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Codependents' Guide to the Twelve Steps

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Codependent No More
How To Stop Controlling Others and Start Caring for Yourself

Melody Beattie



Rebuilding Lives, Restoring Families, Building Communities

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INFORMATION & EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

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*"It is not easy to find
happiness in ourselves, and
it is not possible to find it
elsewhere."*

Agnes Repplier, *The Treasure Chest*

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For helping make this book possible, I thank:

God, my mother, David, my children, Scott Egleston, Sharon George, Joanne Marcuson, and all the codependent people who have learned from me and allowed me to learn from them.

This book is dedicated to me.

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PREFACE TO THE 1992 EDITION

Back in the early eighties, when I first envisioned writing a book about codependency when I was desperately struggling to sort through my own pain I vowed that if I ever figured out what happened to me and what I needed to do to get better, I'd write a book about it. That book, I decided, would be warm, gentle, nonjudgmental, nontechnical.

It would be kind. Because that's what I needed information and kindness. I needed help with my healing process from my codependency issues.

About five years later, I sat down to write that book. Just separated from my husband of ten years, I went on welfare for four months, to help me support myself and my two children, Nichole and Shane, while I wrote *Codependent No More*.

When I wondered how I, a nonexpert, could write a book like that, I took comfort by telling myself that it was okay to say what I thought because only a few people would read it anyway. I also spent a great deal of time on the introduction, striving not only to introduce the book, but to introduce the concept of *codependency* the word to a world that, for the most part, had not heard about it.

Now, another five years later, I've been asked to write an anniversary preface to a book that has sold over two million copies.

"What do I put in it?" I asked my editor and friend, Rebecca Post, from Hazelden.

"Tell about the changes that have happened to women, to people in our country, to *you*, since you wrote that book," she suggested.

"Hmmm," I pondered. "What changes have happened besides the Persian Gulf War, the breakdown of communism in the Soviet Union, and the Hill-Thomas hearings?"

I turn on the television. The movie of the week, I can't remember the name, is a story about a teenager struggling to deal with her alcoholism

and the impact of being raped. Her mother, a nurse, has worked valiantly to break free from a dysfunctional and abusive relationship with her husband, the girl's father. Throughout the movie, mother and daughter talk directly about not rescuing each other because of the diminishing effects of such behavior. The movie ends with the daughter playing a guitar and singing a song she's written about not being a victim anymore.

I walk into a church, one I haven't attended for a long time. The sermon is somewhat unusual this cold, Sunday winter

death.

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Many of you have written to me, saying how much I've helped you. Well, you've helped and touched me, too.

One woman wrote to me recently, saying she had read all my books and had been recovering from codependency for years. "I want to learn more, though," she wrote. "I want to go deeper into my codependency. Please write more about that."

Maybe we don't need to go deeper into our codependency. We can, instead, march forward into our destinies. We can remember and practice all we've learned about addictions, codependency, and abuse. With compassion and boundaries, we need to commit fully to loving God, ourselves, and others. We need to commit fully to trusting God, ourselves, and our process.

Then we can be open to the next step. We are on time, and we are where we need to be. We can be trusted. So can God. And letting go and gratitude still work. Keep your head up and your heart open. And let's see what's next. Happy five-year anniversary, *Codependent No More*.

MELODY BEATTIE

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INTRODUCTION

My first encounter with codependents occurred in the early sixties. This was before people, tormented by other people's behavior, were called *codependents*, and before people addicted to alcohol and other drugs were labeled *chemically dependent*. Although I didn't know *what* codependents were, I usually knew *who* they were. As an alcoholic and addict, I stormed through life, helping create other codependents.

Codependents were a necessary nuisance. They were hostile, controlling, manipulative, indirect, guilt producing, difficult to communicate with, generally disagreeable, sometimes downright hateful, and a hindrance to my compulsion to get high. They hollered at me, hid my pills, made nasty faces at me, poured my alcohol down the sink, tried to keep me from getting more drugs, wanted to know why I was doing this to them, and asked what was wrong with me. But they were always there, ready to rescue me from self-created disasters. The codependents in my life didn't understand me, and the misunderstanding was mutual. I didn't understand me, and I didn't understand them.

My first professional encounter with codependents occurred years later, in 1976. At that time in Minnesota, addicts and alcoholics had become *chemically dependent*, their families and friends had become *significant others*, and I had become a *recovering addict and alcoholic*. By then, I also worked as a counselor in the chemical dependency field, that vast network of institutions, programs, and agencies that helps chemically dependent people get well. Because I'm a woman and most of the significant others at that time were women, and because I had the least seniority and none of my co-workers wanted to do it, my employer at the Minneapolis treatment center told me to organize support groups for wives of addicts in the program.

