

Think on These Things

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Codependency, A Biblical View

By Gary E Gilley, Pastor-teacher Southern View Chapel

There is neither scientific nor Biblical evidence to support the claims of those who teach the theories of codependency, but why should truth get in the way of a good thing?

Codependency is one of the "hot topics," at the moment, in modern-day psychology. Until recent years the word (and even the concept) was virtually unknown; now everyone seems to be a codependent. The goals of this section are to define codependency, look at what psychologists tell us causes it, examine its supposed effects on people and find out how to cure it. Finally, we will examine all of this in the light of Scripture.

A Definition of Codependency

"Originally, codependency was used to describe a person whose life was affected as a result of being involved with someone who was chemically dependent" (Martin Bobgan, *Twelve Steps To Destruction*, p15). Today, however, definitions vary so greatly that it is often difficult to be certain what is being talked about. For example:

- ◆ "A codependent person is one who has let another person's behavior affect him or her, and who is obsessed with controlling that person's behavior" (Melody Beattie, *Codependent No More*, p31).
- ◆ "Codependency can be defined as an addiction to people, behaviors, or things. Codependency is the fallacy of trying to control interior feelings by controlling people, things, and events on the outside. To the codependent, control, or the lack of it, is central to every aspect of life. When it comes to people, the codependent has become so elaborately enmeshed in the other person that the sense of self— personal identity — is severely restricted, crowded out by that other person's identity and problems" (*Love is a Choice* by Hemfelt, Minirth, & Meier, p11).
- ◆ "Codependency is the condition when your love tanks are running on empty" (Ibid p38).
- ◆ "Codependency is a pattern of painful dependency on compulsive behaviors and on approval from others in an attempt to find safety, self-worth, and identity" (Definition used at the first national conference on codependency in 1989, Bobgan, p17).

Confused? Even Melody Beattie, the acknowledged spokeswoman for codependency admits, "There are almost as many definitions of codependency as there are experiences that represent it. In desperation (or perhaps enlightenment), some therapists have proclaimed, 'Codependency's anything, and everyone is a codependent'" (*Codependent No More*, p29). Not only are the experts uncertain about what this disorder is, they are also not sure who has it. Minirth and Meier tell us that roughly one hundred million Americans suffer from codependency; and therefore, we are embattled by an epidemic of staggering degree (*Love Is A Choice*, p14). It has been estimated by yet another source, that eighty-five percent of the codependency market is female. The reason for this is that mainly the traditional feminine traits and behaviors, such as nurturing mothering and developing intimate relationships, are often considered symptoms of codependency. Women, who have chosen to be caretakers and nurturers, rather than put their own feelings and desires above others, are labeled codependent — in need of psychological help. While we would acknowledge that these traits can be carried too far by some, we are greatly concerned when we are told that virtually the whole adult population (especially women), is suffering from this "disease." Could it be that the psychologists are confusing codependence with unselfish acts of love? Is the goal of the anti-codependent proponents to turn us into a race of people who serve and love self more than others? If so, they are in contradiction with Phip. 2:3,4.

The Cause of Codependency

What causes a person to become codependent and what are the effects of this "illness" on the life of the codependent? Minirth and Meier claim the causes of codependency are: "unmet emotional needs, lost childhood, and the compulsion to fix the dysfunctional family" (Ibid. p15). While these causes are interrelated, we will nevertheless take them one at a time:

Unmet Emotional Needs: The theory is that we each have a reservoir for love (or love tank) inside us. If our love tank has not been filled by the "significant others" in our lives, we will not have our emotional needs met; we will therefore become a codependent (see Ibid. p33ff). This theory is especially true of children.

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Lost Childhood: Children lose their childhood through abuse usually by parents or parental figures. Active abuse, such as incest, physical abuse or even excessive anger on a parent's part is the most recognized form of abuse — abuse that we must not deny or minimize. However, we are told of more subtle forms of abuse that apparently leave similar scars on a child's life. Minirth and Meier inform us of the following forms of abuse, often not recognized: one parent who is preoccupied and unavailable to a child emotionally, a child who is not constantly praised, lack of touching and hugging in the family, parents not being at peace (with one another) sexually, parents who demand "too much," parents depending too much on their children, a parent who is too rigid, etc. (Ibid. pp52-62).

We would mention two things at this point: Note the terrible pressure the codependency view places upon parents. At what point do we cross over from being emotionally available, to overindulging our children? When are we being too rigid, rather than firm? How do we know if we are expecting too much from our children, or not enough? What a horrible position to be in, knowing that the answers to these questions are relative, yet knowing that failure on our part will "scar" our children for life. The Biblical view would be that parents do have responsibility to their children, but that they are not responsible for the choices their children make. Likewise, instead of blaming our parents for the mistakes they made while raising us, we must take responsibility for our own actions.

