

Recovering from Codependency

Addiction is like a fire raging out of control. It extends beyond the addict, sometimes spreading to those in his or her life. In many cases, these people fan the flames of addiction, ultimately becoming part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

HEALTH TERMS

codependent

enabling

Al-Anon

detachment

Alateen

HEALTH CONCEPTS

- Codependency is a problem that occurs when those in an addict's life become part of the problem rather than part of the solution.
- In efforts to help the addict, codependents actually make the problem worse.
- The codependent did not cause the addiction and cannot cure it, but he or she can get help whether or not the addict decides to get well.

Common Traits of Codependents

People who become overly concerned with another's addiction problem and feel driven to fix or control it are called **codependents**, or "co-addicts." Though each person who exhibits codependent behavior does so in a unique way, codependents have many traits in common. Typically such people:

- feel lost, bored, or bad about themselves when not rescuing someone in trouble.
- feel responsible for other people's feelings, actions, and happiness.
- have difficulty having fun, relaxing, or taking good care of themselves.

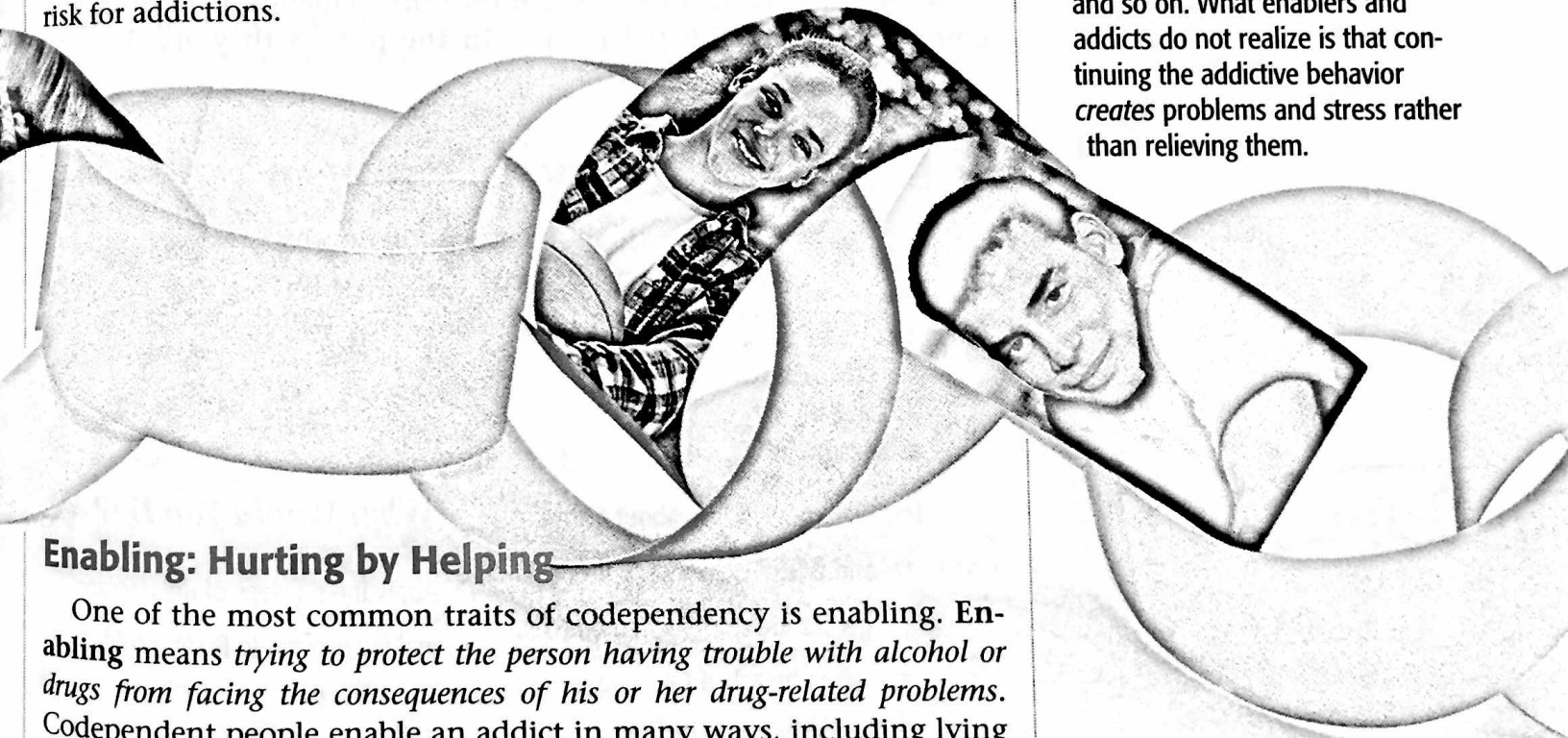
- constantly seek others' approval.
- do not meet their own needs and may not even know what their own needs are.