I wasn't prepared for this task. I still found codependents hostile, controlling, manipulative, indirect, guilt producing, difficult to communicate with, and more.

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In my group, I saw people who felt responsible for the entire world, but they refused to take responsibility for leading

and living their own lives.

I saw people who constantly gave to others but didn't know how to receive. I saw people give until they were angry, exhausted, and emptied of everything. I saw some give until they gave up. I even saw one woman give and suffer so much that she died of "old age" and natural causes at age 33. She was the mother of five children and the wife of an alcoholic who had been sent to prison for the third time.

I worked with women who were experts at taking care of everyone around them, yet these women doubted their ability to take care of themselves.

I saw mere shells of people, racing mindlessly from one activity to another. I saw people-pleasers, martyrs, stoics, tyrants, withering vines, clinging vines, and, borrowing from H. Sackler's line in his play, *The Great White Hope*, "pinched up faces giving off the miseries."

Most codependents were obsessed with other people. With great precision and detail, they could recite long lists of the addict's deeds and misdeeds: what he or she thought, felt, did, and said; and what he or she didn't think, feel, do, and say. The codependents knew what the alcoholic or addict should and shouldn't do. And they wondered extensively why he or she did or didn't do it.

Yet these codependents who had such great insight into others couldn't see themselves. They didn't know what they were feeling. They weren't sure what they thought. And they didn't know what, if anything, they could do to solve their problems if, indeed, they had any problems other than the alcoholics.

It was a formidable group, these codependents. They were aching, complaining, and trying to control everyone and everything but themselves. And, except for a few quiet pioneers in family therapy, many counselors (including me) didn't know how to help them. The chemical dependency field was flourishing, but help focused on the addict. Literature and training on family therapy were scarce. What did codependents need? What did they want? Weren't they just an extension of the alco-

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holic, a visitor to the treatment center? Why couldn't they cooperate, instead of always making problems? The alcoholic had an excuse for being so crazy he was drunk. These significant others had no excuse. They were this way sober.

Soon, I subscribed to two popular beliefs. These crazy codependents (significant others) are sicker than the alcoholics. And, no wonder the alcoholic drinks; who wouldn't with a crazy spouse like that?

By then, I had been sober for a while. I was beginning to understand myself, but I didn't understand codependency. I tried, but couldn't until years later, when I became so caught up in the chaos of a few alcoholics that I stopped living my own life. I stopped thinking. I stopped feeling positive emotions, and I was left with rage, bitterness, hatred, fear, depression, helplessness, despair, and guilt. At times, I wanted to stop living. I had no energy. I spent most of my time worrying about people and trying to figure out how to control them. I couldn't say no (to anything but fun activities) if my life depended on it, which it did. My relationships with friends and family members were in shambles. I felt terribly victimized. I lost myself and didn't know how it had happened. I didn't know *what* had happened. I thought I was going crazy. And, I thought, shaking a finger at the people around me, it's their fault.

Sadly, aside from myself, nobody knew how badly I felt. My problems were my secret. Unlike the alcoholics and other troubled people in my life, I wasn't going around making big messes and expecting someone to clean up after me. In fact, next to the alcoholics, I looked good. I was so responsible, *so* dependable. Sometimes *I* wasn't sure I had a problem. I knew I felt miserable, but I didn't understand why my life wasn't working.

After floundering in despair for a while, I began to understand. Like many people who judge others harshly, I realized I had just taken a very long and painful walk in the shoes of those I had judged. I now understood those crazy codependents. I had become one.

Gradually, I began to climb out of my black abyss. Along the way, I developed a passionate interest in the subject of codependency. As a counselor (although I no longer worked full-time in the field, I still

considered myself one) and as a writer, my curiosity was provoked. As a "flaming, careening codependent" (a phrase borrowed from an Al-Anon member) who needed help, I also had a personal stake in the subject. What happens to people like me? How does it happen? Why? Most important, what do codependents need to do to feel better? And stay that way?

I talked to counselors, therapists, and codependents. I read the few available books on the subject and related topics. I reread the basic therapy books that have stood the test of time looking for ideas that applied. I went to meetings of Al-Anon, a self-help group based on the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous but geared toward the person who has been affected by another person's drinking.

Eventually, I found what I was seeking. I began to see, understand, and change. My life started working again. Soon, I was conducting another group for codependents at another Minneapolis treatment center. But this time, I had a vague notion of what I was doing.

I still found codependents hostile, controlling, manipulative, indirect, and all the things I had found them before. I still saw all the peculiar twists of personality I previously saw. But, I saw deeper.

I saw people who were hostile; they had felt so much hurt that hostility was their only defense against being crushed again. They were that angry because anyone who had tolerated what they had would be that angry.

