



Addiction and Codependency Versus Your Family

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"Helping capable people who feel stuck"

Introduction

Addiction to Alcohol

Alcohol use is a form of voluntary dissociation. It is a means of quelling emotional pain, but it has two serious drawbacks.

Understanding the Long Slide into Codependency

Codependency is a form of addiction. As it deepens, self-esteem plummets. Codependency is full of opposites. It helps him maintain under-functioning.

The Plight of the Children

The children of codependent parents take on adult responsibilities. Their scars can last a lifetime.

The Roadmap to Recovery from Codependency

Awareness is key. Understanding and self-care are essential to experiencing real intimacy.

About Dr. Neill Neill

Bonus

Test for Alcoholism: Does your Husband Have a Drinking Problem? Dr. Neill's 11 Answer-Keys

By going through the 11 items in this short questionnaire, you will gain a better understanding of practical aspects of living with a partner who abuses alcohol.

Introduction

There is much to say about alcohol addiction and the difficulties of recovery. There are many myths about alcohol addiction and abuse. I elaborate more fully on the facts and myths of alcohol abuse in ***Living with an Alcoholic: Dr. Neill's Survival Manual for Women***, to be released in 2006. (You will be notified as soon as it is released.)

For present purposes I will attempt to provide a basic understanding of the relationships among addiction, codependency and intimacy in the context of family.

The terms "alcoholic" and "addicted to alcohol" appear frequently in what follows. Other forms of drug addiction follow very similar patterns, so a lot of what I say about alcohol abuse applies just as much to abuse of other drugs.

The term "addiction" means a strong compulsion to do something. With an alcoholic it is a strong compulsion to seek out and drink alcohol.

There are more formal medical definitions of addiction, but the compulsive aspect of addiction is all that is necessary for the present discussion.

The generic example I follow is that of a family with children, where the husband is addicted to alcohol and his wife is addicted to him and his well-being.

I present some often-misunderstood ideas about how codependency develops alongside alcoholism, and how all members of the family are affected negatively. Sometimes the effects on the children are lifelong.

I will address you as if you are the woman whose husband is abusing alcohol. If you use alcohol too, everything I say still applies. Likewise, if you are the husband of an alcoholic wife, you need make only minor adjustments to the language.

What you should also recognize is that codependency can exist and do its damage, even if there are no alcohol or drugs involved. But the presence of alcohol makes codependency more likely.

Neill Neill, ***Addiction and Codependency Versus Your Family***

If you are a child of alcoholic/codependent parents, your part in all this will become apparent as you read.

Addiction to Alcohol

"Dissociation is the enemy of consciousness"

Addiction to alcohol usually develops gradually. Drinking alcohol in Western cultures especially is almost a rite of passage. And for the vast majority of people who use alcohol, it almost never gets them into trouble.

But in times of trauma, pain and stress, using alcohol may be a way of "escaping" pain and difficulty. It is not really escape, because the pain doesn't go away. What the alcohol does is mask the pain, that is, it makes the user temporarily less aware of his pain.

When your partner uses alcohol to reduce emotional pain, he is dissociating from awareness of the pain. You may think of drinking alcohol as voluntary dissociation; and dissociation is the enemy of consciousness. Stated another way, alcohol is one of dissociation's helpers, because alcohol helps him to split off from reality.

Drinking alcohol to quell his emotional pain creates two big problems.

1. First, if drinking alcohol continues to be his method of choice to handle pain, it will take more and more alcohol to have the desired effect, and he could eventually become addicted to alcohol.
2. The second problem stems from the fact that to deal with the causes of the emotional pain he must be conscious of and accepting of those causes. As long as he drinks alcohol to avoid consciousness of his pain, it will be impossible for him to ever deal with the traumatic causes of his pain. And that is a tragedy, because all trauma can be treated.

"All trauma can be treated."

If a man is addicted to alcohol, his self-destructive behavior will be obvious to his family, but especially to you, his wife. You may or may not be subjected to abusive behavior, but you certainly will be subjected to neglect.

Understanding the Long Slide into Codependency

"Codependency is either total enmeshment or complete cut-off."

