

The Nature of Codependency: Who Am I?

CODEPENDENCY, which is women's basic programming, frequently underlies addiction. For many women there is no clear distinction between the two because they play off each other. For example, a woman may be sexually codependent within her relationship and become addicted to alcohol as a way to numb her pain and maintain her denial system. She may be sexually codependent with her partner, and have sexually addictive flirtations at work. Addiction is often an escape from the powerless feelings of codependency.

I describe a codependent person as someone whose core identity is undeveloped or unknown, and who maintains a false identity built from dependent attachments to external sources — a partner, a spouse, family, appearances, work, or rules. These attachments create both the illusion of a "self" and a form from which to operate. Codependency is a disease of inequality in that any minority person who has to survive in a world defined by others will know more about those in power than about himself or herself.

The word *codependent* (or *coaddict*) was originally created to describe a person, usually female, who is the partner of an alcoholic, usually male. It was often said that the codependent *enables* the addict to stay in his addiction. The term came into use as people realized that partners of alcoholics usually suffer with a parallel set of destructive symptoms, and that they need their own support system. Al-Anon was thus created as a twelve-step program for partners of alcoholics.

I take exception to the traditional notion of defining a codependent solely as the partner of an addict. Because the word is associated with women, this definition tends to reduce the codependent's identity to that of Mrs. Addict. I prefer to regard her as a woman with a unique set of problems that may go hand in hand with those of the addict, just as the addict's unique set of problems go hand in hand with those of the codependent.

WOMEN, SEX, AND ADDICTION

A Search for Love and Power

CHARLOTTE DAVIS KASL, Ph.D.



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Addictive and codependent personalities come into full bloom in adult relationships, but are rooted in early childhood experiences in the family and the culture. Whatever is lacking in the individual comes roaring to the surface in the addict-codependent interplay. An old diagnostic category, *folie à deux*, is used to describe two people who share one psychosis. Essentially, it refers to two people who seem to trigger all that is crazy in each other, which is how I see the interplay between a codependent and an addict. Whatever was buried becomes magnified in the relationship, and as long as the two are together, the craziness escalates.

Another reason to expand on the Mrs. Addict definition is that codependency in women can be fully understood only in the context of women's socialization, not just in relation to a particular addiction or addict.

Some professionals have gone so far as to say that you can't have an addict without an enabler, or a codependent. To me, reading between the lines, this suggests that women are to blame for addicts' behavior. I've never heard it said that you can't have a codependent without an addict. In fact, the latter seems closer to the truth because, as you will see, traits of codependency are usually associated with those who have less power in the system — women — and have to figure out how to live in someone else's — men's — world.

Traditionally, addicts and codependents have been regarded as two separate breeds. But this oversimplifies a complex issue. While in a broad sense addiction reflects the norm for men, and codependency the norm for women, addiction and codependency often mesh within one person. To complicate things further, some people consider codependency in its extreme form an addiction, an all-encompassing destructive force controlling a woman's life. If we are to better understand both men and women, we need to see the complex web of addiction and codependency weave in both of them. Otherwise we will continue to reinforce stereotypical assumptions about men and women that are harmful to everyone.

As I see it, one significant harm that has come from the Mrs. Addict label is that the addict gets most of the attention. There are many treatment programs for addicts and few for codependents. Typically, the addicted person may receive a month of intensive treatment, while the codependent is included for a week of evening family therapy groups, if that. Another pitfall is that the codependent usually receives help only if she is in a relationship with an addict, although this is starting to change. In reality, a person with codependent traits experiences them whether or not she is in a significant relationship. Therefore, treatment programs for codependency would be helpful regardless of the relationship status.

As children we all experienced feelings of powerlessness. Dependency

is inherent to childhood. That's why the use and abuse of power in families has such a profound effect on children. Children who grow up in dysfunctional families spend all their energy dancing to the tune of the parents in the hope of being loved or to avoid shame and abuse. As a result, they don't learn to know themselves.

Because a codependent woman has not developed a sufficient sense of self, she can't really tell you how she is; she can only tell you how her husband, children, and cats are. She can't tell you how she *wants* something to be, but she can tell you the rule for how it *should* be. Not having a center to resonate from, she takes her cues from the outside. Her greatest fear is that if she loses or lets go of the external forms — the house, the husband, the rules, the status — she will fall into a terrifying emptiness. She fears she could not exist on her own. Developmentally part of her is like a tiny child who has not left her mother's arms, so she clings to forms, to people and things representing security, as if they were life itself. Because her spirit and soul have been profoundly neglected, she neglects her own inner self; indeed, it is unknown to her.

Some people define codependency as an addiction to a destructive relationship. This is usually a fundamental symptom of codependency, but the codependent is not so much addicted to the particular person as to what he (or she) represents, namely, security in the form of a partner and a provider. Essentially, she is programmed by the culture to model herself after the images portrayed in countless women's magazines. Addiction takes the form of wanting someone to take care of her financially, provide a beautiful home, and confer on her the status of being Mrs. Someone.

Codependency represents an attachment to *all* those things that give a woman the security of knowing she exists. It follows that, at its deepest level, codependency is essentially an addiction to security. This definition took shape as I listened over time to the countless reasons women gave for not leaving a painful relationship or job, for not saying no, for not moving, for not taking risks. At the bottom of every response was a need for security: "I might never find anyone else." "I don't have other friends." "I wouldn't have enough money." "I couldn't live alone." "I might not find another job." "Something terrible might happen." Underlying all these statements is a crippling sense of powerlessness.

A predictable pattern emerges in conversations with codependent women when they discuss their abusive or neglectful partners. Marsha came to therapy and recited the reasons why she should leave her husband, Hank, who was "just awful." She couldn't stand him. The marriage had been miserable for twenty-five years. She had been massively depressed, suffered from chronic compulsive eating, and was feeling hopeless. Sex was just awful. As she described it, "He would get on me and do his business."

I listened for a while and then asked her if she told him what she wanted sexually or ever said no if she wasn't in the mood. She prickled a little at my nudging her to take some responsibility. Well, no, she couldn't say no to sex. "That's a man's right." I pressed her a little more. When she looked beyond her righteous reason, she admitted that she was afraid he might get upset or even leave her if she said no.

"Are you really saying that, after twenty-five years of marriage and bringing up five boys, if you said no to sex one night he would pack his bags and walk out of the house?" I blurted. While I wanted to challenge her delusion of power, I also knew that if her husband was sexually addicted, her fear had some basis. To say no to sex would be to threaten his identity, which was tied to sex. If he was addicted to sex, her sexual availability was to him like alcohol for an alcoholic. Her saying no would threaten his stash and his anger.

Throughout our early sessions it was very difficult to get Marsha to talk about herself. It was always what Hank said and did. She rarely stayed focused on any one subject and she showed no anger. When I tried to direct her to talk about herself, she would do so for a few minutes, then continue the litany of Hank stories. Finally I said, "Well, then, if it's so bad, why don't you leave him?"

In a reply typical of codependent women, she said, "Oh, it's really not so bad. He's better now. The kids need a father."

Just as she was psychologically cornered into facing up to the fact that she wanted to leave her partner, she would pull out a familiar list of rationalizations to cover her fear. When we delved into the underlying fear, Marsha, like many women who remain stuck in a destructive relationship, reached a terrifying awareness. She came face to face with her fear that she would die if she left him. In a very real sense, in her mind, her identity was more about him than about her. If she left him, who would she be? It slowly emerged that her fear of death was related to childhood abuse and lack of sufficient early bonding with either parent. She had never formed a sufficient sense of self to make possible the thought of being on her own. But I get ahead of myself. I worked with Marsha for over four years, and her story will emerge throughout the book.

Codependency is difficult to describe because it is often about what a person does *not* do, which is basically to live her life. She doesn't follow the path of her own interests or let her passions flow through her. She is afraid of strong feelings and power. If the addict overindulges in sensory pleasures, the codependent starves herself of them. Of if she does indulge, she immediately feels guilty and can't enjoy them because at her core she feels undeserving.