They were controlling because everything around and inside them was out of control. Always, the dam of their lives and the lives of those around them threatened to burst and spew harmful consequences on everyone. And nobody but them seemed to notice or care.

I saw people who manipulated because manipulation appeared to be the only way to get anything done. I worked with people who were indirect because the systems they lived in seemed incapable of tolerating honesty.

I worked with people who thought they were going crazy because they had believed so many lies they didn't know what reality was.

I saw people who had gotten so absorbed in other people's problems they didn't have time to identify or solve their own. These were people who had cared so deeply, and often destructively, about other people that they had forgotten how to care about themselves. The codependents felt responsible for so much because the people around them felt responsible for so little; they were just taking up the slack.

I saw hurting, confused people who needed comfort, understanding, and information. I saw victims of alcoholism who didn't drink but were nonetheless victimized by alcohol. I saw victims struggling desperately to gain some kind of power over their perpetrators. They learned from me, and I learned from them.

Soon, I began to subscribe to some new beliefs about codependency. Codependents aren't crazier or sicker than alcoholics. But, they hurt as much or more. They haven't cornered the market on agony, but they have gone through their pain without the anesthetizing effects of alcohol or other drugs, or the other high states achieved by people with compulsive disorders. And the pain that comes from loving someone who's in trouble can be profound.

"The chemically dependent partner numbs the feelings and the non-abuser is doubled over in pain relieved only by anger and occasional fantasies," wrote Janet Geringer Woititz in an article from the book *Co-Dependency, An Emerging Issue*.

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Codependents are that way sober because they went through what they did sober.

No wonder codependents are so crazy. Who wouldn't be, after living with the people they've lived with?

It's been difficult for codependents to get the information and practical help they need and deserve. It's tough enough to convince alcoholics (or other disturbed people) to seek help. It's more difficult to convince codependents those who by comparison look, but don't feel, normal that they have problems.

Codependents suffered in the backdrop of the sick person. If they recovered, they did that in the background too. Until recently, many

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counselors (like me) didn't know what to do to help them. Sometimes codependents were blamed; sometimes they were ignored; sometimes they were expected to magically shape up (an archaic attitude that has not worked with alcoholics and doesn't help codependents either). Rarely were codependents treated as individuals who needed help to get better. Rarely were they given a personalized recovery program for their problems and their pain. Yet, by its nature, alcoholism and other compulsive disorders turn everyone affected by the illness into victims people who need help even if they are not drinking, using other drugs, gambling, overeating, or overdoing a compulsion.

That's why I wrote this book. It grew out of my research, my personal and professional experiences, and my passion for the subject. It is a personal and, in some places, prejudiced opinion.

I'm not an expert, and this isn't a technical book for experts. Whether the person you've let yourself be affected by is an alcoholic, gambler, foodaholic, workaholic, sexaholic, criminal, rebellious teenager, neurotic parent, another codependent, or any combination of the above, this book is for you, the codependent.

This book is not about how you can help your alcoholic or troubled person, although if you get better, his or her chance of recovery improves too. 2 There are plenty of good books on how to help the alcoholic. This book is about your most important and probably most neglected responsibility: taking care of yourself. It's about what you can do to start feeling better.

I've tried to round up some of the best, most helpful thoughts on codependency. I've included quotes from people I consider experts, to demonstrate their beliefs. I've also included case histories to show how people dealt with particular problems. Although I've changed names and certain details to protect privacy, all case histories are true and are not composites. I've inserted endnotes to document information, to suggest additional reading, and to attribute material to appropriate sources. But, much of what I've learned has been from many people and their similar thoughts on this subject. Many ideas have been handed down and passed

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around, and their sources have become indistinguishable. I've tried to attribute accurately, but in this field that is not always possible.

Although this is a self-help, how-to book, please remember it's not a cookbook for mental health. Each person is unique; each situation is unique. Try to tap into your own healing process. That may include seeking professional help, attending self-help groups such as Al-Anon, and calling on the assistance of a Power greater than yourself.

A friend, Scott Egleston, who is a professional in the mental health field, told me a therapy fable. He heard it from someone, who heard it from someone else. It goes:

Once upon a time, a woman moved to a cave in the mountains to study with a guru. She wanted, she said, to learn everything there was to know. The guru supplied her with stacks of books and left her alone so she could study. Every morning, the guru returned to the cave to monitor the woman's progress. In his hand, he carried a heavy wooden cane. Each morning, he asked her the same question: "Have you learned everything there is to know yet?" Each morning, her answer was the same. "No," she said, "I haven't." The guru would then strike her over the head with his cane.

This scenario repeated itself for months. One day the guru entered the cave, asked the same question, heard the same answer, and raised his cane to hit her in the same way, but the woman grabbed the cane from the guru, stopping his

