Being needed appeals to many of us. It may fill a void within us we didn't know existed until a certain kind of person comes along. The other person may not look needy at first glance (in fact, they may be fun, attractive, and charismatic), but something in us senses that they could be better with our help. Maybe they have a bad habit or had a dysfunctional background or seem down on their luck right now or just have a few rough edges that need to be smoothed off. But it's when we ignore these signs of potential trouble that the music starts and the dance begins.

As the band plays on, though, the dance that felt so right at first becomes uncomfortable, aggravating, and unpredictable. It evolves into a situation that feels unsafe and out of control. The dance partner becomes a "problem person" and the focus of the relationship. Sadly, the codependent person is now in familiar territory again feeling the need to be needed. He/she tries harder and harder to make things right. As this relationship pattern continues, both people play an equal role in the downward spiral of dysfunction. Counselors call this the "vicious cycle".

### **The Vicious Cycle**

The vicious cycle looks like a circle turning clockwise in perpetual motion. On the right side of the circle is the problem person and on the left side is the codependent person. Each one of them provides energy to power a continuing cycle of hurt. If, for example, the problem person is abusive, the old fears he carries inside (fear of being hurt, fear of being manipulated, fear of the loss of control) fuel his hurtful behaviors. Likewise, the codependent's old fears (being unloved, being abandoned, and being powerless) produce her benevolent control behaviors toward the abuser. Each person's fears and related behaviors exacerbate their partner's fears and behaviors in a vicious cycle of continuing conflict, hurt feelings, anger, revenge and despair.

### **A Pattern of Enabling**

If we focus on the codependent side of the vicious cycle, the main behavior fueling the vicious cycle is enabling. To enable is to give opportunity for something to occur or to make it easier to occur. Enabling starts with very good intentions – caring for another who isn't doing well in life. But it evolves into robbing them of the responsibilities and consequences they need to grow.

When a codependent person is married to an alcoholic, for example, he tends to enable her problem drinking unintentionally. Examples of his enabling would include: ignoring it, denying it, nagging, covering for the alcoholic, throwing away alcohol, bailing the alcoholic out of jail, doing things for the alcoholic she should be doing herself, keeping the problem secret, demeaning the alcoholic, worrying about her, and threatening consequences but not following through.

None of the behaviors above help the alcoholic – they actually make her worse. And these same behaviors also prove harmful to the codependent. His efforts to fix, rescue, and control only create increasing hurt, fear, resentment, and stress for him. What the alcoholic really needs is clear limits and stiff consequences provided by her husband. What the enabling husband needs is the courage and willingness to provide these forms of tough love. If she is not willing and able to stop drinking, and he is not willing and able to provide necessary boundaries and consequences, the cost to both will be very high indeed.