

What is people-pleasing?

People-pleasing simply means that someone goes to extremes to make other people happy, often at their own expense. People-pleasers are sometimes described as “doormats” because they let everyone walk all over them. People-pleasers are like chameleons, always trying to blend in. If they're less than perfect, "difficult", or different in any way they fear rejection or abandonment.

People-pleasers have trouble saying "No". They agree to do things that they don't really want to do. People-pleasers worry that others won't like them if they say “No”, disagree, or express a differing opinion. Pleasing others is a way of making sure other people like them, need them, and ultimately stick around.

People-pleasers worry about what others think of them. At its core, people-pleasing is an attempt to ensure that people like you.

People-pleasers carry a lot of fear: Fear of disappointing others, being rejected, anger and arguments. This can lead to internalized shame, guilt, and resentments.

People-pleasers tend to be passive and don't voice their own opinions. They often say, “I don't know” because they don't want to disagree or because they're out of touch with what they want, need, or believe. In this way, people-pleasers lose a part of themselves by acquiescing to the beliefs, opinions, values, and wants of others.

They take care of everyone else's needs before their own. People-pleasers neglect or put their needs and wants last.

They're busy and tired. It's no surprise that people-pleasers are tired due to all the extra work they accept. But they're also tired because all this work leads to staying up too late, eating improperly, and not making time to exercise or take care of social, emotional, or spiritual needs.

People-pleasers are conflict-avoidant. They stay quiet to avoid conflicts. Conflict fuels their fears of being unworthy, unlovable, or rejected.

People-pleasers derive some of their identity and self-worth from doing things for others. They feel good about being the dependable, go-to person who can fix things and make people feel better.

People-pleasers judge themselves harshly. They set high standards for themselves and expect perfection. When they fall short, they're self-critical and harsh.

People-pleasers feel resentful. They do things out of obligation rather than true desire. They are so busy doing for others that their own needs don't get met. Eventually, anger and resentment build up. When this happens they may lash out in anger or act in passive-aggressive ways. Being passive-aggressive is an indirect way of expressing anger, such as the silent treatment, that they use when it feels unsafe to directly express their unhappiness.

They can also have act like martyrs. These resentments and unmet needs can also lead people-pleasers to feel like victims. They crave validation and secretly want people to feel sorry for them. But they continue to cater to others and take on more projects. They may complain, but don't do anything to change the situation.

As you read on, you'll see that people-pleasers and codependents have quite a bit in common. Codependents are people-pleasers, but not all people-pleasers are codependent. In other words, people-pleasing is one aspect of codependency, but codependency encompasses a number of other traits and behaviors.

What is codependency?

Codependency is a dysfunctional relationship pattern stemming from low self-worth and lack of individuation. Codependency goes beyond a tremendous desire to help others. It's called codependency because both people in the relationship are emotionally enmeshed.

People who identify as codependent usually play the role of "rescuer" in a relationship with someone who is impaired, addicted, or ill in some way. Although codependency came out of the substance abuse field, we now recognize that all kinds of impairments, such as mental illness, addiction, narcissism, or physical health problems, can also keep a person from functioning fully in a codependent relationship. This person is dependent on his or her partner/friend/family member due to these impairments. The codependent provides needed emotional, financial, or physical support. Often the other person has few, if any, other close relationships. S/he's burned bridges, has poor social skills, or a difficult personality which has left him/her estranged from or isolated from other support people. S/he's truly dependent on the codependent family member or friend.

Codependents are constantly trying to help, change, fix, or rescue. They derive self-esteem and purpose through helping. And in doing so, they tend to become attached to people who have problems of various sorts and need to be taken care of. However, the codependent's focus on helping creates an unbalanced relationship leaving their needs unmet.

Codependents become so wrapped up in other people and their problems that they lose themselves in the process. They don't know who they are without their role as rescuer and care-taker. They're desperate to feel in control with an out of control loved one and relationship. Underneath the fixing and helping, there is anger, shame, anxiety and pain.

