

The Dilemma of Codependent Men

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The dilemmas of codependent men aren't talked about. Unlike women, few men discuss their relationship problems with friends and family. Instead, they internalize their pain. Many are in denial, suffer in silence, have an addiction and/or become numb to their needs and feelings. They shun attention and try to do the right thing and be good sons, husbands, and fathers, focusing instead on making a living and meeting the needs of their wives and children. These codependent men sacrifice themselves and believe that their needs, including the need for time away from their wives, are selfish.

Societal and cultural values have shamed men as weak for expressing feelings or needs, which reinforces codependent traits of control, suppression of feelings, and denial of needs. Often, they turn to addiction in order to cope.

Dysfunctional Childhood

The societal norm for male suppression of feelings is compounded and distorted if you grew up in a dysfunctional family where it wasn't safe to express feelings and needs. It's easier not to acknowledge feelings that are criticized or needs that are denied or shamed. Your needs were also ignored if you took on age-inappropriate responsibilities because of an out of control, irresponsible, or immature parent. If there was abuse or addiction present, you probably grew up in an atmosphere of chaos, conflict, strict rules, or unpredictability. Self-control helped you survive, but controlling yourself or others leads to problems later in intimate relationships.

Feeling Trapped and Fearing Abandonment

Despite the prevalence of codependent women, I see many codependent men in my private practice. There's a dance that codependent couples

do, and it takes two who know the steps. If you think your wife is codependent, there's a good chance you are, too. Often codependent men are attracted to women who are needy, demanding, jealous, or critical. Men become dependent on their wives' approval, and then feel trapped by their manipulation, demands, or expectations. Some are involved with women who are abusive, or never satisfied or appreciative. They're unable to set boundaries and fear emotional retaliation and/or rejection, including withholding of sex.

Their wives may be very emotional, providing a sense of aliveness to the relationship and compensating for the numbness many codependent men feel inside. In the beginning, a man can feel powerful, helping a needy girlfriend or wife and giving her attention or gifts. He conforms to her expectations, while being assured that she won't abandon him, but eventually discovers that it's never enough to satisfy her. Sometimes, these women have mental health issues, are addicted to drugs or alcohol, or are financially desperate.

Some men end up becoming workaholics to justify alone time, but their needs for nurturing, respect, freedom, and appreciation, just to name a few, go unmet. Fear of rejection and abandonment are powerful motivators for codependency, usually because of early emotional abandonment by a parent. Consequently, the men never leave — physically — but withdraw to the safety of a self-made emotional prison. After a while, they feel trapped, controlled and resentful. They may use drugs or addictive behavior to manage anxiety and depression, while some look outside the marriage for validation. However, it's not their wives that are the cause of their problem, it's their codependency.

Intimacy

Frequently, a woman brings her partner into therapy wanting more intimacy and to get him to be more open and share his feelings. Often, it's revealed that he's fully capable of communicating his feelings, but instead of being assertive and setting healthy boundaries that make it safe for him to do so, he reacts to criticism and demands by fighting

back, emotionally withdrawing, or endlessly placating her with explanations and apologies that don't suffice.

Codependent couples are reactive because they each lack autonomy and are emotionally dependent upon each other. Problems of closeness and separateness are typical. Couples may keep a safe distance or take turns pushing one another away to avoid the emotional intensity of becoming too close. Intimacy escalates anxiety of being hurt by criticism or rejection or being suffocated and losing themselves and their autonomy. Yet, despite unhappiness or frustration, they don't leave and draw each other in after a conflict or separation, so as not to be abandoned.

Abused Men

Some men are verbally and even physically abused by their wives and girlfriends and don't know how to handle it. Often, they're afraid that authorities won't believe that their wives are violent and feel humiliated and ashamed that they can't deal with it themselves. Sometimes, their wives threaten to lie, or do so, and accuse their partners of violence. These men keep their secret and suffer silently. They can learn to value themselves and change the relationships dynamics by healing their codependency and setting boundaries.

Codependency and Addiction

Men who are addicts are also codependent. Their lives revolve around their addiction — whether it's a drug (including alcohol), sex, gambling, food, or work — which they use to modulate their mood and self-esteem. They try to control their addiction and people around them in order to maintain the addiction. Meanwhile, they are controlled by it. Abstinence or sobriety allows them to work on the underlying issues of codependency. Recovery includes regaining autonomy and self-esteem, and the ability to manage their thinking, emotions and life problems.

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