

WELCOME to CoDA

Information for Newcomers

Dec 2010

We welcome you to CoDA.

Co-Dependents Anonymous (CoDA) is a fellowship of support groups for men and women who share an interest in recovering from co-dependency and the problems that it has caused in our lives.

The only requirement for membership in CoDA is a desire for healthy and fulfilling relationships with ourselves and others.

Like other groups based on adapted versions of the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, Co-Dependents Anonymous offers an entirely voluntary program, operating on the principle that it is up to each person to decide if they are co-dependent and if CoDA is right for them.

CO-DEPENDENCE

Co-Dependence could be described as a condition born of losing connection with our authentic self, thereby losing the ability to share our true self with others and be in healthy intimate relationships. Somewhere along the line we may have learned to doubt our perceptions, discount our feelings, and overlook our needs. Subsequently, we may have learned to look to others to tell us what to think, what to feel and how to behave, thus becoming overly dependent on others.

We may also have rebelled, trapping ourselves in our reactions to others. Or childhood experience of abuse may have left us with habits of being overly independent, unable to trust anyone or allow anyone close. We may also alternate between these patterns. In any case, hiding our true selves, our real thoughts, feelings and needs, is painful and exhausting.

We may have used alcohol, drugs, food, nicotine, activities, sex, or preoccupation with others, to try to escape this underlying condition.

RECOVERY

CoDA's suggested program for recovery is based on attending meetings, working through the Twelve Steps, sponsorship and service.

Attending Meetings

A safe environment without crosstalk or feedback is created by meeting guidelines. Each person speaking is listened to without interruption or comment, and is not given advice.

When we are ready we can begin sharing our authentic feelings and experiences in the safe environment of meetings. For some of us this can be the first time in our lives that we are listened to without being interrupted, misinterpreted, or criticized. There is never any requirement to speak if we do not wish to.

It is suggested that a person attend six meetings, in fairly rapid succession, before deciding if CoDA is right for them. Meetings are not all the same. A person may not feel they fit in at their first meeting, but they may find that the next week, if they return, there are different people there, and they may feel more comfortable. There are also different types of meetings to try; steps meetings, focus topic meetings, women's and men's meetings, for example.

The Twelve Steps

By working through the process of the Twelve Steps, we can recover a capacity for being more genuinely ourselves. We can come to know a new love and acceptance of ourselves and others. We can learn to maintain healthy boundaries, good communication skills and become more capable of sustaining intimate and loving relationships.

Sponsorship

A sponsor is an experienced member of CoDA, someone who's consistent sharing of recovery inspires us. Each member of CoDA may ask a person to sponsor them — to gently guide them as they work their way through the twelve steps.

Service

As with all other aspects of the program, service is entirely voluntary. Perhaps after attending a few months of regular meetings, we may feel ready to begin doing service, with something as simple as helping pack up the chairs after a meeting. Service offers us the opportunity to learn healthy ways of doing things as part of a group and sharing responsibility. We can grow a new confidence in ourselves and deepen our sense of belonging by taking up a manageable and equal share of responsibility for our meetings, at our own pace, in a safe and supportive environment.

You are welcome to phone our National Service Office on **0417 995 111** or visit our website at: **www.codependentsanonymous.org.au** for more information.

Co-dependents Anonymous (CoDA) is a worldwide network of groups of men and women who share the common purpose of learning how to develop and maintain healthy and fulfilling relationships.

As CoDA is an anonymous Twelve Step group, each person's privacy is protected. Its' program is based on an adapted version of the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous. As such it is a spiritual not a religious program. It is a non-profit organisation, there are no fees for membership, and each group is fully self-supporting by voluntary donations from its members.

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Typical Characteristics of Co-Dependence

Taken from the CODA Newcomers Handbook

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The following list is collected from individual experiences. It is offered as a way of identification. These are behaviour patterns which individuals claim as their codependant traits. Few of us have all these traits but most of us identify with some of them.

Codependents typically:

- Are not aware of how they feel
- Have difficulty identifying their feelings.
- Have difficulty in expressing their feelings.
- Tend to minimise, alter or even deny the truth about how they feel.
- Give power over their own feelings to others.
- Do not know that it is okay to talk about problems outside the family.
- Do not know or believe that it is good to share feelings, rather than to deny, minimise or try to justify them.

Also co-dependents generally:

- Are not aware of what they want.
- Have difficulty in asking for what they want.
- Are more concerned with what others want.
- Find it easier to ask what others want.
- Tend to put other people's wants and needs before their own.
- Look to other peoples wants or desires in determining what to do or say.