By the codependent definition of abuse, virtually all children in the past have been abused and should have developed into codependents. How could parents of ten or more children always have been emotionally available to them? How were parents able to fill their children's love tanks when they worked sixty-plus hours per week, and often their children held full-time jobs as well? Even more importantly, if codependency has been our problem all of these years, why didn't God give us instructions on how to deal with it? Are we to believe that God allowed all of His people until the 1980s to be unequipped to deal with this grave problem? Are we to believe, as well, that God has not chosen to deal with codependency in His Word, but has revealed this problem and its solution, mostly to ungodly men and women?

The compulsion to fix the dysfunctional family:

Minirth and Meier tell us, "We all possess a primal need to recreate the familiar, the original family situation, even if the familiar, the situation, is destructive and painful" (Ibid. p65). Why would anyone want to recreate a painful situation? Why, because we are compelled by our unconscious minds that actually control (we are told) eighty percent of our decisions (apparently without our conscious knowledge, Ibid. p65). But why would we unconsciously choose to put ourselves through such pain? Consider the following three reasons given by followers of codependency:

* We believe that if the original situation can be drummed back into existence, this time around we can fix it. We can cure the pain. We know we can! The codependent possesses a powerful need to go back and fix what was wrong, he must cure the original pain.

* We believe that we were responsible for the rotten original family; therefore, we must be punished — we deserve pain. Codependents may actually be hooked on misery.

* We believe that there is that yearning for the familiar and the secure. Even if the past was painful, at least it was home.

John Bradshaw, popular author and TV codependent guru, lays the blame on the Biblical teaching that everyone is born in a condition of sin. He contends that such teaching produces a "shame-based" personality destined to become an addict. He says, "Many religious denominations teach a concept of man as wretched and stained with original sin. . . With original sin you're beat before you start" (*Healing the Shame that Binds You*, p64).

Actually, the various "experts" come up with various (and often contradictory) reasons why they believe people become codependent Why so many options? Perhaps this quote from the University of California's "Wellness Letter" explains the problem well, "The literature of codependency is based on assertions, generalizations, and anecdotes. . . To start without the slightest shred of scientific evidence and casually label large groups as diseased may be helpful to a few, but it is potentially harmful and exploitative as well. If as the best sellers claim, 'all society is an addict' and ninety-six percent of us are codependents, that leaves precious few of us outside the rehab centers — but at that point the claims become ludicrous at best" (Oct., 1990 p7, quoted in Bobgan, p33).

The Effects of Codependency

We are being told that it is very difficult to discern whether the behavior of a codependent was caused by his "illness," or the "illness" was caused by his behavior. At any rate, Melody Beattie groups the problems of codependent people around the following categories: caretaking, low self-worth, repression, obsession, controlling, denial, dependency, poor communication, weak boundaries, lack of trust, anger, sex problems, miscellaneous and progressive (*Codependent No More*, p37-45). **After reading her lists, you realize that few, if any, can totally escape the codependent label.**

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The codependency movement is quickly turning Biblical living into a vice. Those who choose to put Christ and others before their own needs are being told they are sick and in need of therapy. *Is it any wonder that their world is confused?*

Minirth and Meier blame addictions and compulsions on codependency. Even more importantly, they claim that a codependent is unable to obey God: "The Christian's foremost privilege and responsibility is to hear and respond to God. The codependent can neither hear clearly nor respond adequately. It's that simple" (p171). How cruel God must be, to demand obedience from people who cannot obey because of their emotional illnesses (caused usually by harsh parents), then punish them because of their disobedience. ***Either the apostles of codependency are right, or God (in His Word) is — we cannot have it both ways!***

The Cure

In order to recover from codependency, codependents must enter a Twelve Step program specifically designed for them: Codependence Anonymous, which is almost identical to Alcoholics Anonymous — with only minor changes in the steps (see our paper on the Twelve Step recovery programs). Another option is to enter a clinic such as Minirth and Meier's and go through their similar program.

As a summation, the adherents of codependency would say, "Codependents carry distorted messages about their own sense of worth and such messages originate in dysfunctional families. Those messages must be erased through regressive therapy and replaced with positive, self-enhancing messages" (Bobgan, p46). (It might be helpful to read our paper on Self Image).

The Scriptures teach a very different method of change and growth. This method is outlined in places such as Eph. 4:22-24, where we are told to put off the old self, put on the new self, and be renewed in the spirit of our mind. Specific application of this principle will depend upon the problem that we face.

The psychological world (including Christian psychologists) errs, because it has a faulty anthropology (view of man) based upon human wisdom, rather than upon the Word of God. Psychologists believe that people behave poorly, and develop emotional and psychological problems because their love tanks are empty. If they

can get their "significant others," or even God, to fill up their "love tanks," their problems will be resolved. ***The end result is everyone living for themselves.*** The Bible says, however, that we behave poorly because we are totally depraved, having been born with a sin nature. As a result, we react sinfully to our problems.

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