

YOU, FIRST

SOUTH ASIAN *Therapists.org*

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A Note From Raj

As we were pulling the content together and brainstorming the articles, I found myself exclaiming 'of COURSE!' on numerous occasions.

It's no secret that I've been in therapy since I was a young child, but what was most shocking for me was that codependency has never come up as a theme. No therapist has ever discussed it with me or even named it as such, even though it is so clear that I have codependent tendencies.

It might be because I've never had a South Asian therapist (until now).

Codependency is usually something therapists look out for in patients who have had an alcoholic or abusive parent. I had neither of these and so perhaps therapists didn't think codependency was a problem for me.

Oh, but it is. And anyone with an understanding of South Asian culture would realize (as I now have), that codependency is a staple in many, if not most, South Asian families.

I sincerely hope that reading this month's workbook is as eye opening for you as writing it was for me.

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Sital Panesar

Notes From Our Resident Therapist

I feel this month's focus on codependency is perfectly timed. As we start to move slowly out of Covid restrictions, we might be reflecting on what impact 'lockdown' has had on us and our relationships and whether pandemic-imposed isolation with partners, friends, and/or family members has forced us into a kind of pressure cooker for unhealthy attachment.

The term 'codependency' has recently taken on variations of meaning in modern culture. It's sometimes used as a vague phrase for clingy displays of affection or jealous insecurity. And though there is a spectrum for these kinds of behavioral traits, severe codependency goes a lot deeper than this, which usually means insecure or anxious attachment styles.

Now, you'd be forgiven for thinking codependency is only experienced with a partner, but it can be associated with any significant person in your life, (con't)

(con't) and is marked by an overwhelming need to please, which in time, diminishes your own identity, often without realising it. Thinking of the South Asian family dynamics, codependency traits are formed in early childhood through our relationships with our parents and caregivers.

For those of us who already have codependent tendencies, these isolation periods might have exacerbated them, which in turn, might have led to increased anxieties and diminished self-worth and self-esteem. I have definitely seen a rise in clients wanting to explore and examine their codependent relationships in the therapy room. So while I am saying that restrictions over the past year have triggered many of us to fall back into subconscious tendencies, they've also led to positive self-reflection.

Many of my clients have told me that having fewer distractions and avoidance mechanisms around has meant that they've had more time to notice their own behavior, recognize it as problematic, and seek support in working through it all. I've even found myself saying 'I want to use my time to work on what's important to me', and what better way to start, than to dive right into this month's workbook!

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What is codependency?

We see this phrase thrown around a lot, especially on social media, but what does it actually mean?

Codependency is pretty complicated but in its simplest form, it is an imbalanced relationship where one person's self-esteem and self-worth come from how much they feel they can sacrifice themselves for another. Over-helping and rescuing are characteristics of codependency.

What does codependency look like?

Codependency is much more than just everyday clinginess - it is much more extreme and is characterized by an extreme need or desire to be needed and to please others.

A codependent is someone who lacks the confidence to exist on their own terms. They think their worth as a person is related to how much they are needed by, approved of, or can do for others. They tend to deemphasize their own needs and opinions and focus on or prioritize the needs and opinions of others instead. Extreme people pleasing, feeling compelled to rescue others or taking on others' problems as if they are your own are all hallmarks of codependency.

People who are prone to codependent relationships tend to be highly empathetic and attuned to the needs of others. They're likely to impulsively help or give to others and may consciously or unconsciously try to boost their low confidence and self esteem by pushing themselves to be useful or helpful to others - even they don't want to.

Ok, so why is codependency such a bad thing? Codependent people just sound like caring helpful souls!



On the surface it might seem like people who are codependent are just nice helpful caring people and that codependency isn't a bad or unhealthy thing. But it's important to try to distinguish codependency from healthy dependency and healthy assistance from dysfunctional helping.

The following page has some examples that illustrate the difference between codependency and healthy dependency.