As such co-dependents tend to:

- Focus their attention on pleasing the other person.
- Focus their attention on protecting the other person.
- Focus their attention on solving the other person's problems.
- Focus their attention on relieving the other person's pain.
- Focus their attention on manipulating the other person (to do things their way).

Also, in general, co-dependents

- Have difficulty acknowledging good things about themselves.
- Are perfectionists, and tend to place too many expectations on themselves and others.
- Tend to judge everything they say or do, harshly, by someone else's standards.
- Tend to feel that nothing they think, say or do is "good enough"

In relationships. Co-dependents typically:

- Have difficulty forming and/or maintaining close relations with others.
- Have to feel "needed" in order to have a relationship with another.
- Do not know or believe that being vulnerable is a means to greater intimacy.
- Do not know or believe that asking for help is both okay and normal.

Often Codependents

- Are more aware of what others feel.
- Assume responsibility for other people's feelings.
- Allow their serenity to be affected by outside influences.
- Allow their serenity to be affected by the other person's struggles.
- Allow their serenity to be affected by how others feel.
- Allow their serenity to be affected by how others behave.
- Condition feeling good about themselves on being liked by others.
- Condition feeling good about themselves on receiving approval from others.
- Bolster their self-esteem by trying to solve other people's problems.
- Bolster their self-esteem by trying to relieve other people's pain.
- Look to other people's feelings in determining what to do or say.

Accordingly, in relationships, co-dependents may tend to:

- Value the other person's ideas and ways of doing things more
- Diminish their social circle as they become involved with the other person
- Try to control the other person's dress and behaviour feeling that these things are a reflection on them.
- Feel overly responsible for the other person's behaviour.
- Fear the other person's anger, fear being hurt and/or rejected by the other person.
- Let these fears dictate what they should say or how they should behave.
- Use giving as a way of feeling safe in a relationship.
- Put aside their own hobbies and interests and spend time sharing the interests and hobbies of the other.
- Question or ignore their own values in order to connect with the other person.
- Let the other person's actions and attitudes determine how they should respond or react.
- Remain steadfastly loyal, even when such loyalty is unjustified and personally harmful.
- Control others by not listening to them or by discounting their opinions and values.

STEP ONE

We admitted we were powerless over others – that our lives had become unmanageable.

For many of us who came to Co-Dependents anonymous minding other people's business had become a way of life. We might have been taught by well-meaning people that we really were responsible for the well-being of others and that our words and actions were powerful enough to change those with whom we interacted.

Having carried this teaching into adulthood, most of us have had difficulty in our relationships with a spouse, lover, child, friend, co-worker or parent. We had made these "others" our Higher Power, defining who we were by what we imagined they thought. Determining to control, to advise, to guide others, we put off our own good – indefinitely.

In Co-Dependents Anonymous, we are opening ourselves to a new way of thinking and living, one that offers us an end to our compulsive drive to "fix the unfixable".

Powerlessness

Until now we had applied self-control obsessiveness, and our own clouded thinking to our problems of living. When our relationships broke down, many of us just tried harder, applying our arsenal of misinformation with a vengeance. Our self-will took many forms. We were overbearing. We were people pleasers. We confirmed. We rebelled. We blamed. We hurt ourselves and we hurt others. Some of us had to go to the edge of insanity or death before we were willing to admit our powerlessness. And all the while we were convinced we were doing the right thing. Where was success?

We took a moment to reflect on the futility of trying to feel good about ourselves by focusing on the real or imagined problems of another. And we reminded ourselves that we never had the kind of power these old thoughts suggested we apply.

"But what about the long haul?" we asked. "Will I ever be free of these burdensome thoughts?"

Unmanageability

The second half of this step reminded us of our past. Our lives had become unmanageable because we had chosen to solve problems in a way that did not work. We made our well-being hinge on the imagined well-being (or lack of it) of another.

Chances are that by the time we reach CoDA our lives were out of control. The coping skills we had relied on for a lifetime were no longer working. We were the victims of a compulsive way of behaving so subtly powerful and damaging that no ordinary means could break it. Our lives were truly unmanageable. It was at this point that our old ideas began to crumble and we became open to the possibility that there might be another way.

Our new life in Co-Dependents Anonymous began with Step One. As we became willing to say the words, "we admit we are powerless over others, and our lives have become unmanageable", we placed the key in the door to our recovery. We had given up making gods out of ourselves and others. We had made room for a true Higher Power, one in which we could eventually place our faith and trust.

In this moment I do not have to control anyone, including me. And if I feel uncomfortable with what another person is doing or not doing I can remind myself I AM POWERLESS over this person and I AM POWERLESS over my compulsion to act in inappropriate ways.

