

CO-DEPENDENCY AND FAMILY RULES

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Co-dependency is a term that has been widely used within the chemical dependency field over the past several years, but is often misunderstood. Originally, it was used to describe the person or persons whose lives were affected as a result of their being involved with someone who was chemically dependent. The “co-dependent” spouse or child or lover of someone who was chemically dependent was seen as having developed a pattern of coping with life that was not healthy as a reaction to someone else’s drug or alcohol abuse. The now familiar strategies of minimizing problems or of total denial of problems was seen as a reaction to the chemically dependent persons’ maladaptive behavior, and in this pamphlet we will include this type of co-dependency in our discussion. But what many professionals are coming to realize is that these co-dependent patterns of coping do not necessarily develop solely as a result of having lived with a chemically dependent person. In fact, through specific research and clinical work on family systems, it is now becoming clearer that co-dependency is a condition which can emerge from any family system where certain unwritten, even unspoken, rules exist. These unwritten family rules and how they affect our approach to living form the focus of this pamphlet.

Let us define co-dependency, then, as a dysfunctional pattern of living and problem solving which is nurtured by a set of rules within the family system. These rules make healthy growth and change very difficult. For the reader who is not familiar with the concept of co-dependency, we have listed some of the common characteristics below:

1. Difficulty in actually identifying feelings - Am I angry? Am I lonely? Am I sad? Do I feel hurt? Or what?
2. Difficulty expressing feelings - I am feeling hurt. But how might others act toward me if they know how I feel? And worse, what might they think of me if they knew my true feelings?
3. Difficulty in forming or maintaining close relationships - I want to be close to others but I am afraid of being hurt or rejected by them.
4. Perfectionism - too many expectations for self and others.
5. Rigid or stuck in attitudes and behavior - even though it hurts to live this way, it’s the only way I know.
6. Difficulty adjusting to change.
7. Feeling overly responsible for other people’s behavior or feelings - I am embarrassed by what someone else does.
8. Constant need for others’ approval in order to feel good about self.
9. Difficulty making decisions - worrying or thinking so much that you get “stuck.”
10. General feelings of powerlessness over one’s life - nothing I do makes any difference.
11. A basic sense of shame and low self-esteem over perceived failures in one’s life.

Because many co-dependent people appear to be so self-sufficient, “strong,” and in control of their lives, Friel (1982) has also termed this pattern “paradoxical dependency,” the paradox being that beneath the public image or strength and security often lie the opposite feelings of insecurity, self-doubt, and confusion. “Everyone thinks I am so strong, and all of my friends and relatives come to me with their problems,” say many co-dependent people, “but if they knew the real me they would be very surprised.

Sometimes it's all I can do to get through each day." How does this happen? How do we get to this point where who we really are and who everyone thinks we are, are so different. How do we learn to live this way? According to Subby, the co-dependent learns to do only those things which will get him the approval and acceptance of others. By doing this, unfortunately, he gradually denies much of who he really is.

In our view, these patterns of living develop through practice. By practicing a set of rules which we learn as we are growing up, or in some cases, after we have grown up, we become co-dependent in our way of living. When we say that co-dependency originates in the family system, we mean that some - or all - of the characteristics listed above are transmitted to family members through a set of rules. Let's look at perfectionism for a moment. It is okay to expect things to be done correctly most of the time. We try to put the garbage in the garbage can, for example, rather than putting it out on the lawn. But we see many people being downright unhappy because they expect every minor detail to go exactly as they had planned. And when we grow up in perfectionistic families, we tend to become perfectionistic, too, because it's all we know. When Dad yells and screams about a thousand little things, or Mom and Dad yell at each other for minor household tasks left undone, then we begin to believe that it is very bad to leave minor things around the house undone. In fact, we eventually begin to believe that each little mistake that we make in life is a major tragedy. In extreme cases, it's not too long before we begin saying to ourselves over and over, "If only I hadn't been born. If only I were smarter, or prettier, or more athletic, more, more something, then everything would be okay." It's hard to feel good about ourselves when we judge everything we do as not measuring up to someone else's standards.