Think of the stereotypical female and how people praise her: She never thinks of herself. She is a devoted mother. She'd do anything for you. She is a saint. She always puts her husband first. She is patient, kind, and never complains. What her admirers omit is that she probably acts like an angel out of fear: fear people won't like her; fear of financial insecurity; fear her partner will leave her; fear of a fight. Notice that no mention is made of what she feels like inside. That's because to fill this role, you aren't allowed to feel inside; you have to be nice all the time.

CODEPENDENCY AS AN ADDICTION

The five aspects of addiction also apply to codependency. Remember that individuals differ, and not all traits apply to all people, but this list gives the general picture.

Powerlessness The codependent woman feels powerless to

- accept that she has to create her own sense of achievement and purpose from within.
- stop taking personally all the words and actions of those around her (her self-esteem is determined by what other people say).
- get angry directly when she doesn't like something or when someone violates her rights.
- say no to requests for help, service, and sex.
- let people suffer their own problems and take responsibility for themselves. (It is difficult for anyone to watch another person suffer or make destructive choices, but the codependent feels it is her job to stop them, which is, of course, impossible.)
- stop feeling responsible for her children's self-esteem. (She constantly tries to improve them, which only increases their low self-esteem, because the children get the message that they are never good enough.)
- stop trying to change her partner, family, or children. She tries to impose her standards, often with such indirect statements as, "Wouldn't you like to . . ." "Don't you think you should . . ." "Wouldn't it be nice if you . . ."
- stop worrying about her partner, family, friends, and children.
- give up hoping something will magically change her partner or take away life's problems.
- face life on her own.
- see herself as a separate person.
- tune in to her own internal world and operate from self-knowledge.
- stop imagining scripts for how events *should* take place and what

people *should* say. (She doesn't tell people the script, but when they don't follow it she is hurt, angry, and thinks they don't care about her.)

- give up putting on a good external front to present to the world.

Harmful Consequences The harmful consequences for codependents are far more subtle and insidious than those for an addict because they usually happen within the woman. Because part of the disease is to keep up a good front, she hides her suffering from herself and others. As the saying goes, she is "laughing on the outside, crying on the inside." This intensifies the pain.

Harmful consequences may include

- depression, which can show itself as either agitated activity, lethargy, or the two alternately.
- anxiety, a constant sense of foreboding that veils her emotions.
- profound loneliness of the soul because she keeps her pain hidden and shares her truths with no one, including herself.
- out-of-control, abusive, shaming outbursts when her partner does not do things her way. This often happens when their bond gets shaky; she feels abandoned and it touches on her unconscious fear of dying.
- chronically telling little lies, such as "I'm fine; Everything is great; I'm not upset; I'm not angry."
- body tension — tight jaw, shoulders, neck, mouth — from holding in anger.
- chemical dependency, compulsive eating, physical illness (often a long history of medical problems, including headaches, stomachaches, tumors).
- failure to develop her talents, or if she does, abandoning them if her partner feels threatened.
- living in constant fear of losing her partner or not finding or maintaining close friendships.
- feeling terribly separate from herself and from her sexuality.

Unmanageability Again, the unmanageability is difficult to see because the codependent keeps it so well hidden. Because maintaining the form of her life is core to her addiction, she keeps at it until she nearly drops. Unmanageability is most likely to manifest itself in accidents, sickness, severe depression, or anxiety. She usually doesn't reach out for help until she no longer has the energy or ability to keep up the external form — the perfect house, the perfect looks, the dinner on the table every night, the unfilling sex, and so forth. Eventually, she may cease to function in nearly all areas of her life.

Even then the codependent does not always ask for help for *herself* per se. She wants to get rid of the depression and anxiety, so she can continue

the relationship, be a better sex partner, tolerate the emotional desert she lives in, and keep the external forms in operation. Repeatedly women come to therapy wanting to learn how to be calm and happy in an abusive home. While there are certainly ways to detach from negative situations, I usually tell women that my work is not to increase their tolerance for suffering but to help them become powerful individuals.

Often a codependent woman becomes dependent on prescription medication, over-the-counter pills, alcohol, or drugs, or develops eating disorders or other compulsions. The unmanageability may also manifest itself in her children, who act out her inner rage or become a problem for her to deal with.

Escalation The intensity of the situations just described increases, until they permeate her life. She increasingly disassociates from her genuine self in the interest of maintaining external security. Some women die to get out of a bad relationship. They get cancer and other diseases: "I'll make this relationship work if it kills me." Others become clinically depressed and require hospitalization; still others become addicted to Valium, antidepressants, or other medications. It may take years to reach a bottoming-out point because the codependent has an immense tolerance for suffering, never having known that anything else is possible. Most of all, she wakes up daily with fear in her belly, having lost any ability she had for pleasure and enjoyment and not feeling in control of her life. She may attempt or commit suicide.

Withdrawal If the woman embarks on a course of recovery, she initially experiences profound guilt and shame as the primary symptoms of withdrawal. She feels awful if she says no to sex with her partner or to listening to her mother complain on the phone for half an hour. She thinks she is selfish, whiny, and fussy if she starts asking for what she wants, sexually and otherwise. She has an immense fear of abandonment. She is afraid of rejection and retribution every time she says "I want, I feel, or I think. She also starts to have fleeting moments when she feels a surge of power within her as she takes on an identity that belongs solely to her. Her fear abates and her body starts to relax as she discovers herself and lives more in tune with her inner truths.

THE CODEPENDENT HIGH

In listening to accounts of codependency, I frequently wondered whether there was an adrenaline high parallel to the addiction high. When I asked my friend and colleague Shirley Carlsson, she laughed and said, "Oh, yes." She described it for me as follows:

The adrenaline high comes from functioning impressively in a crisis. Everything is falling apart and you are going to be the one who copes, the one who rises to the occasion. This is not to be mistaken for coping as a healthy sign of being able to function. What makes it different is that the energy is fueled by resentment, self-righteousness, and feelings of superiority. There is a secret self-satisfied smugness rather than the feeling "I want to do this because I care about these people." It's more, "I've got to do this because no one could do it as well as I could, and anyone else would mess it up. I'm superior." It's like cleaning out the garage while feeling resentful and pissed as hell because your husband is away screwing someone, and you want to make him feel guilty when he returns. This is quite different from simply wanting to clean out the garage and feeling good about the accomplishment.

When I asked codependent women to describe their "highs," they responded:

"Having the partner blow up and look out of control so people would think he was a jerk and look at me and say, 'Poor you.'"

"Righteousness. Making plans for him. 'What a fool you are; how wise I am.'"

"My self-esteem would rest on being better than him. Watching him fall apart makes me an angel, a savior, and powerful."

"Watching him grovel and beg for sex would make me feel pure and see him as disgusting." (Another version of groveling is for the partner to be superhelpful and buy presents to atone for his misdeeds.)

"I developed skills of telling people about him with great sighs. I'd get them to criticize him, then I'd say, 'It's not as bad as all that.'"

Many double binds and paradoxes related to codependency reflect the basic double messages about being a woman. For example:

She feels powerless to live her own life, yet is deluded in thinking that she has the power to change another person's. Historically, women have not been given power within the culture, yet have been told they are responsible for (i.e., have power over) the welfare and behavior of their husbands and children.

She is praised for being the perfect, subservient wife and mother, yet this role destroys her sense of self and leaves her sick and depressed. Traditional mental health professionals have colluded in the repression by treating her resulting depression with pills, thus helping her to sustain the role of "good" subservient wife. (Designating codependency a recognized mental disorder is under consideration. While I understand some of the arguments for the diagnosis — the codependent is indeed dysfunctional — I propose that the culture be diagnosed as repressive for teaching women that sweetness and saintliness are good for them.)

Her sexuality is sacrificed for the benefit of her partner, yet she is called frigid or a prude if she does not enjoy what he wants. And if she starts asking for what *she* wants sexually, her partner, if he's a sex addict, will get angry.