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Codependency vs. Healthy Dependency

(from Sharon Martin LCSW)

Healthy Dependency	Codependency
Mutual reliance on each other; a balanced give and take.	One person does most of the giving and receives little support or help in return.
Help promotes growth, learning, and self-sufficiency.	Overbearing assistance is disguised as help and it creates dependency and stunts personal growth.
A sense of being your own separate, independent person.	Enmeshment or merging of identity and feelings so that neither person functions like a whole, independent person.
Feel free to be your authentic self.	Lose sight of your own interests, goals, values and instead do and say what the other person wants.
Fully experience your own feelings.	Tend to absorb other people's feelings and suppress your own.
You know you have value even when others are upset with you.	Rely on the other person to make you feel worthy or loveable.
Feel safe and secure in your relationship.	You fear rejection, criticism, and abandonment.
Ability to disagree or say no without guilt or shame.	Fear of conflict, poor boundaries, and expectation of perfection.
Honesty and the ability to admit mistakes help promote growth.	Denial and defensiveness keep things stagnant.

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Where does codependency come from?



Like many things, codependency is usually learned. People who grow up to be codependent adults probably saw or were part of codependent relationships in childhood, either with their parents or with their extended family.

The child might have been taught that focussing on themselves in any way is selfish and that their needs should come after the needs of their parents or other family members. A child who is raised in an environment like this gradually learns to ignore what they need and begins to figure out ways to constantly anticipate, meet and prioritize the needs of others.

This can create gaps in the emotional understanding of the child and rob them of the confidence to be themselves and do things based on their own interests and desires. Instead, the child grows up to focus on doing things that might be helpful or pleasing to others because they begin to see their worth as being directly related to how helpful or pleasing they can be to others.

If you are raised in an environment where your worth is related to how useful or helpful you are for everyone else then as an adult you might be drawn to relationships where you can be useful or helpful because these situations make you feel good about yourself. A classic example of this is being attracted to partners who need 'fixing' or have substance abuse problems.

Additionally, if your inner narrative tells you that you only have value as a person if you are helpful or useful to others or that the purpose of your existence is to facilitate the lives of others then it would be rational for you to fear a scenario where your help is no longer needed or wanted. To deal with this fear you might subconsciously create codependency in your relationships by fostering toxic dependency. Toxic dependency results from something known as 'dysfunctional helping'. This is where people help others even in instances where it would be more helpful to refuse assistance. A classic example of this is someone who continues to fund an addict's habit because they can't say no to the addict's pleas for a fix or a parent who continues to do things for a child well beyond childhood thereby limiting the child's ability to develop the skills necessary to do those tasks for themselves (i.e. spoon feeding beyond an appropriate age, co-sleeping into teenage years, doing an adult child's laundry or cooking, etc).

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Codependency and South Asian Culture

South Asian culture often heavily advocates and promotes codependency by putting sacrifice and selflessness on a pedestal. If you've reached this part of the workbook then a lot of the things we've said so far about codependency might have resonated with you.

Many of us were taught that loving someone means putting them ahead of ourselves. This is often modeled for us as children of immigrants by parents who worked till they were burnt out to provide for their families. Many of our parents saw self-care as a selfish, lazy, luxury, one that they did not have time for and one that they couldn't or wouldn't prioritise. Perpetual self neglect is a running theme amongst South Asian parents and it's often presented as being for the good of the children or for the broader family.

If you grew up in a family like this, it might have taught you that love is sacrifice. Love is doing everything you can for someone else. Love is putting others first. Love is saving and rescuing others because letting them fail is evil.

A codependent relationship is a tale of two halves. The first half comprises a person who puts the other person's needs ahead of their own.



The second half comprises a person who is deeply dependent, needs rescuing and struggles to do things for themselves.

This plays out in South Asian family dynamics on the gender axis in quite a startling way. South Asian women are often taught that their duty is to serve their family at all costs and are often made to feel like they exist to relieve their family of the burden they might have put on them by being born. South Asian men, on the other hand, are taught to need a woman, first as a mother, then as a wife. They are raised to allow their mothers to do everything for them and observe maternal models of love that could be described as smothering or overbearing where independence is framed as betrayal. Often when some South Asian men do try to do things for themselves, their mothers react defensively and treat it as an insult, guilting the son into defaulting to dependence to placate the mother, even though the dependence might now be unhealthy or dysfunctional. This mother-son codependency dynamic usually only ends when the man's dependence is transferred from his mother onto his wife where the cycle will continue from a new angle.

But just because you are the caretaker in one relationship doesn't mean you will assume that role in every relationship you have. If you grow up with your parents exhibiting codependent caretaking with you, you might assume the role of codependent caretaker in your friendships, or professional or romantic relationships. It's not always clear cut and the roles can change in each dynamic.

