

Where Kindness Leaves Off & Codependency Begins

Susan Peabody

I was at a 12-Step Meeting the other day, and a woman said that her therapist told her it was codependent to compliment her children because she was doing it so they would love her more. I was shocked and dismayed and I have written this article from the perspective of someone who grew up without validation and did not offer any to her children. I told this woman that, in my opinion, it was ok if her motivation was to help them feel more loved and good about themselves. It is motivation that makes the difference between kindness and codependency.

I was codependent for many years and then Robin Norwood, who wrote *Women Who Love Too Much*, straightened me out. In her book, she encouraged women to learn how to “become selfish.” Being an eager student, I learned this lesson well and got pretty good at it. Then I had a spiritual experience, and I was filled with an overwhelming desire to be kind, generous and charitable once again.

I was happy about this, but I was also confused. How could I tell the difference between codependent love and genuine love. And how could I avoid loving “too much.” To answer this question, I had to do a lot of soul searching. This took years, but eventually I came to understand that codependent love is spurious—of illegitimate birth—and genuine love is a gift from God passed on to others through us. To tell when I am doing one and not the other, I look for the following clues.

Pseudo Generosity

Generosity stemming from codependent love arises out of fear, guilt or obligation. (If I do not do this, that or the other thing, I am bad.) Kindness born of spirituality comes from a person with well-established self-esteem. They are usually doing for others only what they would do for themselves under other circumstances.

Balance

Codependent love is exclusive to others—there is none left over for ourselves. Kindness means to “love your neighbor as yourself,” and, of course, “charity begins at home.” Therefore, if I am buying presents for others but refusing to accept them for myself, something is wrong.

Anonymity

Codependent love wants recognition. For instance, the codependent can easily rattle off a list of things she or has done for others. Kindness born of spirituality manifests itself in an atmosphere of shyness and begs for secrecy.

Buying Love

Codependent love is an attempt to get something in return. Will you love me if I take care of you? I need to be careful when I do things for others that there are no strings attached. Kindness born of spirituality has no personal payback.

Impact

Recipients of codependent love are outwardly grateful, but inwardly they sense the dishonesty of the giver or at least the hidden agenda. This often leads to resentment and what I call biting the hand that feeds them. It also leads to laziness and dependency on your caretaking. On the other hand, those who receive charity born of spirituality sense the purity and love from whence it flows. They are not resentful and they do not feel obligated. They, along with the giver, have a feeling of completion and wholeness. The intimacy which is achieved has a wonderful sense of authenticity. So if the recipients of your kindness are not thriving they are either jerk or just reacting to your codependent love.

Passing it On

Spiritual love creates a desire in the receiver to pass it on. “Freely, freely you have received. Freely, Freely give.” When the recipient of your love is as generous to others as you are to him or her, this is a good sign.

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Of course, there is always a fine line between codependent love and love born of kindness. But as we surrender to spirituality more fully, the fruit of the spirit will be uncontaminated, and it will truly feed others as well as ourselves. Like the water that does not make us thirst again, the hunger satisfied by a person with spiritual love is everlasting. Since starting my own recovery, I try to love in more wholesome ways. I am glad to finally understand where kindness leaves off and codependency begins, because I enjoy loving others and helping them feel good about themselves. I will never believe this is codependent, at least for me.