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Season 01. Episode 11

Podcast Title: Your problem is my problem

I want to talk more about co-dependency, why it happens, how you end up replacing your own agenda of self-care with the other person's neediness, and how it is absolutely essential for your own sanity to address it.

A few days before I was married a long time ago, the reverend sat with my bride to be and myself to give us some pre-marital advice and he said something I have remembered to this day because it cut through the usual bland admonishments of do's and don'ts. This was supposed to be a pre-nup counselling session, and he seemed sincere and knowledgeable.

This is what he stated that has stuck with me all these years: Don't forget to give of yourself but *be careful that you do not give yourself away*.

I wondered at the time, why did he say that? I didn't stop to ask him what he meant because as a 22-year old kid, I thought everything said by people over 30 was irrelevant.

This was a long time even before the term co-dependency was even termed.

What did he know that we didn't?

Maybe he knew that a partner could empty the tank helping the other guy and it would never ever be enough. You could quote give yourself away and never get anywhere because the other person's neediness is endless, and you rob yourself of your very identity trying to fix what cannot be fixed.

Does that describe the people who love an addict alcoholic? Does it describe you?

In her excellent book Co-dependent, no more, Melanie Beatty talks about how the disease makes everyone in the home as sick, if not sicker, than the alcoholic addict. I realize that that idea might be a hard one to swallow, but consider this:

I'll use myself as an example: as an addict ad alcoholic, I ended up creating co-dependents around me. These were the people who yelled at me, threw out my booze, denied me money after I go fired, tried to protect me from my own sabotage, cajoled, manipulated, and generally got in the way of me getting high whenever I felt like it. I resented them and they resented me. Found my stash and threw it away...maybe they smoked it, who knows.

What would make my loved ones crazy was the crazy stuff I would do on the spur of the moment. My girlfriend was visiting me in my apartment, and I was sitting on the balcony facing the street. She was paranoid about my dope smoking and cocaine use. There's a guy who has just left the building I was living in and as he passed by in front of me a half story below me, I said hey...ya don't suppose you would know where I can get some good weed?

Now this is while my girlfriend is in the kitchen making us dinner.

They guy says sure, do you have a car? I said sure let's go.

Honey I gotta run to the store get some smokes, you want anything? No? OK see ya.

Drove to the ATM got a bunch of cash, ran around town, never got the dope, did some coke and came home about 2:00 a m.

Spaghetti and sauce splattered all over the kitchen.

You see what I mean? Me crazy you crazy, too.

My beautiful lady was one of those who was great at taking care of other people but didn't take the time to take care of herself. Man, I could push her around all I wanted, and she would keep coming back for more. Until she stopped coming back, and I do not blame her a bit. She didn't just give of herself; she gave herself away.

By the way, the subtitle of Ms. Beatty's book is: How to *stop* controlling others and *start* taking care of yourself.

So, STOP doing one thing and START doing something else.

The fact is that many spouses or mothers – let's say the vast majority of cases are one where the husband or son is the alcoholic or addict and the wife or mother is the one bearing the weight of the consequences.

The wife may have been told so many lies about herself that she doesn't know who she is anymore, she thinks she is going crazy.

Fact is she is that she is co-dependent, because as I've stated before, alcoholism and addiction are family diseases...the way that addiction affects family members is called co-dependency.

There are two illusions, or let's call them myths, that the people closest to the addict live with:

1. The addiction (or alcoholism) is only the addict's problem.
2. That life would be wonderful if the addict stopped using or the alcoholic stopped drinking.

Let's bust them both right now.

1. The addict's disease has the non-addicts in the house reacting in misguided and irrational ways such as covering for the addict, enabling the addict, while also resenting the addict, manipulating, lying, worrying to exhaustion, doing the responsible stuff while he watches TV drunk. Obviously, the addict's disease takes over the family so that they stop talking openly, stop trusting and stop feeling...they stuff their own feelings because they are afraid of them anymore. Ask a co-dependent in the grip of the disease what she really feels, and she won't really be able to access her real feelings anymore. She's become numb. Because once IT sets in, co-dependency takes on a life of its own. And because you don't know that you have it, you sure can't kick it.

