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*Beyond Codependency: And Getting Better All the Time*  
*The Language of Letting Go: Daily Meditations for Codependents*  
*Codependents' Guide to the Twelve Steps*

# Codependent No More

HOW TO STOP CONTROLLING OTHERS  
AND START CARING FOR YOURSELF

Melody Beattie



INFORMATION & EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

*"It is not easy to find  
happiness in ourselves, and  
it is not possible to find it  
elsewhere."*

—Agnes Repplier,  
*The Treasure Chest*

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For helping make this book possible, I thank:

God, my mother, David, my children, Scott Egleston, Sharon George, Joanne Marcuson, and all the codependent people who have learned from me and allowed me to learn from them.

This book is dedicated to me.

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## PREFACE TO THE 1992 EDITION

Back in the early eighties, when I first envisioned writing a book about codependency—when I was desperately struggling to sort through my own pain—I vowed that if I ever figured out what happened to me and what I needed to do to get better, I'd write a book about it. That book, I decided, would be warm, gentle, nonjudgmental, nontechnical.

It would be kind. Because that's what I needed—information and kindness. I needed help with my healing process from my codependency issues.

About five years later, I sat down to write that book. Just separated from my husband of ten years, I went on welfare for four months, to help me support myself and my two children, Nichole and Shane, while I wrote *Codependent No More*.

When I wondered how I, a nonexpert, could write a book like that, I took comfort by telling myself that it was okay to say what I thought because only a few people would read it anyway. I also spent a great deal of time on the introduction, striving not only to introduce the book, but to introduce the concept of *codependency*—the word—to a world that, for the most part, had not heard about it.

Now, another five years later, I've been asked to write an anniversary preface to a book that has sold over two million copies.

"What do I put in it?" I asked my editor and friend, Rebecca Post, from Hazelden.

"Tell about the changes that have happened—to women, to people in our country, to you, since you wrote that book," she suggested.

"Hmmm," I pondered. "What changes have happened besides the Persian Gulf War, the breakdown of communism in the Soviet Union, and the Hill-Thomas hearings?"

I turn on the television. The movie of the week, I can't remember the name, is a story about a teenager struggling to deal with her alcoholism

and the impact of being raped. Her mother, a nurse, has worked valiantly to break free from a dysfunctional and abusive relationship with her husband, the girl's father. Throughout the movie, mother and daughter talk directly about not rescuing each other because of the diminishing effects of such behavior. The movie ends with the daughter playing a guitar and singing a song she's written about not being a victim anymore.

I walk into a church, one I haven't attended for a long time. The sermon is somewhat unusual this cold, Sunday winter morning. The minister is speaking from his heart, telling the congregation that he is done leading a church that's based on shame, fear, guilt, and dishonesty. He wants instead, he says, to be part of a church that's based on equality, honesty, intimacy, acceptance, and the healing power of God's love. He wants to be part of a church where he can have his own issues and problems, and where people are functioning in healthy, honest relationships with each other and God.

My daughter comes home from her first week at a new school. "Guess what, Mom?" she says. "We're reading a meditation each day in homeroom class from your book, *The Language of Letting Go*. And at my friend's school, they're talking about codependency issues in health class."

*Codependent No More*, with a picture of handcuffs broken apart on the front cover, makes the best-seller list in France.

*Catdependent No More*, parodying the title of my book, makes the 1991 Christmas book list here in Minnesota.

Some things have changed. I've written four more books, traveled the world, divorced (but not remarried), and paid back the welfare department for the financial help they gave me.

I feel more passionately about the importance of healing from our abuse issues. I feel more passionately. I've become more spontaneous, embraced my femininity, and learned new lessons along the way—about boundaries, flexibility, and owning my power. And about love. I'm learning to respect men. My relationships have deepened. Some have changed.

The most significant change in my life has been the loss of my son, Shane. As you may have heard or read, in February of 1991, three days after his twelfth birthday, my beloved Shane—so much a part of my life

and work—was killed suddenly in a ski accident on the slopes at Afion Alps.

I'm learning about death and life.

I've grown and changed. I've watched my friends grow and change. Many of you have written to me about your growth and change.

I still struggle with feeling feelings and trusting my process, my path, and my Higher Power. I still feel afraid at times. Sometimes I forget and try to control everything. I may become obsessive, unless I catch myself.

And, despite its years on the best-seller list, the most common question I'm still asked by people and the media is, "Just exactly what is codependency?"

Some things haven't changed, at least not a lot. I still refuse to be an expert and permanently decline the title of "guru." But I'm still willing to tell you what I see, and believe.

Although some things appear not to have changed, things are constantly changing. Our consciousness, as individuals and as a society, has been raised. We've realized that women have souls, and men have feelings.

And I've gone deeper into my healing process than I ever intended.

\* \* \*

I don't know how much my writing has contributed to this consciousness-raising, and how much the consciousness-raising has contributed to my writing. But I'm grateful to be part of what's happened.

I'm honored to be part of a movement influenced by people such as Anne Wilson Schaefer, John Bradshaw, Patrick Carnes, Earnie Larsen, and led by people such as you, my readers—the real heroes—quietly and profoundly doing your own healing work and carrying the message to others, most significantly by example.

I've met many of you in my travels across the country. Some of you have written to me. Thank you for the love, support, and compassion you've shown me not only over the years, but throughout the rough, raw months of 1991 after Shane's death.

Many of you have written to me, saying how much I've helped you. Well, you've helped and touched me, too.

One woman wrote to me recently, saying she had read all my books and had been recovering from codependency for years. "I want to learn more, though," she wrote. "I want to go deeper into my codependency. Please write more about that."

Maybe we don't need to go deeper into our codependency. We can, instead, march forward into our destinies. We can remember and practice all we've learned about addictions, codependency, and abuse. With compassion and boundaries, we need to commit fully to loving God, ourselves, and others. We need to commit fully to trusting God, ourselves, and our process.

Then we can be open to the next step. We are on time, and we are where we need to be. We can be trusted. So can God. And letting go and gratitude still work. Keep your head up and your heart open. And let's see what's next. Happy five-year anniversary, *Codependent No More*.

Melody Beatrice

## INTRODUCTION

My first encounter with codependents occurred in the early sixties. This was before people, tormented by other people's behavior, were called *codependents*, and before people addicted to alcohol and other drugs were labeled *chemically dependent*. Although I didn't know *what* codependents were, I usually knew *who* they were. As an alcoholic and addict, I stormed through life, helping create other codependents.

Codependents were a necessary nuisance. They were hostile, controlling, manipulative, indirect, guilt producing, difficult to communicate with, generally disagreeable, sometimes downright hateful, and a hindrance to my compulsion to get high. They hollered at me, hid my pills, made nasty faces at me, poured my alcohol down the sink, tried to keep me from getting more drugs, wanted to know why I was doing this to them, and asked what was wrong with me. But they were always there, ready to rescue me from self-created disasters. The codependents in my life didn't understand me, and the misunderstanding was mutual. I didn't understand me, and I didn't understand them.

My first professional encounter with codependents occurred years later, in 1976. At that time in Minnesota, addicts and alcoholics had become *chemically dependent*, their families and friends had become *significant others*, and I had become a *recovering addict and alcoholic*. By then, I also worked as a counselor in the chemical dependency field, that vast network of institutions, programs, and agencies that helps chemically dependent people get well. Because I'm a woman and most of the significant others at that time were women, and because I had the least seniority and none of my co-workers wanted to do it, my employer at the Minneapolis treatment center told me to organize support groups for wives of addicts in the program.

I wasn't prepared for this task. I still found codependents hostile, controlling, manipulative, indirect, guilt producing, difficult to communicate with, and more.

In my group, I saw people who felt responsible for the entire world, but they refused to take responsibility for leading and living their own lives.

I saw people who constantly gave to others but didn't know how to receive. I saw people give until they were angry, exhausted, and emptied of everything. I saw some give until they gave up. I even saw one woman give and suffer so much that she died of "old age" and natural causes at age 33. She was the mother of five children and the wife of an alcoholic who had been sent to prison for the third time.

I worked with women who were experts at taking care of everyone around them, yet these women doubted their ability to take care of themselves.

I saw mere shells of people, racing mindlessly from one activity to another. I saw people-pleasers, martyrs, stoics, tyrants, withering vines, clinging vines, and, borrowing from H. Sackler's line in his play, *The Great White Hope*, "pinched up faces giving off the miseries."

Most codependents were obsessed with other people. With great precision and detail, they could recite long lists of the addict's deeds and misdeeds: what he or she thought, felt, did, and said; and what he or she didn't think, feel, do, and say. The codependents knew what the alcoholic or addict should and shouldn't do. And they wondered extensively why he or she did or didn't do it.

Yet these codependents who had such great insight into others couldn't see themselves. They didn't know what they were feeling. They weren't sure what they thought. And they didn't know what, if anything, they could do to solve their problems—if, indeed, they had any problems other than the alcoholics.

It was a formidable group, these codependents. They were aching, complaining, and trying to control everyone and everything but themselves. And, except for a few quiet pioneers in family therapy, many counselors (including me) didn't know how to help them. The chemical dependency field was flourishing, but help focused on the addict. Literature and training on family therapy were scarce. What did codependents need? What did they want? Weren't they just an extension of the alco-

holic, a visitor to the treatment center? Why couldn't they cooperate, instead of always making problems? The alcoholic had an excuse for being so crazy—he was drunk. These significant others had no excuse. They were this way sober.

Soon, I subscribed to two popular beliefs. These crazy codependents (significant others) are sicker than the alcoholics. And, no wonder the alcoholic drinks; who wouldn't with a crazy spouse like that?

By then, I had been sober for a while. I was beginning to understand myself, but I didn't understand codependency. I tried, but couldn't—until years later, when I became so caught up in the chaos of a few alcoholics that I stopped living my own life. I stopped thinking. I stopped feeling positive emotions, and I was left with rage, bitterness, hatred, fear, depression, helplessness, despair, and guilt. At times, I wanted to stop living. I had no energy. I spent most of my time worrying about people and trying to figure out how to control them. I couldn't say no (to anything but fun activities) if my life depended on it, which it did. My relationships with friends and family members were in shambles. I felt terribly victimized. I lost myself and didn't know how it had happened. I didn't know *what* had happened. I thought I was going crazy. And, I thought, shaking a finger at the people around me, it's *their* fault.

Sadly, aside from myself, nobody knew how badly I felt. My problems were my secret. Unlike the alcoholics and other troubled people in my life, I wasn't going around making big messes and expecting someone to clean up after me. In fact, next to the alcoholics, I looked good. I was so responsible, so dependable. Sometimes I wasn't sure I had a problem. I knew I felt miserable, but I didn't understand why my life wasn't working.

After floundering in despair for a while, I began to understand. Like many people who judge others harshly, I realized I had just taken a very long and painful walk in the shoes of those I had judged. I now understood those crazy codependents. I had become one.

Gradually, I began to climb out of my black abyss. Along the way, I developed a passionate interest in the subject of codependency. As a counselor (although I no longer worked full-time in the field, I still

considered myself one) and as a writer, my curiosity was provoked. As a "flaming, careening codependent" (a phrase borrowed from an Al-Anon member) who needed help, I also had a personal stake in the subject. What happens to people like me? How does it happen? Why? Most important, what do codependents need to do to feel better? And stay that way?

I talked to counselors, therapists, and codependents. I read the few available books on the subject and related topics. I reread the basics—the therapy books that have stood the test of time—looking for ideas that applied. I went to meetings of Al-Anon, a self-help group based on the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous but geared toward the person who has been affected by another person's drinking.

Eventually, I found what I was seeking. I began to see, understand, and change. My life started working again. Soon, I was conducting another group for codependents at another Minneapolis treatment center. But this time, I had a vague notion of what I was doing.

I still found codependents hostile, controlling, manipulative, indirect, and all the things I had found them before. I still saw all the peculiar twists of personality I previously saw. But, I saw deeper.

I saw people who were hostile; they had felt so much hurt that hostility was their only defense against being crushed again. They were that angry because anyone who had tolerated what they had would be that angry.

They were controlling because everything around and inside them was out of control. Always, the dam of their lives and the lives of those around them threatened to burst and spew harmful consequences on everyone. And nobody but them seemed to notice or care.

I saw people who manipulated because manipulation appeared to be the only way to get anything done. I worked with people who were indirect because the systems they lived in seemed incapable of tolerating honesty.

I worked with people who thought they were going crazy because they had believed so many lies they didn't know what reality was.

I saw people who had gotten so absorbed in other people's problems they didn't have time to identify or solve their own. These were people who had cared so deeply, and often destructively, about other people that they had forgotten how to care about themselves. The codependents felt responsible for so much because the people around them felt responsible for so little; they were just taking up the slack.

I saw hurting, confused people who needed comfort, understanding, and information. I saw victims of alcoholism who didn't drink but were nonetheless victimized by alcohol. I saw victims struggling desperately to gain some kind of power over their perpetrators. They learned from me, and I learned from them.

Soon, I began to subscribe to some new beliefs about codependency. Codependents aren't crazier or sicker than alcoholics. But, they hurt as much or more. They haven't cornered the market on agony, but they have gone through their pain without the anesthetizing effects of alcohol or other drugs, or the other high states achieved by people with compulsive disorders. And the pain that comes from loving someone who's in trouble can be profound.

"The chemically dependent partner numbs the feelings and the non-abuser is doubled over in pain—relieved only by anger and occasional fantasies," wrote Janet Geringer Woititz in an article from the book *Codependency, An Emerging Issue*.<sup>1</sup>

Codependents are that way sober because they went through what they did sober.

No wonder codependents are so crazy. Who wouldn't be, after living with the people they've lived with?

It's been difficult for codependents to get the information and practical help they need and deserve. It's tough enough to convince alcoholics (or other disturbed people) to seek help. It's more difficult to convince codependents—those who by comparison look, but don't feel, normal—that they have problems.

Codependents suffered in the backdrop of the sick person. If they recovered, they did that in the background too. Until recently, many



counselors (like me) didn't know what to do to help them. Sometimes codependents were blamed; sometimes they were ignored; sometimes they were expected to magically shape up (an archaic attitude that has not worked with alcoholics and doesn't help codependents either). Rarely were codependents treated as individuals who needed help to get better. Rarely were they given a personalized recovery program for their problems and their pain. Yet, by its nature, alcoholism and other compulsive disorders turn everyone affected by the illness into victims—people who need help even if they are not drinking, using other drugs, gambling, overeating, or overdoing a compulsion.

That's why I wrote this book. It grew out of my research, my personal and professional experiences, and my passion for the subject. It is a personal and, in some places, prejudiced opinion.

I'm not an expert, and this isn't a technical book for experts. Whether the person you've let yourself be affected by is an alcoholic, gambler, foodaholic, workaholic, sexaholic, criminal, rebellious teenager, neurotic parent, another codependent, or any combination of the above, this book is for you, the codependent.

This book is not about how you can help your alcoholic or troubled person, although if you get better, his or her chance of recovery improves too.<sup>2</sup> There are plenty of good books on how to help the alcoholic. This book is about your most important and probably most neglected responsibility: taking care of yourself. It's about what you can do to start feeling better.

I've tried to round up some of the best, most helpful thoughts on codependency. I've included quotes from people I consider experts, to demonstrate their beliefs. I've also included case histories to show how people dealt with particular problems. Although I've changed names and certain details to protect privacy, all case histories are true and are not composites. I've inserted endnotes to document information, to suggest additional reading, and to attribute material to appropriate sources. But, much of what I've learned has been from many people and their similar thoughts on this subject. Many ideas have been handed down and passed

around, and their sources have become indistinguishable. I've tried to attribute accurately, but in this field that is not always possible.

Although this is a self-help, how-to book, please remember it's not a cookbook for mental health. Each person is unique; each situation is unique. Try to tap into your own healing process. That may include seeking professional help, attending self-help groups such as Al-Anon, and calling on the assistance of a Power greater than yourself.

A friend, Scott Egleston, who is a professional in the mental health field, told me a therapy fable. He heard it from someone, who heard it from someone else. It goes:

Once upon a time, a woman moved to a cave in the mountains to study with a guru. She wanted, she said, to learn everything there was to know. The guru supplied her with stacks of books and left her alone so she could study. Every morning, the guru returned to the cave to monitor the woman's progress. In his hand, he carried a heavy wooden cane. Each morning, he asked her the same question: "Have you learned everything there is to know yet?" Each morning, her answer was the same. "No," she said, "I haven't." The guru would then strike her over the head with his cane.

This scenario repeated itself for months. One day the guru entered the cave, asked the same question, heard the same answer, and raised his cane to hit her in the same way, but the woman grabbed the cane from the guru, stopping his assault in midair.

Relieved to end the daily batterings but fearing reprisal, the woman looked up at the guru. To her surprise, the guru smiled. "Congratulations," he said, "you have graduated. You now know everything you need to know."

"How's that?" the woman asked.

"You have learned that you will never learn everything there is to know," he replied. "And you have learned how to stop the pain."

That's what this book is about: stopping the pain and gaining control of your life.

Many people have learned to do it. You can, too.

**Part 1:**

WHAT'S CODEPENDENCY,  
AND WHO'S GOT IT?

# I

## JESSICA'S STORY

*The sun was shining, and it was a beautiful day when I met him.  
Then, everything went crazy.*

—Georgianne, married to an alcoholic

This is Jessica's story. I'll let her tell it.

\* \* \*

I sat in the kitchen, drinking coffee, thinking about my unfinished housework. Dishes. Dusting. Laundry. The list was endless, yet I couldn't get started. It was too much to think about. Doing it seemed impossible. Just like my life, I thought.

Fatigue, a familiar feeling, overtook me. I headed for the bedroom. Once a luxury, naps had become a necessity. Sleeping was about all I could do. Where had my motivation gone? I used to have an excess of energy. Now, it was an effort to comb my hair and apply makeup daily—an effort I frequently didn't put forth.

I lay on my bed and fell into a deep sleep. When I awoke, my first thoughts and feelings were painful. This, also, was not new. I wasn't sure which hurt most: the raw ache I felt because I was certain my marriage was over—the love was gone, extinguished by the lies and the drinking and the disappointments and the financial problems; the bitter rage I felt toward my husband—the man who had caused it all; the despair I felt because God, whom I had trusted, had betrayed me by allowing this to

happen; or the mixture of fear, helplessness, and hopelessness that blended into all the other emotions.

Damn him, I thought. Why did he have to drink? Why couldn't he have sobered up earlier? Why did he have to lie? Why couldn't he have loved me as much as I had loved him? Why didn't he stop drinking and lying years ago, when I still cared?

I never intended to marry an alcoholic. My father had been one. I had tried so hard to carefully choose my husband. Great choice. Frank's problem with drinking had become apparent on our honeymoon when he left our hotel suite late one afternoon and didn't return until 6:30 the next morning. Why didn't I see then? Looking back, the signs were clear. What a fool I had been. "Oh, no. He's not an alcoholic. Not him," I had defended, time and again. I had believed his lies. I had believed my lies. Why didn't I just leave him, get a divorce? Guilt, fear, lack of initiative, and indecision. Besides, I had left him before. When we were apart, all I did was feel depressed, think about him, and worry about money. Damn me.

I looked at the clock. Quarter to three. The kids would soon be home from school. Then he would be home, expecting supper. No homework done today. Nothing ever got done. And it's his fault, I thought. HIS FAULT!

Suddenly, I shifted emotional gears. Was my husband really at work? Maybe he had taken another woman to lunch. Maybe he was having an affair. Maybe he had left early to drink. Maybe he was at work, creating problems there. How long would he have this job, anyway? Another week? Another month? Then he'd quit or be fired, as usual.

The phone rang, interrupting my anxiety. It was a neighbor, a friend. We talked, and I told her about my day.

"I'm going to Al-Anon tomorrow," she said. "Want to come along?"

I had heard about Al-Anon. It was a group for people married to drunks. Visions charged into my mind of "the little women" huddled at this meeting, making the most of their husbands' drinking, forgiving them, and thinking of little ways to help them.

"I'll see," I lied. "I've got a lot of work to do," I explained, not lying.

Outrage poured through me, and I barely heard the rest of our conversation. Of course I didn't want to go to Al-Anon. I had helped and helped. Hadn't I already done enough for him? I felt furious at the suggestion that I do more and continue giving to this bottomless pit of unmet needs we called a marriage. I was sick of shouldering the burden, and feeling responsible for the success or failure of the relationship. It's his problem, I railed silently. Let him find his solution. Leave me out of this. Don't ask another thing of me. Just make him better, and I'll feel better.

After I hung up the phone, I dragged myself into the kitchen to fix supper. Anyway, I'm not the one that needs help, I thought. I haven't drunk, used drugs, lost jobs, and lied to and deceived those I loved. I've held this family together, sometimes by the skin of my teeth. I've paid the bills, maintained a home on a scant budget, been there for every emergency (and, married to an alcoholic, there had been plenty of emergencies), gone through most bad times alone, and worried to the point of frequent illness. No, I decided, I'm not the irresponsible one. To the contrary, I've been responsible for everything and everyone. There was nothing wrong with me. I just needed to get going, start doing my daily chores. I didn't need meetings to do that. I'd just feel guilty if I went out when I had all this work to do at home. God knows, I didn't need more guilt. Tomorrow, I'd get up and get busy. Things will be better—tomorrow.

When the kids came home, I found myself hollering at them. That didn't surprise them or me. My husband was easygoing, the good guy. I was the bitch. I tried to be pleasant, but it was hard. Anger was always just beneath the surface. For so long, I had tolerated so much. I was no longer willing or able to tolerate anything. I was always on the defensive, and I felt like I was, somehow, fighting for my life. Later, I learned I was.

By the time my husband came home, I had put a disinterested effort into preparing supper. We ate, barely talking.