Having surrendered thus far, we were ready to take Step Two.

Am I Codependent?

Co-Dependents Anonymous

WHAT IS CODEPENDENCE?

Many of us struggle with these questions: What is codependence? Am I codependent? We want precise definitions and diagnostic criteria before we will decide. Codependents Anonymous, as stated in its Eighth Tradition, is a non-professional Fellowship. We offer no definitions or diagnostic criteria for codependence, respectfully allowing psychiatric and psychological professionals to accomplish that task. What we do offer from our own experience are characteristic attitudes and behaviour patterns that describe what our codependent histories have been like.

We believe that recovery begins with an honest self-diagnosis. We came to accept our inability to maintain healthy and nurturing relationships with ourselves and others. We began to recognize that the cause lay in long-standing destructive patterns of living. We have found these patterns fall into four major categories: denial, low self-esteem, compliance and control.

The following checklist is offered as a tool to aid in self-evaluation. It may be particularly helpful to newcomers as they begin to understand codependence. It may aid those who have been in recovery a while to determine what traits still need attention and transformation. We suggest that it might be helpful to think of the notations always, usually, sometimes, or never as one evaluates each item on the checklist.

DENIAL PATTERNS

I have difficulty identifying what I am feeling. I minimize, alter or deny how I truly feel. I perceive myself as completely unselfish and dedicated to the well-being of others.

LOW SELF-ESTEEM PATTERNS

I have difficulty making decisions. I judge everything I think, say or do harshly, as never good enough. I am embarrassed to receive recognition, praise or gifts. I do not ask others to meet my needs and desires. I value others' approval of my thinking, feelings and behaviours over my own. I do not perceive myself as a lovable or worthwhile human being.

COMPLIANCE PATTERNS

I compromise my own values and integrity to avoid rejection or others' anger. I am very sensitive to how others are feeling and feel the same. I am extremely loyal, remaining in harmful situations too long. I am often afraid to express differing opinions and feelings of my own. I put aside my own interests and hobbies in order to do what others want. I accept sex when I want love.

After completing this checklist we suggest that you continue attending CODA meetings for several weeks. Search out members of the Fellowship you believe you can trust and discuss your checklist answers with them. If you come to accept that you are, indeed, codependent, then you will be ready to begin the Twelve Steps to recovery and to seek a sponsor to guide you through the process.

SOME COMMON QUESTIONS

Q: What is the difference between CODA, At-Anon and Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACA/ACoA)?

A: At-Anon and Adult Children of Alcoholics are Fellowships for those who are spouses, family members or significant others of alcoholics. CODA is a Fellowship for those who have difficulty in maintaining healthy, functional relationships with others, regardless of whether those others have alcohol, drug or other problems. Members of CODA may also be members of these other Twelve Step Fellowships.

Q: Can you recommend any books about codependence? or a therapist/hospital/treatment centre that treats codependents?

A: Those are good questions, ones that suggest you are really seeking recovery. CODA is a Twelve Step program for spiritual recovery and doesn't endorse any other program or literature. You are encouraged to read other CODA Conference endorsed booklets and publications like this one. You are also encouraged to listen to the stories of CODA members in recovery.

Q: Do you have to believe in God to belong to CODA?

A: No, but as we attend meetings and listen to CODA members describe their recovery, we hear them describe a relationship with a Higher Power, and notice that those who maintain a regular connection with this power experience what we seek - recovery. The form of this Higher Power is left for each of us to discover, whether it be unconditional love, divine intelligence, God, nature, music, an image of an ocean, river or tree, or our own CODA home group. The point is that in the beginning of our time in CODA we become willing to entertain the possibility that there is something that can do for us what we could not do for ourselves.

THE TWELVE PROMISES of Co-Dependents Anonymous

1. I know a new sense of belonging. The feelings of emptiness and loneliness will disappear.
2. I am no longer controlled by my fears. I overcome my fears and act with courage, integrity and dignity.
3. I know a new freedom.
4. I release myself from worry, guilt, and regret about my past and present. I am aware enough not to repeat it.
5. I know a new love and acceptance of myself and others. I feel genuinely lovable, loving, and loved.
6. I learn to see myself as equal to others. My new and renewed relationships are all with equal partners.
7. I am capable of developing and maintaining healthy and loving relationships. The need to control and manipulate others will disappear as I learn to trust those who are trustworthy.
8. I learn that it is possible for me to mend - to become more loving, intimate, and supportive. I have the choice of communicating with my family in a way which is safe for me and respectful of them.
9. I acknowledge that I am a unique and precious creation.
10. I no longer need to rely solely on others to provide my sense of worth.
11. I trust the guidance I receive from my Higher Power and come to believe in my own capabilities.
12. I gradually experience serenity, strength, and spiritual growth in my daily life.