She is not given power or responsibility in the culture, yet when she chatters about what she is doing — fixing up the house, buying new drapes, what she is cooking for dinner — she is called superficial and boring. Because she receives little sustenance and nurture for her inner world, she nurtures the only forms she knows — her house, her looks, the rituals of eating, socializing, and being a partner and mother.

Codependency is women's basic training. That is, in order to be acceptable in the male system a woman is taught to set aside her knowledge, her hopes, her dreams, and her power by playing the role of wife, secretary, maid, cheap laborer, mistress, prostitute, and so on. She is taught that her identity comes through her partner. If he or she has status, she has status. If anyone in the family is in trouble, she worries. If her children are nice, she is successful. If they get bad grades, she is a failure. It follows that her overidentification with her partner's addiction, whatever it is, is an extension of her overidentification with her partner's life, successes, failures, and all. They all go together.

While a woman's symptoms of codependency may intensify as the addiction of her partner progresses, the seeds of her behavior were planted when someone first said, "It's a girl." While times are changing, and women are increasingly encouraged to develop their talents and skills, the fundamental message is still that men come first and that they have the power. And there are many women today who are terrific in their careers, climb mountains, are savvy about financial planning, yet turn to mush in their personal relationships.

Codependency is a devastating disease. If we remember that the codependent woman is really a tiny child living in a woman's body, trying desperately to hide from the terrible emptiness at her core, her behavior becomes more understandable. Clinging to an abusive relationship feels preferable to letting go and falling into a terrifying abyss.

In *Women Who Love Too Much*, Robin Norwood accurately portrays the experience of codependency. The fact that this book was a major best seller indicates that women are still trying to find their meaning and worth through relationships and believe that they simply "love too much." I differ with two of Norwood's major points. I would like to see the word *love* reserved for its real meaning, which is to care for another person without dependency or possessiveness. Love comes from a state of surrender to the deepest part of ourselves. Codependency is not about *loving* too much. It is about being extremely dependent on another.

person, about women who control too much, seek their identity through others, and pay for care with self-sacrifice. Learning to love, particularly oneself, is the antidote for codependency.

Regarding Norwood's list of traits that a woman will achieve once she has recovered, I question suggesting a concrete notion of "being recovered," because it reinforces the delusional thinking of the codependent — that there is a model of perfection to be reached. I differ with Norwood's suggestion that a woman will be "in touch with her feelings and attitudes about every aspect of her life, including her sexuality," or that "all the struggles, drama, and chaos of the past have lost their appeal." This is simply not realistic and leaves us striving for an unobtainable goal rather than learning to accept our humanness and watch with humor and a sense of perspective as our life drama unfolds. It also fails to recognize the whole notion of impermanence, the fact that we will always grapple with life and sometimes fall into the soup. What's important to learn is to fall in gracefully and enjoy the noodles.

WHAT CODEPENDENCY IS NOT

Sometimes people mistake the milk of human kindness for codependency. Thus, when codependent women start to recover, the pendulum swings the other way and they become determined not to "caretake" or to give away too much. They don't want to offer care unless someone asks. This is fine, and for some a necessary part of the recovery, but some distinctions are in order.

Empathy, sensitivity, care, compassion, and tenderness are wonderful traits. Being deeply involved and nurturing in a relationship can reflect a woman's wonderful capacity for intimacy. The ability to protect and care for children is a skill to be highly valued. When you comfort someone in need, you bestow a precious gift. Tuning in to the needs of others is beautiful. A woman does not need to get rid of these abilities; she needs to learn both to recognize her motivation and to bestow these gifts on herself.

Her behavior becomes codependent only when carried out with a hidden agenda — to look good, to have her partner indebted, or to feel superior. Then it is not love and nurture.

Calling up someone whom you know is hurting and saying, "How are you doing?" is a caring gesture. Too often women attempting to recover from codependency think that they shouldn't reach out, that the other person is always supposed to ask first. The easiest way to distinguish between codependency and genuine care is to examine your own motivation. If you are about to do something because you think you should, or because you need to reinforce your image of yourself as a good person,

or you are keeping score and expect something in return, you might experiment by not doing it and see how you feel. If, on the other hand, you are acting out of simple caring and concern, without negating your own needs, by all means reach out. That's what love is about. That's what will heal the world.

I would like to see the term *love addiction* dropped from the vocabulary. People may be addicted to euphoria, romance, people, security, but they can't be addicted to love. It's like saying one is addicted to breathing clean air: that can't be, for there's enough and it's right there and there are no side effects. Similarly, there are no harmful consequences to love and there can't be too much of it. We don't find love by chasing after it; we simply open our hearts and find it within us. We don't have to work hard to breathe deeply; we just relax and it comes. We find love by learning to tell the truth, by surrendering to our calling, by having discipline in our lives, by operating from faith. No one loves too much. Love is the ultimate joy.

Codependent Sobriety: "Know the Truth and the Truth Shall Set You Free"

Power, in my way, is the understanding of the spirit of medicine energy that flows through all beings. . . . Power is strength and the ability to see yourself through your own eyes and not through the eyes of another. It is being able to place a circle of power at your own feet and not take power from someone else's circle. True power is love. (Emphasis added)

Agnes Whistling Elk in
Lynn V. Andrews, *Flight of the Seventh Moon*

WHenever I am asked to speak on women, sex, and addiction, people want to hear accounts of sexually addicted women, the *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* stories. These stories sell; they hold an audience. When I bring up the subject of codependency, interest wanes. Sex addiction is more exciting and dramatic, but you can't separate the two. Nearly all sexually addicted women also struggle with aspects of codependency. Jayel, who has been warring with her codependency in one of my therapy groups for nearly two years, prompted me to write this chapter. When I said at the close of a therapy session that I was going to take a week off to write, she asked, "Are you going to include that list about codependent sobriety you talk about?"

"I haven't decided," I said.

"Well, I think you should," she said strongly. "I know it's helped me a lot. Besides," she said, starting to laugh, "I'm sick of the addicts' getting all the attention."

That convinced me.

Sobriety for a sexually codependent woman is difficult to define because codependency is often about what a woman is *not* doing in order to be an acceptable female. She is not speaking up for herself. She is not alive to her sexuality. She is not focusing on her needs. She is not creating goals for herself. She is not saying no when she needs to.

A codependent woman lacks a sense of self, which leads her to control others, whom she mistakes for herself. "If my husband is important, then I am important. If my children fail, then I fail. I'm responsible for everyone." Codependent sobriety is a process of creating an internal identity by learning to listen to signals coming from deep within you. When a woman understands fully who she is and accepts that knowledge, her need to control others automatically diminishes.

Many codependent women are reluctant to explore their emotions, terrified of the rage that lies beneath their excessive caretaking. They don't want to acknowledge what they know — that they are hurt, that they are being taken advantage of, that they have abandoned their dreams, that they are capable of thinking for themselves.

Most women will need to follow the guidance outlined here time and time again. It is important to adopt the mind-set that recovery is for you. There is no schedule, no such thing as doing it perfectly. There is just making a deep, heartfelt commitment to recovery. You are not doing it to please your therapist, to impress a friend, to get back at someone, to fix a relationship, or to be a good person. You are doing it because you want to feel more alive.

GUIDELINES FOR CODEPENDENT SOBRIETY

Be willing to know what you know.

Or, be willing to feel whatever is inside you; or, be willing to know whatever is true for you. One woman used the phrase "I am willing to do what it takes to find my soul." Remember I suggested in Chapter 14 that the addict say, "I am willing to do whatever it takes to get well." Often the addicted one has to give up destructive behavior. While that is also true for the codependent woman, the key to recovery is going within yourself and finding a self. That is why the first step involves the willingness to go inside, the willingness to be an autonomous person, a woman unto yourself. In essence you are saying, "Yes, I will give birth to myself."

Women who try to look within before they put themselves in a state of willingness end up repeating endless circular arguments against it. "But I can't, Jack might not like it." "I'm selfish to spend so much time on

myself." All the recovery groups and therapy in the world will be useless if a woman really doesn't truly want to know what she knows and let that knowledge guide her life.

