



Topic overview

Codependence

Encyclopedia of Drugs, Alcohol & Addictive Behavior

Ed. Pamela Korsmeyer and Henry R. Kranzler. Vol. 1. 3rd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2009. p331-333. COPYRIGHT 2009 Macmillan Reference USA, a part of Gale, Cengage Learning

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Codependence

The term *codependence* replaced an earlier term, *coalccoholism*, in the early 1970s and achieved widespread acceptance among the general public during the 1980s. Both terms point to problematic beliefs and behaviors that family members of individuals with substance use disorders tend to have in common, and the term *codependence* has been applied to every possible type of addiction.

A rather large non-scientific literature has developed on the topic of codependence. Self-help books addressing codependency (e.g., *Codependent No More*; Beattie, 1987) have sold more than a million copies. Much of the literature is couched in terms of the need to deal with injuries to emotions sustained during childhood—that is, to heal the wounds of the *inner child*, a term popularized by John Bradshaw.

DEFINITION AND CONSTRUCT VALIDITY

Despite the popularity of the concept of codependence in both the general public and among some clinicians, there is a dearth of empirical research on the construct validity of codependence. Furthermore, a variety of definitions of the construct exist. As noted by Gotham and Sher (1996),

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codependency has been described as an addiction, a personality disorder, a so-called psychosocial condition, and an interpersonal style.

Potter-Efron and Potter-Efron (1989) define a codependent person as “someone who has been significantly affected in specific ways by current or past involvement in an alcoholic, chemically dependent or other long-term highly stressful family environment” (p. 37). Potter-Efron and Potter-Efron include characteristics of codependency related to both basic personality traits (such as neuroticism) and psychological symptoms (such as anxiety). They described codependents as being

affected by involvement with highly stressful family environments. The effects include fear, shame/guilt, prolonged despair, anger, denial, rigidity, impaired identity development, and confusion.

Using Potter-Efron and Potter-Efron's Codependency Assessment Questionnaire (CAQ), Gotham and Sher (1996) assessed the construct validity of codependency. The researchers found that this measure of codependency showed reliability and exhibited a one-dimensional factor structure. However, most of the relation between codependency and family history of alcoholism resulted from general negative affectivity or neuroticism, and there was little in the way of unique information afforded by this measure beyond what one would obtain with more traditional measures of personality.

CHARACTERISTICS

As noted above, codependency has been described in a number of ways. Cermak (1986) described codependency as a personality disorder. Cermak's codependent personality disorder included a number of purported characteristics of codependent individuals. Codependents are thought to have a continued investment of self-esteem in the ability to control both oneself and others in the face of serious adverse consequences. They are thought to exclude their own needs to meet the needs of others. They also are said to experience anxiety and boundary distortions around intimacy and separation. They are enmeshed in relationships with people with psychological disorders, such as personality disorders or substance use disorders. Furthermore, under Cermak's description, codependents have three or more of the following: reliance on denial, constriction of emotions, depression, hypervigilance, compulsions, anxiety, substance abuse, experience of physical or sexual abuse, stress-related medical illnesses, or persistence in a primary relationship with an active substance abuser for at least two years without seeking outside help.

EMPERICAL EVIDENCE OF CODEPENDENCY

Stafford (2001) reviewed proposed definitions of codependency, issues related to the construct validity of codependency, and instruments used to measure codependency. She noted that the myriad definitions and the lack of an operational definition of codependency has been a major impediment to evaluating the utility of codependency as a construct. Furthermore, the author noted that capricious and vague criteria are often included in instruments used to assess codependency and concluded that there is a lack of robust normative data on these instruments. Based on her review, the author advised that professionals should maintain a high degree of skepticism before accepting codependency as a meaningful concept. Other reviewers (Harter, 2000; Sher, 1991) have concluded that there is little empirical evidence for specific syndromes attributed to being a family member of an alcoholic in the literature on adult children of alcoholics (ACOA) and codependence.

However, in 2008, it may be premature to discount the concept of codependence entirely. Lyon and Greenberg (1991) tested the theory that women with an alcoholic parent would be more helpful and more attracted to a man who was portrayed as exploitive than to a man who was portrayed in a more socially desirable manner. Codependent participants (defined as female children of at least one alcoholic parent) and control participants were led to believe that a male experimenter was either nurturant or exploitive. Results suggested that female offspring of an alcoholic parent offered more help to an experimenter presented as exploitive compared to an experimenter presented as nurturant. Furthermore, on self-reported measure of attitudes towards parents, codependents rated their alcoholic fathers more favorably than their mothers and more favorably than the control group rated their nonalcoholic fathers. Thus, according to the authors, codependents appear to maintain positive regard for their alcoholic parent and are seemingly willing to help exploitive others outside the family

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environment. However, it is important to note that the codependent group evinced greater self-

reported depression than the control group, and thus depression was confounded with codependency to some extent.

Although codependence and related concepts appear to have been embraced by a number of people in the general public and the addiction treatment community, there is little consensus as to what is meant by the term and limited support for various measures purported to assess key components of the concept. Clearly, the family members of alcoholics and other addicted individuals are exposed to a wide range of stressors both inside and outside the home. Moreover, they are likely to experience a range of behavioral problems likely owing to both a problematic home environment as well as genetic liabilities shared with the addicted relative (in the case of children and other biological relatives; Sher 1991). Thus, skepticism over the concept of codependence should not be equated with skepticism over the very real difficulties of individuals who grow up in or live in alcoholic homes. However, it may be better to frame these difficulties within established psychiatric nomenclature (e.g., adjustment disorders, mood disorders, substance use disorders, personality disorders) rather than positing a unique type of disorder that is specific to growing up with or living with an addict.

See also **Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOA); Al-Anon; Alateen; Families and Drug Use.**

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Source Citation (MLA 7th Edition)

"Codependence." *Encyclopedia of Drugs, Alcohol & Addictive Behavior*. Ed. Pamela Korsmeyer and Henry R. Kranzler. 3rd ed. Vol. 1. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2009. 331-333. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Web. 17 Nov. 2015.