Core features of codependency:

Caretaking

Codependents are amazing care takers. They're empathetic and feel things deeply. They don't like to see others suffer and want to "make it better". Codependents give and give until they're

depleted. They put everyone else's needs before their own. Taking care of others is a core part of the codependent's identity and self-worth.

Denial and Avoidance

Codependents deny their own feelings and needs. They minimize problems and try to avoid conflicts. They avoid confronting problems by staying busy, distracted, and numb. They also deny their own feelings and needs.

Anger

Resentments build up when your needs aren't met, you don't have a voice, and you're treated with disrespect. Hurt and fear can also turn into anger. Codependents learned that anger is a scary emotion and/or that they shouldn't feel or express anger. Instead they may experience it as depression, crying, or physical health problems. Anger gets repressed because it's not safe or acceptable to express it directly. Eventually, codependents may lash out or act in passive-aggressive ways.

Controlling

When life feels out of control, many people try to grab onto control even harder. Codependents try to control other people's actions and feelings. They try to control the outcome and avoid problems from happening. Of course, this is impossible since they can only control themselves.

Enabling or Rescuing

Helping is doing things that others can't do for themselves. Enabling is doing for others what they can and should do for themselves. Codependents help their loved ones avoid the natural (and negative) consequences of their addiction (or mental illness or other impairment). This may temporarily keep the peace, but ultimately prolongs the problems.

Enabling prevents the codependent's loved ones from experiencing the full impact of their poor choices, dangerous, illegal, or immature behavior. And when there are few negative consequences, people are less motivated to change. These problematic behaviors can continue for long periods of time in part because the codependent enables them. Codependents become stuck in a dysfunctional pattern.

Lack of boundaries

Boundaries are the rules you create to let people know how to treat you. Codependents have weak boundaries. Codependents feel responsible for how other people feel and want to make them feel better. They take on other people's feelings and don't distinguish their own feelings from others'. They allow people to mistreat or take advantage of them and don't communicate assertively to ask for what they need. Without boundaries, things feel out of control.

Fear and guilt

Codependents experience high levels of guilt and fear. They feel guilty at the idea of setting boundaries, limiting help, or ending a relationship. A codependent's self-worth is so entangled with pleasing others that they're afraid to say "no". They're afraid to let other's suffer any consequences. Codependents are also "pleasers" with a high need to be liked, wanted and accepted.

Codependency creates the perfect storm: The codependent's loved one doesn't develop the skills or experience the consequences needed for change. S/he is dependent on the codependent's help. And the codependent unconsciously needs the loved one to remain impaired to feel good as a rescuer and care-taker. In addition, the codependent's fear of abandonment keeps him/her tolerant of poor treatment, unmet needs, and unhappy and unequitable relationships.

Where does codependency come from?

While the answers aren't the same for everyone, for most people codependency begins in childhood. This is important because children are extremely impressionable. Young children don't have the cognitive abilities or life experiences to realize that the relationships they are seeing and experiencing aren't healthy; that their parents aren't always right; that parents lie and manipulate and lack the skills to provide a secure attachment.

Kids who grow up in dysfunctional families come to believe they don't matter and/or they're the cause of the family problems.

Dysfunctional families tend to have some of these characteristics:

- chaotic and unpredictable
- unsupportive
- scary and unsafe
- emotionally and/or physically neglectful
- manipulative
- blaming
- overly harsh or abusive
- shaming
- deny that the family has problems and refuse outside help
- secretive
- judgmental
- inattentive
- unrealistic expectations for children (expecting kids to be perfect or to do things beyond what's developmentally appropriate)

The children are blamed for the problems or are told there isn't a problem (which is very confusing because the children intuitively know something is wrong, but this feeling is never validated by the adults). The easiest way for kids to understand their chaotic families is to listen to the negative and distorted messages from adults and assume "I'm the problem."