Your response to his drinking may be to make excuses to the kids, not make any family plans because of the uncertainty about what condition he will be in, argue with him about his drinking, and constantly fret about what he is doing to himself and what risks he is subjecting you and the kids to.

Over time your family atmosphere becomes increasingly chaotic. You may be finding that family life revolves around him and his drinking. You try to please and appease him and not upset him. You make even more excuses for him and his drinking. You manage and protect the children in relation to him.

You resent what he is doing to your marriage and blame him for it. He in turn blames you for making him drink. You may blame him for not exercising more control. The blaming is blunter than it used to be.

In all the chaos self-esteem gets lower and lower for both of you as well as the children. And the lower the self-esteem, the more uncertainty and chaos there is. Escape seems futile.

What is happening to you in this situation is that you are becoming addicted to your husband's rescue and care. If his life is about alcohol, yours is about your looking after an alcoholic.

You can't back away from your addiction any easier than he can back away from his. Your attempts at not rescuing him are fraught with guilt and shame. So, just as he reverts to his drinking after yet another failed attempt to quit drinking, you are quickly back to doing what you do best, devoting yourself to the rescue and care of an alcoholic.

"Real intimacy requires consciousness."

You love him and he loves you. Although sex may be great or mediocre,

there is little real intimacy between the two of you. Real intimacy requires consciousness.

To understand what is happening psychologically, let's take a detour back to your first years of life. When you were a toddler, you could not distinguish between yourself and other people. In fact you were psychologically merged with your mother. Your identities were merged.

In infancy you were totally dependent on your mother. But it may surprise you to know that your mother was also emotionally dependent on you. As human beings such codependence is hard-wired to assure the survival of our helpless infants, thereby assuring the survival of the human species.

If it is not obvious that a mother is dependent on her infant child, let me ask you "Have you ever known a mother who lost a very young child?"

What you probably observed went far beyond the expected level of grief over losing someone she cared about. It was as if a part of herself had died. When the child died, part of the mother died. And many a good marriage has failed under the tragedy of a child's death. That is the extent to which the two beings were merged.

Over the years as you grew up, you became increasingly aware that you were separate from your parents. By around age 9 you began to understand that you weren't the cause of parental behavior and moods.

What is happening now is that you and your alcoholic husband have to some extent merged your identities with each other. The popular name for this is codependence. Technically, it is symbiosis, but it doesn't really matter what you call it.

In codependence neither of you has a completely separate identity. Rather your identities are merged. You have a dysfunctional relationship with yourself.

Codependence is different from mutual dependence, because two people can have quite separate identities and still be mutually dependent.

Some critics of the concept of codependency confuse loving care with codependence, and they ask "What's wrong with loving care?" I answer that loving care can be present with mutual dependence and in the absence of codependence. But without the codependence the love can be deeper and less needy.

Why does alcohol encourage codependency? For starters alcohol reduces inhibitions, making it easier to lash out. With alcohol it is easier to criticize, argue and bully without thinking about consequences. All these behaviors tend to foster the slide into codependence.

Codependency is full of opposites.

Codependency is full of opposites. You have an intense pull towards your husband. You lose yourself in the intensity of the need to care for him. On the other hand you have a strong need to pull away and get a life for yourself. You may have left and come back, and then left again and come back again. There seems to be no middle ground. It's either total enmeshment or complete cut-off.

What is not well understood is that the cut-off is just as much a part of codependency as the enmeshment. Distancing yourself from your alcoholic spouse will not cure your addiction to his rescue and care. You are still over-compensating for his under-functioning.

Similarly, for the alcoholic, compulsive drinking and compulsive abstinence are two sides of the same coin. Compulsive abstinence does not "cure" his addiction to alcohol.

What is the effect of your codependency on your under-functioning, alcoholic husband? To put it bluntly, he stays stuck in his alcoholism.

When you're there and enmeshed with him, he has no incentive to change. When you distance yourself, he declares his undying love and gives a hint of cleaning up. Nothing really changes, nor can it change as long as you continue to overcompensate for your partner's shortcomings.