2. *Learn to listen inside.*

Once you are determined to find out who you really are, you can proceed to the next step, listening. There are many approaches to listening. My favorite is to start by taking a quiet time to be aware of your breathing, your insides, and how you feel. Follow your breath as it goes deep inside and then releases. Imagine a balloon filling your abdomen and diaphragm. Put your hand on your solar plexus or your abdomen and feel the motion as you breathe deeply. Many codependent women breathe in a tight, shallow way, which is part of holding themselves and their power back. They literally pull in their solar plexus and gut — the energy centers where anger and power reside—so they won't do anything to upset anyone. As codependent women recover, their voices usually become fuller and deeper because they speak from deeper inside themselves, unblocking their energy.

When you wake up in the morning, before you have a chance to put on your defenses, tune in to your breathing for a few minutes and imagine a radiant light around and within you. Say whatever reminds you that you are a miracle of life, a child of the Universe. If you are seeking a solution to a particular situation, put the problem in your mind and ask for a solution to come. Say to yourself, "I am willing to find the solution that is true to me." Then pay attention to your breathing again. Just feel the breath going deeper and deeper down inside. You may want to think to yourself, "The answer is within me. It will come." You may experience fear and resistance as you do this; keep telling yourself that you want to know what you know because in the long run it will help you feel better.

Conscious deep breathing will take you to your Knowing center, the God within you. After you feel quiet and tuned in, ask yourself one of the following questions, either in general or in response to a question you have seeded in your mind. It is best to pick one question and stick with it for a while. Your codependent side will probably resist this work, saying such things as: "This is stupid. I've done it for ten minutes and nothing has happened. I quit." "This therapist is weird, telling me to breathe. Why doesn't she just tell me the answers?" "I don't see why I have to stick to one question. If I do them all, I could get this done sooner."

Ignore the rattling of your mind and gently ask yourself:

- What do I feel?
- What do I think?
- What do I really want? (Not for someone else to be different! Not for someone else to love you. But what do you want to be?)
- What is true for me?

• What is my opinion?

Breathe, stay quiet, and let the answers and feelings come to the surface. Usually the minute you reach a decision, a ton of arguments will come to your mind. "That would be too hard. I'd have to give up something. I'm afraid." Let them float through your mind. Don't grab on to them. To counteract these arguments, say firmly to yourself, "There is always a way."

Trust that this process will work even though you don't feel immediate results. It is simply a matter of time. I once spent several months seeking inner guidance regarding a family situation before I woke up knowing the right thing to do. Persevere. Do it daily until it becomes a habit. Codependent women often say, "I have no idea of what I want or feel." My response is always, "Take time and listen." You won't find your inner truth while analyzing, talking, or trying to figure out other people. A class in meditation or yoga can be a wonderful tool to help you connect to your own center.

3. *Ask no advice.*

Codependent women keep themselves feeling "little" and others — usually men and so-called experts — "big" by asking advice. They play innocent and not too bright. Every time you are inclined to ask advice, look within and say, "I know the answer." If nothing comes, take a walk and say nonstop for twenty minutes, "I know what is true for me. I can find the answer for myself." Part of sobriety is learning to live with ambiguity, paradox, and unanswered questions. You can't force an answer to come. It will come in its own time.

4. *Think no advice, give no advice.*

Because the self-esteem of a codependent woman is tied up with other people, her mind is constantly humming with plans to change others to fit her script. Resist the temptation to tell or hint to other people what's best for them. Interrupt yourself every time you start to think about how you'd like someone else to change and ask, "What do I need to do for me?" or "What do I want them to do that I really need to do for myself?" Often the way you want them to change is a mirror of what you really want for yourself but think you don't deserve.

For a week stop yourself every time you start to give advice, make "helpful" suggestions to others, or ask leading questions. Or every time you give advice write in a notebook how you were feeling. When I suggested to one woman that she give or take no advice for a week she laughed and said, "I won't have much to say." And she was right. It was difficult at first but she persevered. A few weeks later she said she was learning a lot about herself by being quiet. For the codependent woman, giving and receiving advice prevents intimacy because it places one person

in a role of superiority or inferiority. (I'm not saying that giving and receiving advice can't be useful in some situations. I appreciate my friends setting me straight if I'm getting in a rocky place. It is different, however, for the codependent, who uses advice as a way of life.)

5. *Don't make "fix it" statements.*

Codependents often attempt to smooth things over when people are upset. They quash other people's anger and expressions of strong feelings because they are afraid of their own. Let people be upset. When I have just pulled a muscle or broken a favorite dish or received bad news, I want to be upset for a few minutes. When someone nervously rushes in, saying, "Oh, it's not important, everything will be all right, calm down," I feel angrier. What I want to hear is, "Oh, that's a bummer. You're upset." In other words, I want to be understood and accepted just as I am. I don't want to be changed or fixed. There's nothing wrong with being upset for a moment.

The same is true when people are sad. The codependent tries to hush others' sadness in order to quell her own inner sadness. Her typical response is "It's all right. Don't be sad." Again, she is not truly responding to the other person, who may be feeling release through having a good cry and just wants to be held or acknowledged. You don't have to do much when someone is hurting. You can just say, "Oh, you hurt, you're sad," and comfort or hold the person. If this is difficult for you, practice imagining someone being sad. Take a deep breath and say, "She's just being sad. It's natural to be sad sometimes."

6. *Let yourself have a good gripe session.*

Stomp around and complain about everything you don't like in your life. Soft-spoken Katie continually minimized her problems. At one point she quietly said to the group that she had had a bad day. I said, "Tell us about it. Let it rip."

She responded, "But I don't want to be a baby and whine."

"What's wrong with being a baby?" I asked. "We all feel like babies sometimes. How about trying five minutes of whining and complaining and see how it feels?" She did, and it was really not whining at all. Her voice got increasingly powerful as she sounded off about some difficult situations. When she was done, she broke into a big grin and said, bemused, "This feels good."

Spouting off sometimes is an affirmation of yourself, your life, and what's going on inside. It gets the energy flowing. I enjoyed the speaker who opened a Women in Psychology workshop by saying, "This talk is on physical fitness. The first important thing women should do is have more fits."

The second thing is to let someone see your anger. Codependent people

* are always telling you about the feelings they had yesterday. One way to bond with people is to be real with them. Don't call a friend in the afternoon and calmly say, "I was upset this morning because I lost my job." Call in the morning when the bad news arrives and let your anger and pain show. One time when I received such an after-the-fact call, I asked the person, "Why didn't you call me this morning when you were upset?" Her response belied her shame of strong feelings. "I wanted to get myself together before I talked with anyone." It is difficult to empathize and give support to someone who is cool and all together.

7. *Stop telling stories that could be titled "What He (She) Did to Me."*

This keeps you in a victim role. Women often tell lengthy stories about what others did to them in an attempt to have friends reinforce their sense of powerlessness. They often tell the story with great surprise even if the person has done the same thing a thousand times. The unspoken goal is to have a friend say, "Yes, he sure is a jerk. Poor you, it's really terrible what you go through." Blaming others creates dense energy and is one of the greatest blocks to recovery. Instead of, "Did you hear what Charlie did to me?" learn to take responsibility for your feelings. "I am angry at Charlie for seeing a prostitute again, and I need some help figuring out what I'm going to do." This statement places you in an active role that leads to change. Simply repeating your charges against your partner will get you nowhere. *ORIAL*

You also need to stop listening to your friends tell stories of what their partners did to them. This can be difficult because women are taught to be good listeners. When you encourage your friends' constant victim stories you create a victim bond between you which is dense energy for both of you. Codependent women think they have to listen to other people's complaints because it would be rude to interrupt. One rule of thumb is to give support when a friend is looking for a solution or taking action, but to set a limit on the telltale stories after the first or second round. You can say to a friend who does nothing but complain, "I'm willing to support you if you work to find solutions, but I'm not willing to hear you repeatedly say how bad it is."