This much is for sure. Whatever behaviors or emotions they may exhibit on the outside, the spouses, children, and close friends of the addict suffer terribly and often in silence.

What Codependency Is Not

Codependent people are not physically addicted to a drug the way an addict is. Though codependency is often referred to as an addiction, it is neither an addiction nor a disease in the physical sense. It is, instead, a very damaging emotional and social preoccupation, or obsession, which often can have physical consequences. This type of obsession is different from drug addiction.

Codependents can suffer from a variety of stress-related mental or physical disorders, from depression and eating disorders to high blood pressure and digestive disorders. They may also be at increased risk for addictions.



Enabling: Hurting by Helping

One of the most common traits of codependency is enabling. **Enabling** means *trying to protect the person having trouble with alcohol or drugs from facing the consequences of his or her drug-related problems*. Codependent people enable an addict in many ways, including lying or covering up for the addict's mistakes; lending money, which may be used to purchase more drugs or alcohol; making excuses for him or her being late, absent, or irresponsible; doing the person's homework or other work for the addict; or trying to deflect attention from the person's addiction or bad behavior through humor, understatement, diverting attention, or denial.

What many people do not realize is that enabling is not healthful caring. Such actions do not help the addict. They just make it more comfortable and possible for the alcoholic or addict to keep on drinking or using drugs. In this way, enabling may actually help the addict to become more sick.



Excuses, Excuses

- An enabler is someone who shields the addict from the consequences of his or her behaviors. In addition, the enabler may accept the addict's excuses or defenses that he or she is drinking or using drugs because of other great problems. For example, the addict might convince the enabler that he or she needs to drink or smoke because of stress at school or work, financial worries, other illnesses, broken relationships, and so on. What enablers and addicts do not realize is that continuing the addictive behavior *creates* problems and stress rather than relieving them.

▲ **Individuals who care about one another sometimes find themselves caught in the circle of codependency.**

Addiction as a Family Problem

In a family where there is alcoholism or other drug dependence, both addicts and codependent family members are hurting and need help. That is why alcoholism and drug dependence are sometimes referred to as *family diseases*. They affect everyone in the family.

People in a family with drug or alcohol dependency may experience shame, fear, disappointment, guilt, and anger. They are embarrassed to admit these feelings, not realizing that millions of other families suffer from the effects of drug dependency.

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family system For more information on the family system and ways of maintaining its health, see Chapter 12, page 276.

Families Dealing with Addiction

In a healthful **family system**, rules are flexible and members play many roles based on changing situations and needs. When someone in a family has a drug dependency, other members of the family must learn to cope with the addict's problems. Some individuals tend to act out roles to deal with the situation.

Different people react in different ways. They adjust their needs, emotions, and behaviors to the unhealthy demands, behaviors, and emotions of the addicted person. In the process they also become unhealthy.

The Codependency Continuum

As a family member's alcoholism or addiction progresses, his or her family's codependency becomes more complex. Some family members may become overly involved in others' problems, taking the

Making Responsible

Decisions

When Help Is Needed

Lately, Pete's best friend Carmine has been unusually quiet and withdrawn. At first Carmine refused to tell Pete what was wrong, but yesterday he finally blurted out, "It's my dad. He lost his job and has been drinking a



lot." Pete really cares about Carmine and would like to help his friend get his life straightened out. Yet, when he asked Carmine what he could do, his friend angrily snapped, "Nothing! It's none of your business!" Pete has never seen Carmine act like this. What can he do to help?



What Would You Do?

Apply the six steps of the decision-making process to Pete's problem.

1. State the situation.
2. List the options.
3. Weigh the possible outcomes.
4. Consider your values.
5. Make a decision and act.
6. Evaluate the decision.

focus off themselves. Other family members may simply withdraw. In either case, family members put their lives on hold hoping the addiction will go away, but it does not. In turn, they may demonstrate unhealthful behaviors. Like the alcoholic or addict, they may also be in denial, not realizing or being able to admit just how bad things at home have become.

However, there is good news and hope for all families with addiction. There are many ways for families with chemical dependency to get help.

Recovering from Codependency

Just as addiction is not hopeless, neither is codependency. The downward slide into codependency can be turned around and changed into a process of recovery. Like recovery from chemical dependency, recovery from codependency takes time and effort. Different people may recover at different speeds and in different ways. Regardless of the timetable for recovery, the personal and family rewards can be great.

