

**Working with Codependent Behaviors:
Practical Ways to Help Individuals Understand, Manage, and Develop Their Self**
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Four Guiding Lights for Self Health

First Guiding Light: Defining Codependency and Goals for Self Health

“The current study (Dear, Roberts, & Lange, 2005) was designed to identify the core defining features of codependency that are contained within the most influential published definitions of codependency by undertaking a systematic thematic analysis of those definitions.”

Four core features of codependency were identified through their analysis which was the first substantive clarification of these core defining features:

1. **External Focus** emerged as the most important defining feature of codependency. It was included in some form in every definition examined.
External focusing refers to focusing one’s attention on the behaviors, opinions, and expectations of other people and then fitting one’s own behavior to those expectations or opinions to obtain approval and esteem.
2. **Self-Sacrificing** presented itself in ten of the eleven definitions examined.
Self-sacrificing refers to neglecting one’s own needs to focus on meeting the needs of other people.
3. **Interpersonal Control** also appeared in ten of the eleven definitions examined.
Interpersonal control reflects an entrenched belief in one’s capacity to fix other people’s problems and control their behavior.
4. **Emotional Suppression** also appeared in ten of the eleven definitions.
Emotional suppression refers to the deliberate suppression, or limited conscious awareness, of one’s emotions until they become overwhelming.

I suggest then that we consider these four core features as **our working definition of codependency**:

**External Focus
Self-Sacrificing
Interpersonal Control
Emotional Suppression**

With these features in mind, we are then able to have the following as **goals** for our self and/or our clients:

↑ Internal Focus
↑ Self Care
↑ Self Control
↑ Emotional Expression

Second Guiding Light: Working with Codependent Behaviors

“. . . professionals should be cautioned about the limitation of labeling a client as codependent. It might be more useful to regard a client as demonstrating codependent **behaviors** to a greater or lesser degree” (Fisher & Harrison, p. 246, 1997).

“It is helpful if codependency is thought of as **a cluster of behaviors** that lie on a continuum ranging from ‘mildly codependent’ to ‘severely codependent.’ In this manner, mental health professionals can determine **the significance of codependent behaviors as they relate to the person’s functioning**” (Fisher & Harrison, p. 247, 1997).

So what are some of these **codependent behaviors**?

- Helping
- Fixing
- Care taking
- Serving
- Hardworking
- People pleasing
- Thinking for others
- Speaking for others
- Holding on
- Conflict avoiding

What are others?

Third Guiding Light: Working with Codependent Behaviors on a Continuum

“Since the term codependency is used so broadly, the concept must be **considered along a continuum** from the most severe (e.g. someone who clings to a physically and emotionally abusive relationship in spite of being offered viable alternatives) to the mildest (e.g. the highly functional adult child who apologizes when someone steps on his or her foot)” (Zelvin, p. 270, 2004).

“The point we are making here is that codependent characteristics, per se, are not inherently good or bad. Sometimes **behaving** codependently is appropriate, very adaptive, and can lead to satisfaction with oneself and others. Sometimes these same characteristics can lead to problems. An inflexible adherence to codependency as well as an inflexible avoidance of it may become problematic” (Fisher & Harrison, p. 239, 1997)

“As the pattern of looking outside themselves for affirmation develops, they experience dramatic changes:

admirable urge to help →→→ alarming attempt to assume responsibility for other people’s lives

gift of compassion →→→ senseless nightmare of enmeshment, the confusing of their identity with that of someone else

generous desire to share knowledge and ideas →→→ direct and conduct and comment on other people’s activities while their own inner lives wither” (Yoder, 1990)

A Continuum for Understanding and Managing Codependent Behaviors	
Any particular codependent behavior can be examined along this continuum:	
Okay	Too Far
Keeps connection with self	Loses connection with self
Able to be flexible and open	Rigid, obsessed
Causes no impairment in functioning	Causes impairment in functioning
Securely attached	Insecurely attached

Let’s apply some of the codependent behaviors we identified earlier to this continuum.

Fourth Light: Working with Self along These Behavioral Continuums

Process of Change:

The process of change toward increased self health involves several steps which I believe include:

Awareness
Willingness
Intentionality
Self Education
Skill Development
Self Regard
Notice your Self in the Moment
Intervening on your Own Behalf

Skills to Reach Goals:

Remembering that our **recovery goals** for codependency are:

↑ Internal Focus
↑ Self Care
↑ Self Control
↑ Emotional Expression

I offer the following **treatment tools** as ways to bring a healthy focus to our self so that we can monitor our self and make adjustments in our ways of being so as to promote serenity within self and ease within our relationships:

Mindful Presence

Listening to Aspects of Self:

Thinking, Feeling, Physical, and Spiritual

Skill Development in 4 Areas of Personal Work:

Illusions, Detaching, Boundaries, and Spirituality

Developing a secure attachment with Self:

Learning to Value and Trust Self/
Internal vs. External seeking and soothing

Intervening on Our Own Behalf

Practice:

Having a Practice and Practicing

References

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