"I had a good day," Frank said.

What does that mean? I wondered. What did you really do? Were you even at work? Furthermore, who cares?

"That's nice," I said back.

"How was your day?" he asked.

How in the hell do you think it was? I railed silently. After all you've done to me, how do you expect me to have any day? I flashed him daggers, forced a smile, and said, "My day was okay. Thanks for asking."

Frank looked away. He heard what I wasn't saying, more than what I had said. He knew better than to say anything else; I did too. We were usually one step away from a raving argument, a recount of past offenses, and screamed threats of divorce. We used to thrive on arguments, but we grew sick of them. So we did it silently.

The children interrupted our hostile silence. Our son said he wanted to go to a playground several blocks away. I said no, I didn't want him to go without his father or me. He wailed he wanted to go, he would go, and I never let him do anything. I yelled he wasn't going, and that was that. He yelled please, I have to go, all the other kids get to go. As usual, I backed down. Okay, go ahead, but be careful, I warned. I felt like I had lost. I always felt like I lost—with my kids and with my husband. No one ever listened to me; no one took me seriously.

*I didn't take me seriously.*

After supper, I washed dishes while my husband watched television. As usual, I work, and you play. I worry, and you relax. I care, and you don't. You feel good; I hurt. Damn you. I walked through the living room several times, purposely blocking his view of the television and secretly flashing him hateful looks. He ignored me. After tiring of this, I promaded into the living room, sighed, and said I was going outside to rake the yard. It's really the man's job, I explained, but I guess I'll have to do it. He said he'd do it later. I said later never came, I couldn't wait, I was embarrassed by the yard, just forget it, I was used to doing everything, and I would do that, too. He said okay, he would forget it. I stormed outside and stomped around the yard.

As tired as I was, bedtime came too early. Sleeping with my husband had become as strained as our waking moments. We would either not speak, each curling up on opposite sides of the bed as far away from each other as possible, or he would make attempts—as though everything

were fine—to have sex with me. Either way, it was tense. If we turned our backs to each other, I would lie there with confused, desperate thoughts. If he tried to touch me, I froze. How could he expect me to make love to him? How could he touch me as though nothing had happened? Usually I pushed him away with a sharp, "No, I'm too tired." Sometimes I agreed. Occasionally, I did it because I wanted to. But, usually, if I had sex with him, it was because I felt obligated to take care of his sexual needs and guilty if I didn't. Either way, sex was psychologically and emotionally unsatisfying. But, I told myself I didn't care. It didn't matter. Not really. Long ago, I had shut off my sexual desires. Long ago, I had shut off my need to give and receive love. I had frozen that part of me that felt and cared. I had to, to survive.

I had expected so much of this marriage. I had so many dreams for us. None of them had come true. I had been tricked, betrayed. My home and family—the place and people who should have been warm, nurturing, a comfort, a haven of love—had become a trap. And I couldn't find the way out. Maybe, I kept telling myself, it will get better. After all, the problems are his fault. He's an alcoholic. When he gets better, our marriage will get better.

But, I was beginning to wonder. He had been sober and attending Alcoholics Anonymous for six months. He was getting better. I wasn't. Was his recovery really enough to make me happy? So far, his sobriety didn't appear to be changing the way I felt, which was, at age 32, dried up, used up, and brittle. What had happened to our love? What had happened to me?

One month later, I began to suspect what I would soon learn was the truth. By then, the only thing that had changed was I felt worse. My life had ground to a halt; I wanted it to end. I had no hope that things would get better; I didn't even know what was wrong. I had no purpose, except to care for other people, and I wasn't doing a good job of that. I was stuck in the past and terrified of the future. God seemed to have abandoned me. I felt guilty all the time and wondered if I was going crazy. Something dreadful, something that I couldn't explain, had happened to

me. It had snuck up on me and ruined my life. Somehow, I had been affected by his drinking, and the ways I had been affected had become my problems. It no longer mattered whose fault it was.

I had lost control.

\* \* \*

I met Jessica at this point in her life. She was about to learn three fundamental ideas.

- 1) She wasn't crazy; she was codependent. Alcoholism and other compulsive disorders are truly family illnesses. The way the illness affects other family members is called codependency.
- 2) Once they have been affected—once "it" sets in—codependency takes on a life of its own. It is similar to catching pneumonia or picking up a destructive habit. Once you've got it, you've got it.
- 3) If you want to get rid of it, you have to do something to make it go away. It doesn't matter whose fault it is. Your codependency becomes your problem; solving your problems is your responsibility.

If you're codependent, you need to find your own recovery or healing process. To begin that recovery, it helps to understand codependency and certain attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that often accompany it. It is also important to change some of these attitudes and behaviors and understand what to expect as these changes occur.

This book will search for those understandings and encourage those changes. I'm happy to say Jessica's story had a happy ending or a new beginning. She got better. She started living her own life. I hope you do too.

## 2

### OTHER STORIES

*When I say I'm codependent, I don't mean I'm a little bit codependent. I mean I'm really codependent. I don't marry men who stop for a few beers after work. I marry men who won't work.*

—Ellen, an Al-Anon member

Maybe you identified with Jessica in the last chapter. Her story is an extreme example of codependency, but it is one I hear frequently. However, Jessica's experience is not the only type of codependency. There are as many variations of that story as there are codependents to tell them.

Here are a few.

\* \* \*

Gerald, a handsome and personable man in his early forties, calls himself "a success in business but a failure in relationships with women." During high school and college, Gerald dated many women. He was popular and considered a good catch. However, after graduation, Gerald stunned his family and friends when he married Rita. Rita treated Gerald worse than any other woman he had dated. She acted cool and hostile toward Gerald and his friends, shared few interests with him, and didn't seem to care much for or about Gerald. Thirteen years later, the marriage ended in divorce when Gerald discovered some things he had suspected for years were true: Rita had been dating other men since they were

married, and she was (and had been for some time) abusing alcohol and other drugs.

Gerald was devastated. But, after mourning for about two months, he fell wildly in love with another woman, who was a start-in-the-morning-and-drink-'til-she-passes-out alcoholic. After spending several months worrying about her, trying to help her, trying to figure out what he was doing that caused her to drink, trying to control her drinking, and ultimately getting angry with her because she wouldn't stop drinking, Gerald terminated that relationship. Soon he met another woman, fell in love with her, and moved into her apartment. Within months, Gerald suspected she too was chemically dependent.

Soon, Gerald began spending much of his time worrying about his girlfriend. He checked up on her, rummaged through her purse looking for pills or other evidence, and questioned her about her activities. Sometimes, he simply denied she had a problem. During those times, he kept busy, tried to enjoy his time with his girlfriend (although he said he felt uneasy), and told himself, "It's just me. Something's wrong with me." During one of the many crises in his most recent relationship, when Gerald was temporarily jolted out of denial, he went to a chemical dependency counselor for advice.

"I know I should end the relationship," Gerald said, "but I'm just not ready to let it go. We can talk about anything and everything together. We're such good friends. And I love her. Why? Why does this always happen to me?"

"Give me a room full of women, and I'll fall in love with the one with the most problems—the one that will treat me the worst. Frankly, they're more of a challenge," Gerald confided. "If a woman treats me too well, it turns me off."

Gerald considered himself a social drinker who had never had problems as a result of his drinking. Gerald told the counselor he had never used drugs. Gerald's brother, now in his late forties, had been an alcoholic since he was a teenager. Gerald denied that either of his deceased parents was an alcoholic, but reluctantly admitted his dad may have "drunk too much."

The counselor suggested the alcoholism and excessive drinking in Gerald's immediate family may still be affecting him and his relationships.

"How could their problems be affecting me?" he asked. "Dad has been dead for years, and I rarely see my brother."

After a few counseling sessions, Gerald began to label himself codependent, but he wasn't sure exactly what that meant or what to do about it. When Gerald became less angry about the immediate problem in his relationship, he discontinued counseling. Gerald decided his girlfriend's problems with drugs weren't that bad. He became convinced his problems with women were due to bad luck. He said he hoped his luck would change someday.

Is Gerald's problem bad luck? Or is it codependency?

\* \* \*

Patty was in her mid-thirties and had been married for eleven years when she sought help from a private therapist. She had three children, the youngest of whom had cerebral palsy. Patty had devoted her life to being a good wife and mother. She told her therapist she loved her children, didn't regret her decision to stay home and raise them, but hated her daily routine. Before her marriage, she had many friends and hobbies, worked as a nurse, and was interested in the world around her. However, in the years following the birth of her children, particularly her handicapped child, she had lost her enthusiasm for life. She had few friends, had gained over 80 pounds, didn't know what she was feeling, and if she did, felt guilty for feeling that way. She explained she had tried to stay active by helping her friends and doing volunteer work for various organizations, but her efforts usually resulted in feelings of ineffectiveness and resentment. She thought about returning to work, but she didn't because, "All I know is nursing, and I'm sick of taking care of people."

"My family and friends think I'm a tower of strength. Good ol' dependable Patty. Always there. Always in control. Always ready to help them. The truth is," Patty said, "I'm falling apart, very quietly but very



certainly. I've been depressed for years. I can't shake it. I cry at the drop of a hat. I don't have any energy. I scream at the kids all the time. I don't have any interest in sex, at least not with my husband. I feel guilty all the time about everything. I even feel guilty about coming to see you," she told the counselor. "I should be able to solve my own problems. I should be able to just snap out of this. It's ridiculous to waste your time and my husband's money for my problems, problems I'm probably imagining and blowing way out of proportion."

"But I had to do something," Patty confessed. "Lately, I've been thinking about suicide. Of course," she added, "I'd never actually kill myself. Too many people need me. Too many people depend on me. I'd be letting them down. But I'm worried. I'm scared."

The counselor learned Patty and her husband had children, the youngest with cerebral palsy. Patty also said before their marriage, her husband had problems with alcohol. During their marriage, he had drank less, had held the same job, and had been a good provider. But, upon questioning, Patty told the counselor her husband had not attended Alcoholics Anonymous meetings or any other support group. Instead, he went "on the wagon" for months between weekend drinking binges. When he drank, he acted crazy. When he wasn't drinking, he was angry and hostile.

"I don't know what's happened to him. He's not the man I married. What's even more frightening is I don't know what's happening to me or who I am," Patty said. "It's difficult to explain exactly what the problem is. I don't understand it myself. There's no major problem I can point to and say, 'That's what's wrong.' But it feels like I've lost myself. At times, I wonder if I'm going crazy. What's wrong with me?" Patty asked.

"Maybe your husband is an alcoholic, and your problems are caused by the family disease of alcoholism," the counselor suggested.

"How could that be?" Patty asked. "My husband doesn't drink that often."

The counselor dug into Patty's background. Patty talked with fondness about her parents and her two adult brothers. She came from a good family that was close and successful.

The counselor dug deeper. Patty mentioned her father had attended Alcoholics Anonymous since she was a teenager.

"Dad sobered up when I was in high school," she said. "I really love him, and I'm proud of him. But his drinking years were some pretty crazy years for our family."

Not only was Patty married to someone who was probably an alcoholic, she is what is now called an adult child of an alcoholic. The entire family had been affected by the family disease of alcoholism. Her dad stopped drinking; her mother went to Al-Anon; family life improved. But Patty, too, had been affected. Was she expected to magically overcome the ways she had been affected, just because the drinking stopped?

Instead of additional counseling sessions, Patty's counselor referred Patty to a self-esteem course and an assertiveness class. The counselor also recommended Patty attend Al-Anon meetings or Adult Children of Alcoholics meetings, which are self-help groups based on the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Patty followed the counselor's advice. She didn't find an overnight cure, but as the months passed she found herself making decisions with greater ease, feeling and expressing her feelings, saying what she thought, paying attention to her needs, and feeling less guilty. She became more tolerant of herself and her daily routine. Gradually, her depression lifted. She cried less and laughed more. Her energy and enthusiasm for life returned. Incidentally, with no prodding from Patty, her husband joined Alcoholics Anonymous. He became less hostile, and their marriage began to improve. The point here is Patty gained control of her life. Her life started working.

Now, if you ask Patty what her problem is or was, she will answer: "I'm codependent."

\* \* \*

Clients who seek help from mental health and chemical dependency agencies are not the only people who suffer from codependency. Randell was a chemical dependency counselor and a recovering alcoholic with



several years of sobriety when he found himself having troubles. Randall was also an adult child of an alcoholic; his father and three brothers were alcoholics. An intelligent, sensitive man who enjoyed his work, Randall's problem was his leisure time. He spent most of it worrying about—obsessed with—other people and their problems. Sometimes he tried to untangle messes alcoholics created; other times he felt angry with the alcoholics for creating the messes he felt obligated to clean up; sometimes he felt upset because people, not necessarily alcoholics, behaved in particular ways. He ranted, felt guilty, sorry, and used by people. Rarely, however, did he feel close to them. Rarely did he have fun.

For many years, Randall believed his duty was to worry about people and get involved in their problems. He called his behavior kindness, concern, love, and, sometimes, righteous indignation. Now, after getting help for his problem, he calls it codependency.

\* \* \*

Sometimes, codependent behavior becomes inextricably entangled with being a good wife, mother, husband, brother, or Christian. Now in her forties, Marlyss is an attractive woman—when she takes care of herself. Most of the time, however, she's busy taking care of her five children and her husband, who is a recovering alcoholic. She devoted her life to making them happy, but she didn't succeed. Usually, she feels angry and unappreciated for her efforts, and her family feels angry at her. She has sex with her husband whenever he wants, regardless of how she feels. She spends too much of the family's budget on toys and clothing for the children—whatever they want. She chauffeurs, reads to, cooks for, cleans for, cuddles, and coddles those around her, but nobody gives to her. Most of the time, they don't even say, "Thank you." Marlyss resents her constant giving to people in her life. She resents how her family and their needs control her life. She chose nursing as her profession, and she often resents that.

"But I feel guilty when I don't do what's asked of me. I feel guilty when I don't live up to my standards for a wife and mother. I feel guilty when I don't live up to other people's standards for me. I just plain feel

guilty," she said. "In fact," she added, "I schedule my day, my priorities, according to guilt."

Does endlessly taking care of other people, resenting it, and expecting nothing in return mean Marlyss is a good wife and mother? Or could it mean Marlyss is codependent?

\* \* \*

Alcoholism (or chemical dependency) is not the only family problem that can create a codependent person. Alissa, the mother of two teenagers, worked part-time at a mental health organization when she went to a family counselor. (She had previously gone to many family counselors in her search for help.) She went to counseling because her oldest child, a fourteen-year-old boy, was constantly causing problems. He ran away, broke curfew, skipped school, disobeyed other family rules, and generally did whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted.

"This child," Alissa told the counselor, "is driving me crazy."

She meant it. She was worried sick. Some days she was so depressed and troubled she couldn't get out of bed. Alissa had tried everything she could think of to help this child. She'd placed him in treatment three times, put him in two different foster homes, and dragged the whole family from counselor to counselor. Alissa had tried other techniques, too: She had threatened, cried, hollered, and begged. She had gotten tough and called the police on him. She had tried gentleness and forgiveness. She even tried acting like he hadn't done the inappropriate things he had done. She had locked him out. And she had traveled halfway across the state to bring him home after he ran away. Although her efforts hadn't helped her child, Alissa was obsessed with finding and doing the one thing that would "make him see the errors of his ways" and help him change.

"Why," she asked the counselor, "is he doing this to me? He's running and ruining my life!"

The counselor agreed the problem with Alissa's son was painful, upsetting, and required action. But the counselor also said the problem didn't have to run and ruin Alissa's life.

"You haven't been able to control your son, but you can gain control of yourself," he said. "You can deal with your own codependency."

\* \* \*

Sheryl also labels herself codependent. Shortly after marrying the man of her dreams, she found herself in a nightmare. Her husband, she learned, was a sex addict. In his case, that meant he couldn't control his urges to indulge in pornography, he was compulsively drawn into affairs with other women, and as Sheryl put it, "God only knows what and who else." She learned her husband was a sex addict one week after their wedding, when she discovered him in bed with another woman.

Sheryl's first response was panic. Then she got angry. Then she felt concern—for her husband and his problem. Her friends advised her to leave him, but she decided to stay in the marriage. He needed help. He needed her. Maybe he would change. Besides, she wasn't ready to lose her dream of that rosy future they would have together.

Her husband joined Sex Addicts Anonymous, a Twelve Step self-help group similar to Alcoholics Anonymous. Sheryl refused to join Co-SA (similar to Al-Anon) for family members of sex addicts. She didn't want to go public with her problem; she didn't even want to discuss it privately.

Over a period of months, Sheryl, a successful fashion model, found herself accepting fewer work assignments, turning down evenings out with friends, and sticking closer to home. She wanted to answer the telephone, in case women called for her husband. She wanted to be home to see her husband when he left the house and returned. She wanted to see what he looked like, how he acted, and how he talked. She wanted to know exactly what he was doing and with whom he was doing it. She often called his S.A. sponsor to complain, to report, and to inquire about her husband's progress. She refused, she said, to be tricked and deceived again.

Gradually, she alienated herself from her friends and activities. She was too worried to work; she was too ashamed to talk to her friends. Her husband had several more affairs; her friends were frustrated with her for

staying with him and constantly whining about how terrible it was to be his wife.

"I couldn't stand the sight of my husband. I had nothing but contempt for him. Yet, I couldn't bring myself to leave him," Sheryl reported later. "I couldn't make myself do much of anything except worry and check up on him.

"My turning point was the night I chased him with a butcher knife," Sheryl said. "It was my lowest point. I was running through the house screaming and raving, when I suddenly became aware, for the first time, of me. I had gone mad. I was crazy—completely out of control—and he just stood there, calmly looking at me. I knew then I had to do something to get help for me."

Sheryl joined Co-SA shortly after that incident. It was at those meetings that she began to label herself and her loss of control as codependency. Sheryl is now separated from her husband and seeking a divorce. She is also feeling better about herself.

\* \* \*

Although the preceding examples have been dramatic, codependency doesn't necessarily have to be so intense. And it doesn't always involve experiences with deeply troubled people. Kristen is married, has two young children, and knows of no alcoholism or compulsive disorders in her immediate or extended family. Yet, she calls herself codependent. Her problem, she says, is that other people's moods control her emotions; she, in turn, tries to control their feelings.

"If my husband is happy, and I feel responsible for that, then I'm happy. If he's upset, I feel responsible for that, too. I'm anxious, uncomfortable, and upset until he feels better. I try to *make* him feel better. I feel guilty if I can't. And he gets angry with me for trying.

"And it's not only with him that I behave codependently," she added. "It's with everyone: my parents, my children, guests in my home. Somehow, I just seem to lose myself in other people. I get enmeshed in them.

"I'd like to do something about it—this thing called codependency—before it gets any worse. I'm not terribly unhappy," she said, "but I'd like to learn how to relax and start enjoying myself and other people."

A minister summarized the condition this way: "Some people are really codependent, and some of us are just a little bit codependent."

\* \* \*

I chose the preceding examples because they're interesting and represent a variety of experiences. They also illuminate a point that needs to be made: No single example illustrates the typical codependent or his or her experience. Codependency is complex. People are complex. Each person is unique, and each person's situation is different. Some people have extremely painful and debilitating experiences with codependency. Others don't and may be only mildly affected. Sometimes codependency is a person's response to another person's alcoholism; sometimes it isn't. Each codependent has a unique experience born from his or her circumstances, history, and personality.

Yet, a common thread runs through all stories of codependency. It involves our responses and reactions to people around us. It involves our relationships with other people, whether they are alcoholics, gamblers, sex addicts, overeaters, or normal people. Codependency involves the effects these people have on us and how we, in turn, try to affect them.

As Al-Anon members say, "Identify, don't compare."

### ACTIVITY

1. Did you identify with any people in this chapter? What helped you think of yourself? Which relationships did it bring to mind? Why?
2. You might find it helpful to buy a large notebook and record your responses to these activities. You can also write down other thoughts and feelings you have as you read this book.

## 3

### CODEPENDENCY

*Relationships are like a dance, with visible energy racing back and forth between the partners.*

*Some relationships are the slow, dark dance of death.<sup>1</sup>*

—Colette Dowling

Up to this point, I have been using the words *codependent* and *codependency* as lucid terms. However, the definitions of these words remain vague.

The definition of chemical dependency means being dependent (psychologically and/or physically) on alcohol or other drugs. Overeating and gambling are also words that bring specific ideas to mind. But what is codependency?

The obvious definition would be: being a partner in dependency. This definition is close to the truth but still unclear. It brings no specific image to mind. Codependency is part of treatment center jargon, professional slang that's probably unintelligible to people outside that profession and gibberish to some inside the trade.

Jargon may or may not mean anything in particular. Jargon may mean different things to different people. Or, people may sense what a term means but not be able to clearly define it, because it's never been clearly defined.

Those are some of the problems I've encountered with researching and attempting to define codependency and codependent. Many people haven't heard the terms. Others, who are familiar with the words, can't

define them. If they can, each definition is different. Or people define the words by using more jargon. To complicate matters, I can't find the words in any dictionaries. My computer keeps tagging the words as misspelled, trying to convince me they're not words.

Yet, codependency does mean something in particular, something particularly important to me and millions of people. Let's get rid of the jargon and look at that meaning.

### What's Codependency?

I have heard and read many definitions of codependency.

In an article from the book *Co-Dependency, An Emerging Issue*, Robert Subby wrote codependency is: "An emotional, psychological, and behavioral condition that develops as a result of an individual's prolonged exposure to, and practice of, a set of oppressive rules—rules which prevent the open expression of feeling as well as the direct discussion of personal and interpersonal problems."<sup>2</sup>

Earnie Larsen, another codependency specialist and a pioneer in that field, defines codependency as: "Those self-defeating, learned behaviors or character defects that result in a diminished capacity to initiate or to participate in loving relationships."

