



*Educate, Advocate and Serve*

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## **Understanding and Treating Codependency**

Codependent people are so trapped by a loved one's addiction that they lose their own identity in the process of obsessively managing the day-to-day trauma created by the addict. Codependency is unhealthy behavior learned in the midst of chaos. Some codependents are as dysfunctional as the addict, if not more so. Living with addiction triggers excessive care-taking, suppression of one's needs, a feeling of low self-worth, and strained relationships. The life and identity of a codependent becomes "enmeshed" with the everyday problems of living with an addict.

Many codependents grow up in a dysfunctional family. (Some are adult children of alcoholics.) They marry or become romantically involved with someone who abuses alcohol or some other drug. To some extent, the addict fills the needs of the codependent - needs such as care-taking, loneliness and addiction to destructive behavior, such as excessive partying and thrill seeking. Codependency can be viewed as a normal reaction to abnormal stress.

If the addict terminates the use of his or her drug of choice, the codependent's dysfunctional behaviors generally continue, unless he or she receives treatment. There are a variety of treatment approaches for codependents - individual psychotherapy, self-help groups (such as Al-Anon and Adult Children of Alcoholics), and codependency therapeutic groups. For many codependents, treatment involves recognition that they have a life and an identity separate from the addict; that the addict alone is responsible for his or her drug abuse; and that their life and the addict's will improve by terminating their care-taking and enabling behaviors. Through treatment, many codependents regain (or gain for the first time in their life) their own identity.