

## **THE CODEPENDENCY “EPIDEMIC”**

Tina struggles with wanting perfection, from herself and from everyone and everything around her. Kylie finds that no matter what she tries, she is unable to control her tendency to overeat. Brad habitually loses his temper, especially with those he loves. Anne sought help because after two years of trying to stop fantasizing about a man she no longer sees, she can't seem to get him out of her head. Four years ago, Tim took a “peep” at some Internet pornography, claiming that it wouldn't hurt his wife, because she would never know. Now he has become hooked on looking up porno sites whenever he thinks he can and get away with it. It is now affecting his work, his marriage and his relationship with his kids. These are all major problems in our society today that undermine happiness and can drive people to seeking professional help. Some people find, however, that no matter how hard they try to put into place common helpful “strategies”, the best they experience is some degree of relief or control in this area of their life. For many people, however, these struggles can be merely symptoms of a greater and more insidious underlying problem; that of codependency. For deep and lasting change and healing to take place, the codependent patterns of behaviour need to be addressed.

Many of us may have heard the term codependency but are not really sure what it is and how to know if we struggle with it. The meaning of codependency has also evolved a great deal over the past 30 years. The term originated in the 1970's (?) when people treating alcoholics began to realise that spouses and children of alcoholics developed a particular pattern of behaviour as they tried to adjust to and manage the alcoholic's behaviour. Originally coined co-alcoholics, the term changed to co-dependent as the field expanded to include other types of addictions and habits. In recent years, the term has “been increasingly viewed as an identifiable unhealthy compulsion in it's own right” (Groom, 20). It is the “myth that you can make yourself happy by trying to control people and events outside yourself”. Where does this myth originate?

We all have an inborn need or longing to depend on another, to feel connected. Because none of our families were perfect, we all have unmet needs and hurts which we carry with us into adulthood. For many, their parents were loving and safe enough to “cover over” these natural imperfections. But when the family environment is not safe, not

“good enough”, and the bond between the child and at least one parent is weak or even missing, the child’s view of themselves and others is more profoundly affected and therefore, more evident in their adult life. In order to cope with the way their family functioned, the child developed ways of protecting themselves from too much pain. One way is to become resigned to the way things are, deny the importance of your own needs and seek to appease others around you in order to gain approval and affirmation. This is known as compliance patterns. Ultimately however, this leads to a feeling of being used or victimized by others. On the other hand, the codependent person may desperately try to control or manipulate how others think feel and act in order to validate their own uncertain thoughts, feelings and actions. They may seek to rescue or look after another, but their actions are motivated by a deep desire to feel strong and powerful. The sad thing is, they cannot allow themselves to need others because it was so unsafe to be needy in childhood. Self-sufficiency for some was necessary for survival. They seek a response from the person they are helping that will deeply affirm and comfort them. Because they are so dependent on the other person’s response to them, the boundaries between them become blurred so that everything will be perceived as personal. When the “right” response is not forthcoming, a deep resentment and anger at the others seeming lack of appreciation brews, usually unacknowledged. It is this level of denial that keeps codependents in abusive relationships. Because it is there, however, the codependent may suddenly erupt with unexpected outbursts of anger, often misdirected; at the children, other drivers on the road, or even back at themselves.

Because codependents have such intense and manipulative relationships within their own family, these patterns of relating can be passed onto their own children, thus perpetuating a cycle of codependency in our society. This is why it is sometimes referred to as the “codependency epidemic”. There are a growing number of people in our society who develop compulsive tendencies in order to anaesthetise their feelings of emptiness that has been created by an inability to properly bond and become intimate with others. This all sounds like a very gloomy, doomy picture. However, the good news is, people can be treated. Becoming aware of why we do what we do and learning healthier ways of relating to others around us can be assisted by gaining further information and insight.