Some less professional definitions follow.

"Codependency means," said one woman, "that I'm a caretaker."

"Being codependent means I'm married to an alcoholic," responded one woman. "It also means I need to go to Al-Anon."

"Codependency," replied another, "means I'm up to my elbows in alcoholics."

"It means I'm always looking for someone to job onto."

"Codependency? It means I know any man I'm attracted to, fall in love with, or marry will be chemically dependent or have some other equally serious problem."

"Codependency," explained one person, "is knowing all your relationships will either go on and on the same way (painfully), or end the same way (disastrously). Or both."

There are almost as many definitions of codependency as there are experiences that represent it. In desperation (or perhaps enlightenment), some therapists have proclaimed: "Codependency is *anything*, and *everyone* is codependent." So, who's got the inside story? Which definition is accurate? A brief history of codependency will help answer this question.

### A Brief History

The word codependency appeared on the treatment scene in the late seventies. I don't know who discovered it. Although several people may claim to have done so, the word emerged simultaneously in several different treatment centers in Minnesota, according to information from the office of Sondra Smalley, C.C.D.P., a licensed psychologist and a leader in the codependency field. Maybe Minnesota, the heartland of chemical dependency treatment and Twelve Step programs for compulsive disorders, discovered it.

Robert Subby and John Friel, in an article from the book *Co-Dependency, An Emerging Issue*, wrote: "Originally, it was used to describe the person or persons whose lives were affected as a result of their being involved with someone who was chemically dependent. The codependent spouse or child or lover of someone who was chemically dependent was seen as having developed a pattern of coping with life that was not healthy, as a reaction to someone else's drug or alcohol abuse."<sup>3</sup>

It was a new name for an old game. Professionals had long suspected something peculiar happened to people who were closely involved with chemically dependent people. Some research had been done on the subject, indicating a physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual condition similar to alcoholism seemed to appear in many nonalcoholic or non-chemically dependent people who were close to an alcoholic. Words (more jargon which would later become synonymous for codependent) surfaced to describe this phenomenon: co-alcoholic, nonalcoholic, para-alcoholic.

Codependents certainly felt the effects of codependency long before the word was coined. In the 1940s, after the birth of Alcoholics Anony-

mous, a group of people—primarily wives of alcoholics—formed self-help, support groups to deal with the ways their spouses' alcoholism affected them.<sup>4</sup> They didn't know they would later be called codependents. They did know they had been directly affected by their mates' alcoholism. And, they were envious that alcoholics had a Twelve Step program to recover through. The wives also wanted a program. So they used the A.A. Twelve Step program, revised the A.A. Twelve Traditions, changed its name to Al-Anon, and it worked! Millions of people have since benefited from Al-Anon.<sup>5</sup>

The basic thought then, and in 1979 when the word codependency emerged, was codependents (co-alcoholics or para-alcoholics) were people whose lives had become *unmanageable as a result of living in a committed relationship with an alcoholic*.<sup>6</sup>

However, the definition for codependency has expanded since then. Professionals began to better understand the effects of the chemically dependent person on the family, and the effects of the family on the chemically dependent person. Professionals began to identify other problems such as overeating and undereating, gambling, and certain sexual behaviors. These compulsive disorders paralleled the compulsive disorder, or illness, of alcoholism. Professionals also began to notice many people in close relationships with these compulsive people developed patterns of reacting and coping that resembled the coping patterns of people in relationships with alcoholics. Something peculiar had happened to these families, too.

As professionals began to understand codependency better, more groups of people appeared to have it: adult children of alcoholics; people in relationships with emotionally or mentally disturbed persons; people in relationships with chronically ill people; parents of children with behavior problems; people in relationships with irresponsible people; professionals—nurses, social workers, and others in "helping" occupations. Even recovering alcoholics and addicts noticed they were codependent and perhaps had been long before becoming chemically dependent.<sup>7</sup> Codependents started cropping up everywhere.

When a codependent discontinued his or her relationship with a troubled person, the codependent frequently sought another troubled person and repeated the codependent behaviors with that new person. These behaviors, or coping mechanisms, seemed to prevail throughout the codependent's life—if that person didn't change these behaviors.

Was it safe to assume codependency was triggered through relationships with people who have serious illnesses, behavior problems, or destructive compulsive disorders? Alcoholism in the family helped create codependency, but many other circumstances seemed to produce it, also.

One fairly common denominator was having a relationship, personally or professionally, with troubled, needy, or dependent people. But a second, more common denominator seemed to be the unwritten, silent rules that usually develop in the immediate family and set the pace for relationships.<sup>8</sup> These rules prohibit discussion about problems; open expression of feelings; direct, honest communication; realistic expectations, such as being human, vulnerable, or imperfect; selfishness; trust in other people and one's self; playing and having fun; and rocking the delicately balanced family canoe through growth or change—however healthy and beneficial that movement might be. These rules are common to alcoholic family systems but can emerge in other families too.

Now, I return to an earlier question: Which definition of codependency is accurate? They all are. Some describe the cause, some the effects, some the overall condition, some the symptoms, some the patterns, and some the pain. Codependency either meant, or has come to mean, all the definitions listed earlier.

I'm not trying to confuse you. Codependency has a fuzzy definition because it is a gray, fuzzy condition. It is complex, theoretical, and difficult to completely define in one or two sentences.

Why all this fuss about a definition? Because I'm going to attempt the difficult—define codependent in one sentence. And, I want you to see the broader picture before I show you the narrower one. I hope this approach might help you identify codependency in yourself, if that identification is appropriate. Defining the problem is important because it

helps determine the solution. Here, the solution is vital. It means feeling better. It means recovery.

So, here is my definition of a codependent:

*A codependent person is one who has let another person's behavior affect him or her, and who is obsessed with controlling that person's behavior.*

The *other person* might be a child, an adult, a lover, a spouse, a brother, a sister, a grandparent, a parent, a client, or a best friend. He or she could be an alcoholic, a drug addict, a mentally or physically ill person, a normal person who occasionally has sad feelings, or one of the people mentioned earlier.

But, the heart of the definition and recovery lies not in the *other person*—no matter how much we believe it does. It lies in ourselves, in the ways we have let other people's behavior affect us and in the ways we try to affect them: the obsessing, the controlling, the obsessive "helping," caretaking, low self-worth bordering on self-hatred, self-repression, abundance of anger and guilt, peculiar dependency on peculiar people, attraction to and tolerance for the bizarre, other-centeredness that results in abandonment of self, communication problems, intimacy problems, and an ongoing whirlwind trip through the five-stage grief process. Is codependency an illness? Some professionals say codependency isn't a disease; they say it's a normal reaction to abnormal people.<sup>9</sup>

Other professionals say codependency is a disease; it's a chronic, progressive illness. They suggest codependents want and need sick people around them to be happy in an unhealthy way. They say, for instance, the wife of an alcoholic needed to marry an alcoholic and chose him because she unconsciously thought he was an alcoholic. Furthermore, she needed him drinking and socking it to her to feel fulfilled.

This latter judgment may be overly harsh. I'm convinced codependents need less harshness in their lives. Other people have been hard enough on us. We have been hard enough on ourselves. Friends, we have

suffered enough. We have been victimized by diseases and people. Each of us must decide what part we played in our victimization.

I don't *know* if codependency is or isn't an illness. I'm not an expert. But, to tell you what I *believe*, let me complete the brief history of codependency which I started earlier in this chapter.

Although the first Al-Anon groups were formed in the 1940s, I am certain we could go back to the beginning of time and human relationships and find glimmers of codependent behavior. People have always had problems, and others have always cared for their troubled friends and relatives. People have likely been caught up with the problems of others since relationships began.

Codependency probably trailed man as he struggled through the remaining B.C. years, right up to "these generally wretched times of the twentieth century," as Morley Safer of *60 Minutes* says. Ever since people first existed, they have been doing all the things we label "codependent." They have worried themselves sick about other people. They have tried to help in ways that didn't help. They have said yes when they meant no. They have tried to make other people see things their way. They have bent over backward to avoid hurting people's feelings and, in so doing, have hurt themselves. They have been afraid to trust their feelings. They have believed lies and then felt betrayed. They have wanted to get even and punish others. They have felt so angry they wanted to kill. They have struggled for their rights while other people said they didn't have any. They have worn sackcloth because they didn't believe they deserved silk.

Codependents have undoubtedly done good deeds too. By their nature, codependents are benevolent—concerned about and responsive to the needs of the world. As Thomas Wright writes in an article from the book *Co-Dependency, An Emerging Issue*, "I suspect codependents have historically attacked social injustice and fought for the rights of the underdog. Codependents want to help. I suspect they have helped. But they probably died thinking they didn't do enough and were feeling guilty.

"It is natural to want to protect and help the people we care about. It is also natural to be affected by and react to the problems of people



around us. As a problem becomes more serious and remains unresolved, we become more affected and react more intensely to it."

The word *react* is important here. However you approach codependency, however you define it, and from whatever frame of reference you choose to diagnose and treat it, codependency is primarily a reactionary process. Codependents are reactionaries. They overreact. They underreact. But rarely do they *act*. They react to the problems, pains, lives, and behaviors of others. They react to their own problems, pains, and behaviors. Many codependent reactions are reactions to stress and uncertainty of living or growing up with alcoholism and other problems. It is normal to react to stress. It is not necessarily abnormal, but it is heroic and lifesaving to learn how to *not* react and to act in more healthy ways. Most of us, however, need help to learn to do that.

Perhaps one reason some professionals call codependency a disease is because many codependents are reacting to an illness such as alcoholism.

Another reason codependency is called a disease is because it is progressive. As the people around us become sicker, we may begin to react more intensely. What began as a little concern may trigger isolation, depression, emotional or physical illness, or suicidal fantasies. One thing leads to another, and things get worse. Codependency may not be an illness, but it can make you sick. And, it can help the people around you stay sick.

Another reason codependency is called a disease is because codependent behaviors—like many self-destructive behaviors—become habitual. We repeat habits without thinking. Habits take on a life of their own.<sup>10</sup>

Whatever problem the other person has, codependency involves a habitual system of thinking, feeling, and behaving toward ourselves and others that can cause us pain. Codependent behaviors or habits are self-destructive. We frequently react to people who are destroying themselves; we react by learning to destroy ourselves. These habits can lead us into, or keep us in, destructive relationships, relationships that don't work. These behaviors can sabotage relationships that may otherwise

have worked. These behaviors can prevent us from finding peace and happiness with the most important person in our lives—ourselves. These behaviors belong to the only person each of us can control—the only person we can change—ourselves. These are our problems. In the next chapter, we will examine these behaviors.

### ACTIVITY

1. How would you define codependency?
2. Do you know anybody who has significantly affected your life, somebody whom you worry about and wish you could change? Who? Write several paragraphs about that person and your relationship. Later, read what you wrote. What are your feelings?

## CODEPENDENT CHARACTERISTICS

*God, grant me the serenity  
To accept the things I cannot change,  
Courage to change the things I can,  
And wisdom to know the difference.*

—The Serenity Prayer

Although two codependents might disagree on the definition of codependency, if they discuss the issues with each other, each will probably sense what the other person means. They will share ideas about things they have in common—things they do, think, feel, and say—that are characteristic of codependency. It is on these points—symptoms, problems, coping mechanisms, or reactions—that most definitions and recovery programs overlap and agree. These points dictate recovery. They are the things we need to recognize, accept, live with, deal with, struggle through, and frequently change.

Before I list the things codependents tend to do, however, I will make an important point: Having these problems does not mean we're bad, defective, or inferior. Some of us learned these behaviors as children. Other people learned them later in life. We may have learned some of these things from our interpretation of religion. Some women were taught these behaviors were desirable feminine attributes. Wherever we learned to do these things, most of us learned our lessons well.

Most of us started doing these things out of necessity to protect ourselves and meet our needs. We performed, felt, and thought these things



to survive—emotionally, mentally, and sometimes physically. We tried to understand and cope with our complex worlds in the best ways. It is not always easy to live with normal, healthy people. It is particularly difficult to live with sick, disturbed, or troubled people. It is horrible having to live with a raving alcoholic. Many of us have been trying to cope with outrageous circumstances, and these efforts have been both admirable and heroic. We have done the best we could.

However, these self-protective devices may have outgrown their usefulness. Sometimes, the things we do to protect ourselves turn on us and hurt us. They become self-destructive. Many codependents are barely surviving, and most aren't getting their needs met. As counselor Scott Eggeston says, codependency is a way of getting needs met that doesn't get needs met. We've been doing the wrong things for the right reasons.

Can we change? Can we learn healthier behaviors? I don't know if mental, spiritual, and emotional health can be taught, but we can be inspired and encouraged. We can learn to do things differently. We can change. I think most people want to be healthy and live the best lives they can. But many of us don't know it's okay to do things differently. Many of us don't even understand what we've been doing that hasn't been working. Most of us have been so busy responding to other people's problems that we haven't had time to identify, much less take care of, our own problems.

Many professionals say the first step toward change is awareness. The second step is acceptance.<sup>1</sup> With that in mind, let's examine the characteristics of codependency. These characteristics have been compiled from my entire bibliography and from my personal and professional experience.

#### CARETAKING

##### *Codependents may:*

- think and feel responsible for other people—for other people's feelings, thoughts, actions, choices, wants, needs, well-being, lack of well-being, and ultimate destiny.
- feel anxiety, pity, and guilt when other people have a problem.

- feel compelled—almost forced—to help that person solve the problem, such as offering unwanted advice, giving a rapid-fire series of suggestions, or fixing feelings.
- feel angry when their help isn't effective.
- anticipate other people's needs.
- wonder why others don't do the same for them.
- find themselves saying yes when they mean no, doing things they don't really want to be doing, doing more than their fair share of the work, and doing things other people are capable of doing for themselves.
- not know what they want and need or, if they do, tell themselves what they want and need is not important.
- try to please others instead of themselves.
- find it easier to feel and express anger about injustices done to others, rather than injustices done to themselves.
- feel safest when giving.
- feel insecure and guilty when somebody gives to them.
- feel sad because they spend their whole lives giving to other people and nobody gives to them.
- find themselves attracted to needy people.
- find needy people attracted to them.
- feel bored, empty, and worthless if they don't have a crisis in their lives, a problem to solve, or someone to help.
- abandon their routine to respond to or do something for somebody else.
- overcommit themselves.
- feel harried and pressured.
- believe deep inside other people are somehow responsible for them.
- blame others for the spot the codependents are in.
- say other people make the codependents feel the way they do.
- believe other people are making them crazy.
- feel angry, victimized, unappreciated, and used.
- find other people become impatient or angry with them for all the preceding characteristics.

**LOW SELF-WORTH***Codependents tend to:*

- come from troubled, repressed, or dysfunctional families.
- deny their family was troubled, repressed, or dysfunctional.
- blame themselves for everything.
- pick on themselves for everything, including the way they think, feel, look, act, and behave.
- get angry, defensive, self-righteous, and indignant when others blame and criticize the codependents—something codependents regularly do to themselves.
- reject compliments or praise.
- get depressed from a lack of compliments and praise (stroke deprivation).
- feel different from the rest of the world.
- think they're not quite good enough.
- feel guilty about spending money on themselves or doing unnecessary or fun things for themselves.
- fear rejection.
- take things personally.
- have been victims of sexual, physical, or emotional abuse, neglect, abandonment, or alcoholism.
- feel like victims.
- tell themselves they can't do anything right.
- be afraid of making mistakes.
- wonder why they have a tough time making decisions.
- expect themselves to do everything perfectly.
- wonder why they can't get anything done to their satisfaction.
- have a lot of "shoulds."
- feel a lot of guilt.
- feel ashamed of who they are.
- think their lives aren't worth living.
- try to help other people live their lives instead.

- get artificial feelings of self-worth from helping others.
- get strong feelings of low self-worth—embarrassment, failure, etc.—from other people's failures and problems.
- wish good things would happen to them.
- believe good things never will happen.
- believe they don't deserve good things and happiness.
- wish other people would like and love them.
- believe other people couldn't possibly like and love them.
- try to prove they're good enough for other people.
- settle for being needed.

**REPRESSION***Many codependents:*

- push their thoughts and feelings out of their awareness because of fear and guilt.
- become afraid to let themselves be who they are.
- appear rigid and controlled.

**OBSESSION***Codependents tend to:*

- feel terribly anxious about problems and people.
- worry about the silliest things.
- think and talk a lot about other people.
- lose sleep over problems or other people's behavior.
- worry.
- never find answers.
- check on people.
- try to catch people in acts of misbehavior.
- feel unable to quit talking, thinking, and worrying about other people or problems.

- abandon their routine because they are so upset about somebody or something.
- focus all their energy on other people and problems.
- wonder why they never have any energy.
- wonder why they can't get things done.

### CONTROLLING

#### *Many codependents:*

- have lived through events and with people that were out of control, causing the codependents sorrow and disappointment.
- become afraid to let other people be who they are and allow events to happen naturally.
- don't see or deal with their fear of loss of control.
- think they know best how things should turn out and how people should behave.
- try to control events and people through helplessness, guilt, coercion, threats, advice-giving, manipulation, or domination.
- eventually fail in their efforts or provoke people's anger.
- get frustrated and angry.
- feel controlled by events and people.

### DENIAL

#### *Codependents tend to:*

- ignore problems or pretend they aren't happening.
- pretend circumstances aren't as bad as they are.
- tell themselves things will be better tomorrow.
- stay busy so they don't have to think about things.
- get confused.
- get depressed or sick.

- go to doctors and get tranquilizers.
- become workaholics.
- spend money compulsively.
- overeat.
- pretend those things aren't happening, either.
- watch problems get worse.
- believe lies.
- lie to themselves.
- wonder why they feel like they're going crazy.

### DEPENDENCY

#### *Many codependents:*

- don't feel happy, content, or peaceful with themselves.
- look for happiness outside themselves.
- latch onto whoever or whatever they think can provide happiness.
- feel terribly threatened by the loss of any thing or person they think provides their happiness.
- didn't feel love and approval from their parents.
- don't love themselves.
- believe other people can't or don't love them.
- desperately seek love and approval.
- often seek love from people incapable of loving.
- believe other people are never there for them.
- equate love with pain.
- feel they need people more than they want them.
- try to prove they're good enough to be loved.
- don't take time to see if other people are good for them.
- worry whether other people love or like them.
- don't take time to figure out if they love or like other people.
- center their lives around other people.
- look to relationships to provide all their good feelings.

- lose interest in their own lives when they love.
- worry other people will leave them.
- don't believe they can take care of themselves.
- stay in relationships that don't work.
- tolerate abuse to keep people loving them.
- feel trapped in relationships.
- leave bad relationships and form new ones that don't work either.
- wonder if they will ever find love.

### POOR COMMUNICATION

#### *Codependents frequently:*

- blame.
- threaten.
- coerce.
- beg.
- bribe.
- advise.
- don't say what they mean.
- don't mean what they say.
- don't know what they mean.
- don't take themselves seriously.
- think other people don't take the codependents seriously.
- take themselves too seriously.
- ask for what they want and need indirectly—sighing, for example.
- find it difficult to get to the point.
- aren't sure what the point is.
- gauge their words carefully to achieve a desired effect.
- try to say what they think will please people.
- try to say what they think will provoke people.
- try to say what they hope will make people do what they want them to do.

- eliminate the word *no* from their vocabulary.
- talk too much.
- talk about other people.
- avoid talking about themselves, their problems, feelings, and thoughts.
- say everything is their fault.
- say nothing is their fault.
- believe their opinions don't matter.
- wait to express their opinions until they know other people's opinions.
- lie to protect and cover up for people they love.
- lie to protect themselves.
- have a difficult time asserting their rights.
- have a difficult time expressing their emotions honestly, openly, and appropriately.
- think most of what they have to say is unimportant.
- begin to talk in cynical, self-degrading, or hostile ways.
- apologize for bothering people.

### WEAK BOUNDARIES

#### *Codependents frequently:*

- say they won't tolerate certain behaviors from other people.
- gradually increase their tolerance until they can tolerate and do things they said they never would.
- let others hurt them.
- keep letting people hurt them.
- wonder why they hurt so badly.
- complain, blame, and try to control while they continue to stand there.
- finally get angry.
- become totally intolerant.

**LACK OF TRUST***Codependents:*

- don't trust themselves.
- don't trust their feelings.
- don't trust their decisions.
- don't trust other people.
- try to trust untrustworthy people.
- think God has abandoned them.
- lose faith and trust in God.

**ANGER***Many codependents:*

- feel very scared, hurt, and angry.
- live with people who are very scared, hurt, and angry.
- are afraid of their own anger.
- are frightened of other people's anger.
- think people will go away if anger enters the picture.
- think other people make them feel angry.
- are afraid to make other people feel anger.
- feel controlled by other people's anger.
- repress their angry feelings.
- cry a lot, get depressed, overeat, get sick, do mean and nasty things to get even, act hostile, or have violent temper outbursts.
- punish other people for making the codependents angry.
- have been shamed for feeling angry.
- place guilt and shame on themselves for feeling angry.
- feel increasing amounts of anger, resentment, and bitterness.
- feel safer with their anger than with hurt feelings.
- wonder if they'll ever not be angry.

**SEX PROBLEMS***Some codependents:*

- are caretakers in the bedroom.
- have sex when they don't want to.
- have sex when they'd rather be held, nurtured, and loved.
- try to have sex when they're angry or hurt.
- refuse to enjoy sex because they're so angry at their partner.
- are afraid of losing control.
- have a difficult time asking for what they need in bed.
- withdraw emotionally from their partner.
- feel sexual revulsion toward their partner.
- don't talk about it.
- force themselves to have sex, anyway.
- reduce sex to a technical act.
- wonder why they don't enjoy sex.
- lose interest in sex.
- make up reasons to abstain.
- wish their sex partner would die, go away, or sense the codependent's feelings.
- have strong sexual fantasies about other people.
- consider or have an extramarital affair.