In *Daughters of Cooperwoman*, Anne Cameron describes American Indian women's circles, which are comparable to modern women's support groups. These women had a wonderful way of setting gentle but clear limits when one of their members was stuck in her problem and not doing anything to find a solution.

A woman would come to the circle as often as she needed, but the circle wasn't there to encourage a woman to only talk about her problems. . . . It was expected that besides just talking . . . you'd do something about it. The first three times you came with the same story, the women would listen and try to help. But if you showed up a fourth time, and it was the same old

tired thing, the others in the circle would just get up and move and re-form the circle somewhere else. They didn't say the problem wasn't important, they just said, 'by movin', that it was YOUR problem and it was time you did somethin' about it, you'd taken up all the time in other people's lives as was goin' to be given to you, and t'was time to stop talkin' and DO somethin'.

8. Stop giving reasons for everything you do.

Stop using the word *because*, except to say "because I feel like it." Codependents tend to feel they have to justify themselves and build a case for what they think or do. You need to learn to say "I want to go to that movie." Period. Not, "I want to see that movie, because it would be good for me" (or "because I read an excellent review," or "because Judy said it was really great"). You don't have to bring in an army of reasons to support your stand. If you want to go, just say so. You've got the right. Learn to get to the essence of what you want to say. Codependents get lost in detail because they have a difficult time sorting out the essence of a situation. This makes it difficult for your listener to hear what you are saying, and you can get confused yourself. For many women such behavior stems from growing up in a family where no one listened. Thus long-winded explanations sometimes have the desperate quality of a child trying to be heard but not believing she will be.

Codependent women often talk from their guts for a second and then jump outside themselves and explain or comment on what they've just said or how they said it. A strong statement is immediately diluted by remarks like, "Oh gee, now I'm afraid of . . . or the reason I said this is . . ." I call this the Greek chorus syndrome. The chorus stands just offstage and comments on what is taking place. It can be tedious in conversation. When women do this in therapy groups, people start tuning out. They long for a period to the sentence, for the speakers to take a breath and simply say what is true for them. It takes a lot of work to sort through all the extraneous information the codependent woman uses to justify her feelings and actions.

Here is an example of the long version of a codependent explanation. See if you can identify the Greek chorus parts.

"I called my mother. You see, it was the day before her birthday and I thought she might be feeling lonely. I called about three-thirty because she sometimes naps. I asked about her birthday plans. I haven't called her in a long time because I'm trying to be more independent from her. When she answered I asked her about the plans for her birthday. She said my brother thinks we should all go out to lunch. That's because he has a restaurant and he hoped we would all go there so he wouldn't have to be away from work too long. My sister wants to go to her house in the evening so she can have her children there. I finally said to my mother,

"Well, I would rather have dinner than lunch. That's because I have a meeting at work at one-thirty and I would have to rush to get back and the traffic can be bad at that time." So then my mother said I should call my brother and work it out with him. I said, "Why didn't she figure it out? It's her birthday."

This is the kind of dialogue codependents replay in their heads. The excess baggage keeps them from getting to the point and to their feelings. It has the effect of pushing away people, who don't want to spend the effort to sift through the verbiage.

Leaving out the excess explanations, which often start with "because," we could reduce the above to a much more straightforward statement: "I called my mother to ask about her birthday plans. My brother wants to go out to lunch and my sister wants to have dinner. When I said I'd prefer dinner, my mother suggested I call my brother and work it out with him. I thought my mother should just say what she wants."

Distilling it even further, leaving out all irrelevant content and adding feelings, gets to the essence: "I called my mother about her birthday. Our family can't seem to agree on plans because different members of the family want it at different places at different times. I'm feeling confused and upset about what to do."

This kind of statement has power and will hold listeners. The original version will put them to sleep.

9. Stop making excuses for others or rationalizing situations.

This behavior can take different forms. Here is a typical scene in a therapy group.

Jane says, "I'm so unhappy with how my friend is acting toward me. She isn't calling, and I'm very upset."

Lana responds, "Well, maybe your friend is having a hard time. I'm sure she really cares about you." Instead of responding to Jane's feelings, Lana tries to make excuses for the friend. This kind of response conveys a superior attitude and creates distance from Jane.

Jane's energy drops and she responds listlessly, "Yeah, I guess."

The group works to help her say instead, "That's not a helpful response. I want you to understand I'm feeling upset. I need help finding a solution."

Codependents tend to interrupt other people — and themselves — just as they are about to find solutions or move into their feelings. If you have the urge to change the subject when someone is upset or sad, stop and ask yourself, "Am I on track with that person, or am I just afraid of feelings and conflict? Am I turning the focus to me or keeping it on the one who's upset?" It is a gift to people to be with them right where they are at.

Codependent women often relate how their partners abused them and then give a litany of excuses for the partner. Listeners are drawn in to be

sympathetic, and then their sympathy is discounted. The conversation usually goes like this:

CHRISTIE: My husband was screaming at me again. Et cetera.

JANE: Oh, that sounds really awful.

CHRISTIE: Yeah, and you know what else he did. Et cetera.

JANE: That must be hard. Did you say anything to him?

CHRISTIE: Well, it's really not so bad. You know he has a hard time at work.

The codependent rationalizes for two — herself and her partner. The sober approach would be to state her gut-level response to her partner's behavior. Instead of making excuses for her partner, Christie needs to learn to say "I don't like it when Jack gets so short-tempered and yells at me. I'm going to start walking out of the room when he does that."

10. *Take your emotional temperature after visiting various people in your life.*

After you spend time with someone take a density-to-light reading. On a scale of one to ten, density to light, how do you feel before and after? Become aware of what brings light feelings into your life and what brings dense feelings. Write them down and keep a journal. This can be with statements such as, I feel _____ when I spend time with _____. Or I feel _____ when I _____. List the lightning score along with the feeling.

11. *Learn when to talk and when not to talk.*

People who have had a lot of therapy or been through treatment often think they should discuss everything with their partners. I believe there are times to talk about something and times to be quiet. One way to determine this is to stop and ask yourself, "If I say X, is it likely to lead to a blowout or a heavy conversation where we'll both feel worse as a result?" Talking endlessly about "the relationship" can be a defense, a way of not taking responsibility to go inside yourself and discover your true feelings. Part of achieving harmony in a relationship is knowing when to talk and when not to. In general, when people get clear for themselves and speak the truth, most conversations are quite brief.

As I arrived for dinner at the home of a Quaker couple who had just had an argument, Leah greeted me at the door asking for a hug and said, "Jim and I just had a terrible fight. We're kind of upset." She smiled and went on, "I don't want to upset you, we'll get over it, but things are kind of tense for the moment." She gave me a brief explanation of what had happened, then asked how my life was going.

I went into the kitchen with her. When Jim came in, he said, in his charming, boyish way, "Did Leah tell you we just had a terrible fight? I came in from working on the roof and got real angry." They didn't offer

much more, and it didn't feel right to ask questions. I was impressed by the way they simply let me know what was going on without making it a tragedy. No massive explanations, no shame, no hiding the conflict, no blame, no rationalizations.

We proceeded to have dinner. Afterward, Leah suggested that we sit together in silence, as people do in a Quaker meeting so they can listen within. About ten minutes into the silence, Jim said, "I was having a hard time fixing the roof, and I was feeling really bad that I didn't get the scholarship I applied for. I took my anger out on you, Leah." After five more minutes of silence, Leah said, "I was upset that it took you so long to finally get to fixing the roof and wishing you had started sooner. I hadn't let you know that. Instead of saying, 'I'm glad you're getting to it,' I put you down." After another five minutes, we reached for one another's hands and gave the familiar squeeze signifying the end of the silence at a meeting. Leah and Jim got up and hugged each other, then they both hugged me. The air was completely cleared.

I have suggested this process to many people. Most fights start with one little thing, then each person hauls out the whole artillery of old grievances and World War III begins. Sitting in silence and reaching for one's inner truths saves time and hurt feelings.

