

Unraveled *roots*

Chapter 5: The Root of Codependency

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Unraveled Roots: Exposing the Hidden Causes of Damaging Behaviors

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Chapter Five

The Root of Codependency

When trees are planted too close together, their roots become intertwined. They compete for resources. The closeness limits their growth potential and threatens their health. They aren't able to produce as many leaves or as much fruit as a tree that has more room to grow. Instead of expanding wide and flourishing, the trees grow tall and skinny—a pale, sickly shadow of what they were designed to be. When we become too closely intertwined with others, depending on them to provide our sense of value and purpose, we can also experience similar damaging effects to our personal growth and development. This is often known as codependency.

We are born into this world with basic needs. As we discussed in Chapter Two, we need our parents or caregivers to provide love, nurturing, support, and acceptance. Our sense of identity is developed in childhood. These vital anchors help us feel secure enough to take risks, make mistakes, and explore and discover our own unique desires, skills, qualities, and talents. That security also helps us to bounce back from failures and learn more about ourselves in the process. A healthy parent or caregiver encourages age-appropriate degrees of independence, enabling us to progressively gain insight and confidence in who we are.

If you had a parent(s) with an addiction; a mental, emotional, or physical illness, or simple self-centeredness, you most likely didn't receive a solid, healthy foundation for self-discovery. You may have been given the message early on that your feelings, needs, and desires were unimportant or secondary to your parent's. When you expressed your wants and needs, you may have even been made to feel dismissed, selfish, or guilty.¹ In some cases, the parent-child roles were reversed. You carried the weight of responsibilities you weren't equipped to handle as a child. This may have been necessary for

your emotional or physical survival. For example, if you had an alcoholic parent, you may have had to make meals and/or take care of siblings from a very young age. Maybe your parent was in an abusive or dysfunctional relationship and heavily depended on you for support or comfort. Patterns of consistently rescuing or caring for your parent may have developed.

Or, perhaps you had a parent who made you feel that the only way you could be accepted, loved, or “good enough” for them was to suppress your own thoughts, needs, opinions, and desires. We have a strong and natural desire for our parents’ approval, so we learn to adapt our behavior and expressions to their preferences and standards.

Can you relate?

These childhood messages and experiences can cause us to link our acceptance, purpose, and value to our ability to care for others physically and/or emotionally, make others happy, and gain their approval. This can follow us into adulthood, leading us to sacrifice and accommodate others in ways that are draining and destructive—to us and to them as well. Yet the driving need to feel self-worth, purpose, and value runs so deep that we are often willing to sacrifice our physical, mental, and emotional health in order to meet it.

Sadly, our “helping” isn’t true helping at all. It often actually protects others from experiencing the consequences of their choices, further enabling and encouraging them to continue in those damaging patterns. We become so enmeshed with someone else that we mold our behavior and opinions to fit what they seem to want or need, preventing us from discovering who we truly are and what we have to offer, independent of our performance or success at “fixing” or pleasing others.

Codependency can cause us to unconsciously be drawn to those who are similar to our parent(s). We look for others who we can help, rescue, and “fix” in order to continue to fill our ongoing need to feel valuable and important. The codependent’s draw to “needy” people means that we often find ourselves in draining or abusive one-sided relationships. We often think of people with codependency entering into romantic relationships with those

with alcoholism or other addictions. While that is true, unhealthy self-sacrifice can exhibit itself in all types of relationships—romantic, friendships, parental, and/or working relationships.

In healthy relationships, there is a natural “give-and-take.” Over time, both people in the relationship provide and receive a relatively balanced degree of love, support, and understanding. This beneficial bond promotes individual growth, strength, and a sense of resilience. At the same time, each person has a very clear sense of their own identity, value, and purpose separate from the other person. In a codependent relationship, each person has his/her dysfunctional role. One person is the “taker” and plays the victim role, while the other person is the “giver,” willing to sacrifice their own well-being in order to please the other person.² In other words, one person creates the chaos and the other person cleans it up.

We may think it’s because we love or care about the other person, but it’s a distorted form of love. In truth, if we are really honest with ourselves, we may love the sense of worth and identity caring for the person gives us more than we love the person. The codependent needs to be needed. We twist ourselves into a pretzel—changing our behavior and our personalities—in order to try to make the other person happy.

While maintaining the relationship may damage, exhaust, and frustrate us, we are hesitant to do anything to risk losing it. Our value and purpose is far too tangled up and invested in its survival.



A very fine line exists between the desire to help others and needing to help others. It comes down to motive.