**MISCELLANEOUS***Codependents tend to:*

- be extremely responsible.
- be extremely irresponsible.
- become martyrs, sacrificing their happiness and that of others for causes that don't require sacrifice.
- find it difficult to feel close to people.
- find it difficult to have fun and be spontaneous.

- have an overall passive response to codependency—crying, hurt, helplessness.
- have an overall aggressive response to codependency—violence, anger, dominance.
- combine passive and aggressive responses.
- vacillate in decisions and emotions.
- laugh when they feel like crying.
- stay loyal to their compulsions and people even when it hurts.
- be ashamed about family, personal, or relationship problems.
- be confused about the nature of the problem.
- cover up, lie, and protect the problem.
- not seek help because they tell themselves the problem isn't bad enough, or they aren't important enough.
- wonder why the problem doesn't go away.

### PROGRESSIVE

*In the later stages of codependency, codependents may:*

- feel lethargic.
- feel depressed.
- become withdrawn and isolated.
- experience a complete loss of daily routine and structure.
- abuse or neglect their children and other responsibilities.
- feel hopeless.
- begin to plan their escape from a relationship they feel trapped in.
- think about suicide.
- become violent.
- become seriously emotionally, mentally, or physically ill.
- experience an eating disorder (over- or undereating).
- become addicted to alcohol and other drugs.

\* \* \*

The preceding checklist is long but not all-inclusive. Like other people, codependents do, feel, and think many things. There are not a certain number of traits that guarantees whether a person is or isn't codependent. Each person is different; each person has his or her way of doing things. I'm just trying to paint a picture. The interpretation, or decision, is up to you. What's most important is that you first identify behaviors or areas that cause you problems, and then decide what you want to do.

At the end of Chapter Three, I asked you to define codependency. As Earnie Larsen says, if you defined your problem as, "living with an alcoholic," you may think *not* living with an alcoholic is the solution to your problem. That may be partially correct. But our real problems as codependents are our own characteristics—our codependent behaviors. Who's codependent? I am.

An estimated 80 million people are chemically dependent or in a relationship with someone who is.<sup>2</sup> They are probably codependent.

People who love, care about, or work with troubled people may be codependent.

People who care about people with eating disorders are probably codependent. In her book, *Fat Is a Family Affair*, Judi Hollis wrote that one eating disorder person can keep fifteen to twenty codependents busy.<sup>3</sup> Many people with eating disorders are codependents, too. "In an informal survey, I discovered at least 40 percent of the wives of alcoholics were obese," Hollis wrote.<sup>4</sup>

You may be reading this book for yourself; you may be codependent. Or, you may be reading this book to help someone else; if so, you probably are codependent. If concern has turned into obsession; if compassion has turned into caretaking; if you are taking care of other people and not taking care of yourself—you may be in trouble with codependency. Each person must decide for him- or herself if codependency is a problem. Each person must decide for him- or herself what needs to be changed and when that should happen.

Codependency is many things. It is a dependency on people—on their moods, behaviors, sickness or well-being, and their love. It is a paradoxical dependency.<sup>5</sup> Codependents appear to be depended upon, but

they are dependent. They look strong but feel helpless. They appear controlling but in reality are controlled themselves, sometimes by an illness such as alcoholism.

These are the issues that dictate recovery. It is solving these problems that makes recovery fun. Many recoveries from problems that involve a person's mind, emotions, and spirit are long and grueling. Not so, here. Except for normal human emotions we would be feeling anyway, and twinges of discomfort as we begin to behave differently, recovery from codependency is exciting. It is liberating. It lets us be who we are. It lets other people be who they are. It helps us own our God-given power to think, feel, and act. It feels good. It brings peace. It enables us to love ourselves and others. It allows us to receive love—some of the good stuff we've all been looking for. It provides an optimum environment for the people around us to get and stay healthy. And recovery helps stop the unbearable pain many of us have been living with.

Recovery is not only fun, it is simple. It is not always easy, but it is simple. It is based on a premise many of us have forgotten or never learned: Each person is responsible for him- or herself. It involves learning one new behavior that we will devote ourselves to: taking care of ourselves. In the second half of this book, we'll discuss specific ideas for doing that.

### ACTIVITY

1. Go through the checklist in this chapter. Mark each characteristic with a 0 if it is never a problem for you. Mark the characteristic with a 1 if it is occasionally a problem. And mark it with a 2 if it is frequently a problem. Later, in another chapter, you will use this to establish goals. You may wish to use it now as a guide to the chapters you want to read.
2. How do you feel about changing yourself? What do you think would happen if you began to change? Do you think you can change? Why or why not? Write several paragraphs answering these questions.

## Part II:

### THE BASICS OF SELF-CARE

## DETACHMENT

*It (detachment) is not detaching from the person whom we care about, but from the agony of involvement.<sup>1</sup>*

—Al-Anon member

When I was trying to choose the topic for the first chapter in this section of the book, many subjects competed for first place. I chose detachment not because it is significantly more important than the other concepts. I selected it because it is an underlying concept. It is something we need to do frequently, as we strive to live happy lives. It is the goal of most recovery programs for codependents. And, it is also something we must do first—before we can do the other things we need to do. We cannot begin to work on ourselves, to live our own lives, feel our own feelings, and solve our own problems until we have detached from the object of our obsession. From my experiences (and those of others), it appears that even our Higher Power can't do much with us until we have detached.

**Attachment**

When a codependent says, "I think I'm getting attached to you," look out! He or she probably means it.

Most codependents are attached to the people and problems in their environments. By "attachment," I don't mean normal feelings of liking people, being concerned about problems, or feeling connected to the world. Attachment is becoming overly-involved, sometimes hopelessly entangled.



Attachment can take several forms:

- We may become excessively worried about, and preoccupied with, a problem or person (our mental energy is attached).
- Or, we may graduate to becoming obsessed with and controlling of the people and problems in our environment (our mental, physical, and emotional energy is directed at the object of our obsession).
- We may become reactionaries, instead of acting authentically of our own volition (our mental, emotional, and physical energy is attached).
- We may become emotionally dependent on the people around us (now we're really attached).
- We may become caretakers (rescuers, enablers) to the people around us (firmly attaching ourselves to their need for us).

The problems with attachment are many. (In this chapter I will focus on worry and obsession. In following chapters I will cover the other forms of attachment.) Overinvolvement of any sort can keep us in a state of chaos; it can keep the people around us in a state of chaos. If we're focusing all our energies on people and problems, we have little left for the business of living our own lives. And, there is just so much worry and responsibility in the air. If we take it all on ourselves, there is none left for the people around us. It overworks us and underworks them. Furthermore, worrying about people and problems doesn't help. It doesn't solve problems, it doesn't help other people, and it doesn't help us. It is wasted energy.

"If you believe that feeling bad or worrying long enough will change a fact, then you are residing on another planet with a different reality system," wrote Dr. Wayne W. Dyer in *Your Erroneous Zones*.<sup>2</sup>

Worrying and obsessing keep us so tangled in our heads we can't solve our problems. Whenever we become attached in these ways to someone or something, we become detached from ourselves. We lose touch with ourselves. We forfeit our power and ability to think, feel, act, and take care of ourselves. We lose control.

Obsession with another human being, or a problem, is an awful thing to be caught up in. Have you ever seen someone who is obsessed with someone or something? That person can talk about nothing else, can think of nothing else. Even if he appears to be listening when you talk, you know that person doesn't hear you. His mind is tossing and turning, crashing and banging, around and around on an endless race-track of compulsive thought. He is preoccupied. He relates whatever you say, no matter how unrelated it actually is, to the object of his obsession. He says the same things, over and over, sometimes changing the wording slightly, sometimes using the same words. Nothing you say makes any difference. Even telling him to stop doesn't help. He probably would if he could. The problem is he can't (at that moment). He is bursting with the jarring energy that obsession is made of. He has a problem or a concern that is not only bothering him—it is controlling him.

Many of the people I've worked with in family groups have been *that* obsessed with people they care about. When I asked them what they were feeling, they told me what the other person was feeling. When I asked what they did, they told me what the other person had done. Their entire focus was on someone or something other than themselves. Some of them had spent years of their lives doing this—worrying about, reacting to, and trying to control other human beings. They were shells, sometimes almost invisible shells, of people. Their energy was depleted—directed at someone else. They couldn't tell me what they were feeling and thinking because they didn't know. Their focus was not on themselves.

Maybe you've been obsessed with someone or something. Someone does or says something. A thought occurs to you. Something reminds you of a past event. A problem enters your awareness. Something happens or doesn't happen. Or you sense something's happening, but you're not sure what. He doesn't call, and he usually calls by now. He doesn't answer the phone, and he should. It's payday. In the past he always got drunk on payday. He's only been sober three months. Will it happen again today? You may not know what, you may not know why, and you're

not sure when, but you *know* something bad—something terrible—has happened, is happening, or is about to happen.

It hits you in the stomach. The feeling fills you up—that gut-twisting, handwringing anxiety that is so familiar to codependents. It is what causes us to do much of what we do that hurts ourselves; it is the substance worry and obsession feed upon. It is fear at its worst. Fear usually comes and goes, leaving us in flight, ready to fight, or just temporarily frightened. But anxiety hangs in there. It grips the mind, paralyzing it for all but its own purposes—an endless rehashing of the same useless thoughts. It is the fuel that propels us into controlling behaviors of all sorts. We can think of nothing but keeping a lid on things, controlling the problem, and making it go away; it is the stuff codependency is made of.

When you're obsessed, you can't get your mind off that person or that problem. You don't know what you are feeling. You didn't know what you were thinking. You're not even sure what you should do, but by God, you should do something! And fast!

Worrying, obsessing, and controlling are illusions. They are tricks we play on ourselves. We feel like we are doing something to solve our problems, but we're not. Many of us have reacted this way with justifiably good reason. We may have lived with serious, complicated problems that have disrupted our lives, and they would provoke any normal person to become anxious, upset, worried, and obsessed. We may love someone who is in trouble—someone who's out of control. His or her problem may be alcoholism, an eating disorder, gambling, a mental or emotional problem, or any combination of these.

Some of us may be living with less serious problems, but they concern us anyway. People we love or care about may have mood swings. They may do things we wish they wouldn't do. We may think he or she should do things differently, a better way, a way that we believe wouldn't cause so many problems.

Out of habit, some of us may have developed an attitude of attachment—of worrying, reacting, and obsessively trying to control. Maybe we have lived with people and through events that were out of control.

Maybe obsessing and controlling is the way we kept things in balance or temporarily kept things from getting worse. And then we just kept on doing it. Maybe we're afraid to let go, because when we let go in the past, terrible, hurtful things happened.

Maybe we've been attached to people—living their lives for and through them—for so long that we don't have any life of our own left to live. It's safer to stay attached. At least we know we're alive if we're reacting. At least we've got something to do if we're obsessing or controlling.

For various reasons codependents tend to attach themselves to problems and people. Never mind that worrying isn't solving anything. Never mind that those problems rarely have solutions. Never mind that they're so obsessed they can't read a book, watch television, or go for a walk. Never mind that their emotions are constantly in turmoil over what she said or didn't say, what she did or didn't do, or what she will do next. Never mind that the things we're doing aren't helping anyone! No matter what the cost, we will hang on. We will grit our teeth, clutch the rope, and grab more tightly than ever.

Some of us may not even be aware we've been holding on so tightly. Some of us may have convinced ourselves we have to hang on this tightly. We believe there is simply no other choice but to react to this particular problem or person in this obsessive manner. Frequently, when I suggest to people that they detach from a person or problem, they recoil in horror. "Oh, no!" they say. "I could never do that. I love him, or her, too much. I care too much to do that. This problem or person is too important to me. I *have* to stay attached!"

My answer to that is, "WHO SAYS YOU HAVE TO?"

I've got news—good news. We don't "have to." There's a better way. It's called "detachment."<sup>3</sup> It may be scary at first, but it will ultimately work better for everyone involved.

### A Better Way

Exactly what is detachment? What am I asking of you? (The term, as you may have guessed, is more jargon.)

First, let's discuss what detachment isn't. Detachment is not a cold, hostile withdrawal; a resigned, despairing acceptance of anything life and people throw our way; a robotic walk through life oblivious to, and totally unaffected by people and problems; a Pollyanna-like ignorant bliss; a shirking of our *true* responsibilities to ourselves and others; a severing of our relationships. Nor is it a removal of our love and concern, although sometimes these ways of detaching might be the best we can do, for the moment.

Ideally, detachment is releasing, or detaching from, a person or problem *in love*. We mentally, emotionally, and sometimes physically disengage ourselves from unhealthy (and frequently painful) entanglements with another person's life and responsibilities, and from problems we cannot solve, according to a handout, entitled "Detachment," that has been passed around Al-Anon groups for years.

Detachment is based on the premises that each person is responsible for himself, that we can't solve problems that aren't ours to solve, and that worrying doesn't help. We adopt a policy of keeping our hands off other people's responsibilities and tend to our own instead. If people have created some disasters for themselves, we allow them to face their own proverbial music. We allow people to be who they are. We give them the freedom to be responsible and to grow. And we give ourselves that same freedom. We live our own lives to the best of our ability. We strive to ascertain what it is we can change and what we cannot change. Then we stop trying to change things we can't. We do what we can to solve a problem, and then we stop fretting and stewing. If we cannot solve a problem and we have done what we could, we learn to live with, or in spite of, that problem. And we try to live happily—focusing heroically on what is good in our lives today, and feeling grateful for that. We learn the magical lesson that making the most of what we have turns it into more.

Detachment involves "present moment living"—living in the here and now. We allow life to happen instead of forcing and trying to control it. We relinquish regrets over the past and fears about the future. We make the most of each day.

Detachment also involves accepting reality—the facts. It requires faith—in ourselves, in God, in other people, and in the natural order and destiny of things in this world. We believe in the rightness and appropriateness of each moment. We release our burdens and cares, and give ourselves the freedom to enjoy life in spite of our unsolved problems. We trust that all is well in spite of the conflicts. We trust that Someone greater than ourselves knows, has ordained, and cares about what is happening. We understand that this Someone can do much more to solve the problem than we can. So we try to stay out of His way and let Him do it. In time, we *know* that all is well because we see how the strangest (and sometimes most painful) things work out for the best and for the benefit of everyone.

Judi Hollis wrote of detachment in a section on codependency in her book, *Fat Is a Family Affair*. There she described detachment as "a healthy neutrality."<sup>4</sup>

Detaching does not mean we don't care. It means we learn to love, care, and be involved without going crazy. We stop creating all this chaos in our minds and environments. When we are not anxiously and compulsively thrashing about, we become able to make good decisions about how to love people, and how to solve our problems. We become free to care and to love in ways that help others and don't hurt ourselves.<sup>5</sup>

The rewards from detachment are great: serenity; a deep sense of peace; the ability to give and receive love in self-enhancing, energizing ways; and the freedom to find real solutions to our problems. We find the freedom to live our own lives without excessive feelings of guilt about, or responsibility toward others.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes detachment even motivates and frees people around us to begin to solve their problems. We stop worrying about them, and they pick up the slack and finally start worrying about themselves. What a grand plan! We each mind our own business.

Earlier, I described a person caught in the entanglement of obsessions and worry. I have known many people who have had to (or have chosen to) live with serious problems such as an alcoholic spouse who never sobered up, a severely handicapped child, and a teenager hell-bent

on destroying himself through drugs and criminal behavior. These people learned to live with, and in spite of, their problems. They grieved for their losses, then found a way to live their lives not in resignation, martyrdom, and despair, but with enthusiasm, peace, and a true sense of gratitude for that which was good. They took care of their actual responsibilities. They gave to people, they helped people, and they loved people. But they also gave to and loved themselves. They held themselves in high esteem. They didn't do these things perfectly, or without effort, or instantly. But they strived to do these things, and they learned to do them well.

I owe a debt of gratitude to these people. They taught me that detachment was possible. They *showed me* it could work. I would like to pass that same hope on to you. It is my wish that you will find other people to pass that hope on to, for detachment is real and thrives with reinforcement and nurturing.

Detachment is both an act and an art. It is a way of life. I believe it is also a gift. And it will be given to those who seek it.

How do we detach? How do we extricate our emotions, mind, body, and spirit from the agony of entanglement? As best we can. And, probably, a bit clumsily at first. An old A.A. and Al-Anon saying suggests a three-part formula called "HOW": Honesty, Openness, and Willingness to try.<sup>7</sup>

In the chapters ahead, I will discuss some specific concepts for detaching from certain forms of attachment. Many of the other concepts I will discuss later will lead to detachment. You will have to decide how these ideas apply to you and your particular situation and then find your own path. With a little humility, surrender, and effort on your part, I believe you can do it. I believe detachment can become a habitual response, in the same manner that obsessing, worrying, and controlling became habitual responses—by practice. You may not do it perfectly, but no one has. However, and at whatever pace, you practice detachment in your life, I believe it will be right for you. I hope you will be able to detach with love for the person or persons you are detaching from. I think it is better to do everything in an attitude of love. However, for a variety of reasons, we can't always do that. If you can't detach in love, it

is my opinion that it is better to detach in anger rather than to stay attached. If we are detached, we are in a better position to work on (or through) our resentful emotions. If we're attached, we probably won't do anything other than stay upset.

When should we detach? When we can't stop thinking, talking about, or worrying about someone or something; when our emotions are churning and boiling; when we feel like we *have* to do something about someone because we can't stand it another minute; when we're hanging on by a thread, and it feels like that single thread is frayed; and when we believe we can no longer live with the problem we've been trying to live with. It is time to detach! You will learn to recognize when detachment is advisable. A good rule of thumb is: You need to detach most when it seems the least likely or possible thing to do.

I'll close this chapter with a true story. One night about midnight my telephone rang. I was in bed and wondered, as I picked up the receiver, who was calling me at that hour. I thought it had to be an emergency.

In a way it was an emergency. It was a stranger. She had been calling various friends all evening, trying to find some kind of consolation. Apparently, she hadn't been able to find it. Someone had given her someone else's phone number, that person had given her someone else's phone number, and the last person had suggested she call me.

Immediately upon introducing herself, the woman exploded in a tirade. Her husband used to go to Alcoholics Anonymous. He had separated from her, and now he was seeing another woman because he wanted to "find himself." Furthermore, before he left her, he had been acting really crazy and didn't go to meetings. And she wondered, isn't he acting crazy now by dating a woman who is *that much younger than him?*

I was speechless at first, then found it hard to find a chance to talk. She went on and on. Finally she asked, "Don't you think he's sick? Don't you think he's acting crazy? Don't you think something should be done about him?"

"That could be," I replied. "But obviously I can't do it, and neither can you. I'm more concerned about you. What are *you* feeling? What do you think? What do *you* need to do to take care of *yourself?*"

I shall say the same thing to you, dear reader. I know you have problems. I understand that many of you are deeply grieved over, and concerned about, certain people in your lives. Many of them may be destroying themselves, you, and your family, right before your eyes. But I can't do anything to control those people; and you probably can't either. If you could, you probably would have done it by now.

Detach. Detach in love, or detach in anger, but strive for detachment. I know it's difficult, but it will become easier with practice. If you can't let go completely, try to "hang on loose."<sup>8</sup> Relax. Sit back. Now, take a deep breath. The focus is on you.

### ACTIVITY

1. Is there a problem or person in your life that you are excessively worried about? Write about that person or problem. Write as much as you need to write to get it out of your system. When you have written all you need to write about that person or problem, focus on yourself. What are you thinking? What are you feeling?
2. How do you feel about detaching from that person or problem? What might happen if you detach? Will that probably happen anyway? How has staying "attached"—worrying, obsessing, trying to control—helped so far?
3. If you did not have that person or problem in your life, what would you be doing with your life that is different from what you are doing now? How would you be feeling and behaving? Spend a few minutes visualizing yourself living your life, feeling and behaving that way—in spite of your unsolved problem. Visualize your hands placing in God's hands the person or problem you are concerned about.<sup>9</sup> Visualize His hands gently and lovingly holding that person or willingly accepting that problem. Now, visualize His hands holding you. All is well for the moment. All is as it should and as it needs to be. All will be well—better than you think.

## 6

### DON'T BE BLOWN ABOUT BY EVERY WIND

*Easy Does It.*

—Twelve Step program slogan

*I am a reactionary.*

That thought burned deeply into my consciousness one day while I was sitting in my office. I had heard people discuss reacting, but until that moment I didn't understand how much I reacted.

I reacted to other people's feelings, behaviors, problems, and thoughts. I reacted to what they might be feeling, thinking, or doing. I reacted to my own feelings, my own thoughts, my own problems. My strong point seemed to be reacting to crises—I thought almost everything was a crisis. I overreacted. Hidden panic (which bordered on hysteria) brewed in me much of the time. I sometimes underreacted. If the problem I faced was significant, I often used the tool of denial. I reacted to almost everything that came into my awareness and environment. My entire life had been a reaction to other people's lives, desires, problems, faults, successes, and personalities. Even my low self-worth, which I dragged around like a bag of stinking garbage, had been a reaction. I was like a puppet with strings hanging out, inviting and allowing anyone or anything to yank them.

Most codependents are reactionaries. We react with anger, guilt, shame, self-hate, worry, hurt, controlling gestures, caretaking acts, depression, desperation, and fury. *We react with fear and anxiety.* Some of us react so much it is painful to be around people, and torturous to be

in large groups of people. It is normal to react and respond to our environment. Reacting is part of life. It's part of interacting, and it's part of being alive and human. But we allow ourselves to get so upset, and so distracted. Little things, big things—anything—have the power to throw us off the track. And the way we respond after we react is frequently not in our best interests.

