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Season 02. Episode 10

## Co-Dependency Happens When You're Not Looking.

By now – we are recording this in March 2020 - I'm sure you've heard enough about staying safe in an unsafe world, about protecting yourself from others and protecting others from you. Many people don't think that they themselves could be a threat to others.

But what I wish to talk about today is what is often at the centre of family dysfunction when alcohol or drug addiction is ripping through the family like a runaway freight train. We are talking about co-dependency and if you are new to the concept, co-dependency is “excessive emotional or psychological reliance on a partner, (or parent or child) who requires support on account of an illness or addiction.”

The tie that binds most of us together in this trap of addiction is called co-dependency.

Ninety nine percent of people caught up in addictive disorder in their own families are totally unaware that they have slowly but surely been sucked into a punishing whirlpool of negative emotion and destructive behaviour.

The actions taken by ninety nine percent of people who are co-dependent as a result of another's addictive disorder are well-meaning but woefully misguided. Where they

thought they were helping, they were enabling. Where they thought they were controlling, they were being controlled. And where they thought they were seeing signs of improvement; they were more than likely being fooled by a slick addict whose stock in trade is lying.

Much of what we call co-dependency happens because we don't feel safe in relationships. This feeling of not being safe, this anxiety, causes us to control, obsessively focus on the other person while neglecting ourselves or shutting down our feelings. I heard this expressed more than once years ago in the recovery group I joined because of my own co-dependency at the time. A typical comment was this, and I quote: "I don't even know what I am feeling now." What happened was this. The fear became too intense, the resentment too strong and the despair too depressing; therefore, one answer is to not feel anything at all.

Psychiatrists will tell you that when people suppress or stuff their feelings, they are setting themselves up for a complete breakdown, or in some cases, these same people turn to drugs and alcohol because the effort to stuff those intense feelings is too much to bear and the pain becomes overpowering.

Which also explains how some, not all, people become addicts and alcoholics.

Co-dependency means that we are chained to the emotional state of our beloved addict alcoholic. We are up only when he is up, and we are down when he is down. We don't have an emotional life of our own, we don't even pay attention to our feelings. To quote a woman whose story appears in Melody Beatty's book *Co-dependent No More*: "If my husband is happy, *and I feel I'm responsible for that*, then I'm happy. If he's upset, I feel responsible for that, too. I'm anxious, uncomfortable and upset until he feels better. I try to *make* him feel better. I feel guilty if I can't. And he gets angry with me for trying."

She has yet to learn how to swim in her own lane, even as she and her husband (and children for that matter) share the same pool.

Co-dependency is about lane violations, worse actually, because our co-dependent doesn't even know she has her own lane and makes the other guy's lane *her* lane. She believes his agenda is her agenda, or that her agenda has to be his...she has no agenda of her own.

Let's go back to a fundamental premise that addiction (and alcoholism) is recognized as a *family disease*. The whole family, by trying to control, by worrying, by becoming resentful and by being haunted by fear – not feeling in the least bit safe and comfortable – has become sick without their knowledge, without their permission.

I've said this before in my podcast that the family is dancing with the devil – the disease - but doesn't see the dance for what it is.

Let's go right to the heart of the matter. The very first step of the Al Anon program - Al Anon is a 12-step program for family members who have an active alcoholic in their family – says this:

“We admitted we were powerless over alcohol, and that our lives had become unmanageable.”

Think about that. Family members are as powerless over alcohol as is the alcoholic. That certainly smashes any illusion you might have entertained that you had any power to alter the course of the disease or to change the behaviour of the alcoholic in any fundamental way.

Now, if you choose to believe that you have some control over his addiction or alcoholism, be prepared to be disappointed. That's a simple but hard truth. It might even sound heartless, but then again, this is a heartless disease.

To admit defeat for most people is unthinkable. We are taught by our society that if you don't succeed, try, try again. We are encouraged to overcome, to win, to fight for what you want or for what you need. There's even that moral trope that says: “Fight for what is right.” That idea makes sense most of the time. But not in this case.

