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Co-dependency Persists in Many Relationships

Co-dependency is dead, the rumors say. But according to clinicians who treat addiction problems, co-dependency is alive and well as it has been since people first began to relate to each other.

Admittedly, “co-dependency” is a clumsy term. It evolved in the 1960’s from the term “co-alcoholic,” a descriptive label which correctly described the alcoholics’ spouses as co-conspirators because the spouses were seen as chronically enmeshed in their alcoholic partners’ self-destructive lives.

Co-dependency – the behavior, condition, syndrome, call it what you will – is still around. But we know today that it’s not just the spouses who can be co-dependent, but also the addicts’ friends, employers, doctors, lawyers, etc. The insidious pathology becomes obvious when you work with addicts and co-dependents – separately and/or together – in group therapy. Here is an example:

Betsy is a 42-year-old co-dependent, in her first group therapy session, with several recovering alcoholics, drug addicts and other co-dependents. Betsy has never met any of them before. (Also, her alcoholic husband, clean and sober for two weeks, is in a similar group therapy session in a room down the hallway.)

Co-dependency in action To start Betsy’s group, therapist asks Harry, a shy alcoholic, how he feels about his legal separation from his wife. Harry stammers, stalls, trembles and looks helpless. When the group leader persists with more questions, Betsy jumps in aggressively.

“Now just a minute.” She chides the therapist. “You are acting more like an inquisitor than a counselor. Can’t you see that Harry is nervous? Leave him alone for a while. He could probably use a cup of coffee.”

This causes Jerome, an alcoholic group member to speak up.

“Betsy, I’m glad you are in this group,” he says, kindly but firmly. “I can see that I’m gonna learn a lot from you. You’re treating Harry just like my ex-wife would. I saw you do same thing in the dayroom this morning. You were defending a patient who was being chastised by the cleaning lady because he had spilled coffee on the counter.”

Betsy is aghast! “How can you talk to me like that?” she says sharply. “You don’t even know me.”

Jerome’s reply is simple. “Betsy, I can talk like that because in this group we learn to recognize each other’s

behaviors. Even though you’ve been here only for a few minutes, your behavior shows that you can benefit from this group,” he says.

Betsy is puzzled. She looks around the group for additional feedback. “I don’t know what you mean,” she says a little more subdued. “What is it I’m doing?”

The group leader explains, “Betsy, to help you see what you’re doing, look at how your protective attitude has affected Harry.”

Harry, who was literally jumping out of his skin two minutes ago, now sits with legs outstretched in front of him, relaxed and smiling. He facial expression says, “Shucks, I got a good thing going here. I like it when somebody stands up for me.”

What is co-dependency? It’s the need to latch on to dependents of any kind, be they alcoholics, drug addicts or gamblers. But instead of helping them change, co-dependents end up killing them with kindness. At the same time, the co-dependents are able to see – and portray – themselves as kind, abused, noble and worthwhile. Also, by focusing their own emotions and behaviors on the addicts, the co-dependents are able to ignore their own character flaws.

Co-dependency should not be confused with being kind, caring or helpful. It is also not a way of putting down or singling out women because women are, generally speaking, more inclined to be helpful, kind and nurturing. It is a clinical fact that some of the most destructive co-dependents are hard, disciplined, judgmental men who destroy their addict partners’ lives by covering up and bailing them out repeatedly, only to eventually and angrily dump them, often without resources.

Co-dependency is also not a term we use to “pathologize” normal behavior, as critics have complained. The opposite is true: To deny the phenomenon of co-dependency as just being “kind or helpful to somebody in need,” is to normalize pathological behavior. Why is co-dependent behavior pathological? Because it kills the dependents and grinds up the co-dependent, while at the same time preventing both from becoming self-reliant, mature, productive people.

The behavior and the pathology it denotes are not going away. As long as there are dependents (chemical or otherwise), there will be co-dependents who will join them in their mutually destructive battle. And until they both get well, they will “need” each other, in spite of their mutual denials and protestations.

How do we know? Because when one member of such a relationship gets well or dies, the other finds a new replacement that is similar to the old one.