We may have started reacting and responding urgently and compulsively in patterns that hurt us. Just *feeling* urgent and compulsive is enough to hurt us. We keep ourselves in a crisis state—adrenaline flowing and muscles tensed, ready to react to emergencies that usually aren't emergencies. Someone does something, so we must do something back. Someone says something, so we must say something back. Someone feels a certain way, so we must feel a certain way. **WE JUMP INTO THE FIRST FEELING THAT COMES OUR WAY AND THEN WALLOW IN IT.** We think the first thought that comes into our heads and then elaborate on it. We say the first words on our tongues and sometimes regret them. We do the first thing that comes to mind, usually without thinking about it. That is the problem: we are reacting without thinking—without honest thought about what we need to do, and how we want to handle the situation. Our emotions and behaviors are being controlled—triggered—by everyone and everything in our environment. We are indirectly allowing others to tell us what to do. That means we have lost control. We are being controlled.

When we react we forfeit our personal, God-given power to think, feel, and behave in our best interests. We allow others to determine when we will be happy; when we will be peaceful; when we will be upset; and what we will say, do, think, and feel. We forfeit our right to feel peaceful at the whim of our environments. We are like a wisp of paper in a thunderstorm, blown about by every wind.

Here is an example of a way I tend to react (one of many). My office is in my home, and I have two young children. Sometimes when I'm working they start going wild in the other rooms—fighting, running, messing up the house, and eating and drinking everything in the kitchen. My first, instinctive reaction is to screech at them to, "Stop that!" My

second reaction is to holler some more. It comes naturally. Reacting that way appears to be easier than leaving my office, working my way through the laundry room, and walking upstairs. It also appears easier than taking the time to think about how I want to handle the situation. The problem is: bellowing and screaming do not work. It is not really easier. It makes my throat sore and teaches the children how to make me sit in my office and screech.

Reacting usually does not work. We react too quickly, with too much intensity and urgency. Rarely can we do our best at anything in this state of mind. I believe the irony is that we are not called upon or required to do things in this state of mind. There is little in our lives we need to do that we cannot do better if we are peaceful. Few situations—no matter how greatly they appear to demand it—can be bettered by us going berserk.

Why do we do it, then?

We react because we're anxious and afraid of what has happened, what might happen, and what is happening.

Many of us react as though everything is a crisis because we have lived with so many crises for so long that crisis reaction has become a habit.

We react because we think things *shouldn't* be happening the way they are.

We react because we don't feel good about ourselves.

We react because most people react.

We react because we think we have to react.

We don't have to.

We *don't have to be so afraid of people.* They are just people like us.

We *don't have to forfeit our peace.* It doesn't help. We have the same facts and resources available to us when we're peaceful that are available to us when we're frantic and chaotic. Actually we have more resources available because our minds and emotions are free to perform at peak level.

We *don't have to forfeit our power to think and feel for anyone or anything.* That is also not required of us.



*We don't have to take things so seriously (ourselves, events, and other people).* We blow things out of proportion—our feelings, thoughts, actions, and mistakes. We do the same thing with other people's feelings, thoughts, and actions. We tell ourselves things are awful, terrible, a tragedy, and the end of the world. Many things might be sad, too bad, and unpleasant—but the only thing that's the end of the world is the end of the world. Feelings are important, but they're only feelings. Thoughts are important, but they're only thoughts—and we all think a lot of different things, and our thoughts are subject to change. What we say and do is important, what others say and do is important, but the world doesn't hinge on any particular speech or action. And if it is particularly important that something gets done or said, don't worry: It'll happen. Lighten up. Give yourself and others room to move, to talk, to be who they are—to be human. Give life a chance to happen. Give yourself an opportunity to enjoy it.

*We don't have to take other people's behaviors as reflections of our self-worth.* We don't have to be embarrassed if someone we love chooses to behave inappropriately. It's normal to react that way, but we don't have to continue to feel embarrassed and less than if someone else continues to behave inappropriately. Each person is responsible for his or her behavior. If another person behaves inappropriately, let him or her feel embarrassed for him- or herself. If you have done nothing to feel embarrassed about, don't feel embarrassed. I know this is a tough concept, but it can be mastered.

*We don't have to take rejection as a reflection of our self-worth.* If somebody who is important (or even someone unimportant) to you rejects you or your choices, you are still real, and you are still worth every bit as much as you would be if you had not been rejected. Feel any feelings that go with rejection; talk about your thoughts; but don't forfeit your self-esteem to another's disapproval or rejection of who you are or what you have done. Even if the most important person in your world rejects you, you are still real, and you are still okay. If you have done something inappropriate or you need to solve a problem or change a behavior, then take appropriate steps to take care of yourself. But don't reject yourself,

and don't give so much power to other people's rejection of you. It isn't necessary.

*We don't have to take things so personally.* We take things to heart that we have no business taking to heart. For instance, saying "If you loved me you wouldn't drink" to an alcoholic makes as much sense as saying "If you loved me, you wouldn't cough" to someone who has pneumonia. Pneumonia victims will cough until they get appropriate treatment for their illness. Alcoholics will drink until they get the same. When people with a compulsive disorder do whatever it is they are compelled to do, they are not saying they don't love you—they are saying they don't love themselves.

*We don't have to take little things personally either.* If someone has a bad day or gets angry, don't assume it has something to do with you. It may or may not have something to do with you. If it does you'll find out. Usually things have far less to do with us than we think.

An interruption, someone else's bad mood, sharp tongue, bad day, negative thoughts, problems, or active alcoholism does not have to ruin our lives, our day, or even an hour of our day. If people don't want to be with us or act healthy, it is not a reflection on *our* self-worth. It reflects on *their* present circumstances. By practicing detachment we can lessen our destructive reactions to the world around us. Separate yourself from things. Leave things alone, and let people be who they are. Who are you to say that the interruption, mood, word, bad day, thought, or problem is not an important and necessary part of life? Who are you to say that this problem won't ultimately be beneficial to you or someone else?

We don't have to react. We have options. That is the joy of recovery from codependency. And each time we exercise our right to choose how we want to act, think, feel, and behave, we feel better and stronger.

"But," you might protest, "why shouldn't I react? Why shouldn't I say something back? Why shouldn't I be upset? He or she deserves to bear the brunt of my turmoil." That may be, but you don't. We're talking here about your lack of peace, your lack of serenity, your wasted moments. As Ralph Edwards used to say, "This is your life." How do you

want to spend it? You're not detaching for him or her. You're detaching for you. Chances are everyone will benefit by it.

We are like singers in a large chorus. If the guy next to us gets off key, must we? Wouldn't it help him, and us, more to strive to stay on key? We can learn to hold our part.

We don't need to eliminate all our reactions to people and problems. Reactions can be useful. They help us identify what we like and what feels good. They help us identify problems in and around us. But most of us react too much. And much of what we react to is nonsense. It isn't all that important, and it doesn't merit the time and attention we're giving it. Some of what we react to is other people's reactions to us. (I'm mad because he got mad; he got mad because I was angry; I was angry because I thought he was angry with me; he wasn't angry, he was hurt because. . .)

Our reactions can be such a chain reaction that frequently everyone's upset and nobody knows why. They're just upset. Then, everyone's out of control and being controlled. Sometimes people behave in certain ways to provoke us to react in certain ways. If we stop reacting in these certain ways, we take all the fun out of it for them. We remove ourselves from their control and take away their power over us.

Sometimes our reactions provoke other people to react in certain ways. We help them justify certain behaviors. (We don't need any more of that, do we?) Sometimes reacting narrows our vision so much that we get stuck reacting to symptoms of problems. We may stay so busy reacting we never have the time or energy to identify the real problem, much less figure out how to solve it. We can spend years reacting to each drinking incident and resulting crisis, completely failing to recognize that the true problem is alcoholism! Learn to stop reacting in ways that aren't necessary and don't work. Eliminate the reactions that hurt you.

Some suggestions follow to help you detach from people and your destructive reactions to them. These are only suggestions. There is no precise formula for detachment. You need to find your own way, a way that works for you.

1. Learn to recognize when you're reacting, when you are allowing someone or something to yank your strings. Usually when you start to feel anxious, afraid, indignant, outraged, rejected, sorry for yourself, ashamed, worried, or confused, something in your environment has snagged you. (I'm not saying it's wrong to feel these feelings. Probably anybody would feel that way. The difference is, we're learning to decide how long we want to feel that way, and what we want to do about it.) Using the words "he or it or she *made me feel*" often indicates we are reacting. Losing our sense of peace and serenity is probably the strongest indication that we are caught up in some sort of reaction.

2. Make yourself comfortable. When you recognize that you're in the midst of a chaotic reaction, say or do as little as possible until you can restore your level of serenity and peace. Do whatever you need to do (that is not self- or other-destructive) to help yourself relax. Take a few deep breaths. Go for a walk. Clean the kitchen. Go sit in the bathroom. Go to a friend's house. Go to an Al-Anon meeting. Read a meditation book. Take a trip to Florida. Watch a television program. Find a way to emotionally, mentally, and (if necessary) physically separate yourself from whatever you are reacting to. Find a way to ease your anxiety. Don't take a drink or drive the car down a side street at 85 miles per hour. Do something safe that will help restore your balance.

3. Examine what happened. If it's a minor incident, you may be able to sort through it yourself. If the problem is serious, or is seriously upsetting you, you may want to discuss it with a friend to help clear your thoughts and emotions. Troubles and feelings go wild when we try to keep them caged inside. Talk about your feelings. Take responsibility for them. Feel whatever feeling you have. Nobody made you feel. Someone might have helped you feel a particular way, but you did your feeling all by yourself. Deal with it. Then, tell yourself the truth about what happened. Was someone trying to sock it to you? (If in doubt about whether to interpret something as an insult or rejection, I prefer to believe it had nothing to do with me. It saves my time and helps me feel good about myself.) Were you trying to control someone or some event? How serious



is the problem or issue? Are you taking responsibility for someone else? Are you angry because someone didn't guess what you really wanted or what you were really trying to say? Are you taking someone's behavior too personally? Did someone push your insecurity or guilt buttons? Is it truly the end of the world, or is it merely sad and disappointing?

4. Figure out what you need to do to take care of yourself. Make your decisions based on reality, and make them from a peaceful state. Do you need to apologize? Do you want to let it go? Do you need to have a heart-to-heart talk with someone? Do you need to make some other decision to take care of yourself? When you make your decision keep in mind what your responsibilities are. You are not responsible for making other people "see the light," and you do not need to "set them straight." You are responsible for helping yourself see the light and for setting yourself straight. If you can't get peaceful about a decision, let it go. It's not time to make it yet. Wait until your mind is consistent and your emotions are calm.

Slow down. You don't have to feel so frightened. You don't have to feel so frantic. Keep things in perspective. Make life easier for you.

### ACTIVITY

1. Are you spending too much time reacting to someone or something in your environment? Who or what? How are you reacting? Is that how you would choose to behave or feel if you had a choice?
2. Go through the previous steps on detachment for whatever or whoever is bothering you the most. If you need to talk to someone select a trusted friend. If necessary seek professional help.
3. What activities help you feel peaceful and comfortable? (A Twelve Step meeting, a steaming hot shower, a good movie, and dancing are my favorite ones.)

## 7

### SET YOURSELF FREE

*Let Go and Let God.*

—Twelve Step program slogan

People say codependents are controllers.

We nag; lecture; scream; holler; cry; beg; bribe; coerce; hover over; protect; accuse; chase after; run away from; try to talk into; try to talk out of; attempt to induce guilt in; seduce; entrap; check on; demonstrate how much we've been hurt; hurt people in return so they'll know how it feels; threaten to hurt ourselves; whip power plays on; deliver ultimatums to; do things for; refuse to do things for; stomp out on; get even with; whine; vent fury on; act helpless; suffer in loud silence; try to please; lie; do sneaky little things; do sneaky big things; clutch at our hearts and threaten to die; grab our heads and threaten to go crazy; beat on our chests and threaten to kill; enlist the aid of supporters; gauge our words carefully; sleep with; refuse to sleep with; have children with; bargain with; drag to counseling; drag out of counseling; talk mean about; talk mean to; insult; condemn; pray for miracles; pay for miracles; go to places we don't want to go; stay nearby; supervise; dictate; command; complain; write letters about; write letters to; stay home and wait for; go out and look for; call all over looking for; drive down dark alleys at night hoping to see; chase down dark alleys at night hoping to catch; run down alleys at night to get away from; bring home; keep home; lock out; move away from; move with; scold; impress upon; advise; teach lessons to; set straight; insist; give in to; placate; provoke; try to make jealous; try to

make afraid; remind; inquire; hint; look through pockets; peek in wallets; search dresser drawers; dig through glove boxes; look in the toilet tank; try to look into the future; search through the past; call relatives about; reason with; settle issues once and for all; settle them again; punish; reward; almost give up on; then try even harder; and a list of other handy maneuvers I've either forgotten or haven't tried yet.

We aren't the people who "make things happen." Codependents are the people who consistently, and with a great deal of effort and energy, try to force things to happen.

We control in the name of love.

We do it because we're "only trying to help."

We do it because we know best how things should go and how people should behave.

We do it because we're right and they're wrong.

We control because we're afraid not to do it.

We do it because we don't know what else to do.

We do it to stop the pain.

We control because we think we have to.

We control because we don't think.

We control because controlling is all we can think about.

Ultimately we may control because that's the way we've always done things.

Tyrannical and dominating, some rule with an iron hand from a self-appointed throne. They are powerful. They know best. And by God, it will be done this way. They will see to it.

Others do their dirty work undercover. They hide behind a costume of sweetness and niceties, and secretly go about their business—OTHER PEOPLE'S BUSINESS.

Others, sighing and crying, claim inability, proclaim their dependence, announce their overall victimization, and successfully control through weakness. They are so helpless. They need your cooperation so badly. They can't live without it. Sometimes the weak are the most powerful manipulators and controllers.<sup>1</sup> They have learned to tug at the guilt and pity strings of the world.

Many codependents combine tactics, using a variety of methods. Whatever works! (Or, more accurately, whatever doesn't work although we continue to hope it will.)

Despite tactics, the goals remain the same. Make other people do what you want them to. Make them behave as you think they should. Don't let them behave in ways you think they shouldn't, but probably would, without your "assistance." Force life's events to unravel and unfold in the manner and at such times as you have designated. Do not let what's happening, or what might happen, occur. Hold on tightly and don't let go. We have written the play, and we will see to it that the actors behave and the scenes unfold exactly as we have decided they should. Never mind that we continue to buck reality. If we charge ahead insistently enough, we can (we believe) stop the flow of life, transform people, and change things to our liking.

We are fooling ourselves.

Let me tell you about Maria. She married a man who turned out to be an alcoholic. He was a binge drinker. He didn't drink every day, every weekend, or every month, but when he did—look out. He stayed drunk for days, sometimes weeks. He started drinking at eight in the morning and drank until he passed out. He vomited all over, devastated the family's finances, got fired from jobs, and created unbearable chaos each time he drank. Between binges life was not perfect either. A sense of impending doom and unresolved feelings filled the air. Other unresolved problems, residues from the drinking, cluttered their lives. They could never get ahead of the disasters. They were always starting over with a dirty slate. But, it was better—for Maria and her three children—when her husband wasn't drinking. There was hope, too, that this time it would be different.

It never was different. For years, each time Maria turned around or turned her back, her husband went on a binge. When she went away for a weekend, when she went to the hospital to deliver her babies, when her husband left town on a trip, or when he was out of her sight for any reason—he drank.

Whenever Maria returned or retrieved him from wherever he was drinking, he would abruptly quit drinking. Maria decided that the key

to her husband's sobriety was her presence. She could control the drinking (and all the pain it caused) by sticking close to home and standing guard over her husband. Because she learned this method of control, and because of increasing feelings of shame, embarrassment, anxiety, and the overall trauma that accompanies codependency, Maria became a recluse. She turned down opportunities to travel, and she refused to attend church conferences she was interested in. Even leaving the house for more than a trip to the grocery store began to threaten the balance she had created—or thought she had created. In spite of her determined and desperate efforts, her husband still found opportunities to drink. He found ways to drink at home without her knowing about it, and he drank when she had no choice but to spend the night away from home.

After one particularly disruptive drinking bout, Maria's husband informed her that the impossible financial predicament they were in caused him to drink. (He neglected to mention that his drinking had caused the impossible financial predicament.) He said if she would take a job and help out financially, he would not feel like he had to drink any more. The pressure would be off. Maria thought about his request, then reluctantly agreed. She was afraid to leave home and felt concerned about setting up appropriate baby-sitting arrangements for the children. She did not feel emotionally or mentally able to work. She especially resented taking a job to earn extra money when her husband was so irresponsible with money. But it was worth a try. Anything to keep this man sober!

Before long Maria located a job as a legal secretary. She did well—better than she thought she would. Codependents make great employees. They don't complain; they do more than their share; they do whatever is asked of them; they please people; and they try to do their work perfectly—at least for a while, until they become angry and resentful.

Maria started feeling a little better about herself. She enjoyed her contact with people—something that had been missing in her life. She liked the feeling of earning her own money (although she still resented her husband's irresponsibility with it). And her employers appreciated her. They gave her increasing amounts of responsibility and were on the verge of promoting her to a paralegal position. But about that time Maria

began to feel that old familiar anxious feeling—her cue that her husband was about to drink again.

The feeling came and went for days. Then one day, it hit hard. That handwringing, gut-twisting anxiety came back in full force. Maria started calling her husband on the phone. He was not at work where he was supposed to be. His employer didn't know where he was. She made more phone calls. Nobody knew where he was. She spent the day biting her nails, making frantic phone calls, and hoping her fellow employees wouldn't see through her "everything's fine—no problem" veneer. When she arrived home that evening she discovered that her husband was not at home and had not picked up the children from day care as he was supposed to. Things were out of control again. He was drinking again. The next morning she quit her job—walked out with no appropriate notice. By 10:00 A.M., she was back in her house—guarding her husband.

Years later she said, "I felt like I had to do this. I had to get things under control—MY CONTROL."

My question is this: Who's controlling whom?

Maria learned she was not controlling her husband or his drinking at all. He and his alcoholism were controlling her.

This point was further clarified for me one evening during a family group facilitation I had at a treatment center. (Many of my clients are wise—wiser than I am. I have learned much by listening to them.) During the group, the wife of an alcoholic talked openly to her husband—a man who had spent many years of their marriage drinking, unemployed, and in prison.

"You accuse me of trying to control you, and I guess I have," she said. "I've gone to bars with you so you wouldn't drink so much. I've let you come home when you were abusive and drunk so you wouldn't drink anymore or hurt yourself. I've measured your drinks, drank with you (and I hate drinking), hid your bottles, and taken you to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings."

"But the truth is," she said, "you've been controlling me. All those letters from prison telling me what I've wanted to hear. All those prom-

ises, all those words. And every time I'm ready to leave you—to walk out for good—you do or say just the right thing to keep me from leaving. You know just what I want to hear, and that's what you tell me. But you never change. You've never intended to change. You just want to control me."

He smiled a half-smile and nodded when she said that. "Yes," he said, "I have been trying to control you. And I've been doing a pretty good job of it at that."

When we attempt to control people and things that we have no business controlling, we are controlled. We forfeit our power to think, feel, and act in accordance with our best interests. We frequently lose control of ourselves. Often, we are being controlled not just by people but by diseases such as alcoholism, eating disorders, and compulsive gambling. Alcoholism and other destructive disorders are powerful forces. Never forget that alcoholics and other troubled persons are expert controllers. We have met our match when we attempt to control them or their disease. We lose the battles. We lose the wars. We lose our selves—our lives. Borrowing a tidbit from Al-Anon: You didn't cause it; you can't control it; and you can't cure it.

So stop trying! We become utterly frustrated when we try to do the impossible. And we usually prevent the possible from happening. I believe that clutching tightly to a person or thing, or forcing my will on any given situation eliminates the possibility of my Higher Power doing anything constructive about that situation, the person, or me. My controlling blocks God's power. It blocks other people's ability to grow. It stops events from happening naturally. It prevents me from enjoying people or events.

Control is an illusion. It doesn't work. We cannot control alcoholism. We cannot control anyone's compulsive behaviors—overeating, sexual, gambling—or any of their behaviors. We cannot (and have no business trying to) control anyone's emotions, mind, or choices. We cannot control the outcome of events. We cannot control life. Some of us can barely control ourselves.

People ultimately do what they want to do. They feel how they want to feel (or how they are feeling); they think what they want to think; they

do the things they believe they need to do; and they will change only when they are ready to change. It doesn't matter if they're wrong and we're right. It doesn't matter if they're hurting themselves. It doesn't matter that we could help them if they'd only listen to, and cooperate with, us. **IT DOESN'T MATTER, DOESN'T MATTER, DOESN'T MATTER, DOESN'T MATTER, DOESN'T MATTER.**

We cannot change people. Any attempts to control them are a delusion as well as an illusion. People will either resist our efforts or redouble their efforts to prove we can't control them. They may temporarily adapt to our demands, but the moment we turn our backs they will return to their natural state. Furthermore, people will punish us for making them do something they don't want to do, or be something they don't want to be. No amount of control will effect a permanent or desirable change in another person. We can sometimes do things that increase the probability that people will want to change, but we can't even guarantee or control that.

And that's the truth. It's too bad. It's sometimes hard to accept, especially if someone you love is hurting him- or herself and you. But that's the way it is. The only person you can now or ever change is yourself. The only person that it is your business to control is yourself.

Detach. Surrender. Sometimes when we do that the result we have been waiting and hoping for happens quickly, almost miraculously. Sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it never happens. But you will benefit. You don't have to stop caring or loving. You don't have to tolerate abuse. You don't have to abandon constructive, problem-solving methods such as professional intervention. You only need to put your emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical hands back in your own pockets and leave things and people alone. Let them be. Make any decisions you need to make to take care of yourself, but don't make them to control other people. Start taking care of yourself!

