What is Codependency?

Some say that it is a disease of the heart. Codependency is believed to have developed from 1.) the family you grew up in wherein someone was addicted to alcohol/drugs, 2.) a relationship with someone who actively abuses chemicals or is involved in other addictive behaviors (i.e. gambling, sex) and 3.) growing up in a home where feelings and emotions were repressed or not expressed. In most cases, drugs and alcohol play a significant role in the development of codependency. Codependency grows out of a want and a need to “fix things”, to take care of and protect those we love and to feel as though “we matter and make a difference.”

A codependent person can be someone who is dependent on and controlled by others who are struggling with their own dysfunction and addiction. The codependent wants to help however can get so involved that things become worse and they are often blamed for their partners troubles. It becomes a vicious self-defeating cycle.

A codependent person can be someone who was raised in a family that had rigid set of rules and did not express their feelings or discuss personal problems. You live by these rules that say it is not okay to talk, to feel or to trust. You learn to never ask for help for it is a sign of weakness and betrayal. You are taught to be good, perfect and strong, and above all never to “rock the boat”. Eventually as an adult these rules become messages, which you internalize as “You can’t trust your feelings or perceptions.” Thus your dependence on others begins and your loss of self becomes evident.

There are many faces to codependency. While the core of codependent behavior is the need to take care of others it comes at the expense of yourself. It can develop into a menagerie of codependent roles. It is not uncommon for a codependent to switch roles to fit their needs. There are three roles: the victim, the judge and the enabler. The victim also known as the “martyr” believes they deserve their suffering. They take great pride in the sacrifices they make for their family despite the pain and grief that it causes them emotionally. A victim will say, “I have done XYZ and no one listens to me and gives me the recognition that I deserve for all the time and effort I put into this family.” The judge believes in nagging and blaming others for their unhappiness. They take no responsibility for their role in the dysfunction and control others through anger and guilt. They will say, “It is your fault that I can’t have a life and go to college. You hold me back.” The enabler keeps the addicted person “sick” by making excuses for them. They are often in denial that any problem exists and enable the afflicted person to stay in their dysfunction. They will say. “It is really not that bad as long as I keep things together.”

Recovering from Codependency

As a codependent you first need to accept responsibility for your life and make the necessary changes in your relationship with others. It is time to focus on you, your wants, needs and desires and most of all your feelings. You will need to rediscover who you are because you have denied so much of yourself in your codependent relationship. There has been a “Loss of Self.”

Recovery is about awareness—of knowing who you are, giving totally of yourself, to be vulnerable and honest with yourself. It is also about establishing boundaries. Since we have allowed others to mistreat us we have to learn to set limits based upon how we feel in certain situations. This can be a difficult process because we have become so conditioned to be what others want us to be, that asking for what we want can be problematic and confusing for we really do not know ourselves truly.

Another essential part of recovering from codependency is that we need to stop controlling others. You need to recognize that all your yelling, nagging, crying and promises has not changed their behavior. You can only control your behavior from now on. You will have to learn how to detach with love from
others so that you can be true to yourself. It is a process and a journey that takes time, patience and support. Be gentle with yourself. Surround yourself with others who care about you and love you unconditionally. Affirm yourself with positive messages. Heal within and embrace your courage and strength to put yourself FIRST!!

It is important to educate yourself about codependency. Seek a professional who specializes in codependency if you feel you are “stuck” and need support in your personal journey. You can attend a CODA meeting for support in developing healthy relationships. It is essential that you spend time with others who are non-judgmental and are centered on your well being. Know that you are enough and are deserving of everything good that life has to offer.

For more information on CODA: www.codependentsanonymous.org