

Partners & Paradox

Probably the main question in the minds of most codependent people who seek help is this: *Will my husband/wife/lover quit drinking or doping if I change?*

The only answer is a great big unequivocal maybe. There's no guarantee and no exceptions to the rule.

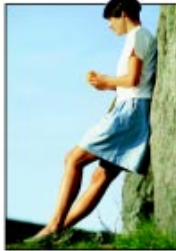
The fact is that addicts usually don't change until addiction problems outweigh perceived pleasures or benefits.

And it's harder to shift that balance, still, when someone that a dependent person loves covers for them, makes excuses, and helps minimize the seriousness of plainly destructive behavior.

Because of the denial associated with chemical dependency, addicts and alcoholics generally don't go looking for help until they don't see many other choices.

The paradox is that codependents have two choices.

They can remain accomplices to their partner's addiction or they can love them enough to let them experience the effects of their chemical use, love them enough to let them feel the pain they create, love them enough to get them started getting well. ❤️



First things first. Codependents may love their partners, but they need to help themselves first.



This is one in a series of publications on drugs, behavior, and health published by Do It Now Foundation. Please call or write for a list of current titles, or visit our web site at www.doitnow.org.



CO-DEPENDENCE



The Partner Paradox

A DO IT NOW PUBLICATION BY GAYLE ROSELLINI

Family Ties

Unless you've been through it yourself, it's hard to imagine the turmoil of someone who's married (or otherwise intimately linked) to an alcoholic or drug abuser.

Their lives are filled with guilt, exasperation, loneliness, anxiety, resentment, fear, and depression.

Their ineffectual attempts to come to grips with their partner's drinking or drug use may even trigger physical or emotional illness of their own—one reason that addiction is sometimes called a "family disease."



Role conflict. The chaos of codependency was vividly depicted by Nicholas Cage and Elizabeth Shue in the film "Leaving Las Vegas."

Need proof? Ask people who are enmeshed with a drinking alcoholic or an active drug abuser and they'll tell you they'd do anything to make their partners change.

Just don't believe them. Because as often as not, they're lying—or confused.

The difficult truth is that a husband or wife (or friend or lover) *can't* make an addict or an alcoholic change. They can't control out-of-control behavior or drinking.

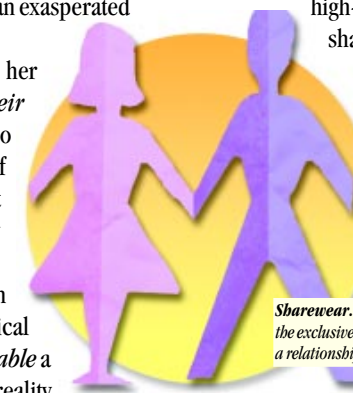
The only thing they *can* change is themselves, and the sooner they find that out, the faster they discover how they can *really* help their partner.

Partners & Pain

"Why should I be the one to change?" an exasperated wife might groan. "It's *his* problem!"

Sorry. In case she hasn't noticed, it's her problem, too. By blaming partners for *their* own mixed-up emotions and refusing to deal with their *own* behavior, partners of chemically-dependent people become what addiction treatment professionals today call *codependents*.

Codependents are people who, through ignorance or fear (and maybe a little chemical dependency of their own), can actually *enable* a dependent person to keep on avoiding the reality of a drug or drinking problem.



Sharewear. Chemical dependency isn't the exclusive domain of either partner in a relationship. It's community property.

Codependents will deny to family, friends, and anyone else who'll listen (or demand an explanation) that a partners' drinking or drug use is unusual.



It's rarely a conscious choice, but in trying to protect themselves, their partner, or their children from embarrassment (or worse), codependents will deny, cover-up, excuse, and even lie about the extent of the problem.

That's too bad, because all they usually get for their trouble is *more* trouble—and an extension of their partner's chemical career. Because the sad truth is that people generally don't seek help for problems they *don't* admit that they have—especially addicts.

Why do codependents do it? Why do they stand in the way of a potentially life-threatening health problem?

There are a lot of answers—mostly one-syllable words we all know, including shame, fear, guilt, hope, and love.

Addiction, the Disease

Addiction is recognized as a treatable disease.

That doesn't mean it's something you catch—like the flu. It's a disease that develops over time, like diabetes or high-blood pressure. Still, many people attach a shameful stigma to the addicted person and his or her family.

This stigma is based on stereotypes that do more harm than good: of drunken louts and no-good dopers, weak-willed, irresponsible characters who are both selfish and hopeless. The truth is that of an estimated 13 million American alcoholics (and

5.5 million addicts in need of treatment), probably fewer than 10 percent fit the descrip-

tion of the hopeless drunk or brain-addled junkie.

Most are responsible, hard-working people—when they're straight or sober. The ranks of recovering people include successful athletes, entertainers, business people, even members of Congress and former First Ladies.

Nevertheless, codependents will often deny to family, friends, and anyone else who'll listen (or demand an explanation) that their partner's drinking or drug use is unusual, even if he or she displays signs of blatant alcoholism or addiction. (See "Reality Check," below.)

But even though codependents may ignore the symptoms, the symptoms don't go away.

Where they often go, instead, is from bad to worse.

■ Crazy Love

Even when codependents recognize the problem for what it is, they often make the mistake of trying to control their partner's *consumption*—the amount an alcoholic drinks or a user uses—while fighting desperately to keep the bottom from falling out from under the family.