But the point is the same: codependent caretaking is something we learn by virtue of being taught that our worth as human beings is related to how much we can do for someone else. When you are raised in a culture where sacrifice, service and selflessness are celebrated as the ultimate virtues, developing healthy relationships that don't incorporate codependent behaviors can be very difficult.

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Symptoms of codependency

(from Sharon Martin LCSW)

You suppress or numb your feelings and absorb other people's feelings.

You have trouble saying "no", setting boundaries, being assertive, and asking for what you need/want.

You feel *responsible* for other people's feelings and choices; you try to rescue them, fix them; you feel compelled to try to make them feel better or solve their problems.

You **routinely prioritize other people's needs** and wants above your own; don't practice self-care routinely and feel guilty when you do.

You feel frustrated and resentful when others don't want your help or advice.

YOU'RE AFRAID OF CONFLICT.

You derive a sense of purpose from taking care of others. Your relationships can have an obsessive quality.

You have difficulty trusting and being emotionally vulnerable.

Your **fear of abandonment and rejection** result in people-pleasing and tolerating mistreatment.

You want to **feel in control** and have a hard time adjusting when things don't go according to plan or the way you want.

YOU HAVE DIFFICULTY ACCEPTING HELP.

You're hard-working, overly responsible, and may give to the point of exhaustion or resentment. You have perfectionist tendencies.

You have low self-esteem, feel unlovable, or *not good enough.*

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So you might have learnt to be codependent...

...what can be done about it?

If you've reached this part of the workbook and realize that you exhibit signs of codependency, you're not alone. Many South Asians are in the same boat. There are a few things that you can do about it.

Firstly, it is important to try and change your inner narrative and remember that your value is not linked to how useful you are to others but that you are valuable by virtue of your existence alone. One of the first most important steps in breaking cycles of codependency is divorcing your value from how much you can do for others.



This is often the root of codependency and fixing this script is key to changing codependent patterns.

Secondly, boundaries and codependency are intimately linked. Codependent caretaking often needs a lack of boundaries to exist and one of the best ways to stop codependent caretaking is to end cycles of toxic dependency or dysfunctional helping by becoming more comfortable with saying no. Codependency is often linked to being unable to separate yourself from other people and their problems, so learning how to separate yourself, say no and be honest about your needs and desires is a good place to start.

As with anything, codependency is complicated and can manifest itself in many different ways within the same person. You might be a codependent caretaker in one relationship and be taking advantage of someone's codependency in another. The best thing to do, as always, is to work with a qualified professional on how to work through these patterns.

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Codependency Workbook

This workbook has been created in simple black & white formatting to allow you to print it simply and cheaply.

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Codependency workbook

Codependency often teaches us to adapt how we are feeling to unhealthily accommodate or appease the wants and needs of others. We learn that our feelings and needs aren't as important as the needs and wants of our parents (for example) and so learn to set our wishes aside to do what would make them happy instead. In what ways did you or do you prioritize others feelings and moods ahead of your own?

If you didn't have to worry about what anyone thinks or what other people want you to do, what would you have done differently?

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Codependency workbook

Was codependency modelled for you as a child? If yes, who modelled it and how? What did you learn from these individuals' behavior?

Codependency can often create a constant sense of yearning. Many codependents are continually yearning for approval, love and validation. What do you think you are yearning for?

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Codependency workbook

Based on the last question, if your answer was, for example, that you are yearning for approval, what things do you do to seek out that approval? Are these behaviors healthy or unhealthy?

One of the worst things about codependency is that it can be exhausting and leave you feeling like you are constantly chasing approval and love. If you were to swap out codependency for healthy dependency in your life, how do you think your life and mental well-being would improve?

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Codependency workbook

Journal prompts

- Sometimes I do what would make other people happy instead of what I want to do. I do this because____ and it makes me feel ____

- 'It is my duty to help others, especially my family, even if I don't want to, or even if helping them means setting aside what I need or sacrificing my money or time.' This statement makes me feel ____

- Codependency can teach us that we have to be perfect in order to be loved or liked. What normal imperfections do I have that I've really beaten myself up over? How can I stop being so hard on myself?

- When I tell myself 'My life and existence has worth and that worth is not related to how much I can do for others or how much I can help or please others' I feel____

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