As a result, children learn that they are bad, unworthy, stupid, incapable, and the cause of the family dysfunction. This belief system creates the roots of adult codependent relationships.

When parents aren't able to provide a stable, supportive, nurturing home environment, several things can happen:

- **You become a caretaker.** If your parent was incapable of fulfilling the parenting role, you may have taken on the parenting role to fill in the gaps. You took care of your parents or siblings, paid the bills, cooked meals, and stayed up to make sure Mom didn't fall asleep with a lit cigarette and burn the house down.
- **You learn that people who profess to love you may actually hurt you.** Your childhood experience was that family physically and/or emotionally hurt you, abandoned you, lied to you, threatened you, and/or took advantage of your kindness. This becomes a familiar dynamic and you let friends, lovers, or family members continue to hurt you in adulthood.
- **You become a people-pleaser.** Keeping people happy is another way you try to feel in control. You don't speak up or disagree out of fear. You give and give. This feeds your self-worth and gives you some emotional fulfillment.
- **You struggle with boundaries.** Nobody modeled healthy boundaries for you, so yours are either too weak (constant pleasing and care taking) or too rigid (closed off and unable to open up and trust others).
- **You feel guilty.** You probably feel guilty about a whole lot of things that you didn't cause. Among these things is your inability to fix your parents or family. Even though it's illogical, there's a deep longing to rescue and fix. And your inability to change your family contributes to your feelings of inadequacy.
- **You become fearful.** Childhood was scary at times. You didn't know what to expect. Some days went smoothly, but other days you hid, worried, and cried. Now you continue to have insomnia or nightmares, feel on edge, and are afraid to be alone.
- **You feel flawed and unworthy.** You grew up feeling and/or being told that there is something wrong with you. You came to believe this as fact, because it was reinforced over and over when you didn't know any other reality.
- **You don't trust people.** People have betrayed and hurt you repeatedly. The result is that it's hard to get close and trust even your spouse or close friends. This is your way of protecting yourself from future hurt, but it's also a barrier to true intimacy and connection.
- **You won't let people help you.** You're not used to having your needs met or having someone take care of you. You're more comfortable giving the help than receiving it. You'd rather do it yourself than be indebted or have it used against you.

- **You feel alone.** For a long time you thought you were the only one with a family like this or who felt like this. You felt alone and shamed by the secrets you had to keep in childhood. When you combine this loneliness with feeling afraid and flawed, it's easy to see why codependents will stay in dysfunctional relationships as adults rather than be alone. Being alone often feels like a validation that you are truly flawed and unwanted.
- **You become overly responsible.** As a child, your survival or your family's survival depended on you taking on responsibilities that surpassed your age. You continue to be an extremely dependable and responsible person to the point that you may over work and have trouble relaxing and having fun. You also take responsibility for other people's feelings and actions.
- **You become controlling.** When life feels out of control and scary, you overcompensate for your feelings of helplessness by trying to control people and situations.

If you're a codependent, this is probably sounding very familiar and perhaps bringing back some childhood memories. As a child, you're stuck. You can't leave your family, so you find ways to cope. You develop strategies to survive. Thinking of your codependent traits as adaptive is a compassionate way to look at them. They served you well as a child. Now you're an adult who can see the roots of your codependency more clearly. Your parents weren't able to meet your needs. This doesn't mean you're flawed. You no longer need to live your life as a scared child who has to prove his/her worth through every action. It's time to emerge from that cocoon and be free. Asking for help is the first step.

Your childhood follows you into adulthood.

You carry all of these relationship dynamics and unresolved issues with you into your adult relationships. Even though their unsatisfying, confusing and scary, you repeat them because they're familiar and unresolved. You don't really know what a healthy relationship is and you don't feel deserving of one.

Be compassionate with yourself.

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How to help your people-pleasing or codependent partner

Encourage individuation

One of the most helpful things you can do for your codependent partner is to encourage him/her to develop a strong and independent sense of self. Encourage your partner to try new things and develop new friendships. Help your partner schedule time for him/herself. This might mean that you take on some additional responsibilities with the house or kids in order to free up some time for your partner to take a class, go out with friends, or exercise.