Basically, how we treat ourselves and others is a direct result of the rules that we learned to follow as we were growing up. How we handle things like stress and conflict as adults is the result of how we learned to handle them as kids. How we choose to handle them in the present is up to us. Let's examine some of these rules which keep us stuck in co-dependent patterns of living.

1. It's not okay to talk about problems.
2. Feelings should not be expressed openly.
3. Communication is best if indirect, with one person acting as messenger between two others (triangulation).
4. Unrealistic expectations — be strong, good, right, perfect. Make us proud.
5. Don't be "selfish."
6. Do as I say, not as I do.
7. It's not okay to play or be playful.
8. Don't rock the boat.

If you look more carefully at these rules, you will begin to see that they all have something to do with protecting or isolating oneself from others by not taking the risk to get close. People growing up according to these rules don't realize that there are actually many families that do allow each individual to talk about problems outside the family, or to express emotions openly, or to make mistakes without undue criticism. They don't realize that in many families, being vulnerable and asking for help is both routine and okay, or that isolating and denying oneself is not the best way to be.

Two Examples

At 13, Jim was an average student, attractive, popular among his peers, athletic and extroverted, but because his father was an alcoholic, Jim lived two lives. At home he was lonely and terrified over what others might find out about his family. Jim was depressed, filled with shame and doubt, guilty for wrongs never committed, and deeply resentful. Unable to discuss the fear, anger, or any of the other

normal emotions that he was feeling, Jim turned to alcohol and drugs.

Twelve years later, Jim entered treatment for chemical dependency, where for the first time he learned that the family rules operating while he was growing up were largely responsible for his inability to face his own personal problems constructively. In an effort to compensate for these unhealthy rules, Jim had developed a pattern of perfectionism, compulsive overworking, and destructive dependency in his interpersonal relationships, in addition to his alcoholism.

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Anne was 10 when she started to withdraw into the safety of her own private fantasy world. An excellent student, shy, eager to please, and inhibited, Anne began to develop a pattern of compulsive overeating, television viewing, and studying. Beneath it all she was fearful, anxious, lonely and depressed. Although neither her parents nor any of her close friends were chemically dependent, the therapist who she first saw many years later recognized her compulsive, approval-seeking, dependent behavior patterns and referred her to an outpatient co-dependency treatment program.

During treatment, Anne discovered for the first time that her problems were rooted in the same set of family rules which led to Jim's chemical dependency. Both Jim and Anne came from families in which there was a "No talk rule," in which communication was poor, in which outward expressions of emotions were discouraged, in which personal identity and needs came second, and in which they always fell short of their parents' expectations. Unable to face the difficult tasks of growing up, both Jim and Anne were forced to develop these unhealthy patterns of coping.

While Jim became chemically dependent, and Anne became co-dependent as a result of their respective backgrounds, the fact of the matter is that given the set of rules listed above, we can expect many people coming out of these family systems to be either chemically dependent, co-dependent, or both.

Rule 1. It's not okay to talk about problems.

How do we learn this rule? In some families, it's easy to see how. Everyone tells you, "Don't air your dirty laundry in public," "Now, Suzy, I don't want you running over to the neighbors' house and telling them all of our business," etc. In other families the message is just as strong without being spoken. For example, you never hear Mom and Dad talk about problems, although you see and feel the tension sometimes. You notice the occasional glare, or feelings of walking on eggshells that occur in a family when conflict arises, but no one ever says anything. It's not long before you realize that if you want to fit in and be like Mom and Dad, then it's probably best not to talk about problems. Or when a difficult topic arises, everyone just sort of disappears, or gets quiet, distracted by television, leaving a cloud of tension hanging in the air.

How does adherence to this rule affect us? It eventually makes us avoid our own problems, deny that we have any problems, and contrary to what you might think, it fosters a sense of impending doom much of the time typified by knots in the stomach, free-floating anxiety, headaches, and sleeplessness. . . to name a few. It makes us numb in all kinds of ways. Since we aren't supposed to talk about problems, we begin to believe that if we admit having problems, then there will be something horribly wrong with us that is not wrong with most people. If we admit to having a problem, then we fear that we will also be judged by others as weak and unhealthy. Ultimately, this results in a deep sense of shame about a very real part of everyday life. . . i.e., that we all have problems. And, of course as you might expect, it is impossible to solve a problem if you don't know how to talk about it, or even acknowledge that you have one. This perhaps is the most frustrating, saddening outcome of the "No talk" rule.

Rule 2. Feelings are not expressed openly.

In the first place, we Americans are known for being a bit inhibited when it comes to showing our feelings. We like the image of being clever and practical. We take pride in being able to hide our emotions and solve all our problems without help. We can put a man on the moon, design and build sophisticated structures, replace diseased organs, even give back someone their sight, but when it comes to expressing our true feelings we are often like a fish out of water.

In families with unresolved chemical and co-dependency issues, this emotional blocking is an even greater problem. Expressing feelings is hard enough, but especially so when the spoken or unspoken rules make it clear that we just “don’t.” Statements like “Big boys don’t cry,” or “I’ll give you something to cry about,” are obvious ways that this rule is learned. But there are more subtle ways. For example, when a child, feeling frightened or lonely, tries to sit on his father’s lap or give him a hug, Dad gets tense. He may not say anything but his back may arch a little and his shoulders stiffen. The father in this case might be uncomfortable with his own feelings, and as a result, may end up conveying this discomfort to his child. In time the child might learn not to show his feelings around Dad at all.

The results of not expressing our feelings are many. We may come to believe that it is better to deny what we feel rather than to risk letting someone else see who we really are inside. Eventually this cutting off of our emotional selves becomes so complete that, indeed, even we do not know who we really are. Our heads tell us one thing, like we don’t care what others think or say, while our bodies unconsciously begin to tell us something else. We develop things like tension headaches or migraines, ulcers, hypertension, rashes, loss of sleep or sleeping too much, depression or anxiety. And because we are now so cut off from our feelings, we don’t see they are affecting us.

Rule 3. Communication is often indirect, with one person acting as messenger between two others (triangulation).

Dad says to Tom, age 14, “I wish you’d tell your mother to be more understanding of me. She’s really been grouchy lately. She doesn’t know how much it hurts me.” Tom goes away thinking that he can really fix things up if he lets Mom know the “inside scoop” on how Dad really feels. Tom says to Mom, “You know, Mom, Dad has been feeling pretty down lately about the way you’ve been reacting to him. . .”

What’s so unusual about this scene? Isn’t it fairly common? Isn’t it part of family togetherness to include children in our lives? Perhaps, but not in this way. Using a messenger in this way, whether a child or an adult, can make things awfully confusing. First, Tom gets caught in the middle. If he doesn’t tell Mom, then he lets Dad down. If he does tell her, he risks receiving the anger or rejection from Mom that she’s really directing toward Dad. And, in either case both Mom and Dad are using Tom to avoid talking face-to-face as adults. If used on a regular basis, this kind of communication pattern can make everyone extremely sick and upset inside. Messages get mixed or confused, feelings get misdirected, and innocent people become victims of others’ inability to confront personal problems directly. The pain can become unbearable.

Rule 4. Unrealistic expectations; be strong, good, right, perfect. Make us proud.

Doing well and achieving is important to most of us. And most of us have a fairly clear idea of how we think things should be done or handled. Sometimes though, we begin to believe that there is only one right way. What’s worse, we begin to believe that enough is never enough. There is only one Albert Einstein, only one Willie Mays, only one Eleanor Roosevelt, and only one Madame Curie. Your child or spouse cannot, therefore, become Albert Einstein or Madame Curie. And besides, those people were not perfect, and certainly they would be the first to admit that fact.