Recovery from Codependency

THE UPWARD CLIMB

A codependent's recovery might progress like this as the person:

- Hits an emotional bottom as a result of involvement with someone else's addiction
- Desires and goes for help
- Gets educated about the diseases of addiction
- Accepts the disease concept and his or her part in the disease
- Stops trying to control others, including the addict
- Focuses on self instead of the addict
- Begins to pay attention to personal appearance
- Experiences improvement in own physical, mental, and social health
- Rebuilds self-esteem
- Helps family become more flexible; aids in the process of redefining roles
- Continues to attend support group meetings, helping other codependents and self
- Takes full responsibility for his or her own life

Strategies for Getting Well

There are many ways that a person from a family with addiction as well as the addicted family member can get help. The first step is to admit that there is a problem. The next step is to reach outside the family system for help. This can seem like an impossibility to many people, since families of active alcoholics and drug addicts usually have lived by three unspoken rules: "Don't talk, don't trust, don't feel."

Reaching outside the family for the first time can feel like a betrayal. However, it is a healthy step to take, and a sense of relief often results. Whatever the risks are in seeking outside help, not seeking it holds greater risks. Continuing to adapt to an unhealthy family system can be far more damaging to everyone involved.

Sometimes only one person in a chemically dependent family seeks and gets outside help. Because of this, that person may feel very lonely. When everyone in the family seeks help and assumes responsibility for his or her own role in the family, recovery can occur more quickly.

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psychiatrist For more information on the services provided by the mental health care professionals known as psychiatrists, see Chapter 10, page 249.

psychologist For more information on the services provided by the mental health care professionals known as psychologists, see Chapter 10, page 250.

social worker For more information on the services provided by the mental health care professionals known as social workers, see Chapter 10, page 251.

Counseling

Many codependents need professional care. Individual and group counseling may be available with a **psychiatrist**, **psychologist**, **social worker**, or therapist trained in chemical dependency and codependency. Family therapy is often recommended and may help the family even if the alcoholic or addict refuses to participate.

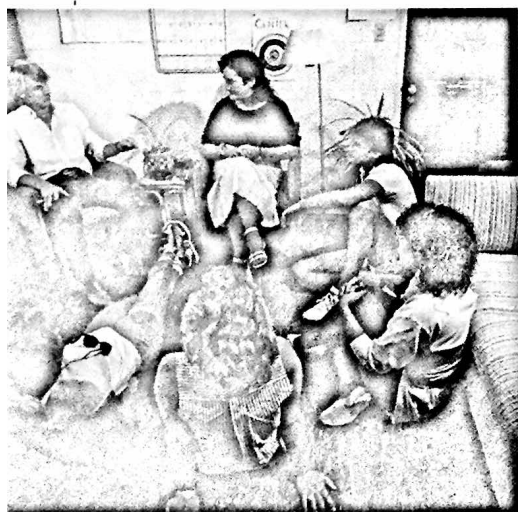
Support Groups

There are many support groups for people involved in the lives of alcoholics and other drug addicts. The most widely known of these groups is Al-Anon. Structured similarly to Alcoholics Anonymous, **Al-Anon** is a worldwide self-help organization for people who are close to alcoholics. It welcomes family members and friends of alcoholics. It is open to the codependent whether or not the chemically dependent person decides to get well. Like AA meetings, Al-Anon meetings offer a support system for coping and a structured program for regaining emotional and social health. The program encourages **detachment**—the process of pulling back or separating from involvement with someone else's addiction and refusing to let that addiction rule one's life any longer. Al-Anon meetings are free, and what is said at the meetings remains confidential.