They may count drinks or water whiskey. They may hide a stash or flush pills down the toilet.

All *that* usually succeeds in doing is to drive the drinking or drug use underground.

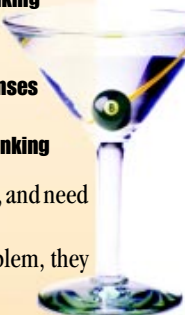
✓ REALITY CHECKS

Although problem drinkers (and their families) try to deny or minimize them, signs of alcoholism are obvious and can include any of the following:

- Drinking too much, too often
- Drinking rapidly or gulping drinks
- Black-outs or memory loss after drinking
- Hiding bottles or sneaking drinks
- Belligerence or abusiveness while drinking
- Drinking alone
- Impaired sexual performance
- Arrests for drunk-driving or other offenses
- Drinking to handle a hangover
- Being late or absent at work due to drinking

Symptoms of drug dependence are similar, and need to be taken just as seriously.

Bottom line: If *you* think they have a problem, they probably do. ■



Then they can only *guess* about the extent of actual use. And since chemical dependency tends toward increasing levels of use, a dependent person's behavior often becomes less predictable and more unreliable.

The result? The web of stress and unhappiness their partners live inside gets tighter all the time.

If you need proof, try juggling a partner's dysfunctional moods and demands with one hand, while balancing an overdrawn checkbook, bewildered friends and angry family, and one's own anxiety and depression with the other.

Perhaps the worst feeling of all is the guilty fear that maybe the dependent partner wouldn't drink or use so much if he or she were a better partner, better lover, better person.

Of course, that's crazy. But that's often the way it is.



Tougher love: Relationships are tricky even when both partners are sober.

■ Love & Recovery

Codependents usually don't want their relationships to fall apart, even though in moments of anger they may talk about divorce or threaten to leave. And the most common reason they give for staying with a drinking or using partner is the simplest reason of all: Love.

And in the name of love, they hang on to each shred of hope that their partner will get straight or somehow transform into a social drinker or a weekend user. In the meantime (and while waiting for a miracle that never comes), they invent excuses for their kids, for relatives and friends, for the boss or supervisor.

Then, when the dependent partner turns up, remorseful and contrite, after another binge or bender, the codependent accepts the tearful apologies and believes the heartfelt promises. Again.

If the partners of codependents are sick, so are codependents. On the other hand, they can *both* recover.

But codependents can help the process along immeasurably by realizing that *they can help themselves*.

That's why they need to get help. Because *their* problem isn't their partner's drinking or drug problem—not any more. It's their own fear, their own anger, their own anxiety, their own resentment.

The most common reason codependents give for staying with a drinking or drugging partner is the simplest reason of all: Love.



■ Dues & Don'ts

If you're codependent and want to take control of your life, you've already paid your dues. Now, you have **do's** to pay attention to, and just as many **don'ts**.

Start by doing the following:

- **Learn about chemical dependency.** It's a disease that thrives on ignorance.
- **Talk to a therapist.** Well-meaning friends and others untrained in addictions can do more harm than good.
- **Contact Al-Anon or Codependents Anonymous.** Attend several meetings before you decide if they're for you. Each is listed in the white pages of the phone book.
- **Be honest with your kids.** They're not deaf or blind when it comes to family problems. Plain talk from you can relieve some of their fears and insecurities.
- **Be patient.** Change is difficult and slow. You won't solve all your problems overnight, but you'll improve your ability to cope and resolve problems with time.

In learning to cope with your partner's chemical dependency, there are also specific things you should avoid doing. Here are some of the major don'ts:

- ▶ **Don't lie, make excuses, or cover up.**
- ▶ **Don't blame** yourself for your partner's behavior.
- ▶ **Don't make threats**, unless you can follow through.
- ▶ **Don't be ashamed.**
- ▶ **Don't try to control** or regulate your partner's use.
- ▶ **Don't protect your partner** from the consequences of his or her behavior.
- ▶ **Don't allow yourself or your kids to be abused**—physically, emotionally, or sexually.
- ▶ **Don't nag, criticize, or argue** over trivia. It doesn't resolve anything and usually makes matters worse.
- ▶ **Don't give up.** Recovery can be a long, slow process, but it really *is* worth the struggle. And you really *can* make it if you try.

▶ ARE YOU CODEPENDENT?

If drinking or drugs are an issue in your relationship, you may be codependent—or on your way to becoming one. If you're not sure exactly *where* you stand, just ask yourself:

- ▶ Do you get defensive if family or friends suggest that your partner has a problem with drugs or drinking?
- ▶ Do you try to control his alcohol or drug consumption?
- ▶ Have you ever lied or made excuses to your partner's employer about tardiness or absences?
- ▶ Do you cover up your partner's chemical use so your children won't know?
- ▶ Have you limited your social activities because of your partner's drinking or drug use?
- ▶ Do you cover up when she is caught in a lie or embarrassing situation related to drugs or drinking?
- ▶ Have you offered your partner a "social drink" (or toke or hit) when he was on the wagon?
- ▶ Have you minimized the role chemical use plays in family arguments?

If you answered yes to two or more questions, you may have a problem. For your own sake (and your partner's), contact Al-Anon, Codependents Anonymous, or another support group or treatment organization.

Your relationship, health, and peace of mind depend on it. ☺