What happens in some families is that we create an ideal in our heads about what is good or right

or best, and this ideal is so far removed from what is possible and realistic that we wind up punishing others because they do not meet our expectations. We begin to nag and push and criticize and analyze and cajole. We become deeply disappointed with those who don't meet our expectations. Then we begin to blame ourselves for not pushing others enough to meet our expectations, and pretty soon everyone is unhappy. . .

me, you, and those who have to watch what is going on between us. Live and let live is perhaps the most difficult principle for us to live by.

Rule 5. Don't be selfish.

For the co-dependent who grows up in the system where this rule is rigidly applied to every situation, feelings of guilt are certain to emerge. They learn to view themselves as wrong for placing their own needs before the needs of others. The idea that a person is being selfish for thinking of himself first is totally unrealistic. Normally there are times in life when it makes good sense to take care of your own needs first. A politician votes for himself because he believes he is the best man for the job. The co-dependent goes into counseling, risking the rejection of an alcoholic spouse because he or she knows that help is needed.

If we believe that our own needs are wrong, we will never be able to get those needs met. What often happens in co-dependency is that we try to feel good about ourselves by taking care of others, and eventually our self-esteem becomes dependent on caretaking. Without someone to take care of, the co-dependent is left with no purpose or worth. The more we take care of someone, the more we fail to take care of our own needs. In time, we start to feel resentful toward those whom we care for because they fail to recognize what we are doing for them. The result of these angry feelings is that we experience even more shame, and so we try harder than ever to make up for it by doing even more caretaking. The co-dependent spouse, the child of the alcoholic, and the chemically dependent person all suffer as a result of this taking care of behavior. As the pain builds in each of us, we begin to blame and point out the failings of others. We become sarcastic, crabby, angry, and pessimistic because we feel that everyone is taking from us and giving nothing in return. Ultimately this circular pattern becomes like an emotional merry-go-round that keeps getting worse as time goes on. The way out of this cycle is to look at it in a paradoxical way. To break the painful hold that this "Don't be selfish" rule has on the co-dependent, he must first decide to be "selfish" and take care of himself. This means that in order to get free, the individual must first stop the very thing that he has come to believe will earn him the acceptance and love which he needs. When the co-dependent discovers that taking care of himself first is often the best way to be of help to others and gain their respect, he will also find self-respect. In other words, while the risk to change is a difficult one at first, in the long run the rewards for taking the risk are great.

Rule 6. Do as I say . . . not as I do.

This rule, perhaps more than any other, teaches us not to trust. If, as children, our parents tell us to be honest, and then turn right around and tell a lie, we become confused. We become suspicious. We stop taking risks and count only on ourselves. We do this out of a need to protect ourselves from the pain of inconsistency. Remember the time that Dad promised to take you to the movies or fishing on Saturday afternoon, but instead decided to play golf; or maybe he had to work; or, worst of all, he started to drink. After a few disappointments like this one, we start to wonder whether or not our parents love us, and whether we count. Many of us who experience these inconsistencies of the "Do as I say, not as I do" rule, come to believe as children, that we really aren't good enough and don't deserve our parents' love. Unable to get our parents' approval, we seek out new ways of getting attention. Conscious or otherwise, our goal is to manipulate others to give us validation and love. Who we are inside is not good enough or deserving enough, so we hide this unacceptable part and learn to do those things which will bring us

approval from others. The most destructive part of this particular rule is that by doing only what we think others want us to do, we deny ourselves and become divided inside. Denying who we really are prevents us from ever knowing if those people close to us really care about us or love us. After all, we have only let them know that part of us which we believed they would accept. We live in constant fear of being rejected if they should ever find out the truth. Trying to do the “right” thing does not make us secure because we are not being true to ourselves. We know a lot about the truth as a result of trying so hard to avoid it, but we never feel okay.

Rule 7. It’s not okay to play.