*GOD
Grant me the
SERENITY
to accept the things I cannot change,
COURAGE
to change the things I can
WISDOM
to know the difference.*

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Attending Meetings

Co-Dependents Anonymous

Three Aspects of CoDA
Meetings:

Speaking
Sharing
Listening

ATTENDING MEETINGS

The four major building blocks of recovering in Co-Dependents Anonymous are meetings, working the steps, sponsorship, and service. There are three aspects to gaining the most benefit from attending CODA meetings: speaking, sharing, and listening.

SPEAKING

Speakers at CODA meetings have been invited to share their own experience, strength, and hope. Generally, people begin with a brief recounting of their childhood experiences which set them up for patterns of co-dependent behaviour. If speaking, it is wise not to dwell heavily on early events, thus avoiding the tendency to share only an ‘abuse-along’.

Speakers are encouraged to recount their own unique varieties of co-dependent behaviours, acknowledge their ‘payoffs’ and the destructive consequences of those behaviours. Secondly, speakers are asked to share how they recognized their co-dependency, got into recovery, work the Steps, found a sponsor, etc.

Thirdly, speakers are asked to share how their lives are now - the qualitative improvements, the difficulties they continue to encounter, how the Promises are coming true in their lives, and, perhaps, the dreams and visions for the future that they are now able to build, thanks to their recovery. It is hoped that speakers will have spent enough time in the Program to generally qualify in these areas.

SHARING

If we are attending a discussion meeting, it is important for each of us to speak as we are able. Most of us have been crippled by shame and fear, thus finding speaking among others, especially strangers, a very difficult task. We encourage people to begin slowly and carefully. It is the intention of every CODA member and group not to ridicule or embarrass anyone. Nothing we have to share is unimportant or stupid! Be patient with yourself, and, if possible, share your fear of speaking first. In our experience, often admitting the fear will cause it to evaporate.

If a topic is selected, such as a Step, surrender, honesty, higher Power etc., we can respond by sharing our understanding of what the concept or Step means, or we can share our own experience and what we have learned or achieved. Also we may wish to share any feelings that have emerged from our experiences around the topic or feelings that have surfaced during the meeting itself. We attempt to share ourselves with ‘I’ statements, avoiding talking about others or to others, using ‘you’ statements. We discourage ‘cross-talk’ and ‘feedback’ since as co-dependents we are working to achieve our own realities and break away from dependency upon what others think, feel, or advise. If people, especially newcomers, have questions and concerns, it is especially appropriate to invite the person for an after-meeting session at

a popular coffee shop to continue the sharing. We do make the caution and suggestion that information be communicated in language which is non-shaming, that is, avoids 'should, ought to, must, have to,' etc., and respects the person's right to make his or her own choice, for example, 'you might want to, what I did was, have you thought about?' etc. Finally, sharing our phone numbers and our availability to listen has proven beneficial, and is a way to attend 'off hour' meetings.

LISTENING

We often assume that listening is a passive and easy activity. Actually, to listen well requires a great deal of concentration and effort. If we are to benefit from attending meetings, we need to rely on our listening skills since rarely do we spend much or most of the time speaking or sharing. In order to listen well, we suggest answering two questions:

- 1) What is the speaker wanting from me? and,
- 2) What am I wanting from the speaker?

In the first instance, we can sort out if a) the speaker is only wanting a 'sounding board' with no response requested, b) he/she would request a sharing of our emotional responses to what was said, c) we might be asked for our opinion or thinking about a matter, or d) we might be asked to take some action. Usually, at meetings we are asked only to serve as 'sounding boards' for the

speaker or people sharing in discussion groups. Therefore, our concentration can focus on what we might be wanting from the speaker. Some of the things we can listen for are: identification of similar behaviours and feelings - how did this person respond? What qualitative changes have happened for the speaker that I would like to have happen for me? How did those happen for him or her? What feelings do I experience when I listen to particular stories? Can I use any of her or his understanding of co-dependency to help my own insights? What action can I take based on any new information I have gained at this meeting?

Many of us have initially used the Fellowship as our "Higher Power" until we could formulate our own concepts. From that experience we have often found that our Higher Power frequently communicated to us through other people's stories, insights, feelings and problems. We have come to the conclusion that a meeting is a 'waste of time' only if we do not expend the effort to listen well.

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