12. *Don't give gifts you can't afford. ~~Present~~ meet*

Codependent women are in the habit of doing things for people out of guilt, or to control them by making them feel indebted. There are some fine lines to draw here. For example, let's say you are trying to build a support system. You start by calling a new woman acquaintance to have tea and take a walk. If you do this in a spirit of exploration and hope that you will make a friend, that's fine. If, however, you say to yourself, "I called her four times; she should call me back; she's not being fair," your calling her the third time was a gift you couldn't afford. Before you make a move, ask yourself *inside*, "Can I give this time, money, energy, present, free and clear, with no strings attached, and no demands of reciprocity?" If the answer is yes, go ahead. If you start thinking of what the recipient will owe you, stop. The gift would be more like a bribe, and you will be better off not giving it. If you do want to have an exchange with someone, suggest it openly. "How about I cook dinner on Wednesday and you cook on Saturday?" Or ask directly why that person isn't calling you.

13. *Change the question "Will they like me?" to "Will I like them?"*

Most codependents walk into a party or gathering trembling and thinking, "Will anyone like me? Do I look all right?" This puts a person in a victim role. Instead, ask yourself, "Whom would I like to talk to here?" The reality about gatherings is that sometimes you meet people you click with and sometimes you don't, and it's really no big deal.

14. *Learn to keep your energy inside.*

Codependent women may feel their energy spill out of them when another person walks into the room or spends an evening with them. I call it an acute codependency attack. I remember sitting with a friend, watching a tennis match, when suddenly my mind was jumping with worries about her liking me. "Am I talking too much? Does she really like me? Does she really want to be here with me?" Totally focused on her, I felt terribly anxious. Some people clam up when this happens, others tend to babble. I took some deep breaths and tried to imagine all my feelings and energy going back in my body. I imagined golden light around me holding them in. For good measure I imagined a Plexiglas wall between us. I focused on my breathing and said to myself, "She will like me or she won't. It's no big deal one way or another. All I can do is be myself." In a few minutes I felt more relaxed, and my self-esteem was no longer tied to her liking me.

★

15. *Pay attention to behavior, not words. Marie Mont said*
Codependent women are easily seduced by words. But talk is cheap; behavior is the true measure of a person. Addicted individuals, to whom codependents are attracted, know just the right words to make you think you are cared about. They come on strong, want to be sexual immediately, are jealous of your friends, shower you with gifts, present themselves as being "all together," and have sudden, inexplicable mood changes. Watch out for these red flags. I urge recovering codependent women to make a red-flag list entitled "Ways I Get Seduced." Scan past relationships and try to remember the fleeting thoughts of danger you submerged, the warning signs you ignored. Include your internal responses. Did you start feeling young or acting curtsie around the person? Were you afraid to speak the truth? Did you turn to rush or violate your values to please the person? Use this list for future reference and as a reminder when you find yourself slipping.

16. *Learn to walk through fear.*

Codependent women say they can't do something hard because they are afraid. Who isn't? Ask yourself what the fear is really about. Remember, too, that you can do things even though you are afraid. Many codependent women find that fear of asserting themselves harks back to childhood fears of abandonment and abuse. It is important to say "That was then, this is now. I am not a powerless child. I can make choices. My parents abandoned me, but that doesn't mean everyone else will. My parents betrayed me, but I don't have to betray myself." Paralyzing fear usually stems from handing our self-esteem over to other people or thinking a situation is do-or-die. It is a paradox that codependent women aren't afraid to live with abusive partners, yet they experience terrible fear in opening their own

checking accounts or stating their opinions. We all feel fear. Sometimes it is a signal to be careful. If you are treading close to another's addiction, he or she may well blow up when you raise the subject.

17. *Accept that being human is messy.*

Most codependent women want everything to be clean, clear, and under control. No sloppy feelings, no getting upset. A woman in a therapy group was postponing getting a divorce. When a member asked her why she was waiting, she said, "I want to have everything worked out so it will go easily. I want to get rid of all this rage first." The group laughed. That's like saying you can prepare for your beloved's death so you won't feel sad. Divorce is messy; people have big feelings, and that's okay. The group urged the woman to accept her rage for a week. Whenever she was tempted to say "I should get over this anger," she said instead, "I accept myself feeling angry. In fact, I'm angry about _____."

18. *Stomachaches usually signify anger.*

If you are talking about someone or an event and your stomach suddenly hurts, it is usually anger churning up. The impulse is usually to double up. Do just the opposite. Stand erect and breathe into the feelings. Stomp and swing your arms. Sometimes I ask, "Who are you sick of? Who do you want to throw up on?" Imagine moving the energy up from your stomach into your throat and out into words. Sometimes it helps to put your hand on your stomach and imagine breathing the feelings up.

19. *Protect yourself.*

When codependent women are being harmed or attacked they tend to want to analyze the situation rather than take cover. To illustrate the point, I often ask clients, "If you are standing under a window and someone starts to dump garbage on top of your head, what do you do?" There is often a long pause. Many women reply tentatively, "Ask them to stop?" Instead of the appropriate response, which is, "You get out of the way. You move." Who cares why when you're getting covered with garbage. Codependent women find it difficult to protect themselves when it might upset their partners, particularly when the partner is threatening or dangerous. They need to learn a balance between showing respect and concern for others and showing respect and concern for themselves.

Dorothy came to group therapy saying she was ready to tell her husband she wanted a divorce. They had separated for several months and she knew that the marriage was beyond repair. She said she was going to tell her husband on the following Tuesday when he would be at her home taking care of their child. She also planned to set up a therapy session for the next day because she was afraid of his reaction.

Members of the group asked what she meant by "afraid." Dorothy said

he could get emotionally violent, he might not leave, he might keep pressing her for reasons. Because he had displayed evidence of his rage in the past, the women expressed concern for her and suggested that for protection that night she have a friend or neighbor drop in or call at ten o'clock. Then someone asked, "Why are you telling him face to face if you are so afraid of him?"

"I feel I owe him that," Dorothy said.

"What about you?" someone else asked. "What do you owe yourself?" "That's right," she said. "I'm thinking only of his feelings and not about mine."

I commented that it was goodhearted of her to consider him, and it is often respectful to discuss important matters face to face, but when there is a risk of danger, the need to protect oneself takes priority. "Just think only of yourself for a moment. What would be the most comfortable way for you to tell him?" I asked.

Dorothy's body visibly relaxed, as if someone had given her permission not to jump into a bramble bush. "What would I like?" she said, pausing to think. "I'd like to phone him and hang up if he starts getting abusive."

"Well, you get to do that," I said.

Dorothy grinned. The group cheered.

I had the feeling that a gong had gone off in her head and she could now carry out her difficult task in a way that was simple and protective of herself.

20. *Become powerful rather than being righteous and superior to others.*

The codependent high is being righteous and judging others as wrong, stupid, or jerks. It is tough to give up because this superior stance brings a feeling of power. Women may put down others to hide their shame about being dishonest, dependent, or jealous. Women may feel ashamed of staying with a partner they don't respect for the security he or she provides. If a woman feels ashamed of her power, and fears rejection for being strong, she may be hostile to women who are successful, powerful, or independent. When you feel righteous, jealous, or want to prove someone else wrong, ask yourself, "What's really true? Am I jealous? Am I afraid I could never be on my own?" To confront these truths and give up being righteous is to get to the core of codependency.

REGARDING SEXUALITY

1. *Stop faking orgasm.*

I know many women who have faked orgasm with their husbands for years and years. To lie is to wound your own soul and the relationship. Actually, it is not much of a relationship if you feel the need to lie. You

don't have to make a grand announcement that you've never had an orgasm, although you may feel the need to do so. You could just stop faking it and say during sex, "I haven't come yet. Would you do this a while longer?" You have to find your own approach to the situation. You might want to have a joint therapy session and talk about it there, along with your whole relationship. Whatever you do, think it out until you arrive at the approach that clearly feels best for you.

2. *Stop faking enjoyment of sex in general.*

Everything in the guidelines above applies. You can change the process gradually by suggesting little things when you are sexual. Or you can say you have been thinking about your sexual relationship. You can say you'd like to take more time, do massage first, or have more eye contact during sex. You might tell your partner you have not always been honest about your response and want to work together on it. Your partner may take your words as an attack on his or her ego and sexual performance. But hang in there. No one ever said the path was easy. You can't keep faking it if you want peace of mind.