Building Health Skills

Obtaining Help: Helping Someone Who Needs Help

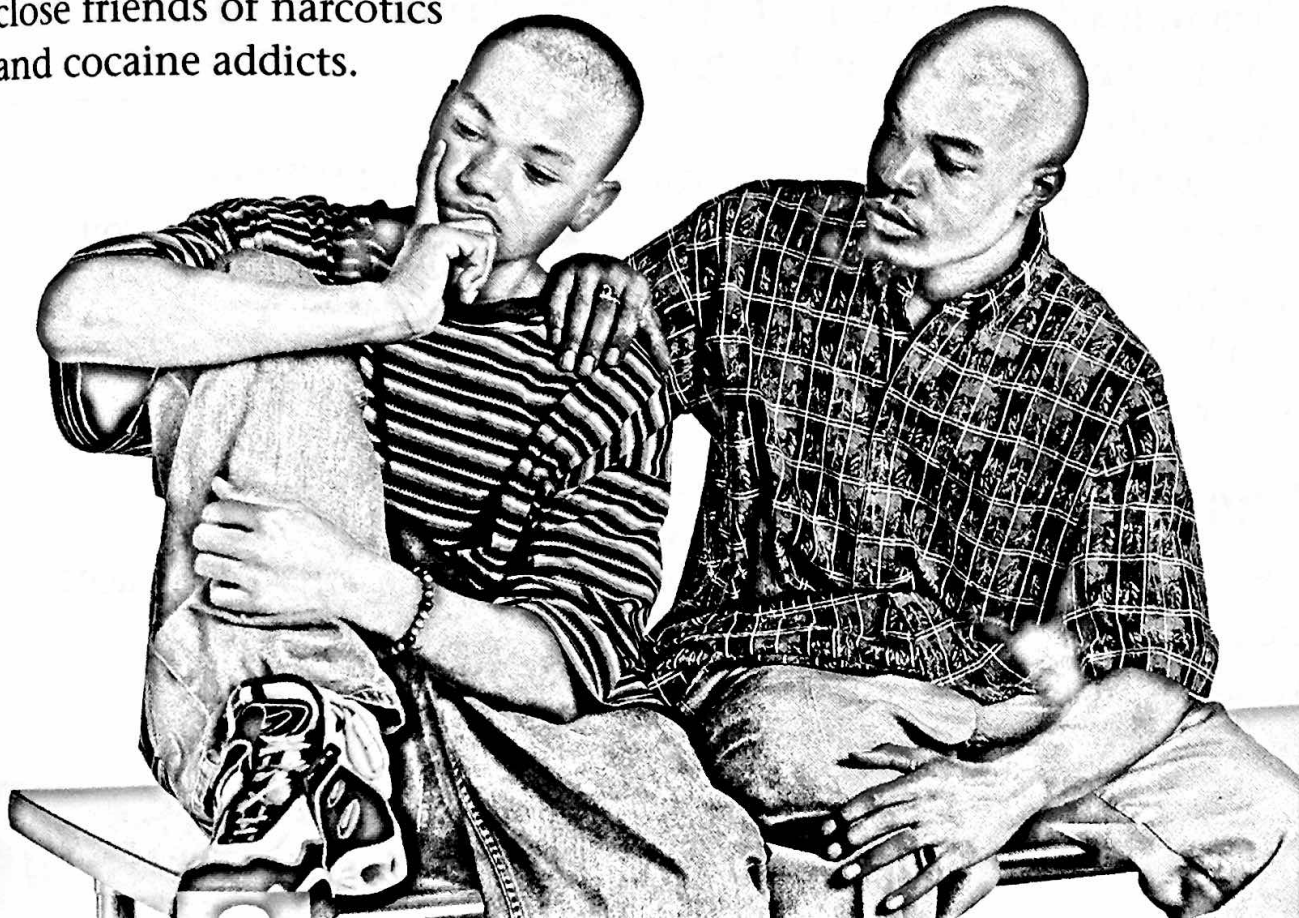
SOMETIMES, GETTING A PERSON you care about to make that first call for help can be the most important step you can take to aid in the recovery process. If someone you know needs help, consider guiding them to the following resources:



- 1. Talk to people.** Encourage the person to talk with a parent, teacher, coach, clergy person, or a trusted adult.
- 2. Locate support groups.** Look in the phone book under Alcoholics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous, or Narcotics Anonymous. The local AA office or volunteer phone counselor can help you or your friend find help.
- 3. Investigate medical facilities.** Have the person call his or her family physician or a local hospital or medical center. If there is no drug or alcohol treatment program on-site, they may be able to direct you to the nearest facility.
- 4. Contact information-giving organizations.** If all other efforts fail, you or the person you're trying to help can contact a reputable information source, such as the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence; the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information; or Partnership for a Drug-Free America.

Other support groups such as Codependents Anonymous, the National Association for Adult Children of Alcoholics, the National Association for Children of Alcoholics, and Children of Alcoholics offer information and support at both national and local levels.

An offshoot of Al-Anon, **Alateen** is a support program for people ages 12 to 20 whose parents, other family members, or friends have drinking problems. Like Al-Anon, Alateen's members come together to share their experiences and discuss how the addiction of someone close to them has affected their lives and how they can cope and recover. Information about Al-Anon and Alateen can be found by calling the local Al-Anon office listed in the phone book. Other similar programs such as Nar-Anon and Coc-Anon are available to help families and close friends of narcotics and cocaine addicts.



◀ **Teens do not have to face problems alone when dealing with a friend or family member who has an addiction.**

ACTIVITY List people you can turn to and support groups such as Alateen where teens can go for support.