"But this is so important to me," many people protest. "I can't detach."

If it's that important to you, I suggest that is all the more reason to detach.

I heard some wisdom on detachment out of the mouths of babes—my babies. Sometimes, my youngest son, Shane, hangs on too tightly and too long after a hug. He starts tipping me over. I lose my balance, and become impatient for him to stop hugging me. I begin to resist him. Perhaps he does it to keep me close to him a little longer. Maybe it's a form of control over me. I don't know. One night when he did this my daughter watched until even she became frustrated and impatient.

"Shane," she said, "there comes a time to let go."

For each of us, there comes a time to let go. You will know when that time has come. When you have done all that you can do, it is time to detach. Deal with your feelings. Face your fears about losing control. Gain control of yourself and your responsibilities. Free others to be who they are. In so doing, you will set yourself free.

### ACTIVITY

1. Is there an event or person in your life that you are trying to control? Why? Write a few paragraphs about it.
2. In what ways (mentally, physically, emotionally, etc.) are you being controlled by whatever or whomever you are attempting to control?
3. What would happen (to you and the other person) if you detached from this situation or person? Will that probably happen anyway, in spite of your controlling gestures? How are you benefitting by attempting to control the situation? How is the other person benefitting by your attempts to control? How effective are your attempts at controlling the outcomes of events?

## 8

### REMOVE THE VICTIM

*We're so careful to see that no one gets hurt.*

*No one, that is, but ourselves.*

—Al-Anon member

About a year into my recovery from codependency, I realized I was still doing something over and over that caused me pain. I sensed this pattern had something to do with why many of my relationships went sour. But I didn't know what "it" was that I was doing, so I couldn't stop doing it.

One sunny day, as I was walking down the sidewalk with my friend Scott, I stopped, turned to him, and asked, "What is the one thing codependents do over and over? What is it that keeps us feeling so bad?"

He thought about my question for a moment before answering. "Codependents are caretakers—rescuers. They rescue, then they persecute, then they end up victimized. Study the Karpman Drama Triangle," he said. The Karpman Drama Triangle and the accompanying roles of rescuer, persecutor, and victim, are the work and observation of Stephen B. Karpman.<sup>1</sup>

What he said didn't make sense, but I went home, dragged out some therapy books that were collecting dust on my shelves, and studied.<sup>2</sup> After a while, a light went on inside my head. I saw. I understood. And I felt like I had discovered fire.

This was it. This was my pattern. This is our pattern. This is what we repeatedly do with friends, family, acquaintances, clients, or anybody

around us. As codependents, we may do many things, but this pattern is what we do best and most often. This is our favorite reaction.

We are the rescuers, the enablers. We are the great godmothers or godfathers to the entire world, as Earnie Larsen says. We not only meet people's needs, we anticipate them. We fix, nurture, and fuss over others. We make better, solve, and attend to. And we do it all so well. "Your wish is my command," is our theme. "Your problem is my problem," is our motto. We are the caretakers.

### What's a Rescue?

*Rescuing* and *caretaking* mean almost what they sound like. We rescue people from their responsibilities. We take care of people's responsibilities for them. Later we get mad at them for what we've done. Then we feel used and sorry for ourselves. That is the pattern, the triangle.

Rescuing and caretaking are synonymous. Their definitions are closely connected to enabling. *Enabling* is therapeutic jargon that means a destructive form of helping. Any acts that help an alcoholic continue drinking, prevent the alcoholic from suffering consequences, or in any way make it easier for an alcoholic to continue drinking are considered enabling behaviors.

As counselor Scott Egleston says, we rescue anytime we take responsibility for another human being—for that person's thoughts, feelings, decisions, behaviors, growth, well-being, problems, or destiny. The following acts constitute a rescuing or caretaking move:

- Doing something we really don't want to do.
- Saying yes when we mean no.
- Doing something for someone although that person is capable of and should be doing it for him- or herself.
- Meeting people's needs without being asked and before we've agreed to do so.
- Doing more than a fair share of work after our help is requested.
- Consistently giving more than we receive in a particular situation.
- Fixing people's feelings.

- Doing people's thinking for them.
- Speaking for another person.
- Suffering people's consequences for them.
- Solving people's problems for them.
- Putting more interest and activity into a joint effort than the other person does.
- Not asking for what we want, need, and desire.

*We rescue whenever we take care of other people.*

At the time we rescue or caretake we may feel one or more of the following feelings: discomfort and awkwardness about the other person's dilemma; urgency to do something; pity; guilt; saintliness; anxiety; extreme responsibility for that person or problem; fear; a sense of being forced or compelled to do something; mild or severe reluctance to do anything; more competency than the person we are "helping"; or occasional resentment at being put in this position. We also think the person we are taking care of is helpless and unable to do what we are doing for him or her. We feel needed temporarily.

I am not referring to acts of love, kindness, compassion, and true helping—situations where our assistance is legitimately wanted and needed and we want to give that assistance. These acts are the good stuff of life. Rescuing or caretaking isn't.

Caretaking looks like a much friendlier act than it is. It requires incompetency on the part of the person being taken care of. We rescue "victims"—people who we believe are not capable of being responsible for themselves. The victims actually are capable of taking care of themselves, even though we and they don't admit it. Usually, our victims are just hanging around that corner of the triangle, waiting for us to make our move and jump on the triangle with them.

After we rescue, we will inevitably move to the next corner of the triangle: persecution. We become resentful and angry at the person we have so generously "helped." We've done something we didn't want to do, we've done something that was not our responsibility to do, we've ignored our own needs and wants, and we get angry about it. To compli-

cate matters, this victim, this poor person we've rescued, is not grateful for our help. He or she is not appreciative enough of the sacrifice we have made. The victim isn't behaving the way he or she should. This person is not even taking our advice, which we offered so readily. This person is not letting us fix that feeling. Something doesn't work right or feel right, so we rip off our halos and pull out our pitchforks.

Sometimes, people don't notice or choose not to notice our peeved mood. Sometimes we do our best to hide it. Sometimes we let loose with the full force of our fury; we particularly do this with family members. Something about family tends to bring out the *real* us. Whether we show, hide, or partially hide our agitation and resentment, WE KNOW what's going on.

Most of the time, the people we rescue immediately sense our shift in mood. They saw it coming. It's just the excuse they needed to turn on us. It's *their* turn in the persecution corner. This may precede, happen at the same time as, or follow our feelings of anger. Sometimes, the victims respond to our anger. Usually it is a response to our taking responsibility for that person, which directly or indirectly tells him or her how incapable we believe he or she is. People resent being told or shown they are incompetent, no matter how loudly they plead incompetency. And they resent us for adding insult to injury by becoming angry with them after we point out their incompetency.

Then it's time for our final move. We head right for our favorite spot: the victim corner on the *bottom*. This is the predictable and unavoidable result of a rescue. Feelings of helplessness, hurt, sorrow, shame, and self-pity abound. We have been used—again. We have gone unappreciated—again. We try so hard to help people, to be good to them. We moan, “Why? Why does this ALWAYS happen to me?” Another person has trampled on us, socked it to us. We wonder, shall we forever be victims? Probably, if we don't stop rescuing and caretaking.

Many codependents, at some time in their lives, were true victims—of someone's abuse, neglect, abandonment, alcoholism, or any number of situations that can victimize people. We were, at some time, truly helpless to protect ourselves or solve our problems. Something came our way,

something we didn't ask for, and it hurt us terribly. That is sad, truly sad. But an even sadder fact is that many of us codependents began to see ourselves as victims. Our painful history repeats itself. As caretakers, we allow people to victimize us, and we participate in our victimization by perpetually rescuing people. Rescuing or caretaking is not an act of love. The Drama Triangle is a hate triangle. It fosters and maintains self-hate, and it hinders our feelings for other people.

The triangle and the shifting roles of rescuer, persecutor, and victim are a visible process we go through. The role changes and the emotional changes come over us as certainly and as intensely as if we were reading a script. We can complete the process in seconds, experiencing only mild emotions as we shift roles. Or, we can take years to complete the triangle and really work up to a major explosion. We can, and many of us do, rescue twenty times in one day.

Let me illustrate a rescue. A friend of mine was married to an alcoholic. Whenever he got drunk, she would drive all over town, enlist the aid of friends, and relentlessly pursue her husband until she found him. She usually felt benevolent, concerned, and sorry for him—a warning that a rescue was about to take place—until she got him home and tucked into bed—taking responsibility for him and his sobriety. When his head hit the pillow, things changed. She charged into the persecutor position. She didn't want this man in her home. She expected him to whine for days about how sick he was. He was unable to assume his responsibilities in the family, and he generally acted pitiful. He had done this so many times! So, she would start in on him, beginning with little snipes and working up to a full-blown blast. He would briefly tolerate her persecution before switching from a helpless victim to vengeful persecutor. She then took a downward dip into the victim role. Self-pity, feelings of helplessness, shame, and despair set in. This was the story of her life, she would moan. After all she had done for him, how could he treat her this way? Why did this always happen to her? She felt like a victim of circumstance, a victim of her husband's outrageous behavior, a victim of life. It never occurred to her that she was also a victim of herself and her own behavior.



Here's another illustration of a rescue. One summer, a friend wanted me to take her to an apple farm. Originally, I wanted to go, and we set a date. By the time that date came, however, I was extremely busy. I called her, and instead of telling her I didn't want to go, I asked to postpone it. I felt guilty and responsible for her feelings—another rescue on the way. I couldn't disappoint her because I thought she couldn't handle or be responsible for her feelings. I couldn't tell the truth, because I thought she might be angry with me—more emotional responsibility—as if someone else's anger is my business. The next weekend rolled around, and I squeezed the trip into my even busier schedule. But I did not want to go. I didn't even need any apples; I had two drawers in my refrigerator crammed with apples. Before I stopped my car in front of her house, I had already switched into the persecuting role. I seethed with resentful, tense thoughts as we drove to the apple orchard. When we arrived at the orchard and began tasting and looking at apples, it became apparent neither of us was enjoying herself. After a few minutes, my friend turned to me. "I really don't want any apples," she said. "I bought some last week. I only came because I thought you wanted to, and I didn't want to hurt your feelings."

This example is only one of the thousands of rescues I have devoted my life to performing. When I began to understand this process, I realized that I spent most of my waking moments flipping around the jagged edges of this triangle taking responsibility for anybody and everybody besides myself. Sometimes I managed big rescues; sometimes I managed little rescues. My friendships were initiated, maintained, and ultimately discontinued according to the rescue progression. Rescuing infiltrated my relationships with family members and clients. It kept me in a tizzy most of the time.

Two codependents in a relationship can really play havoc with each other. Consider two people-pleasers in a relationship with each other. Now consider two people-pleasers in a relationship with each other when they both want out of the relationship. They will, as Earnie Larsen says, do horrible things. They'll nearly destroy each other and themselves before one will stop rescuing and say, "I want out."

As codependents, we spend much of our time rescuing. We try to be living proof that people can outgive God. I can usually spot a codependent within the first five minutes of meeting and talking. He or she will either offer me unrequested help, or the person will keep talking to me although he or she is obviously uncomfortable and wants to discontinue the conversation. The person begins the relationship by taking responsibility for me and not taking responsibility for him- or herself.

Some of us become so tired from the enormous burden—total responsibility for all human beings—that we may skip the feelings of pity and concern that accompany the rescue act and move ahead to anger. We're angry all the time; we feel anger and resentment toward potential victims. A person with a need or problem provokes us to feel we have to do something or feel guilty. After a rescue, we make no bones about our hostility toward this uncomfortable predicament. I have frequently seen this happen to people in helping professions. After so many years of rescuing—giving so much and receiving far less in return—many professional helpers adopt a hostile attitude toward their clients. They may continue to hang in there and keep "helping" them, anyway, but they will usually leave their profession feeling terribly victimized, according to some counselors.

Caretaking doesn't help; it causes problems. When we take care of people and do things we don't want to do, we ignore personal needs, wants, and feelings. We put *ourselves* aside. Sometimes, we get so busy taking care of people that we put our entire lives on hold. Many caretakers are harried and overcommitted; they enjoy none of their activities. Caretakers look so responsible, but we aren't. We don't assume responsibility for our highest responsibility—ourselves.

We consistently give more than we receive, then feel abused and neglected because of it. We wonder why, when we anticipate the needs of others, no one notices our needs. We may become seriously depressed as a result of not getting our needs met. Yet, a good caretaker feels safest when giving; we feel guilty and uncomfortable when someone gives to us or when we do something to meet our needs. Sometimes, codependents may become so locked into a caretaker role that we feel dismayed and



rejected when we can't caretake or rescue someone—when someone refuses to be "helped."

The worst aspect of caretaking is we become and stay victims. I believe many serious self-destructive behaviors—chemical abuse, eating disorders, sexual disorders—are developed through this victim role. As victims, we attract perpetrators. We believe we need someone to take care of us, because we feel helpless. Some caretakers will ultimately present ourselves to somebody or some institution, needing to be taken care of mentally, physically, financially, or emotionally.

Why, you might ask, would apparently rational people do this rescuing? Many reasons. Most of us aren't even aware of what we're doing. Most of us truly believe we're helping. Some of us believe we *have to* rescue. We have confused ideas about what constitutes help and what doesn't. Many of us are convinced that rescuing is a charitable deed. We may even think it cruel and heartless to do something as cold-blooded as allowing a person to work through or face a legitimate feeling, suffer a consequence, be disappointed by hearing "no," be asked to respond to our needs and wants, and generally be held responsible and accountable for him- or herself in this world. Never mind that they will certainly pay a price for our "helping"—a price that will be as harsh as or more severe than any feeling they may be facing.

Many of us do not understand what we are responsible for and what we are not responsible for. We may believe we have to get into a tizzy when someone has a problem because it is our responsibility to do that. Sometimes, we become sick of feeling responsible for so much that we reject all responsibility and become totally irresponsible.

However, at the heart of most rescues is a demon: low self-worth. We rescue because we don't feel good about ourselves. Although the feelings are transient and artificial, caretaking provides us with a temporary hit of good feelings, self-worth, and power. Just as a drink helps an alcoholic momentarily feel better, a rescue move momentarily distracts us from the pain of being who we are. We don't feel lovable, so we settle for being needed. We don't feel good about ourselves, so we feel compelled to do a particular thing to *prove* how good we are.

We rescue because we don't feel good about other people either. Sometimes with justification, sometimes without, we decide other people simply cannot be held responsible for themselves. Although this may appear to be true, it simply is not a fact. Unless a person has brain damage, a serious physical impairment, or is an infant, that person can be responsible for him- or herself.

Sometimes we rescue because it's easier than dealing with the discomfort and awkwardness of facing other people's unsolved problems. We haven't learned to say, "It's too bad you're having that problem. What do you need from me?" We've learned to say, "Here. Let me do that for you."

Some of us learned to be caretakers when we were children. Perhaps we were almost forced to as a result of living with an alcoholic parent or some other family problem. Some of us may have started caretaking later in life, as a result of being in a committed relationship with an alcoholic or other person who refused and appeared unable to take care of him- or herself. We decided to cope—to survive—the best way we could, by picking up the slack and assuming other people's responsibilities.

Many codependents have been taught other ways to be caretakers. Maybe someone taught us these lies, and we believed them: don't be selfish, always be kind and help people, never hurt other people's feelings because we "make them feel," never say no, and don't mention personal wants and needs because it's not polite.

We may have been taught to be responsible for other people but not responsible for ourselves. Some women were taught that good, desirable wives and mothers were caretakers. Caretaking was expected and required of them. It was their duty. Some men believe good husbands and fathers are caretakers—superheroes responsible for meeting every need of each family member.

Sometimes a state resembling codependency sets in when a person is taking care of infants or young children. Taking care of infants requires a person to forfeit his or her needs, to do things he or she doesn't want to do, to squelch his or her feelings and desires (4 A.M. feedings usually only meet the needs of the person being fed), and to assume total respon-

sibility for another human being. Taking care of children is not rescuing. That is an actual responsibility and is not the kind of caretaking I'm talking about. But if that person doesn't take care of him- or herself, he or she may begin to feel the codependent blues.

Others may have interpreted religious beliefs as a mandate to caretake. Be cheerful givers, we are told. Go the extra mile. Love our neighbors, and we try. We try so hard. We try too hard. And then we wonder what's wrong with us because our Christian beliefs aren't working. Our lives aren't working either.

Christian beliefs work just fine. Your life can work just fine. It's rescuing that doesn't work. "It's like trying to catch butterflies with a broomstick," observed a friend. Rescuing leaves us bewildered and befuddled every time. It's a self-destructive reaction, another way codependents attach themselves to people and become detached from themselves. It's another way we attempt to control, but instead become controlled by people. Caretaking is an unhealthy parent-child relationship—sometimes between two consenting adults, sometimes between an adult and a child.

Caretaking breeds anger. Caretakers become angry parents, angry friends, angry lovers. We may become unsatisfied, frustrated, and confused Christians. The people we help either are or they become helpless, angry victims. Caretakers become victims.

Most of us have heard the Biblical parable about Mary and Martha. While Mary sat and talked with Jesus and His friends, Martha cleaned and cooked. Before long, the story goes, Martha started banging pans, accusing Mary of being lazy. Martha complained that she had to do everything while Mary relaxed and enjoyed herself. Does this sound familiar? Jesus didn't let this one go by. He told Martha to hush. Mary knows what's important, He said. Mary made the right decision.

His message might be that Mary made the right choice because it's more important to enjoy people than it is to cook and clean. But I also believe there's a message here about taking responsibility for our choices, doing what we *want* to be doing, and realizing how we become angry

when we don't. Maybe Mary's choice was right because she acted as she wanted to. Jesus helped many people, but He was honest and straightforward about it. He didn't persecute people after He helped them. And He asked them what they wanted from Him. Sometimes He asked why, too. He held people responsible for their behavior.

I think caretaking perverts Biblical messages about giving, loving, and helping. Nowhere in the Bible are we instructed to do something for someone, then scratch his or her eyes out. Nowhere are we told to walk the extra mile with someone, and then grab the person's cane and beat him or her with it. Caring about people and giving are good, desirable qualities—something we need to do—but many codependents have misinterpreted the suggestions to "give until it hurts." We continue giving long after it hurts, usually until we are doubled over in pain. It's good to give some away, but we don't have to give it all away. It's okay to keep some for ourselves.

I believe God wants us to help people and share our time, talents, and money. But I also believe He wants us to give from a position of high self-esteem. I believe acts of kindness are not kind unless we feel good about ourselves, what we are doing, and the person we are doing it for. I think God is in each of us and speaks to each of us. If we absolutely can't feel good about something we're doing, then we shouldn't do it—no matter how charitable it seems. We also shouldn't do things for others that they ought to and are capable of doing for themselves. Other people aren't helpless. Neither are we.

"God told us to lose our lives. He told us to give to people," says the Reverend Daniel Johns, Senior Pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church in Stillwater, Minnesota. "But I don't think He ever intended people to use the Scriptures to behave in unhealthy ways."

Giving to and doing things for and with people are essential parts of healthy living and healthy relationships. But learning when not to give, when not to give in, and when not to do things for and with people are also essential parts of healthy living and healthy relationships. It is not good to take care of people who take advantage of us to avoid responsi-

bility. It hurts them, and it hurts us. There is a thin line between helping and hurting people, between beneficial giving and destructive giving. We can learn to make that distinction.

Caretaking is an act and an attitude. For some of us, it becomes a role, an approach to our entire lives and to all the people around us. Caretaking is, I believe, closely associated with martyrdom (a state codependents are frequently accused of being in), and people-pleasing (another accusation hurled at us). Martyrs, according to Earnie Larsen, "screw things up." We need to keep sacrificing our happiness as well as others' for the good of some unknown cause that doesn't demand sacrifice. People-pleasers, according to Earnie Larsen, can't be trusted. We lie. And as caretakers, we don't take care of ourselves.

The most exciting thing about caretaking is learning to understand what it is and when we are doing it, so we can stop doing it.

We can learn to recognize a rescue. *Refuse to rescue. Refuse to let people rescue us.* Take responsibility for ourselves, and let others do the same. Whether we change our attitudes, our circumstances, our behaviors, or our minds, the kindest thing we can do is remove the victims—ourselves.

## ACTIVITY

1. This assignment may take some time, but if caretaking is causing your problems, it may be a breakthrough experience for you. On a sheet of paper, detail all the things you consider your responsibilities. Do this for your participation at work, with children, with friends, and with your spouse or lover. Now, list detail by detail what responsibilities belong to the other people in your life. If any responsibilities are shared, list what percentage you think is appropriate for each person. For instance, if your spouse is working and you have chosen to be a homemaker and work part-time, list what percentage of the financial responsibilities you assume, and what percentage of the household chores he or she assumes. You may be surprised at how much inappropriate responsibility you have taken on and how little you have allowed others to assume. You may

also find you have been so busy with other people's business that you have been neglecting some of your true responsibilities.

2. Become familiar with the Karpman Drama Triangle and how you go through the process in your life. When you find yourself rescuing, watch for the role and mood shifts. When you catch yourself feeling resentful or used, figure out how you rescued. Practice non-rescuing behaviors: Say no when you want to say no. Do things you want to do. Refuse to guess what people want and need; instead insist that others ask you directly for what they want and need from you. Begin asking directly for what you want and need. Refuse to assume other people's responsibilities. When you initially stop taking care of people who are used to having you take care of them, they may become angry or frustrated. You've changed the system, rocked the boat. It means more work for them, and they can't use you anymore. Explain to them what you are doing, and allow them to be responsible for their feelings. They may thank you for it later. They may even surprise you—sometimes the people we thought least able to take care of themselves can, when we stop taking care of them.

