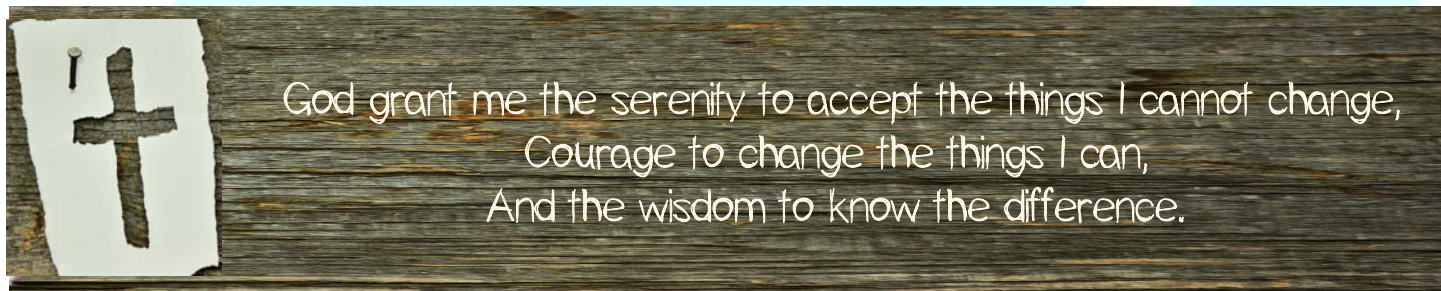


# CODEPENDENT

(the disease of the lost self)

■ by Kim Pronoitis, MA, LCPC



## Who Am I?

At one time or another we all have asked ourselves this question. It is an appropriate question for a college student picking a major or someone making a career choice. It is different though when a person can't identify themselves as an individual, or when a person's happiness is dependent upon another person. This is called a codependent relationship.

One result of a codependent relationship pattern is that God comes second to the relationship. Instead of fully relying on God, we look to the relationship to meet emotional needs. Codependents rely on another person's opinion first. Christian interdependence is vital to the body of Christ and its independent members. We are to love one another, avoid selfish ambition, and use our individual gifts from God to help others. If we cannot exercise our individual purpose because of a toxic relationship, we are going against God's plan for us. This is contrary to the selfishness, dishonesty and destruction of codependent relationships.

Not knowing who we are or who we have become apart from someone else is where many get stuck. Often this relates to a codependent relationship, resulting in a person engaging in maladaptive coping skills for a pseudo sense of wellbeing. One of my therapeutic clichés is to "never compromise your own wellbeing for someone else." The complexity of a codependent relationship is that over an extended period of time, the unhealthy behaviors become the "norm" and the only way to know and understand. Having healthy judgment becomes clouded. Change begins with an honest look at ourselves and acknowledging the codependent relationship.

## What is codependency?

Originally codependency was coined in alcoholic or addictive type relationships. The term has been around a long time and doesn't necessarily have to be directly related to alcohol, or what most would perceive as "addiction". Codependency comes in many forms but all are similar in nature. It's what one person can get from another. Today many clinicians look at the behavioral aspects of relationships and the ability of an individual to function independently. For codependents, being open and honest can be difficult. Codependency is when one person relies on another for their own self-worth, the need to be needed, or the inability to be able to rely on their own independence. Codependency is a behavioral condition where a person enables another person's addiction, underachievement, poor mental health, irresponsibility and/or ability to move forward in a positive direction. For the people involved, codependent behaviors can be difficult to detect as they become a "normal" way of life and are seen as supporting instead of enabling.

## Signs of codependency

- Struggling with boundaries – codependents do not know what a healthy boundary looks like.
- Becoming controlling through manipulation or guilt to get what we want.
- Feeling overly responsible for others feelings and wellbeing, because as a child we learned that to survive in the family, we had to be the responsible one.

- Continued on Page 2 -

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- Continued from Page 1 -

- People pleasing - feeling like we have to please others or make them happy to receive acceptance, love, or approval.
- The need to be needed and often giving unwanted advice.
- Relying on what others think of us for our own self-worth and happiness.
- Being sensitive to criticism.
- Afraid that conflict will cause others to reject or abandon us.
- Lack of trust. Because those close to us have hurt us, it is difficult to trust in relationships as we fear getting hurt.
- Feeling alone or like “someone should” be helping us.
- Always having to be right - being a right fighter.
- Always feeling like the victim - not taking responsibility for our own actions.
- Justifying or making excuses for our own or someone else’s poor behavior.

## What causes codependency?

Most often codependent behaviors start to develop in childhood and follow into adulthood. If we come from a home where we are the caretaker because parents lack the ability, we learn to take care of our siblings or ourselves, filling in the gaps our parents did not fill. For children, taking on adult responsibility before developmentally ready leaves an impact on how a person views the world and behaves in it. Codependency can also develop after a traumatic event. Behaviors are learned and generational. When learned behavior is reinforced, it continues and becomes an automatic pattern.

## Courage to change the things we can

It takes courage to look at ourselves and our relationships and acknowledge unhealthy behaviors. That is the first step. We cannot change what we do not acknowledge. Counseling can help identify codependent behaviors and work to change old ways of thinking. Support groups are also helpful.

What causes us to feel the need to continue unhealthy codependent behaviors in a relationship? In Romans 7:15-20 Paul speaks of doing the things one hates to do, and asks why we do these things. The concept of letting go for many is a scary thing to do— let go and let God.

When becoming healthier, it’s not uncommon to get “push back” from others in the unhealthy relationship. A codependent person feels extremely uncomfortable with the new healthy boundaries. One person in the relationship may feel like they are losing the other and dig in emotional “hooks” – through guilt, shaming, or manipulating the other person into doing what they “should” be doing.

Remember, we have had “stinking thinking” for a long time. Changing the way we think takes time, and is a process. Self-growth is not always comfortable! Isaiah 14:27 For the Lord Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?

If we are feeling confused or stuck about our identity and the answer to the question, “Who am I?”, it may be helpful to see a Christian counselor. Our God is not a God of confusion. Though our heart makes different plans, God’s purpose for each individual is unique and will prevail (Proverbs 19:21). ■

*Kim Pronoitis is a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor.  
She sees clients in our Tinley Park, IL location.*



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