You can also create a safe environment for your partner to practice expressing his/her own opinions and thoughts. Have a curious approach and ask your partner for his/her opinion about everything from politics to how to spend the weekend. And then, be sure to validate his/her unique perspective. That doesn't mean you have to agree, just acknowledge, continue to be curious, and be non-judgmental.

Manage your own anger

It can be frustrating to have a people-pleasing or codependent partner. You probably watch him/her stuck in the same dysfunctional patterns and struggle with exhaustion and resentment. You're tired of seeing your partner mistreated. Or maybe you're frustrated that your partner doesn't prioritize taking better care of him/herself, doesn't reach his/her own goals, and doesn't make time to spend with you. It's understandable that you're feeling stuck, hurt, and angry, too. Find healthy ways to express your feelings – whether it's through direct communication with your partner, seeing a therapist, working out, or journaling. It's important that you acknowledge your feelings and tune into what they are telling you.

Be a neutral sounding board

When you take care of your own feelings, you can be a supportive and unbiased support for your partner. Our partners usually come to us for support, not advice. You don't have to fix your partner's problems. Just be a neutral sounding board that s/he can use to bounce around ideas, unload negative feelings, and feel completely accepted despite his/her struggles and mistakes.

Set your own healthy boundaries

Just because your partner tries to please everyone, doesn't mean you have to, too. Setting healthy boundaries models for your partner that it's normal and completely acceptable to say "no" sometimes.

It also reinforces the message that everyone needs to prioritize self-care and being treated with respect. Setting boundaries also helps you to be more [compassionate](#) and less resentful yourself.

Here's an example: John and Jill argue every year about going to spend a week with Jill's parents at Christmas. Neither enjoys the visit, but Jill feels obligated to go. Jill's mother is overbearing and selfish. Everything has to be about her. She guilts Jill into buying things for her and doing major household projects. One year she had Jill painting the living room on Christmas Eve. John has tried to persuade Jill to stay home. One year he even proposed a trip to Hawaii instead, but Jill says she **has** to go. Her parents expect her and she doesn't want to be a **bad** daughter. John wants to support his wife, but he's learned that he can't force Jill to set boundaries with her parents. He can, however, set his own boundaries. This year he decided to fly to his in-law's on the morning of Christmas Eve and leave after dinner on Christmas. This way he can spend Christmas with his wife and minimize his time with his in-laws. Jill can stay for the rest of the week. This was a healthy compromise for John and Jill.

Communicate clearly and respectfully

Communication is a key to every successful relationship. This is a skill that your partner probably struggles with, so you are again modeling ways for him/her to be more assertive and solve problems. Healthy communication is clear and respectful. "I statements" are a great way to accomplish this. Try this approach: "I feel _____ when you _____ and I'd like _____." John could say something like this to his wife, Jill, "I feel frustrated and sad when you spend most of your vacation time at your parents. I'd really like it if you'd shorten your trip so that we could enjoy a few days of vacation alone.

I hope this guide has provided you with some new understandings about people-pleasing, codependency, and how partners can support each other. With practice and patience and compassion, past hurts and dysfunctional patterns can be healed!

About the author



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Sharon is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, practicing psychotherapist, writer, speaker, and media contributor on emotional health and relationships. Her psychotherapy practice specializes in helping perfectionists and people-pleasers create peaceful, balanced lives and grow happiness. Sharon writes a popular blog called [Happily Imperfect](#) for PsychCentral and a column for The Good Men Project called [Courage to be Me](#).

Sharon lives in San Jose, CA where she enjoys time with friends and family, cooking, and reading and writing about positive psychology and human behavior.

She is also the author of the workbook [Setting Boundaries Without Guilt: A Workbook to Move You from Doormat to Empowerment](#), which is available on her website: <http://sharonmartincounseling.com>.