3. *Stop being sexual when you don't want to be.*

Having sex when you don't want to is to a sexual codependent what taking a drink is to an alcoholic. Tell yourself over and over, "I don't have to be sexual if I don't feel like it. My body is mine." You have to be able to say no before you can say yes and mean it. Many codependent women have said, "I don't care if I'm ever sexual again" or "I just put up with having sex so we can get to the good part, the hugging and cuddling." You don't have to pay for hugging and cuddling with sex. It is a violation of your body and spirit. Again, saying, "No, not now" or "No, later" or "No, but I'll tell you when I feel like it" may be terrifying. Some common rationalizations to continue the deceit are: "But he'll get mad"; "It will hurt his feelings"; "He'll feel threatened"; "She won't like it." Note who is being left out. What about your feelings, your soul?

Honesty is the food of a caring relationship and self-esteem. Faking one of the most intimate aspects of a bond with another person poisons the relationship. You are likely to feel resentment. When a woman says, "He never gave me any pleasure," I ask if she has ever said anything to him. The response is usually no. Women fear that if they ask, their partner won't respond or take them seriously. This may be hard to face, but remember, recovery means a willingness to know what is true and to face up to it, come what may. There is nothing to lose by bringing this up. Your partner may have the reactions you fear, but may instead be glad that you opened the door to talk. In either case, nothing is worse than living in the middle of a lie.

4. Ask your partner to talk about your sexual relationship.

Take time to think over how you feel about your sexual life with your partner, then sit down and talk! You may first want to talk to friends or women in a support group. Start telling the truth about how you feel. Are you dissatisfied? Do you feel he or she is insensitive to you? Are you having sex because you are afraid he or she will be mad at you if you don't? Do you have sex out of duty? Do you feel your sex life is lifeless? Start talking. Keep talking. If you are afraid to talk alone with your partner, ask him or her to accompany you to a counselor. You may want to go alone a few times to get the issues clear for yourself, although thinking that everything must be totally clear is another codependent trap. It's fine just to say you are confused about your sex life, that you don't know quite what you feel, but you know you are dissatisfied.

5. Make love to your body.

Do self-massage, masturbate, get involved in some form of exercise, aerobics, or yoga. Take an hour to enjoy a bubble bath to music, and get to know your body. Pleasure yourself all over. How can you tell another person what you like sexually if you don't know yourself? Masturbation will help develop your sensuality and sexuality so it will be too precious to trade or give away.

CODEPENDENT SOBRIETY IN RELATIONSHIPS

1. Let relationships find their own level.

Codependent women typically put much more energy into relationships than their friends or partners do, which leaves them exhausted, irritated, and feeling ripped off. And because they usually repress the anger that comes from giving much more than they get, they get depressed.

Sometimes a woman is so excited about finding a friend that she initiates nine out of their ten get-togethers. If you tend to do this, one rule of thumb is to let the relationship find its own level by not putting out more energy than you receive; don't call more than you are called; don't spend more money on friends than they do on you; don't listen to them more than they listen to you; if you initiate one event, wait for your friend to initiate the next. It may be weeks or months, or not at all, but you will find the true energy level of the relationship. Not all your friendships will work out, but the relationships you form will be equal, honest, and satisfying. You won't have to wonder if your friends really care and feel angry because you are doing too much.

I know this "keeping score" approach may sound petty, and it is not necessary in a healthy reciprocal relationship. But a codependent woman

needs this kind of mechanism to get past her tendency to give too much and not know who her true friends are.

2. Anything besides yes means no.

Addicted people are masters at keeping relationships vague. They want relationships with the least emotional cost—that's why they choose codependent partners. They lead their partners to believe they are involved without making a commitment. They never quite say yes, but sustain the relationship with muddy maybes. A codependent tends to grab at the 5 percent of the addict's behavior that indicates he or she cares, and ignore the 95 percent that demonstrates indifference.

As a result you feel a churning in your gut wondering if the addict means what he is saying. A typical addict trait is to allude to a future time together, then rescind the offer when he becomes afraid. He may even deny having made the offer. When Charlie says, "We really should take a vacation this summer" and you don't believe him, voice your uneasiness. "I don't quite trust what you are saying, you sound rather vague. Do you really mean it?" If he says, "Sure," press for a time and place. As a codependent, pay careful attention to the energy of the response. Does he say, "Absolutely. I've talked to my supervisor at work and I can leave by three P.M. on Friday"—a high-energy response—or "Well, I have a lot of work to do. I don't know exactly when we can leave; they might have a meeting Saturday morning, but I want to go." If he starts to back off or tells you not to be pushy, it was a bogus offer. Forget it and plan your own vacation. Don't sit around waiting. Remember, when the addict says, "I want to," it is often an expression of avoidance. Commitment phrases are "Yes, I will," "Let's set a date," "I'll start making arrangements." Anything muddy or low-energy means no. So don't set yourself up by expecting the addict to come through.

People who want to keep you on the hook will let you think they are saying yes without really saying yes. Codependents are afraid to press for a clear answer because they subconsciously know the answer and don't want to hear it. They would have to face the truth, possibly have a fight, and hear that the addict is not committed or truly involved. It sometimes helps to remember that if you give up an unsatisfying relationship or friendship, you will have more energy to find one that feels better.

3. Define relationships.

After an initial getting-acquainted process, or if a relationship is murky and you are getting the runaround, press to define the relationship. Addicts sidestep this issue and want to keep things foggy. It is important to define for yourself what you want. If you ask your partner to define the relationship first, you put yourself in a victim role. You become powerful and raise self-esteem by taking the lead.

Once you have leveled with yourself about what you really want — I suggest you write it down — ask your partner to define the relationship. What is his or her commitment? Is the relationship monogamous? Is he or she willing to consider living together, to get married? What is the level of involvement? Getting together once a week? More? Less? Does he or she have a significant other or an on-again, off-again relationship lurking in the background?

You don't have to define a relationship all at once, but it is important to define it over time. Addicts flee from clear definition and commitment. If the person is not interested in the kind of relationship you want, don't try to get him or her to want it your way, unless, of course, you want a lot of grief, depression, and frustration.

ERRONEOUS ASSUMPTIONS

Codependent women make numerous erroneous assumptions that are part of the operational beliefs that promote codependency.

Justified vs. Unjustified

Erroneous: Feeling guilty for saying no means you made a mistake.

True: Guilt is a withdrawal symptom of codependency; you will inevitably feel guilty for saying no and setting limits.

People tell me that this is one of the most important things they learn in therapy. When a codependent woman says, "No, I won't come to your birthday party"; "No, I won't drive you to the airport"; "No, I don't have time to talk now"; "No, I don't want you to call more than once a week," she feels incredibly guilty. After all, women were made to give, give, give, and guilt is a withdrawal symptom. One must simply live through it for a while. No is a beautiful word for codependents.

Many women think that because they feel guilty for saying no or expressing anger, they must have done the wrong thing. Withdrawal from codependency, refusing to play the caretaker's role, may be the most painful type of withdrawal I have ever witnessed. When a woman sets limits and boundaries, she often feels selfish, bad, mean, unlovable, and disloyal because she was raised to believe she was these things if she didn't sacrifice her needs for others'. She fears loss of love or abandonment simply for being a whole, self-respecting human being.

Saying no is the prerequisite for learning to say yes. If you say, "No, I don't want to be sexual now," you can discover your own longing for a caring physical bond. After asserting yourself you will probably feel a sense of relief, along with the guilt, for a couple of days. Call friends, go to the movies, stay busy, and accept the guilt as part of the journey toward

recovery. You'll live through it. Another survival tactic is to flip the guilt into resentment. "I feel guilty for not calling my mother every day" becomes "I am resentful of my mother for expecting me to be her best friend and take care of her all the time." Eventually you'll want to get past the resentments, but in the beginning they help you feel your anger, which helps you keep boundaries.