Barking up the wrong tree

A very fine line exists between the desire to help others and needing to help others. In our experience, it comes down to motive. Why do you want to help others? Is it because you genuinely have their best interests at heart? Or is the goal to gain their approval or make you feel good about yourself? Is it necessary for you to feel valuable? Maybe investing in someone else is your way of avoiding taking risks and learning how to live and thrive inde-

pendently. If the answer is more about filling a need in *you*—for recognition, value, control, or security—than in helping the other person, you may be codependent. **From our personal and clinical experience, other symptoms of codependency include:**

- **Low Self-Esteem.** When we rely on others' feelings about us for our sense of value, we will always feel insecure about ourselves. People's feelings and opinions of us are notoriously unreliable, often misguided, and based on incomplete information or their own wounds or self-serving motives.
- **“Chameleon” like behavior.** If our worth is tied to how others need or feel about us, we will adapt or suppress our own feelings, thoughts, and opinions to be accepted or loved by the other person. As a result, we often don't even know what we enjoy, like, or feel.
- **Assuming the role of rescuer or problem solver.** We take care of the other person. Since taking care of or “fixing” someone else is the source of our value, we often make excuses for the other person's inappropriate or irresponsible behavior.
- **Difficulty setting boundaries or saying “no”** even if it negatively impacts your physical, mental, and emotional health. This is often referred to as “people pleasing.”
- **Suppressing our own needs and feelings** in order not to upset the other person. We feel guilty for thinking about ourselves and our needs. However, over time, we often become angry and resentful toward the other person. Our needs and desires are too strong to be suppressed indefinitely.

Free to flourish

One of the most devastating consequences of codependency is that because we are so focused on being who others want us to be, we miss out on discovering who *we* are. We miss out on our own personal, individual journey of self-discovery and development. That journey is the one where we learn what we enjoy, where we discover our talents, gifts, and qualities that we missed because we are too busy taking care of others. We miss walking out the plan and purpose for which we were created. And those around us miss out, too.

Finding that path to who we really are requires us to face hard truths about ourselves. We may have to admit that all of our “helping” is really more about *us* than about *them*. We may have to acknowledge that the people who we want so much to love us actually aren’t healthy enough to be capable of it. Those realizations can rock our world. But as the truth is exposed, the light can shine in. When we let go of pursuing relationships, performance, and “rescuing” as our source of value, we begin to discover the *real* us—the one buried beneath all that caretaking and enabling.

And trust us, we are of immense value. *We* are worth discovering.



I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

Psalm 139:14 (NIV)

Keep Growing!

A seed of encouragement

From the time I was 15 years old, I was never without a boyfriend. I shifted my choices, opinions, and preferences to whatever I thought would make men want me, whatever I thought would make them happy. When one relationship ended, I looked for my next “fix.” I needed men’s approval to feel beautiful and worthwhile. In Chapter Five, you read Debbie’s Truth Story. Debbie’s story is much like my mother’s. My own mother’s long history of failed relationships profoundly affected my life and my view of men. Our relationship was strained and rocky as I entered young adulthood. I felt like she was giving me relationship advice that she had never followed herself. But she is also the person who helped lead me to and continues to walk me through my healing.

When I was pregnant with my second child, my marriage—and my self-esteem—crumbled. My pregnancy prevented me from running to another man. I was forced, for the first time, to be alone long enough to reflect on why my relationships always ended so badly. At the same time, I was watching my mom take steps to get healthier. She was still in an unhealthy relationship, but it was clear that her choices and mindsets were changing. So when my marriage was struggling, I reached out to her. And she was there for me. She didn’t try to give me advice. She simply said, “What do you need from me?” That love and acceptance was pivotal for me.

I had some knowledge of God; but for the first time, I began to truly pour out my issues and problems to Him instead of looking to another man to make me feel valuable. I also went to a counselor who asked some hard questions that challenged me to consider why I missed the “red flags” in so many of the men that I had dated. At first I was defensive, but I gradually realized how I kept missing obvious warning signs. I began to see how my identity was so wrapped up in meeting men’s wants and needs that I didn’t even know who I was.

Through that process and finding support through my church, I began to understand how I was repeating the patterns of my childhood. My upbringing had profoundly affected my view of men, of myself, and my view of God as Father. As I began to forgive, my relationship with God began to grow stronger and deeper. My relationship with my mother also began to heal. At times, this was an extremely challenging, painful journey. But it has been worth every step.

As I let go of looking to men for my value, I began to discover who I am. I began to explore what I liked and found my purpose. The internal battle between being who I am and who I thought others wanted me to be has ceased. I have the peace of living an authentic life. While I'm compassionate toward others and their struggles, I no longer feel responsible for "fixing" them because my identity is no longer tied to others. The people in my life now are positive and want to grow, too. They challenge me to continue to grow.

I used to run away to a new man or a new distraction to avoid taking a hard look at my choices and behaviors. But when I finally quit running, I found someone valuable and beautiful, someone I grew to love: *Me*.

—Lisa Rowe, LCSW

Chapter Resources

1. Carly Breit, "You May Be In a Codependent Relationship. Here's How to Overcome It," *Time*, August 2, 2018, <https://time.com/5349927/codependent-relationship-signs/>.
2. Leon Seltzer, Ph.D, "Codependent or Simply Dependent: What's the Big Difference?" *Psychology Today*, December 11, 2014, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/evolution-the-self/201412/codependent-or-simply-dependent-what-s-the-big-difference>.