2. The myth that life would be suddenly, magically become wonderful if only the alcoholic stopped drinking or using is yet another illusion that has to be smashed. You

didn't become co-dependent overnight, and you will not recover from the damage the disease has done to you or your family unit overnight either.

So, whether the problem person is in recovery or out of the house, the damage is done. And if you believe the data, that if on average it takes eleven years before a family member takes action to intervene in one way or another, I'd be willing to bet that family has been victimized (yes victimized) by the disease for years and years and therefore:

It is not realistic in the least to expect that the family has come through their ordeal unscathed. In fact, they have been thoroughly worked over as the disease has likely stolen their money, their peace of mind and sucked the oxygen i.e. the joy of living out of their lives for a long time.

3. So much for those myths...I am reminded of the biblical saying (if it's Ok to quote one here): ye shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free. The first way to get at the truth is to smash the myths that keep us in bondage to ignorance and this disease.
4. There is a philosopher quoted by my recovery program, named Herbert Spencer and he was speaking to the sceptics of the day, just like there are sceptics today about the value of recovery programs. He said: something like: There is one bar to all human progress and that is Contempt prior to investigation...the prejudices that we have, the illusions that we carry, the myths that we fervently in, the contempt we might have for ideas that are unfamiliar, all of these things stand in the way of liberating ourselves from the prison of this disease,
5. And the add thing is: this is a prison of our own making but because we were not fully conscious of the dance, we danced unwittingly to the tune of the disease...we became conditioned to react in the same ways over and over, expecting this time, dear god, this time it'll be better.

Our hearts have been broken enough. Our spirit had been beaten down enough. Our self-esteem needs repair. Fear must give way to something greater and more positive.

Loneliness must be eased. The feeling of me being the only one who is dealing with this, the uniqueness must be banished.

Let me tell you my story of co-dependency...it is paralleled by many, so it is definitely not unique...in fact very typical.

25 years ago, I fell in lust with a woman who lived two doors down from the sober living house I was managing – a halfway house some call it. At first, I thought the guy who would come and go from the house she lived in was her husband, but then when her 5-year old son with whom I used to play basketball in the alley told me that they guy was actually her brother, I went for it.

I ignored the warning signs such as: her always having a beer in her hand sitting on the porch, always beer in the fridge, always drinking when friends came over. But hey I was in lust. Her son was so jealous of me he tried to castrate me with a big plastic sword. I have now known him for most of his 29-year life and we are the best of friends.

Back to the lady and my disorder. Remember at this time I was only a about two years sober, so I was in no shape to be in a relationship to begin with and here I was getting it on with an experienced alcoholic, turns out.

My controlling suspicious dependencies took over after a while:

I suspected she had a boyfriend in some other town far away. I listened into her phone calls. I suspected she had a night-time visitor, a married man in the neighbourhood so I would drive my car around watching for him. I looked in her purse. I intercepted her mail. I threw away a gift a guy had sent her. When she travelled to meet a girlfriend my jealousy overtook me, and I almost booked a flight to check on her.

I checked around the house for wine and beer, and when I found them, I confronted her, and we got into it. I became an angry man and took out my anger toward her on her two young children.

So, I finally contacted the counsellor who was still helping me in my sobriety program,

And I confided to her for the very first time my feelings of helplessness, anxiety, resentment, my suspicions, and I told her what I had been doing...sneaking, peeking, snooping, and asking what could I do ABOUT HER?

She said something that stopped me in my tracks, and looking back, put me on the road to healing. She said: Bruno, you need to address your OWN DISHONESTIES

Can you imagine? I come to my counsellor Margaret to see what I can do about my girlfriend and basically Margaret is saying that I AM THE PROBLEM. What the HELL is that?

I come to her hoping for the magic elixir to fix her. Get that: the elixir to fix her...yeah, that and she says there is no potion for that emotion.

There is nothing that I can do to keep her from doing the things she does...I am powerless, but there are lots of things I can do to keep her from living in my head 24/7 rent free.