To make any progress in dealing with the effects of this disease you have to throw away your rulebook and start over. Start thinking differently.

The hardest thing to change is to *change the way we think. That's where it starts.*

Another way to look at co-dependency from a treatment perspective comes from Minnesota, the home of the Hazelden treatment centre, also a research and publishing house, and the Betty Ford Center –which merged with Hazelden a while ago – was this: *co-dependents were people whose lives had become unmanageable as a result of living in a committed relationship with an alcoholic.*

How could anyone feel safe, be happy, be contented, live in the day, not worry about tomorrow, live without fear – could I please God be normal again is all I ask-how could that be when I have an alcoholic or addict creating destructive chaos in my home and in my heart?

One thing that surprises people - the majority are women – when they walk into a recovery meeting, or begin a conversation with a qualified addictions counsellor is that she is *not* there to understand her spouse better so that she can help him control or quit his drinking or quit his abuse of dope in whatever form.

She is there to start working on herself. That's the surprise. This is not about her alcoholic. Here's the sign on the Al Anon wall, in case you haven't heard this

part: "You didn't cause it, you can't control it, and you can't cure it." The IT is addiction or alcoholism, but it could just as easily be chaos or pain.

She will be taught about the art of a loving detachment. This is about finding some peace for herself whether her spouse is in recovery or still drinking and using.

This is about coming into the light having abided by the unwritten silent rules that typically develop in the family upon the unwanted arrival of addictive disease.

These rules, according to Melody Beatty, prohibit discussion about problems, discourage open expression of feelings, suppress honest communication, and make it impossible to hold realistic expectations such as being human, vulnerable or imperfect. The family dynamic is frozen and rigid. The truism that expresses the rules for family members is don't talk, don't trust, don't feel.

Coming into the light means the woman of whom we speak, the long-suffering wife of the alcoholic, begins to see options that she never saw before.

With the help of a therapist skilled in addictive disorder, and with the help of her sponsor in Al Anon and by sharing her experience with other people in the same boat, she stops blaming her husband, stops resenting him and starts to hold herself accountable for her growth as a human being.

One barrier for those who embark on this journey is the concept of surrender as the price of admission into a new life and a different way of being. Then there is the resistance to the idea of a higher power. I often ask those in the grip of addictive disorder whether they are family members or addicts themselves the following question: "Didn't your best thinking get you here?"

Look at it this way: how about you surrender your old way of thinking and begin to believe in a bigger and better idea? The concept stated that way makes the idea of surrender and a higher power more palatable. It sounds more intellectual. Which is what we like. Being appealed to as smart people is flattering and often more compelling than the truth spoken in plainer terms.

In time, our friend will discover that there is victory in surrender of her old ideas and liberation in the rigor by which we practice simple principles of honesty and kindness. She will also be able to summon the courage that comes with the willingness to believe.

And as she begins to become the person she was meant to be, she'll suddenly realize that her obsession with her partner has faded and she has now developed what we call a healthy detachment from his disease. Finally, she is able to find and swim in her own lane. And still love by giving of herself without giving herself away.

What have we learned today?

1. Any family who has an active addict or alcoholic in their midst is vulnerable to co-dependency, without exception.
2. Co-dependents are best defined as people whose lives have become unmanageable as a result of living with an alcoholic (or addict) in a committed relationship.
3. Co-dependents are tied to their alcoholic or addict by an emotional chain which means they are only OK when their addict is OK. The co-dependent spouse of the addict or alcoholic feels overly responsible for every aspect of her spouse's well-being and neglects her own needs.
4. Families where the disorder is active learn to stuff their thoughts and feelings: "Don't talk, don't trust, don't feel" becomes the unspoken mantra.
5. The co-dependent can indeed liberate herself from her spouse's disorder whether her spouse is still using or drinking or not.
6. She can begin her recovery with the help of professionals and with the loving guidance of a sponsor in Al Anon.

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