

CoDependent Parents

Michele Laufik

Most codependent parents form an unhealthy attachment to the child, expecting (and in some ways demanding) a sense of devotion and love from their children that is harmful and destructive. This codependent parent-child relationship is intended to make up for what the mom or dad lacked in their past relationships.

“A codependent parent is bringing what they learned in their own relationship with their parents to the relationship with their children,” explains marriage and family therapist Sheila Tucker of Heart Mind & Soul Counseling. “This codependency leaning interferes with the healthy parental decision-making process, thereby blurring boundaries with their child. Ultimately, there's a message of ‘I'm not OK unless you're OK or ‘I'm not OK unless you tell me I'm OK.’” This can affect how a parent sets and maintains the healthy limits that a child needs.

Tucker explains that “codependency is a learned survival strategy” in an effort to stay emotionally safe. “A person with codependency learned to vigilantly pay attention, and to be prepared to behave in a way that doesn't upset the other person. There's also a tendency for people with codependency to live life under the radar. Think in terms of not rocking the boat, playing small or simply staying quiet.”

But because of the inherent caregiving and loving nature of a parental relationship, a codependent one may be trickier to spot than other types of relationships like that between a boyfriend and girlfriend. To help identify your own possible codependent behavior, here are some signs to look for:

1. You're easily overwhelmed by your child's emotions

“Codependent parents have a hard time enforcing boundaries and limits when their child becomes angry, sad or even distant,” Tucker says, adding that this plays into the "I'm not OK unless you're OK" mentality. “To relieve the stress response (think fight, flight or freeze) and to regulate back to their own sense of calm, parents will loosen boundaries and limits.” Codependent parents might also flip the script and throw their child’s words and emotions back at them, making it about themselves.

2. You need to be in control

Because the parent's sense of self is dependent on their relationship with their child, they may try to control the child's life, Tucker explains. “If there's something going on in their child's life that creates discomfort or discourse for their child, the codependent parent will attempt to gain control by becoming overly involved. The codependent parent will stop at nothing to gain a sense of control as a way to relieve their own feelings, as done through their child.”

3. You play the victim

“The codependent parent may share their childhood stories with their children. This is often done as a way to garner control through sympathy,” Tucker says. She adds that a victim mentality may also show up “unconsciously in the expectations of their children to live the life they wished they'd had. For example, this could be a mother or father that pushes their child to be a dancer or a baseball player. These parents are living vicariously through their children except they have much more at stake.” In a sense, you might be seeking “compensation” for the wrongs in your own childhood. And while it’s normal for a parent to have aspirations for their child, in a codependent relationship it’s more about the parent’s wants than the child’s.

4. You ignore other relationships

Your relationship with your husband or partner may take a backseat to your relationship with your child because you may fear that your marriage will get in the way of your parent-child relationship. You may push them away either subtly or obviously so you can focus on your child.

5. You're never wrong

Even if the codependent parent is truly wrong, they won't apologize. If they do, it will appear forced or insincere. This is because any disagreement is seen as a threat to their authority and dominance and as an act of rebellion by the child. Since codependent parents refuse to budge in their stance, adult children often describe it as like "talking to a brick wall."

6. You use guilt as a weapon

Codependent parents may use the silent treatment, passive-aggressive comments and projection, which Tucker says is "when what we're experiencing or feeling is too much for us to handle, so much so, that its existence is denied and instead attributed to another person. This can also hold true for qualities and is done without the codependent person being aware of their actions."

All of this is done in an effort to manipulate their child into doing what they want, especially when it comes to adult children. For example, a mom might get angry at her grown child because they don't visit enough. The child may acquiesce and promise to stop by more often. But to remain the victim, the mother might then say, "no, that's OK, do it only if you want to," thus guiltting the adult child into visiting more, and forcing them to reassure their mom that they really want to visit, which relieves the parent of any responsibility or guilt.

How does codependency affect your children?

Tucker says that this type of codependent parent-child relationship "sets the stage for how [your children] will relate to life. Every experience we

have informs future decisions.” That means they are at risk of repeating the same pattern with their own kids; they may learn that their needs, wants and feelings are not important and may feel responsible for their parent’s feelings by attempting to appease them.

Can a codependent parent change?

“First and foremost, codependent parents will need to work on their own emotional wellbeing. Once they're able to untangle some of their deeper issues, they'll be more consistent in making lasting changes with their children,” Tucker explains. She suggests attending Al-Anon and CoDA (Codependents Anonymous) meetings and visiting a licensed therapist to start the healing process.

To help break the cycle when it comes to caring for your children, Tucker offers the following tips: