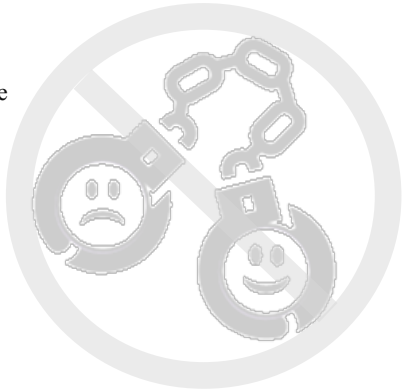
Are Women Who Live with Abusive Partners Codependent?

By Clare Murphy PhD 8 July 2009 – Posted in: Codependency, Intimate partner abuse



According to Codependents Anonymous World Fellowship, the following are six of a long list of characteristics of codependency:

1. She has difficulty identifying what she is feeling
2. She has difficulty making decisions
3. She harshly judges everything she thinks, says, or does – as never "good enough"
4. She does not perceive herself as a lovable or worthwhile person
5. She puts aside her own interests and hobbies in order to do what others want
6. She compromises her own values and integrity to avoid rejection, or others' anger

I have difficulty with applying the 'codependent' label on a woman surviving in a relationship where her male partner abuses and controls her – for the following reasons…

Victims of intimate partner abuse are not codependent ~

Research with women shows that the above six characteristics are ***an effect*** **of experiencing long-term, ongoing, relentless abuse and control**. Many male perpetrators degrade and intimidate women into believing they deserve physical violence, sexual violation, verbal abuse, or other forms of punishment.

A tactic of abuse entails **brainwashing women into believing they think and feel something other than they actually do**. Many domestic violence perpetrators **control the decision-making**. Many **make women wrong for making decisions**, or **denigrate any decisions made by women**. Many male perpetrators **enslave women**, making **demands that she be a more than perfect** housekeeper, partner, parent or woman. **No human can meet those kinds of demands, hence can never be 'good enough'**. Being degraded several times a day, or several times a week, month after month after month **leads to feeling unlovable and unworthy**.

Changing her values and integrity to avoid rejection or anger are often **consciously chosen strategies of self-preservation used by abused and controlled women**. Women I have interviewed would confront the man, avoid the man, lie to get some freedom, be completely honest to try to make him stop controlling them, become violent themselves, retaliate verbally, be passive or silent. Yet these women would **secretly harbor knowledge of their true selves**, whilst attempting a variety of behaviors – that went against their values – in order to avoid, or stop the abuse. These are not strategies of a codependent person.

It is dangerous to give the 'codependent' label to victims of intimate partner abuse ~

Codependence implies a lack of assertion. Whereas, if a woman asserts her opinions, needs, or rights to a controlling man, he could then engage in more or worse abuse to stamp out her assertiveness. It may, therefore, be dangerous for a psychologist to coach a woman to assertively stand up to her partner. Anyone wishing to help such a woman should respect her reasoning for not asserting herself.

Codependence implies women serve others to the detriment of flourishing to her full potential. Whereas, women who want to, or do, attend tertiary schooling to improve their skills and talents, can actually experience more, or worse, abuse by their partner because he wants to ensure she does not grow. For example, a man interviewed by Eva Lundgren (1995) said, *"It makes her reconsider when I lock her up in a cupboard. Then she gets scared. Give her a sense of her total dependency, that's the only way."* Therefore, it may be dangerous for a psychotherapist to encourage a woman to go against her partner's demands by attending school. People in the helping professions need to listen to women's views on how detrimental to her safety such a step might be.

Codependence implies women stay with violent and otherwise abusive men because they are attracted to being abused, like it, and want it. Whereas, in reality, women engage in multiple strategies to stop the

abuse, to help the man change, to protect themselves and their children, or to avoid being abused in the first place. It may be dangerous for a counselor to encourage a woman to leave. Social workers should honor women's knowledge about what will, and will not, keep her safe, and that might mean staying with the abuser. It definitely means that multiple services are required to support the woman's safety, such as police, safe housing, and financial support agencies.

Blaming the victim is tantamount to abusing her ~

Anyone who gives the 'codependent' label – to anyone who is living with a man who engages in a degrading pattern of psychological abuse and control – is blaming the victim and pathologising her. This label implies the victim has behaviors that pull the abuse out of the man. Yet, Jeff Hearn's (1998) in-depth interviews with male perpetrators shows, for example, that **some men threaten suicide as a way of ensuring women do not leave them**, and **other men threaten to harm or kill pets, children, family, friends and/or the woman herself**.

Many perpetrators of intimate partner abuse consider themselves to be the **King of the Castle, the Boss, the Master who must be obeyed at all costs**. Such attitudes may creep in slowly over time **entrapping and disempowering their female partners**. These men may also be charming, caring, protective and kind at other times. This is confusing to women. Many women spend years attempting to understand and change the man's abusive behaviors – they do not accept abuse as their lot.

The subject of this website is domestic violence which is different to mutual abuse – it is about **one person's campaign to control the other through whatever means they find works**. For example, one of the men Cavanagh and her colleagues (2001) interviewed said he *"was a bit of a tactician"* and that he would *"more or less try to intimidate her by going quiet and staring."* **This kind of intentional behavior aimed at subservience, and at lowering a woman's sense of self-esteem, worth and personal integrity, is a hallmark of a systematic pattern over time**. A pattern that entails the male abuser refusing to take responsibility for his behaviors and entails blaming the woman, confusing her, isolating her, making her wrong and demanding respect for his position as the man. Coping with such behaviors does not make a woman codependent.

Power and control over women is a social issue ~

This is not about a woman being codependent by reinforcing the man's behavior. **The need that many men have to establish and maintain authority over women is a social issue – an issue of contemporary expectations of masculinity**. My research with male perpetrators shows that this is **a way for certain men to avoid feeling weak, vulnerable and feminine – as not being a so-called 'real man' is considered inferior**. **Controlling a female partner is a socially sanctioned way for the man to gain social kudos**. Men who control their partners know what they're doing. Many men provoke women to do something that the man then believes will justify hitting her. For instance, a man interviewed by Cavanagh and colleagues (2001) said he'd *"do anything to get an excuse"* to use violence against his partner.

In sum, any psychological issues female victims experience, that resemble characteristics deemed to be codependent, are a result of incessant abuse and control by their male partners, and are reinforced by social issues that support male authority in the home and male control and possessiveness over humans and animals in the home. Women's coping strategies should be taken seriously. Blaming women revictimises them, further isolates them and deepens their growing sense of not being good enough.

References:

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