Erroneous: The truth hurts people.

True: The truth heals.

Nearly every time a woman asks her parents to come in for therapy to clear the air about childhood events, a codependent sister or brother will write her and say she is being cruel, unkind, and selfish to want to hurt their parents. Such people interpret talking honestly and having feelings as hurting others. In truth, if it is motivated by a desire to let go of the past, talking has a high potential for clearing the air and resolving old misunderstandings and hurts. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, in her writings on death and dying, stresses that resolving unfinished business, old conflicts, and hurts allows people to die in peace and eases the grieving process for the survivors. It would be nice if we didn't have to wait until people are on their deathbeds to have the courage to talk about our anger, our hurt, and our love.

Erroneous: Stirring up feelings is dangerous.

True: Feelings are natural and can help you feel alive.

Codependent people have learned that feelings are dangerous. In their original families, feelings were usually either buried or out of control, leaving them with the belief that anger equals violence, and sadness equals unending depression. Thus, having feelings equals shame. They think that if they get upset or someone is mad at them, they are bad. This results in victim responses to feedback or suggestion such as, "You are picking on me"; "You don't like me"; "I must have done something wrong," all of which block useful dialogue.

Learning to work through conflict depends on learning to hear other people express their feelings without interpreting them to mean that something about you is bad or wrong. Feelings need not imply blame or shame; they are just expressions of how people see things. When you start getting upset by someone's remarks, say to yourself, "Whatever anyone says means nothing about me! I can simply listen and try to understand."

Feelings don't kill and they don't injure people if shared appropriately. It is one thing to hurl feelings around at anyone who happens to walk by,

and another to attach feelings to specific events and say in a nonblaming way, "I felt hurt when you _____" or "I felt angry when you _____." Anger is not the same as rage or wrath, which usually means dumping pent-up hostility on someone who doesn't deserve it. Anger is an important emotion for codependents to identify. It can signal that you have been violated. *let yourself be*

Family therapy sessions in which battering, incest, neglect, and abuse are discussed need to be approached in the spirit of love and concern for all involved. This can pave the way for inner resolutions and often improved relationships and understanding. Family members may discover that some wounds stem from misunderstandings: "Oh, I thought you hated me." "No, I was just afraid." Resolution does not always lead to reconciliation, however. Sometimes people feel continued involvement with their families is harmful, but at least they know they've spoken the truth and leave the session feeling clearer about their family situation. This helps them move on and let go. There are times, of course, when even talking to a family member is futile and could be dangerous, though this is by far the exception rather than the rule.

Erroneous: "But I have to see my family. I owe them something."

True: You have a choice about seeing your family. Respecting them doesn't mean you have to allow yourself to be hurt by them.

Codependent women are often terribly tied to their families. While I believe that you owe your parents respect, you also owe yourself respect. If you want to recover, you need to protect yourself from an abusive family. When a codependent woman visits her abusive family before she has the strength to handle the situation, she comes back upset, depressed, doubting her reality, and feeling guilty. *it can take her weeks to recover.*

As you recover from codependency, you may be able to spend a little clearly defined time with family members without trying to change them. In the meantime, if you visit your parents or other family members, pay attention to how you feel when you are with them. Also, be aware of your agenda to change them. Are you still thinking you might at last have a wonderful, close time with them, even though that hasn't ever happened before? What do you really feel when you talk with them?

When people are about to visit a dysfunctional family, I suggest they do four things. The first is to say to themselves in advance, "The truth is, my father/mother/brother will probably put me down, shame me, ask nosy questions, ask, 'Have you got a husband yet?' whatever. That's the way they are. My mother is being my mother. She is running off her pro-

gramming. My father is being my father. He is running off his programming. I can totally expect them to _____." This keeps you from hoping for the happy family scene that won't happen. And, when you react by blowing up or getting wimpy, don't forget to say "I am being myself, I am running off my programming."

Second, I advise people to go as observers, to watch the whole scene like a soap opera. One woman jokingly called this "Put your money in the slot and watch the show." Be aware of how everyone, including yourself, interacts. Do they change the subject, talk about others, make shaming statements? How do you act with them, and how do you feel around them? Do you start trying to convince them to change their politics? Do you get whiny, pleasing, rageful?

My third piece of advice is to take along phone numbers of recovering friends or make arrangements to visit or stay with other friends if worse comes to worst.

Fourth, I suggest attending a local Al-Anon or Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOA) or other twelve-step meeting if necessary. If you are losing control or getting depressed, the kindness of like-minded people committed to recovery will help validate your reality — you're not crazy — and help you relax and be less reactive to the situation.

If a person keeps going home and comes back to therapy with "what my mother did to me" stories, my response is usually, "Are you surprised? If you had a hundred bucks to bet on your family's being suddenly loving and kind, what would you bet? It's good to seek love, but how about going to a well that has water in it?" Those who get angry at me for saying these things still believe their families will change and are not quite ready to give up hoping for the happy family scene. But once you accept the fact that your family will not change, you are free to form relationships with all the other people in the world. If your primary emotional bond is to a parent, you will have difficulty forming a primary peer relationship.

Erroneous: Being called a bitch is bad.

You may call yourself
True: People may call you a bitch when you start to take care of yourself instead of devoting your energy to them.

When women become powerful, they step outside their assigned cultural role, and society may attempt to put them back in that role by accusing them of being pushy, selfish, self-centered, a dyke, or bitchy. So if someone calls you a bitch when you start asserting yourself, say thank you.

Erroneous: The expert knows what's best.

True: You're the expert. Don't take any suggestions, including these, too seriously.

If some of them fit, take them as guidelines, not as rigid rules. Remember that you are the expert on your life. No one can tell you what's true for you. Different situations require different solutions. Codependent women can go through life looking for the all-knowing one, and many predatory, addicted people are more than willing to play the part. Wouldn't we all like to find the all-wise and all-knowing teacher who could give us the answers? How easy that would be, but also, how dull. If we enter situations with a sense of excitement and interest rather than with fear or preconceived notions of how everything should be, we learn and grow. If we go into situations with a script for how everyone should act, we don't see the gifts we are given because we are so busy keeping score and being hurt and angry when people don't say the lines we've written for them. If you have an agenda, let it be known. "I want you to tell me how wonderful I look tonight and listen to me tell about my recent success."

While preparing to write this book, seeking to gain the confidence that I could do it, I repeatedly dreamed that I was about to be in a play but no one would give me a script. I felt tremendous panic. My need for control — a script — betrayed my lack of faith in the process of learning as we go. I wanted promises. As I surrendered to faith, a belief that the wisdom would come and I would be guided in my endeavor, my dreams changed. I stopped feeling panic. More and more I dreamed that I was walking in a beautiful forest with a pretty black-haired woman who signified my higher power. In one dream, when we got hungry, a kiosk appeared, serving chicken soup with a bright orange carrot in it. After that I knew that whatever I needed would come.

Codependency involves a tremendous need to control external events and people because one feels so little control from within. Codependent women have to take the inward journey to the chaos and fear inside them, knowing that if they persevere the process will surely take them to their love and power. When you first let loose your anger, it may come out messy. We don't do things perfectly the first time. Remember Emily, who loyally cooked dinner for her husband long after they had decided to divorce. She struck with therapy for three years. Sometimes she'd hold in her anger, other times she'd jab people with it. Once she told the group of an event that had just taken place.

"I bumped into the woman who had fired me from my job last year. I walked up to her straight on and said, 'I need to say something to you.' The woman looked real scared but I went right on. 'When you fired me, you lied to me and I don't like to be lied to.' The other woman made a lot of excuses about being new in management, but I just said again, 'You

lied to me and I didn't like it. You knew they had to let staff go and you made me look like I'd done something wrong. But I hadn't. You lied and I didn't like it.' The woman then said, 'I'm sorry, I was wrong.'"

Emily's demeanor and her words were in concert — strong, powerful, but not abusive. The group cheered for her. Emily grinned from ear to ear and said, "It felt good. It felt really good."