



The Family Recovery Foundation
FIX YOUR FAMILY
MODULE 3
Understanding Codependency

1. Definition of codependency

Codependency is a behavioral and emotional condition in which an individual consistently prioritizes the needs, feelings, or problems of others—often to the detriment of their own well-being—this helps to maintain connection, control, or stability in a specific relationship. It commonly develops in relationships with individuals who are struggling with addiction, mental illness, or emotional dysfunction, and is marked by patterns of enmeshment, people-pleasing, poor boundaries, and a loss of personal identity.

The concept of codependency does apply to families with substance abuse issues but is also used to refer to other situations too. The main consequence of codependency is that...

codependents, busy taking care of others, forget to take care of themselves.

(Knudson & Terrell, 2012).

2. Key characteristics and behaviors of codependency

- Difficulty making decisions without input from others
- Struggles with setting and maintaining personal boundaries
- Constant need for approval and recognition
- Tendency to neglect personal needs for others' sake
- Fear of abandonment or rejection
- Feels responsible for others' emotions and behaviors
- Avoids conflict to maintain connection
- Low self-esteem masked by people-pleasing or overachievement
- Internalizes others' dysfunction as personal failure
- Believes love must be earned through sacrifice or fixing others

3. *Enmeshment and Loss of Identity*

- Key Idea: Codependency often involves an unhealthy emotional or psychological reliance on another person, leading to blurred boundaries. Individuals may lose their sense of self and focus **excessively** on the needs, emotions, and behaviors of others.

4. *Control and Over-Responsibility*

- Key Idea: Codependent individuals may try to control situations, emotions, or behaviors of others to avoid conflict, maintain peace, or feel needed. This often stems from a belief that their worth is tied to how much they can “fix” or “help” others.

5. *Fear of Abandonment and People-Pleasing*

- Key Idea: A deep fear of abandonment often drives codependent behavior, resulting in excessive people-pleasing, conflict avoidance, and self-sacrifice. This perpetuates a cycle of neglecting one’s own needs.

6. **Strategies to Overcome Codependency**

- **Recognize and Acknowledge Codependent Behaviors**

Begin by identifying patterns such as people-pleasing, self-neglect, or difficulty saying no. Honest self-reflection is the first step toward change. This is an important step in the recovery process.

- **Build Self-Awareness**

Learn to observe your emotional responses, triggers, and automatic behaviors in relationships. Journaling or therapy can help uncover deeper patterns.

- **Establish and Maintain Healthy Boundaries**

Practice setting clear limits around your time, energy, and emotional availability. Boundaries protect your well-being and build mutual respect.

- **Shift from External to Internal Validation**
Develop the ability to validate your own thoughts, feelings, and needs without relying on others for approval.
- **Practice Saying No Without Guilt**
Learn to decline requests that compromise your values or well-being. Saying no is an act of self-respect, not selfishness.
- **Separate Responsibility from Rescue**
Understand that caring for others doesn't mean fixing, rescuing, or taking responsibility for their emotions or actions.
- **Reclaim Personal Needs and Desires**
Identify and get clear on what brings you joy, peace, and fulfillment. Prioritize these alongside the needs of others.
- **Develop Assertive Communication Skills**
Learn to express your needs, feelings, and boundaries clearly and respectfully. Assertiveness supports healthy connection.
- **Break the Caretaking Cycle**
Stop over-functioning in relationships. Let others take responsibility for their own choices, even if it's uncomfortable. You may be caring the emotional labor of the relationship. Letting others carry the load can help you find clarity in the relationship.
- **Seek Professional Support**
Therapy or support groups (like CODA) provide tools, language, and community for those healing from codependency.

RESOURCES

- Knudson, T. M., & Terrell, H. K. (2012). Codependency, perceived interparental conflict, and substance abuse in the family of origin. *American Journal of Family Therapy*, 40(3), 245-257.