

# The Gottman Institute : a research-based approach to relationships

Dr Edwards-Skadowska curated reading/blog

## How Do You Overcome Co-dependency?

Co-dependency describes a relational dynamic where you over-rely on others and their approval of you, have a hard time experiencing yourself as distinct and separate from others, and struggle to recognize and prioritize your own needs.

In co-dependant relationships, your partner's well-being becomes fundamentally entangled with your well-being. You may find yourself confused as you try to make choices and decisions. Putting attention on your partner's real or imagined reactions and responses feels safer and easier than putting attention on yourself, especially during key, emotionally charged moments. This can make it hard to set, respect, and recognize your own and other's boundaries or to know and honour what you want when your desires are distinct from your partner's.

In the short term, co-dependency can masquerade as "getting along" or keeping the peace, but subsuming yourself in another also builds resentment within you for sacrifices you make—however unconsciously—at your own expense. Often, it also creates resentment in the person you're working so hard to please, protect, nurture, and support. Even when relationships are hard, the healthy parts of us ultimately long for partners with integrity who know how to be themselves (while still being appropriately flexible), act in accordance with their own values, and set limits. Our partner's strengths offer a counterweight to our weaknesses, and our strengths to their weaknesses.

### How co-dependency works.

Here's an example of co-dependency in action:

A close friend says, "You need to get away. Let's book a flight to Miami, together. I found us the perfect B&B. I'll buy the tickets. You can pay me back later."

You've been feeling lonely, and you're grateful she's thinking of you. At the same time, you don't want to travel right now. "You have to do this!" she says. "You won't regret it! Flights are cheap."

"It sounds lovely..." you hesitate.

"Done! We're going! I knew you'd agree." she exclaims.

When you get off the phone, you feel disoriented. Your stomach sinks. What just happened? "This will be good," you try to convince yourself. "Maybe she's right and I need to get away." You can't imagine backing out of the trip now. The idea of telling your friend you don't want to go doesn't even cross your mind.

If you're chronically or habitually more focused on others than on yourself, you can become like a ship that's all sails with no anchor. You float around on the currents and breezes of others' needs, requests, desires, and schedules—adrift, at best; at worst, lost. When caring for and about others isn't counterbalanced with a strong sense of who *you* are—someone with your own needs and limitations—you can over-rely on other people's compasses for your own trajectories and sense of purpose.

## **How to stop being co-dependent:**

### **1. Contextualise your co-dependent tendencies.**

Co-dependency gets a bad rap in our hyper-independent culture, which is why I like to recommend people who struggle with this issue begin by practicing compassion toward themselves when they get caught in co-dependent loops. Collectivistic cultures celebrate many of the qualities individualistic cultures consider "co-dependent." For example: putting others first, self-sacrifice for a higher good, and nuanced attunement to others' needs. Co-dependency doesn't mean you're weak or flawed or have somehow "failed" to take care of yourself. *It means you're a relational survivor.*

Co-dependency also has a psychological function. Often, it develops in early childhood when this pattern of "merging" with others' needs offered you the safest and best way of staying connected to caregivers who were unable to prioritize you and your needs—many times in spite of good intentions. Also, it could have become your natural response as a way of insuring you are being accepted and loved .

Find ways to more fully acknowledge the value in these parts of yourself. There are many *loving kindness meditations* and audios you can access on the internet or through different phone apps, which may help.

### **2. Practice small acts of "smart selfishness."**

Remember that co-dependency falls on a spectrum. It's not a fixed, absolute category. Many of the same behaviours that might be called "co-dependent" are also pro-social, kind, and thoughtful. For people on the other end of the co-dependency spectrum—those who are counter-dependent or locked into a narcissistic mindset—growth involves developing

more of the skills you're probably already very good at: relational attunement and sensitivity to other's needs.

To keep yourself from veering too far on your end of the spectrum, notice patterns in your responses to people you're close to. Could you respond differently and feel better, in the long run? Let yourself practice small acts of "smart selfishness"—acts where you honour your needs, wants, and feelings for the long-term good of your relationship. Use your awareness to recognize when you've gone too far in putting others first, and then try something new. Don't judge or berate yourself.

### **3. Get to know your own true needs.**

Distinguish true needs from fear and avoidance. Do you need to avoid someone's disapproval at all costs, or do you need to make sure you don't burn yourself out over-giving? Do you need to avoid making a mistake, or do you need to give yourself some grace and allow yourself to be human in this moment? Make a regular practice of slowing down, soothing yourself, and checking in with what you *really* need.

### **4. Practice clear, direct communication.**

Learn to be courageously direct in the ways you communicate with others, leaving as little room for interpretation as possible, when possible. If someone says, "Are you free tonight?" and you're not, say, "No, I'm not free tonight," rather than, "Well, I'm feeling a little tired." Clear communication begins with communicating clearly with yourself. Allow people to see more than just the "pleasing," peacekeeping, or diplomatic version of you.

### **5. Stay on your side of the fence.**

When you start worrying about how others perceive you or what they think of something you said or did, remind yourself you have no control over what happens in other people's minds. Trust people to find their own way and resolve their own challenges. Your own goodness shines through, even when you disappoint people.

### **6. Nurture your own unconditional self-love.**

Self-judgment undermines our ability to love ourselves and others. Practice self-approval. Tell yourself:

- "I approve of these painful feelings. They're a part of being human."
- "I approve of my own confusion because I can't be clearheaded all the time."
- "I approve of these struggles I'm going through because they're part of my journey."

You can approve of what's happening even when you wish things were different. Always find things to celebrate in yourself, especially when it's hard.

## **7. Let go of your stories.**

Recognize worst-case-scenario stories as they surface in your mind. Stories keep you in a painful loop of trying to control others when your time and energy could be better spent on connecting with your own feelings, needs, desires, and values. Letting go of stories honours life, opens you to possibilities, and respects others' right to be on their own distinct growth journey separate from yours.

## **8. Release attachment to outcome.**

Releasing attachment to outcome requires a willingness to tolerate the unknown and live with uncertainty. It's critical to practice this regularly when you're trying to overcome co-dependency. Part of what maintains the cycle of co-dependent behaviours is the fear of disappointing someone whose opinion matters to you, or of being "disliked." Releasing outcome simply means learning to tolerate the possibility of disappointing important others in your life.

Yes, you may disappoint people. Yes, they may temporarily have negative feelings toward you. You don't have to be happy about this possibility, but you do need to practice tolerating it, so you can be freer to be you.

Cultivate practices that locate you within a larger field of being, so you're not weighed down by fear of rejection or existential loneliness. Prioritize joy. Remind yourself that your worth and value don't rest on making others happy. Meditate, pray, journal, connect with others – find your own way of managing your journey out of co-dependent loop .

These present-moment practices can help you experience more "flow" in the here and now with less anxiety about the future. This, in turn, can increase trust in your own present-moment experiences. This is where life can be most fully lived.