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## **RELATIONSHIP ADDICTION**

We have heard about all sorts of addictions: alcohol and drugs, gambling, sex, pornography, the list can go on. What is common in all addictions is that a person has an overwhelming compulsion (that is, they cannot hold themselves back) to engage in a harmful act of whose dangers they are aware.

I want to add another addiction to the list: RELATIONSHIPS! Think of the following as examples of relationship addictions: A woman who was raised in a family with an abusive father marries an abusive husband and stays; A person divorces a gambler and then marries an alcoholic; A pensioner parent phones her/his married children daily and offers advice on how to run their lives.

All these people are relationship addicts. They cannot let go of a relationship no matter how harmful it is to them. You could proverbially describe them as door mats on which other people rub their dirty feet. Despite all the hardships a relationship may bring, these people stay committed to it and may even kill for it (apologies to Julius Malema).

In this blog I discuss three issues about relationship addicts. First, why they cannot let go of harmful relationships, second, why it is important to let go and, third, some ideas on how to get out of such relationships.

### **1. Why is it that people find it hard to let go even when they know that a situation is bad for them?**

The answer lies in a syndrome that a British psychologist coined codependency. This term, which has got nothing to do with a healthy picture of togetherness that it conjures up, refers to unhealthy, self-sacrificing and, sometimes, self-destructive ways of relating to other people. Codependents are people who are dependent on others for their self-worth and live for other people. They have variously been described as “enablers” or “relationship addicts”. That is, they have a strong sense of being needed and will go to great lengths to please others, even to their own detriment. Examples of codependents would be women who stay in relationships with abusive men, people who always get involved with, or get married to alcoholics, domestic workers who remain loyal to oppressive employers, doctors and other

health professionals who go all out to “serve the community”, parents who dote on their children to a point of spoiling them rotten and so on. They are people who allow themselves to stay “trapped” in unproductive relationships and ignore all danger signs in such relationships. Because of their desperate need to be loved and approved, they can be likened to chameleons that take colours from their surroundings and will not be true to themselves - for them others come first and they will subordinate their own needs to those of others. That is why they stay in abusive relationships. They love “till it hurts”, which is a very unhealthy way of loving. They can also be likened to puppets on strings and are wholly under the control of a puppet master (the powerful person in the relationship).

It is not clear how codependency starts and generalizations cannot be made that easily. From what I have seen, here is what I think : It is certainly a learned behaviour. Codependents learn very early in life to put up a front and not be themselves. They would typically emerge from dysfunctional families where there is a lot of suppressed conflict or inconsistency in parenting so that the children never know what to expect. The families of future codependents may (externally) be “model” families in the community but they may have “skeletons in the cupboard” in private. One of the parents may be a relationship addict him/herself such as a dedicated “servant” of the community, while the other parent may (secretly or overtly) be an alcoholic, a gambler or have some kind of personality disorder. The psychological needs of the children in such dysfunctional families may be neglected so that the children develop ways of “attracting” love to themselves. They may do this through pleasing others to the extreme so that as adults they would become addicted to other people. That charm that codependents learn to exude so early in life often makes them attractive to the wrong types: the abusive spouse, an overbearing boss, alcoholics and other drug addicts, and so on. Codependency explains why some women (and men) would leave an abusive partner only to get involved with an equally, if not more abusive, partner. In a relationship pattern like that, abuse has become so internalised that the person cannot define her/himself apart from it - abuse, therefore, assumes a sort of secondary identity. Getting such people to break free is quite a challenge because they will often have self-defeating conversations such as “What will happen to me if I leave this man/woman that I love so much”. Their addiction to others blinds them to the possibilities that exist outside the relationship.

## **2. Why would it be important to let go?**

It is important to let go ASAP because such relationships are like a spider’s web: The longer you get caught in it and the longer you stay,

the harder it is to get out. It is important that codependents discover that they have an identity separate from the “host” and they have to allow themselves to experiment with independence. Until they discover that they can still be someone without the host they will become trapped in the relationship to a point where they develop serious psychiatric/psychological disorders. Staying in unproductive relationships psychologically paralyzes a person and it becomes difficult to have meaningful relationships with others.

### **3. Practical advice on how to get out**

The first thing - and the most difficult because codependents seldom realize they have a problem - is to acknowledge that one is an individual of worth and will not be anybody's puppet. Drawing that line will make it possible for the person to realize that they have their own needs which only they can fulfill. Secondly, they must have the courage to disappoint others. They must learn that it is not wrong to say NO! when they do not feel comfortable with doing something for others. Once they discover that saying NO! to someone who matters does not bring the heavens down, they are on the blissful road to discovery and from there on it becomes easier to cut the proverbial puppet strings. Thirdly, they need to be kind to themselves. Making oneself a priority in life is a surefire way to gaining independence. Independence in this regard should not be confused with selfishness. Selfishness is looking at your own needs without any regard for the next person. Independence, on the other hand means you are able to be kind to your own needs while making room for others in your life. A person who is independent in a healthy way is able to engage in meaningful and fulfilling relationships with others. It is only the extreme form of independence, which is unhealthy (that is another topic you might want to write about in future).

What I say in the foregoing paragraph may sound easy. It is not. Often people cannot break free on their own. It helps to speak to a psychologist so that the nature of one's codependency is understood (there are unique dynamics in every codependent relationship) and relevant interventions can be developed.

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