## UNDEPENDENCE

*"What is it about me?" she asked.*

*"Do I need a dead body laying in my bed  
in order to feel good about myself?"*

—Alice B., a codependent who has been married to two alcoholics

"I'm real independent—as long as I'm in a relationship," announced a policewoman who has been involved with several emotionally troubled men.

"My husband has been lying on the couch drunk and hasn't brought home a paycheck in ten years," said another woman, the director of a large human services organization. "Who needs this?" she asked. "I must," she said, answering her own question. "But why? And for what?"

A woman who had recently joined Al-Anon called me one afternoon. This married woman worked part-time as a registered nurse, had assumed all the responsibility for raising her two children, and did all the household chores, including repairs and finances. "I want to separate from my husband," she sobbed. "I can't stand him or his abuse any longer. But tell me, please tell me," she asked, "do you think I can take care of myself?"

The words vary, but the thought is the same. "I'm not happy living with this person, but I don't think I can live *without* him (or her). I cannot, for some reason, find it within myself to face the aloneness that every human being must face or continue to run from: that of being ultimately and solely responsible for taking care of myself. I don't believe I can take

care of myself. I'm not sure I want to. I need a person, any person, to buffer the shock of my solitary condition. No matter what the cost."

Colette Dowling wrote about this thought pattern in *The Cinderella Complex*. Penelope Russiano discussed it in *Why Do I Think I'm Nothing Without a Man?* I've said it many times.

Whether codependents appear fragile and helpless, or sturdy and powerful, most of us are frightened, needy, vulnerable children who are aching and desperate to be loved and cared for.

This child in us believes we are unlovable and will never find the comfort we are seeking; sometimes this vulnerable child becomes too desperate. People have abandoned us, emotionally and physically. People have rejected us. People have abused us, let us down. People have never been there for us; they have not seen, heard, or responded to our needs. We may come to believe that people will never be there for us. For many of us, even God seems to have gone away.

We have been there for so many people. Most of us desperately want someone to finally be there for us. We need someone, anyone, to rescue us from the stark loneliness, alienation, and pain. We want some of the good stuff, and the good stuff is not in us. Pain is in us. We feel so helpless and uncertain. Others look so powerful and assured. We conclude the magic must be in them.

So we become dependent on them. We can become dependent on lovers, spouses, friends, parents, or our children. We become dependent on their approval. We become dependent on their presence. We become dependent on their need for us. We become dependent on their love, even though we believe we will never receive their love; we believe we are unlovable and nobody has ever loved us in a way that met our needs.

I am not saying codependents are peculiar ducks because they want and need love and approval. Most people want to be in a love relationship. They want a special person in their lives. Most people want and need friends. Most people want the people in their lives to love and approve of them. These are natural, healthy desires. A certain amount of emotional dependency is present in most relationships, including the healthiest ones.<sup>1</sup> But many men and women don't just want and need

people—we need people. We may become driven, controlled by this need.

Needing people too much can cause problems. Other people become the key to our happiness. I believe much of the other-centeredness, orbiting our lives around other people, goes hand in hand with codependency and springs out of our emotional insecurity. I believe much of this incessant approval seeking we indulge in also comes from insecurity. The magic is in others, not us, we believe. The good feelings are in them, not us. The less good stuff we find in ourselves, the more we seek it in others. They have it all; we have nothing. Our existence is not important. We have been abandoned and neglected so often that we also abandon ourselves.

Needing people so much, yet believing we are unlovable and people will never be there for us, can become a deeply ingrained belief. Sometimes, we think people aren't there for us when they really are. Our need may block our vision, preventing us from seeing the love that is there for us.

Sometimes, no human being could be there for us the way we need them to be—to absorb us, care for us, and make us feel good, complete, and safe.

Many of us expect and need other people so much that we settle for too little. We may become dependent on troubled people—alcoholics and other people with problems. We can become dependent on people we don't particularly like or love. Sometimes, we need people so badly we settle for nearly anyone. We may need people who don't meet our needs. Again, we may find ourselves in situations where we need someone to be there for us, but the person we have chosen cannot or will not do that.

We may even convince ourselves that we can't live without someone and will wither and die if that person is not in our lives. If that person is an alcoholic or deeply troubled, we may tolerate abuse and insanity to keep him or her in our lives, to protect our source of emotional security. Our need becomes so great that we settle for too little. Our expectations drop below normal, below what we ought to expect from our relationships. Then, we become trapped, stuck.

"... It is no longer Camelot. It is no longer even person to person," wrote Janet Geringer Woititz in an article from the book *Co-Dependency, An Emerging Issue*. "The distortion is bizarre. I will stay because... 'He doesn't beat me.' 'She doesn't run around.' 'He hasn't lost his job.' Imagine getting credit for the behaviors we ordinary mortals do as a matter of course. Even if the worst is true. Even if he does beat you. Even if she does run around. Even if he is no longer working. Even with all this, you will then say, 'But I love him/her!' When I respond, 'Tell me, what is so lovable?' there is no response. The answer doesn't come, but the power of being emotionally stuck is far greater than the power of reason."<sup>2</sup>

I am not suggesting all our intimate relationships are based on insecurities and dependencies. Certainly the power of love overrides common sense, and perhaps that is how it should be at times. By all means, if we love an alcoholic and want to stick with him or her, we should keep loving that person. But the driving force of emotional insecurity can also become far greater than the power of reason or love. Not being centered in ourselves and not feeling emotionally secure with ourselves may trap us.<sup>3</sup> We may become afraid to terminate relationships that are dead and destructive. We may allow people to hurt and abuse us, and that is never in our best interest.

People who feel trapped look for escapes. Codependents who feel stuck in a relationship may begin planning an escape. Sometimes our escape route is a positive, healthy one; we begin taking steps to become independent, financially and emotionally. "Undependence" is a term Pelenope Russianoff uses in her book to describe that desirable balance wherein we acknowledge and meet our healthy, natural needs for people and love, yet we don't become overly or harmfully dependent on them.

We may go back to school, get a job, or set other goals that will bring freedom. And we usually begin setting those goals when we are sick enough of being trapped. Some codependents, however, plan destructive escapes. We may try to escape our prison by using alcohol or drugs. We may become workaholics. We may seek escape by becoming emotionally dependent on another person who is like the person we were attempting

to escape—another alcoholic, for example. Many codependents begin to contemplate suicide. For some, ending our lives appears to be the only way out of this terribly painful situation.

Emotional dependency and feeling stuck can also cause problems in salvageable relationships. If we are in a relationship that is still good, we may be too insecure to detach and start taking care of ourselves. We may stifle ourselves and smother or drive away the other person. That much need becomes obvious to other people. It can be sensed, felt.

Ultimately, too much dependency on a person can kill love. Relationships based on emotional insecurity and need, rather than on love, can become self-destructive. They don't work. Too much need drives people away and smothers love. It scares people away. It attracts the wrong kind of people. And our real needs don't get met. Our real needs become greater and so does our despair. We center our lives around this person, trying to protect our source of security and happiness. We forfeit our lives to do this. And we become angry at this person. We are being controlled by him or her. We are dependent on that person. We ultimately become angry and resentful at what we are dependent on and controlled by, because we have given our personal power and rights to that person.<sup>4</sup>

Feeling desperate or dependent can expose us to other risks too. If we let the desperate part of us make our choices, we may unwittingly put ourselves in situations where we expose ourselves to sexually transmitted diseases such as herpes or AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). It is not safe to be that needy in intimate relationships.

Sometimes, we may play tricks on ourselves to disguise our dependency. Some of these tricks, according to Colette Dowling, are making someone more than he or she is ("He's such a genius; that's why I stick with him."), making someone less than he or she is ("Men are such babies; they can't take care of themselves."), and—the favorite trick of codependents—caretaking. Dowling demonstrated these characteristics in *The Cinderella Complex*, where she cited the case history of Madeleine, a woman who was extricating herself from a destructive relationship with Manny, her alcoholic husband.

That is the last trick of the dependent personality—believing that you're responsible for "taking care of" the other one. Madeleine had always felt more responsible for Manny's survival than for her own. As long as she was concentrating on Manny—his passivity, his indecisiveness, his problems with alcohol—she focused all her energy on devising solutions for him, or for "them," and never had to look inside herself. It was why it had taken twenty-two years for Madeleine to catch on to the fact that if things continued as they had always been, she would end up shortchanged. She would end up *never having lived a life*.

... From the time she was eighteen until she was forty—years when people are supposed to reap, and grow, and experience the world—Madeleine Boroff had been hanging on, pretending to herself that life was not what it was, that her husband would get his bearings before long, and that she would one day spring free to live her own inner life—peacefully, creatively.

For twenty-two years she had not been able to cope with what it would mean to face down the lie, and so, without intending any harm, but too frightened to live authentically, she turned her back on truth.

It may seem dramatic in its surface details, but in its fundamental dynamic Madeleine's story is not so unusual. The go-along quality she exhibited, the seeming inability to extricate herself, or even *think* of extricating herself, from an utterly draining relationship—these signs of helplessness are characteristic of women who are psychologically dependent.<sup>5</sup>

Why do we do this to ourselves? Why do we feel so uncertain and vulnerable that we can't go about the business of living our lives? Why, when we have proved we are so strong and capable by the sheer fact that many of us have endured and survived what we have, can't we believe in ourselves? Why, when we are experts at taking care of everybody around us, do we doubt our ability to take care of ourselves? What is it about us?

Many of us learned these things because when we were children, someone very important to us was unable to give us the love, approval, and emotional security we needed. So we've gone about our lives the best way we could, still looking vaguely or desperately for something we never got. Some of us are still beating our heads against the cement trying to get this love from people who, like Mother or Father, are unable to give what we need. The cycle repeats itself until it is interrupted and stopped. It's called unfinished business.

Maybe we've been taught to not trust ourselves. This happens when we have a feeling and we're told it's wrong or inappropriate. Or when we confront a lie or an inconsistency and we're told we're crazy. We lose faith in that deep, important part of ourselves that feels appropriate feelings, senses truth, and has confidence in its ability to handle life's situations. Pretty soon, we may believe what we are told about ourselves—that we're off, a tad crazy, not to be trusted. We look at the people around us—sometimes sick, troubled, out of control people—and we think, "They're okay. They must be. They told me so. So it must be me. There must be something fundamentally wrong with me." We abandon ourselves and lose faith in our ability to take care of ourselves.

Some women were taught to be dependent. They learned to center their lives around other people and to be taken care of. Even since the women's liberation movement, many women, deep inside, fear being alone.<sup>6</sup> Many people, not just women, fear being alone and taking care of themselves. It is part of being human.

Some of us may have entered an adult relationship with our emotional security intact, only to discover we were in a relationship with an alcoholic. Nothing will destroy emotional security more quickly than loving someone who is alcoholic or has any other compulsive disorder. These diseases demand us to center our lives around them. Confusion, chaos, and despair reign. Even the healthiest of us may begin to doubt ourselves after living with an alcoholic. Needs go unmet. Love disappears. The needs become greater and so does the self-doubt. Alcoholism creates emotionally insecure people. Alcoholism creates victims of us—



drinkers and nondrinkers, alike—and we doubt our ability to take care of ourselves.

If we have decided, for whatever reason, that we can't take care of ourselves, I have good news. The theme of this book is encouragement to begin taking care of ourselves. The purpose of this chapter is to say we can take care of ourselves. We are not helpless. Being ourselves and being responsible for ourselves do not have to be so painful and scary. We can handle things, whatever life brings our way. We don't have to be so dependent on the people around us. Unlike Siamese twins, we can live without any particular human being. As one woman put it: "For years, I kept telling myself I couldn't live without a particular man. I was wrong. I've had four husbands. They're all dead, and I'm still living." Knowing we can live without someone does not mean we *have* to live without that person, but it may free us to love and live in ways that work.

Now, let me give what I shall call the "rest" of the news. There is no magic, easy, overnight way to become undependent.

Emotional security and our present level of insecurity are penetrating issues that we must keep in mind as we make our decisions. Sometimes we become financially as well as emotionally dependent on a person, and we are then faced with two real concerns—two concerns that may or may not be connected.<sup>7</sup> Neither issue is to be taken lightly; each demands consideration. My words or our hopes will not diminish the reality of these facts. If we are financially or emotionally dependent, that is a fact, and facts need to be accepted and taken into account. But I believe we can strive to become less dependent. And I know we can become undependent, if we want to.

Here are some ideas that may help:

1. *Finish up business from our childhoods, as best as we can. Grieve. Get some perspective. Figure out how events from our childhoods are affecting what we're doing now.*

A client who has been in committed love relationships with two alcoholics told me the following story. Her father left home when she was five years old. He had been drunk for most of those five years. Although they lived in the same city, she rarely saw her father after he

moved out. He visited her a few times after her mother divorced him, but there was no substance to the relationship. As she grew up, she called her father from time to time to tell him about important events in her life: high school graduation, her marriage, the birth of her first child, her divorce, her remarriage, her second pregnancy. Each time she called, her father talked to her for five minutes, mentioned seeing her sometime, then hung up. She said she didn't feel particularly hurt or angry; she expected this from him. He had never been there for her. He never would be there for her. He didn't participate in the relationship. There was nothing, including love, coming back from him. But it was a fact of life, and it did not particularly upset her. She truly thought she had resigned herself to and dealt with her father's alcoholism. This relationship went on this way for years. Her relationships with alcoholics went on for years.

When she was in the midst of her most recent divorce, the phone rang one evening. It was her father. It was the first time he had ever called her. Her heart nearly jumped out of her chest, she reported later. Her father asked how she and her family were—a question he usually avoided. Just as she was wondering if she could tell him about her divorce (something she wanted to do), she had always wanted to cry and be comforted by her father) he began whining about how he had been locked up in a psychiatric ward, he had no rights, it wasn't fair, and couldn't she do something to help him? She quickly wrapped up the conversation, hung up the phone, sat down on the floor, and bawled.

"I remember sitting on the floor screaming: 'You've never been there for me. Never. And now I need you. I let myself need you just once, and you weren't there for me. Instead, you wanted me to take care of you.'

"When I quit crying, I felt strangely peaceful," she said. "I think it was the first time I ever let myself grieve or get angry at my father. Over the next few weeks, I began to understand—really understand. Of course he had never been there for me. He was an alcoholic. He had never been there for anyone, including himself. I also began to realize that underneath my sophisticated veneer, I felt unlovable. Very unlovable. Somewhere, hidden inside me, I had maintained a fantasy that I had a loving

father who was staying away from me—who was rejecting me—because I wasn't good enough. There was something wrong with me. Now I knew the truth. It wasn't me that was unlovable. It wasn't me that was screwed up, although I know I've got problems. It was *he*.

"Something happened to me after that," she said. "I no longer need an alcoholic to love me. The truth has indeed set me free."

I am not suggesting that all of this woman's problems were solved when she finished her grieving or by one moment of awareness. She may have more grieving to do; she still needs to deal with her codependent characteristics. But I think what happened helped her.

2. *Nurture and cherish that frightened, vulnerable, needy child inside us. The child may never completely disappear, no matter how self-sufficient we become. Stress may cause the child to cry out. Unprovoked, the child may come out and demand attention when we least expect it.*

I had a dream about this that I think illustrates the point. In my dream, a girl about nine years old had been left alone, abandoned by her mother for several days and nights. Without supervision, the child ran around the neighborhood late at night. She didn't cause any serious problems. She seemed to be looking for something, trying to fill her empty hours. *The child did not want to stay in her house alone when it got dark.* The loneliness was too frightening. When the mother finally returned, the neighbors approached her and complained about this child running all over, unsupervised. The mother became angry, and started yelling at the child for her misbehavior. "I told you to stay in the house while I was gone. I told you to not cause problems, didn't I?" the mother screamed. The child offered no retort, didn't even cry. She just stood there with downcast eyes and quietly said, "I think I have a stomach ache."

Don't pound on that vulnerable child when he or she doesn't want to stay in the dark all alone, when he or she becomes frightened. We don't have to let the child make our choices for us, but don't ignore the child either. Listen to the child. Let the child cry if he or she needs to. Comfort the child. Figure out what he or she needs.

3. *Stop looking for happiness in other people. Our source of happiness and well-being is not inside others; it's inside us. Learn to center ourselves in ourselves.*

Stop centering and focusing on other people. Settle down with and in ourselves. Stop seeking so much approval and validation from others. We don't need the approval of everyone and anyone. We only need our approval. We have all the same sources for happiness and making choices inside us that others do. Find and develop our own internal supply of peace, well-being, and self-esteem. Relationships help, but they cannot be our source. Develop personal cores of emotional security with ourselves.

4. *We can learn to depend on ourselves. Maybe other people haven't been there for us, but we can start being there for us.*

Stop abandoning ourselves, our needs, our wants, our feelings, our lives, and everything that comprises us. Make a commitment to always be there for ourselves. We can trust ourselves. We can handle and cope with the events, problems, and feelings life throws our way. We can trust our feelings and our judgments. We can solve our problems. We can learn to live with our unsolved problems, too. We must trust the people we are learning to depend upon—ourselves.

5. *We can depend on God, too. He's there, and He cares. Our spiritual beliefs can provide us with a strong sense of emotional security.*

Let me illustrate this idea. One night, when I lived in a rough neighborhood, I had to walk down the alley behind my house to get to my car. I asked my husband to watch from a window on the second floor to make sure nothing happened to me. He agreed. As I walked across the backyard, away from the security of my home and into the blackness of the night, I began to feel afraid. I turned around and saw my husband in the window. He was watching; he was there. Immediately, the fear left, and I felt comforted and safe. It occurred to me that I believe in God, and I can find the same feelings of comfort and security in knowing that He is always watching over my life. I strive to look to this security.

Some codependents begin to believe God has abandoned us. We have had so much pain. So many needs have gone unmet, sometimes for

so long that we may cry out, "Where has God gone? Why has He gone away? Why has He let this happen? Why won't He help? Why has He abandoned me?"

God hasn't abandoned us. We abandoned ourselves. He's there, and He cares. But He expects us to cooperate by caring for ourselves.

6. *Strive for independence. Begin examining the ways we are dependent, emotionally and financially, on the people around us.*

Start taking care of ourselves whether we are in relationships that we intend to continue, or whether we are in relationships we are trying to get out of. In *The Cinderella Complex*, Colette Dowling suggested doing this with an attitude of "courageous vulnerability."<sup>18</sup> That means: You feel scared, but you do it anyway.

We can feel our feelings, talk about our fears, accept ourselves and our present conditions, and then get started on the journey toward independence. We can do it. We don't have to feel strong all the time to be independent and taking care of ourselves. We can and probably will have feelings of fear, weakness, and even hopelessness. That is normal and even healthy. Real power comes from feeling our feelings, not from ignoring them. Real strength comes, not from pretending to be strong all the time, but from acknowledging our weaknesses and vulnerabilities when we feel this way.

Many of us have dark nights. Many of us have uncertainty, loneliness, and the pang of needs and wants that beg to be met and yet go seemingly unnoticed. Sometimes the way is foggy and slippery, and we have no hope. All we can feel is fear. All we can see is the dark. I was driving one night in weather like this. I don't like driving, and I particularly don't like driving in bad weather. I was stiff and frightened at the wheel. I could barely see; the headlights were only illuminating a few feet of the road. I was almost blind. I started to panic. Anything could happen! Then, a calming thought entered my mind. The path was only lit for a few feet, but each time I progressed those few feet, a new section was lit. It didn't matter that I couldn't see far ahead. If I relaxed, I could see as far as I needed for the moment. The situation wasn't ideal, but I could get through it if I stayed calm and worked with what was available.

You can get through dark situations, too. You can take care of yourself and trust yourself. Trust God. Go as far as you can see, and by the time you get there, you'll be able to see farther.

It's called *One Day at a Time*.

### ACTIVITY

1. Examine the following characteristics, and decide if you are in a dependent (addicted) or healthy (love) relationship:

## CHARACTERISTICS

## LOVE

## (OPEN SYSTEM)

Room to grow, expand; desire for other to grow.

## ADDICTION

## (CLOSED SYSTEM)

Dependent, based on security and comfort; use intensity of need and infatuation as proof of love (may really be fear, insecurity, loneliness).

Separate interests; other friends; maintain other meaningful relationships.

Total involvement; limited social life; neglect old friends, interests.

Encouragement of each other's expanding; secure in own worth.

Preoccupation with other's behavior; dependent on other's approval for own identity and self-worth.

Trust; openness.

Jealousy, possessiveness, fears competition, "protects supply."

Mutual integrity preserved.

One partner's needs suspended for the other's; self-deprivation.

Willingness to risk and be real.

Search for perfect invulnerability—eliminates possible risks.

Room for exploration of feelings in and of relationship.

Reassurance through repeated, ritualized activity.

Ability to enjoy being alone.

Intolerance—unable to endure separations (even in conflict); hang on even tighter. Undergo withdrawal—loss of appetite, restless, lethargic, disoriented agony.

## BREAKUPS

Accept breakup without feeling a loss of own adequacy and self-worth. Feel inadequate, worthless; often one-sided decision.

Wants best for partner, though apart; can become friends. Violent ending—often hate other; try to inflict pain; manipulation to get other back.

## ONE-SIDED ADDICTION

Denial, fantasy; overestimation of other's commitment.

Seeks solutions outside self—drugs, alcohol, new lover, change of situation.<sup>9</sup>

## LIVE YOUR OWN LIFE

*Live and let live.*

—Twelve Step program slogan

If I make one point in this book, I hope it is that *the surest way to make ourselves crazy is to get involved in other people's business, and the quickest way to become sane and happy is to tend to our own affairs.*

I have discussed concepts and ideas pertaining to that thought. We've examined reactions typical of codependency. We've discussed ways of learning how to react differently using detachment. But, after we've detached and taken our grip off the people around us, what's left? Each of us is left with ourselves.