From the very beginning, the co-dependent person believes that the world is a very serious place. Life is difficult and always painful. Like all of the rules previously mentioned, this rule lends itself to the development of a co-dependent view of ourselves as unlovable, boring, stupid, ugly, and wrong. Because of this, the co-dependent must work twice as hard as everyone else just to feel okay. Believing that what they do is who they are, it becomes increasingly important to their feeling okay that they not be without something to do. It’s okay to play if you are a child, but not if you are an adult. The longer we deny our need to play, the more we suffer. Ultimately, to play is to risk being spontaneous, and perhaps even foolish, which is too scary for the co-dependent. Children in alcoholic families are in a hurry to grow up. Parents of these children often say about them that they are “6 years old going on 40.” Being all grown-up someday is important, but losing the ability to play is a disaster.

Rule 8. Don’t rock the boat.

Every family is a system. . . like the organs in the body. Each person in the family has a special part, like actors in a play; and the family rules help each person to know his or her part. Family rules make it easier for us to know what is right, what is wrong, at what age we should be doing certain things, and so on. Stability is one of the positive results of healthy family rules. The rules keep everything in balance, and they let the entire family know when the system is upset. . . just as pain or fever lets your body know that something within its system is upset. When Timmy gets a negative report from school, or Mom gets a serious illness, the family rules say that something should be done to restore the system to some kind of balance. Mom and Dad talk to Timmy’s teacher; or Dad and the kids change their schedules to handle the work that Mom can’t do. The system seeks balance. All systems do. Adjusting to change is a healthy quality of systems. In families with unresolved chemical or co-dependency issues, the system also seeks to hold onto a type of balance, but the balance it seeks to maintain is an unhealthy one. The rules it fights so hard to hang onto make it difficult for each person in the system to grow, mature or become healthier. Suzy becomes constantly anxious because Mom and Dad are fighting all the time, but the rules of the system say, “We don’t talk about problems,” or “We don’t show our sad feelings,” so Suzy keeps them inside. Is Suzy doing something wrong, according to the family system? No. Like the actors in the play, Suzy is doing her part to keep the system in balance. She’s not rocking the boat.

In other words, the system seeks to maintain itself. The flaw in this system is that the family rules do not allow for healthy change. Dad doesn’t want to give up drinking because it will be painful to do so. Everyone agrees not to rock the boat because it will be painful. Everyone agrees not to rock the boat because it might make Dad more upset; and because if Dad gave up drinking, everyone else in the family might have to change, too, and change can be frightening. However, with enough help and support the fear of change can be overcome and recovery can take place.

“Don’t rock the boat” is the rule which oversees and directs all the other rules in the family. In healthy families, this rule is transformed into, “It’s okay to change and grow, your family will always be with you.”

The co-dependent individual can be locked inside a set of unhealthy family rules. Until the individual recognizes this trap and challenges these rules, he or she feels powerless to change. Worst of all is the fact that living inside this trap means that the person can never really let his true feelings show and the private self, the child, remains hidden, isolated, and alone. Because this private self is not allowed to come out, real closeness and intimacy with self and others is very hard to achieve. "Am I loved for what I do. . . or am I loved for who I am?"

Putting It All Together

We have said a lot about rules and systems and how they relate to co-dependency and chemical dependency. Basically, the way that we learn to live our lives and interact with others is acquired from our families as we grow up, whether the family be Mom and Dad, or Dad and Stepmom, or Mom and Grandma. The rules which we have discussed are examples of some of the ways in which families can unconsciously create the conditions for co-dependency or chemical dependency to develop. Why do some people escape the negative consequences? We don't know for sure, but research suggests that they may have formed an attachment to someone who was outside the family system long enough so that they were able to choose healthier ways of living. Perhaps this other person was an aunt or an uncle or the parent of a friend.

Our point is that the rules teach us how to live and solve problems, and that these rules are passed down from one generation to the next, not by heredity or genetics, but by learning. . . by watching and learning. Also, the more we live with these rules, the more we practice them in our daily lives, the more we find ourselves exposed to other people who are also co-dependent or chemically dependent, and the more we experience living with these rules, then the more we tend to internalize these rules and practice them in our own lives.