I shared the so-called problem with my sponsor in the my alcohol recovery program, and he said: Bruno, I can see that your obsession with your lady friend is threatening your sobriety...you might end up becoming so pissed off that you'll say EF it I might as well drink. Am I right?

He was right.

He recommended I get counselling for my co-dependency (it was taking over my life...I could barely get my work done, I kid you not) which I did, and he also did something that changed my life for the price of a few dollars a week in the basket: he kicked my butt into Alanon.

My counsellor had me look at my patterns; it turned out that I was always attracted to sexy drunks, because I met almost all of the women I ended up with in a bar or a drinking situation like a wedding, that almost always we were both drunk when we had sex the first time, that alcohol and drugs were involved every time we made love and that we were almost always high when we travelled somewhere. If a woman wasn't drinking or smoking dope or both and if she didn't give off a vibe of being a bad girl, then I wasn't interested.

Yeah so what you say. Well I get sober, and now I'm the one who will straighten YOU out. I had no idea that I had the potential for massive co-dependency inside of me. All of the things I was doing to try to control my fiancé's (she became my fiancé even though her drinking drove me nuts) drinking was well meaning but woefully misguided and was only serving to provoke rage and resentment.

I learned an awful lot in al anon. I quickly learned that, when it came to another's disease; I didn't cause it, I can't control it and I cannot cure it.

Learned I was there FOR ME, not for the addicted loved one. I learned that I had no business being an A hole no matter what the other person said or did. I had a responsibility to be a good stepdad no matter what because the children were innocent bystanders and deserve better.

I learned the value of detachment accompanied by love...yes that is probably the biggest lesson I learned next to I AM THE PROBLEM with me

But I was very lucky. I was already in a recovery program and I grabbed onto this new way of thinking and being fairly quickly.

Others are not as fortunate.

Here is the story of Lucy who was starting to break down and actually think about suicide because, although she had always been a tower of strength, she was just sick and tired of taking care of her three kids and her husband who apparently was a very angry man.

Turns out he was an alcoholic who was supposed to be going to his meetings but basically going off on benders every now and then and being what we call "on a dry drunk" which means being angry, blaming, hostile, infantile, irresponsible and selfish. Hmm, kinda like real alcoholics.

Then we learn that Lucy is also an adult child of an alcoholic, an ACOA, just like my own daughter, and that fact points to her incurring some PTSD-like damage to her psyche which had her stuff her feelings to the point where she didn't know what she felt, and contributed to her anxiety and depression.

So, there was a lot going on under the surface of which she was not aware. It took years of emotional abuse by the disease to bring her to this point of despair. She could not understand why she had become so fragile and fearful.

Taking her counsellor's advice, she learned to identify what she was feeling...yes, you need to - in the words of that old cliché – get in touch with your feelings and just experience them, not fight them. In therapy we would ask ourselves, am I mad, sad, glad, afraid, ashamed or hurt?

We learn that Shame is a master emotion, and that in many a dysfunctional home, toxic shame is wielded as a weapon of control. Books are written about toxic shame. Co-dependents wield shame to bludgeon the alcoholic into submission as in How could you?

Over time, Lucy learned to be Ok with what she was feeling, that it was Ok to express herself freely, that she did not have to sit on her feelings, that it was Ok to detach from her husband's insanity...she could still love him but she no longer felt the need to control him, to let him go which meant she started to take care of her own needs in the healthiest of ways.

In this episode, we learned that:

1. There is a big difference between giving of yourself and giving yourself away. Between helping and co-dependency.
2. Myth 1: Addiction is only the addict's problem. Reality: Addiction is a family illness.
3. Myth 2: Life will be grand if only the addict would stop using or if the alcoholic would stop drinking. Reality: It took years for the family to become ill, and it will take time and effort to heal.
4. Co-dependency is the accepted clinical term for the effect that addiction or alcoholism has on family members. Co-dependents, in putting so much energy into trying to control the addict, stop taking care of themselves.
5. There is help for family members affected by the disease so that they can put the focus back on their well-being, including Al Anon, ADOA (adult children of alcoholics), many books, individual counselling and other support groups.

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