I remember the day I faced that truth. For a long time I had blamed my unfortunate circumstances on other people. "You are the reason I am the way I am!" I had screamed. "Look what you made me do—with my minutes, my hours, my life." After I detached and took responsibility for myself, I wondered, maybe other people weren't the reason I hadn't been living my own life; maybe they were just the excuse I needed. My destiny—my todays and tomorrows—looked pretty glum.

Living our lives may not be an exciting prospect to some of us either. Maybe we've been so wrapped up in other people that we've forgotten how to live and enjoy our lives.

We may be in so much emotional distress we think we have no life; all we are is our pain. That's not true. We are more than our problems. We can be more than our problems. We will be more than our prob-

lems.<sup>1</sup> Just because life has been this painful so far doesn't mean it has to keep hurting. Life doesn't have to hurt so much, and it won't—if we begin to change. It may not be all roses from here on out, but it doesn't have to be all thorns either. We need to and can develop our own lives. As one friend says, "Get a life."

Some codependents think a life with no future, no purpose, no great shakes, and no great breaks isn't worth living. That's not true, either. I believe God has exciting, interesting things in store for each of us. I believe there is an enjoyable, worthwhile purpose—besides taking care of people and being an appendage to someone—for each of us. I believe we tap into this attitude by taking care of ourselves. We begin to cooperate. We open ourselves up to the goodness and richness available in us and to us.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout this book I have used the phrase *taking care of ourselves*. I have heard that phrase used and abused. I have heard people use it to control, impose upon, or force their wills on people. (I dropped in, uninvited, with my five kids and cat. We're going to spend the week. I'm just taking care of myself!) I have heard the phrase used manipulatively to justify persecuting and punishing people, instead of dealing appropriately with angry feelings. (I'm going to holler and scream at you all day because you didn't do what I wanted you to do. Don't get mad at me though. I'm just taking care of myself.) I have heard people use these words to avoid responsibility. (I know my son is up in his bedroom shooting heroin, but that's his problem. I'm not going to worry. I'm going to the store and charge \$500, and I'm not going to worry about how I'll pay that either. I'm just taking care of myself.)

Those behaviors are not what I mean by taking care of ourselves. Self-care is an attitude toward ourselves and our lives that says, I am responsible for myself. I am responsible for leading or not living my life. I am responsible for tending to my spiritual, emotional, physical, and financial well-being. I am responsible for identifying and meeting my needs. I am responsible for solving my problems or learning to live with those I cannot solve. I am responsible for my choices. I am responsible for what I give and receive. I am also responsible for setting and achieving

my goals. I am responsible for how much I enjoy life, for how much pleasure I find in daily activities. I am responsible for whom I love and how I choose to express this love. I am responsible for what I do to others and for what I allow others to do to me. I am responsible for my wants and desires. All of me, every aspect of my being, is important. I count for something. I matter. My feelings can be trusted. My thinking is appropriate. I value my wants and needs. I do not deserve and will not tolerate abuse or constant mistreatment. I have rights, and it is my responsibility to assert these rights. The decisions I make and the way I conduct myself will reflect my high self-esteem. My decisions will take into account my responsibilities to myself.

My decisions will also take into account my responsibilities to other people—my spouse, my children, my relatives, my friends. I will examine and decide exactly what these responsibilities are as I make my decisions. I will also consider the rights of those around me—the right to live their lives as they see fit. I do not have the right to impose on others' rights to take care of themselves, and they have no right to impose on my rights.

Self-care is an attitude of mutual respect. It means learning to live our lives responsibly. It means allowing others to live their lives as they choose, as long as they don't interfere with our decisions to live as we choose. Taking care of ourselves is not as selfish as some people assume it is, but neither is it as selfless as many codependents believe.

In the chapters that follow, we will discuss some specific ways of taking care of ourselves: goal setting, dealing with feelings, working a Twelve Step program, and more. I believe taking care of ourselves is an art, and this art involves one fundamental idea that is foreign to many: giving ourselves what we need.

This may be a shock to us and our family systems at first. Most codependents don't ask for what we need. Many codependents don't know or haven't given much thought to what we want and need. (Throughout this book, I have used and will use the terms *needs* and *wants* interchangeably. I consider wants and needs important, and I will treat these terms with equal respect.)

Many of us have falsely believed our needs aren't important and we shouldn't mention them. Some of us even began to believe our needs are bad or wrong, so we've learned to repress them and push them out of our awareness. We haven't learned to identify what we need, or listen to what we need because it didn't matter anyway—our needs weren't going to get met. Some of us haven't learned how to get our needs met appropriately.

Giving ourselves what we need is not difficult. I believe we can learn quickly. The formula is simple: In any given situation, detach and ask, "What do I need to do to take care of myself?"

Then we need to listen to ourselves and to our Higher Power. Respect what we hear. This insane business of punishing ourselves for what we think, feel, and want—this nonsense of not listening to who we are and what our selves are struggling to tell us—must stop. How do you think God works with us? As I've said before, no wonder we think God has abandoned us; we've abandoned ourselves. We can be gentle with ourselves and accept ourselves. We're not only or merely human, we were created and intended to be human. And we can be compassionate with ourselves. Then, perhaps, we may develop true compassion for others.<sup>3</sup> Listen to what our precious self is telling us about what we need.

Maybe we need to hurry and get to an appointment. Maybe we need to slow down and take the day off work. Maybe we need exercise or a nap. We might need to be alone. We may want to be around people. Maybe we need a job. Maybe we need to work less. Maybe we need a hug, a kiss, or a back rub.

Sometimes giving ourselves what we need means giving ourselves something fun: a treat, a new hairdo, a new dress, a new pair of shoes, a new toy, an evening at the theater, or a trip to the Bahamas. Sometimes, giving ourselves what we need is work. We need to eliminate or develop a certain characteristic; we need to work on a relationship; or we need to tend to our responsibilities to other people or to our responsibilities to ourselves. Giving ourselves what we need does not only mean giving presents to ourselves; it means doing what's necessary to live responsibly—not an excessively responsible or an irresponsible existence.

Our needs are different and vary from moment to moment and day to day. Are we feeling the crazy anxiety that goes with codependency? Maybe we need to go to an Al-Anon meeting. Are our thoughts negative and despairing? Maybe we need to read a meditation or inspirational book. Are we worried about a physical problem? Maybe we need to go to a doctor. Are the kids going wild? Maybe we need to figure out a family plan for discipline. Are people stomping on our rights? Set some boundaries. Are our stomachs churning with emotions? Deal with our feelings. Maybe we need to detach, slow down, make an amend, do an intervention, initiate a relationship, or file for divorce. It's up to us. What do we think we need to do?

Besides giving ourselves what we need, we begin to ask people for what we need and want from them because this is part of taking care of ourselves and being a responsible human being.

Giving ourselves what we need means we become, as the Reverend Phil L. Hansen suggests, our personal counselor, confidante, spiritual advisor, partner, best friend, and caretaker in this exciting, new venture we have undertaken—living our own lives. The Reverend Hansen is nationally active in the addiction field. We base all our decisions on reality, and we make them in our best interests. We take into account our responsibilities to other people, because that is what responsible people do. But we also know we count. We try to eliminate "shoulds" from our decisions and learn to trust ourselves. If we listen to ourselves and our Higher Power, we will not be misled. Giving ourselves what we need and learning to live self-directed lives requires faith. We need enough faith to get on with our lives, and we need to do at least a little something each day to begin moving forward.

As we learn how to care for and meet our own needs, we forgive ourselves when we make mistakes and we congratulate ourselves when we do well. We also get comfortable doing some things poorly and some things with mediocrity, for that is part of life too. We learn to laugh at ourselves and our humanity, but we don't laugh when we need to cry. We take ourselves seriously but not too seriously.



Ultimately, we may even discover this astounding truth: Few situations in life are ever improved by not taking care of ourselves and not giving ourselves what we need. In fact, we may learn most situations are improved when we take care of ourselves and tend to our needs.

I am learning to identify how to take care of myself. I know many people who have either learned or are learning to do this too. I believe all codependents can.

### ACTIVITY

1. As you go through the days ahead, stop and ask yourself what you need to do to take care of yourself. Do it as often as you need to, but do it at least once daily. If you are going through a crisis, you may need to do it every hour. Then give yourself what you need.
2. What do you need from the people around you? At an appropriate time, sit down with them and discuss what you need from them.

## 11

### HAVE A LOVE AFFAIR WITH YOURSELF

*This above all:*

*to thine own self be true,  
and it must follow, as the night the day,  
thou canst not then be false to any man.*

—William Shakespeare

“Love thy neighbor as thyself.” The problem with many codependents is we do just that. What’s worse, many of us wouldn’t dream of loving or treating other people the way we treat ourselves. We wouldn’t dare, and others probably wouldn’t let us.

Most codependents suffer from that vague but penetrating affliction, low self-worth. We don’t feel good about ourselves, we don’t like ourselves, and we wouldn’t consider loving ourselves. For some of us, low self-worth is an understatement. We don’t merely dislike ourselves, we hate ourselves.<sup>1</sup>

We don’t like the way we look. We can’t stand our bodies. We think we’re stupid, incompetent, untalented, and, in many cases, unlovable.<sup>2</sup> We think our thoughts are wrong and inappropriate. We think our feelings are wrong and inappropriate. We believe we’re not important, and even if our feelings aren’t wrong, we think they don’t matter. We’re convinced our needs aren’t important. And we shame someone else’s desires or plans. We think we’re inferior to and different from the rest of the world—not unique, but oddly and inappropriately different.

We have never come to grips with ourselves, and we look at ourselves not through rose-colored glasses but through a dirty, brownish-gray film.

We may have learned to disguise our true feelings about ourselves by dressing right, fixing our hair right, living in the right home, and working at the right job. We may boast of our accomplishments, but underneath the trappings lies a dungeon where we secretly and incessantly punish and torture ourselves. At times, we may punish ourselves openly before the whole world, by saying demeaning things about ourselves. Sometimes, we even invite others to help us hate ourselves, such as when we allow certain people or religious customs to help us feel guilty, or when we allow people to hurt us. But our worst beatings go on privately, inside our minds.

We pick on ourselves endlessly, heaping piles of shoulds on our conscience and creating mounds of worthless, stinking guilt. Don't confuse this with true, authentic guilt, which motivates change, teaches valuable lessons, and brings us into a close relationship with ourselves, others, and our Higher Power. We constantly put ourselves in impossible situations where we have no choice but to feel badly about ourselves. We think a thought, then tell ourselves we shouldn't think that way. We feel a feeling, then tell ourselves we shouldn't feel that way. We make a decision, act on it, then tell ourselves we shouldn't have acted that way. There is nothing to correct in these situations, no amends to make; we have done nothing wrong. We are engaged in a form of punishment designed to keep us feeling anxious, upset, and stifled. We trap ourselves.

One of my favorite forms of self-torture involves a dilemma between two things to do. I make a decision to do one of them first. The minute I act on this decision, I say: "I should be doing the other thing." So I switch gears, begin doing the other thing, and I start in on myself again: "I really shouldn't be doing this. I should be doing what I was doing before." Another one of my favorites is this: I fix my hair, put on makeup, look in the mirror, and say, "Gee, I look weird. I shouldn't look this way."

Some of us believe we have made such bad mistakes that we can't reasonably expect forgiveness. Some of us believe our lives are a mistake. Many of us believe everything we've done is a mistake. A few of us believe

we can't do anything right, but at the same time, we demand perfection of ourselves. We put ourselves in impossible situations, then wonder why we can't get out.

Then we finish the job by shaming ourselves. We don't like what we do, and we don't like who we are. Fundamentally, we are not good enough. For some reason, God created in us a person totally inappropriate for life.

In codependency, as in many other areas of life, everything is connected to everything, and one thing leads to another. In this case, our low self-worth is frequently connected to much of what we do or don't do, and it leads to many of our problems.

As codependents, we frequently dislike ourselves so much that we believe it's wrong to take ourselves into account, in other words, appear selfish. Putting ourselves first is out of the question. Often, we think we're only worth something if we do things for others or caretake, so we never say no. Anyone as insignificant as us must go an extra mile to be liked. No one in their right minds could like and enjoy being with us. We think we have to do something for people to get and keep their friendships. Much of the defensiveness I've seen in codependents comes not because we think we're above criticism, but because we have so little self-worth that any perceived attack threatens to annihilate us. We feel so bad about ourselves and have such a need to be perfect and avoid shame that we cannot allow anyone to tell us about something we've done wrong. One reason some of us nag and criticize other people is because that's what we do to ourselves.

I believe, as Earnie Larsen and other authorities do, that our low self-worth or self-hatred is tied into all aspects of our codependency: martyrdom, refusal to enjoy life; workaholicism, staying so busy we can't enjoy life; perfectionism, not allowing ourselves to enjoy or feel good about the things we do; procrastination, heaping piles of guilt and uncertainty on ourselves; and preventing intimacy with people such as running from relationships; avoiding commitment, staying in destructive relationships; initiating relationships with people who are not good for us, and avoiding people who are good for us.

We can find endless means of torturing ourselves: overeating, neglecting our needs, comparing ourselves to others, competing with people, obsessing, dwelling on painful memories, or imagining future painful scenes. We think, what if she drinks again? What if she has an affair? What if a tornado hits the house? This "what if" attitude is always good for a strong dose of fear. We scare ourselves, then wonder why we feel so frightened.

We don't like ourselves, and we're not going to let ourselves get any of the good stuff because we believe we don't deserve it.

As codependents, we tend to enter into totally antagonistic relationships with ourselves.<sup>3</sup> Some of us learned these self-hating behaviors in our families, possibly with the help of an alcoholic parent. Some of us reinforced our self-disdain by leaving an alcoholic parent and marrying an alcoholic. We may have entered into adult relationships with fragile self-worth, then discovered our remaining self-esteem disintegrated. A few of us may have had our self-worth completely intact until we met him or her or until *that problem* came along; we suddenly or gradually found ourselves hating ourselves. Alcoholism and other compulsive disorders destroy self-worth in alcoholics and codependents. Remember, alcoholism and other compulsive disorders are self-destructive. Some of us may not even be aware of our low self-esteem and self-hatred because we have been comparing ourselves to the alcoholics and other crazy people in our lives; by comparison, we come out on top. Low self-worth can sneak up on us any time we let it.

Actually, it doesn't matter when we began torturing ourselves. We must stop now. Right now, we can give ourselves a big emotional and mental hug. We are okay. It's wonderful to be who we are. Our thoughts are okay. Our feelings are appropriate. We're right where we're supposed to be today, this moment. There is nothing wrong with us. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with us. If we've done wrongs, that's okay; we were doing the best we could.

In all our codependency, with all our controlling, rescuing, and assorted character defects, we are okay. We are exactly as we are meant to be. I've talked a lot about problems, issues, and things to change—these

are goals, things we will do to enhance our lives. Who we are right now is okay. In fact, codependents are some of the most loving, generous, good-hearted, and concerned people I know. We've just allowed ourselves to be tricked into doing things that hurt us, and we're going to learn how to stop doing those things. But those tricks are our problems; they are not us. If we have one character defect that is abhorrent, it is the way we hate and pick on ourselves. That is simply not tolerable nor acceptable any longer. We can stop picking on ourselves for picking on ourselves.<sup>4</sup> This habit is not our *fault* either, but it is our *responsibility* to learn to stop doing it.

We can cherish ourselves and our lives. We can nurture ourselves and love ourselves. We can accept our wonderful selves, with all our faults, foibles, strong points, weak points, feelings, thoughts, and everything else. It's the best thing we've got going for us. It's who we are, and who we were meant to be. And it's not a mistake. We are the greatest thing that will ever happen to us. Believe it. It makes life much easier.

The only difference between codependents and the rest of the world is that the other people don't pick on themselves for being who they are. All people think similar thoughts and have a range of feelings. All people make mistakes and do a few things right. So we can leave ourselves alone.

We aren't second-class citizens. We don't deserve to lead second-hand lives. And we don't deserve second-best relationships! We are lovable, and we are worth getting to know. People who love and like us aren't stupid or inferior for doing that. We have a right to be happy.<sup>5</sup> We deserve good things.

The people who look the most beautiful are the same as us. The only difference is they're telling themselves they look good, and they're letting themselves shine through. The people who say the most profound, intelligent, or witty things are the same as us. They're letting go, being who they are. The people who appear the most confident and relaxed are no different from us. They've pushed themselves through fearful situations and told themselves they could make it. The people who are successful are the same as us. They've gone ahead and developed their gifts and talents, and set goals for themselves. We're even the same as the people

on television: our heroes, our idols. We're all working with approximately the same material—humanity. It's how we feel about ourselves that makes the difference. It's what we tell ourselves that makes the difference.

We are good. We are good enough. We are appropriate to life. Much of our anxiety and fearfulness stems, I believe, from constantly telling ourselves that we're just not up to facing the world and all its situations. Nathaniel Branden calls this "a nameless sense of being unfit for reality."<sup>6</sup> I'm here to say we are fit for reality. Relax. Wherever we need to go and whatever we need to do, we are appropriate for that situation. We will do fine. Relax. It's okay to be who we are. Who or what else can we be? Just do our best at whatever we are called upon to do. What more can we do? Sometimes, we can't even do our best; that's okay, too. We may have feelings, thoughts, fears, and vulnerabilities as we go through life, but we all do. We need to stop telling ourselves we're different for doing and feeling what everyone else does.

We need to be good to ourselves. We need to be compassionate and kind to ourselves. How can we expect to take care of ourselves appropriately if we hate or dislike ourselves?

We need to refuse to enter into an antagonistic relationship with ourselves. Quit blaming ourselves and being victimized, and take responsible steps to remove the victim. Put the screws to guilt. Shame and guilt serve no long-term purpose. They are only useful to momentarily indicate when we may have violated our own moral codes. Guilt and shame are not useful as a way of life. Stop the "shoulds." Become aware of when we're punishing and torturing ourselves and make a concerted effort to tell ourselves positive messages. If we should be doing something, do it. If we're torturing ourselves, stop it. It gets easier. We can laugh at ourselves, tell ourselves we won't be tricked, give ourselves a hug, then go about the business of living as we choose. If we have real guilt, deal with it. God will forgive us. He knows we did our best, even if it was our worst. We don't have to punish ourselves by feeling guilty to prove to God or anyone else how much we care.<sup>7</sup> We need to forgive ourselves. Take the Fourth and Fifth Steps (see the chapter on working a Twelve Step pro-

gram); talk to a clergy person; talk to God; make amends; and then be done with it.

We need to stop shaming ourselves. Shame, like guilt, serves absolutely no extended purpose. If people tell us, directly or indirectly, that we ought to be ashamed, we don't have to believe it. Hating or shaming ourselves doesn't help except for a moment. Name one situation that is improved by continuing to feel guilt or shame. Name one time when that has solved a problem. How did it help? Most of the time, guilt and shame keep us so anxious we can't do our best. Guilt makes *everything* harder.

We need to value ourselves and make decisions and choices that enhance our self-esteem.

"Each time you learn to act as if you are valuable, not desperate, you make it easier the next time," advises Toby Rice Drew in *Getting Them Sober*.<sup>8</sup>

We can be gentle, loving, listening, attentive, and kind to ourselves, our feelings, thoughts, needs, wants, desires, and everything we're made of. We can accept ourselves—all of us. Start where we're at, and we will become more. Develop our gifts and talents. Trust ourselves. Assert ourselves. We can be trusted. Respect ourselves. Be true to ourselves. Honor ourselves, for that is where our magic lies. That is our key to the world.

Following is an excerpt from *Honoring the Self*, an excellent book on self-esteem written by Nathaniel Branden. Read closely what he writes.

Of all the judgments that we pass in life, none is as important as the one we pass on ourselves, for that judgment touches the very center of our existence.

... No significant aspect of our thinking, motivation, feelings, or behavior is unaffected by our self-evaluation. . . .

The first act of honoring the self is the assertion of consciousness: the choice to think, to be aware, to send the searchlight of consciousness outward toward the world and inward toward our own being. To default on this effort is to default on the self at the most basic level.

To honor the self is to be willing to think independently, to live by our own mind, and to have the courage of our own perceptions and judgments.

To honor the self is to be willing to know not only what we think but also what we feel, what we want, need, desire, suffer over, are frightened or angered by—and to accept our right to experience such feelings. The opposite of this attitude is denial, disowning, repression—self-repudiation.

To honor the self is to preserve an attitude of self-acceptance—which means to accept what we are, without self-oppression or self-castigation, without any pretense about the truth of our own being, pretense aimed at deceiving either ourselves or anyone else.

To honor the self is to live authentically, to speak and act from our innermost convictions and feelings.

To honor the self is to refuse to accept unearned guilt, and to do our best to correct such guilt as we may have earned.

To honor the self is to be committed to our right to exist which proceeds from the knowledge that our life does not belong to others and that we are not here on earth to live up to someone else's expectations. To many people, this is a terrifying responsibility.

To honor the self is to be in love with our own life, in love with our possibilities for growth and for experiencing joy, in love with the process of discovery and exploring our distinctively human potentialities.

Thus we can begin to see that to honor the self is to practice *selfishness* in the highest, noblest, and least understood sense of that word. And this, I shall argue, requires enormous independence, courage, and integrity.<sup>9</sup>

We need to love ourselves and make a commitment to ourselves. We need to give ourselves some of the boundless loyalty that so many codependents are willing to give others. Out of high self-esteem will come true acts of kindness and charity, not selfishness.

The love we give and receive will be enhanced by the love we give ourselves.

### ACTIVITY

1. How do you feel about yourself? Write about it. Include the things you like or don't like about yourself. Reread what you have written.