Although it may seem controversial, what many professionals are also beginning to realize is that a large number of people who have become chemically dependent were first experiencing the pain of co-dependency. Whether or not they had inherited, through their genes, a tendency toward chemical addiction, many of these people turn to chemicals in an effort to medicate the pain of their already existing co-dependent condition. Many people who have begun the recovery process from chemical dependency are now finding that the next step in achieving greater peace of mind is to begin working on their underlying co-dependencies. What many people call a "dry-drunk" in the non-using chemically dependent person is, at least in part, the expression of unresolved co-dependencies in his or her life. Ongoing relationship problems, irritability, and moodiness are all signs that the person may be operating according to rules which say, "Don't talk," "Be perfect," "Don't rock the boat," etc. Getting overly involved in one relationship to the exclusion of self, friends, and associates is also a sign of unresolved co-dependency. Until we start to live by a new set of rules, the pain will remain.

What Can Be Done?

Does it sound like co-dependency and chemical dependency are such a tangle of rules and dynamics that no one can ever really get away from them? Are we enslaved by our childhoods forever, forced to live by a set of rules which make our lives miserable? No! As is already known, millions of people in this country are now living full, happy lives, as a result of various chemical dependency treatment programs: Al-Anon, Alcoholics Anonymous, and, most recently, Adult Children of Alcoholics Groups. By the same token, many people are beginning to recognize their co-dependencies, whether or not they had ever lived with a chemically dependent person. Most important is the fact that these co-

dependents can also recover and live by new rules. They are learning that they do not have to be afraid of expressing their opinions or showing how they feel. They are learning that they do not have to stay in relationships which cause only misery and grief. And they are learning that life can be peaceful and even fun. . . that the world is not as difficult or dark or lonely as they once had thought. Through established self-help groups like Al-Anon, Alateen, Adult Children of Alcoholics, Co-dependents Anonymous and any new co-dependency treatment programs which are springing up across the country, people are learning that the chain can be broken. The rules can be changed.

While change is almost always risky and scary, in this case the benefits of learning new rules are well worth it: clear sense of self, peace of mind, and comfortable relationships. Here's to change!

A Check-Up

On the next page is a chart which we have found to be helpful in assessing one's process in coming to terms with co-dependencies. The list is not all-inclusive, but it does serve as a rough guideline. Two or three times per year, try to rate yourself on each item to check your changes.

Use a 5- or 7-point scale, like the one in this example:

(It's not okay to play.)	1	2	3	4	5
					(I let myself have fun.)

Reviewing a chart like this can be especially helpful while you are in the middle of a difficult crisis or conflict. It can serve as a beacon or guide to help you stay on track, to maintain your resolve to change. The most difficult time, of course, is when you are in the middle of a crisis, or in a conflict with someone, and your co-dependencies come into play. We have put this list at the back of this pamphlet so that it is easy to find and review.

Co-dependency Rules

Growth-enhancing Rules

1. It's not okay to talk about problems.	1	2	3	4	5	I try to share my problems and get feedback about myself from others.
2. Feelings should not be expressed openly.	1	2	3	4	5	I try to express any persistent feeling with the appropriate person.
3. Communication is indirect, using "messengers."	1	2	3	4	5	I speak for myself directly to whomever is appropriate for the message.
4. Expectations are unrealistic.	1	2	3	4	5	I am learning to let go of perfection, details, and being "right" all the time.

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| 5. Don't be selfish (guilt). | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Doing things just for me is healthy. I enjoy caring for me. |
| 6. Do as I say, not as I do. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | I try to follow through with actions rather than just words. |
| 7. It's not okay to play. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | I let myself have fun. I can even be silly sometimes. |
| 8. Don't rock the boat. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | I am learning to look at change as healthy, as fun, as a challenge. |

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