

WHEN WE LOVE TOO MUCH

Escaping The Control Of Codependency

by Jeff Olson

Jimmy Piersall was like most red-blooded American boys growing up in the 1930s. He loved to play America's favorite pastime. From as early as Jimmy can remember, his father taught him to play baseball. In his book *Fear Strikes Out*, Jimmy recounts, "One of my earliest memories . . . was standing in the yard behind the house, catching a rubber ball and lobbing it back to my dad. I learned how to catch and throw a ball before I learned the alphabet."

According to Jimmy, he loved playing catch with his dad. It was fun—until it started to become an obsession. Jimmy's father, a strict man with a violent temper, put enormous pressure on his son to become a major league baseball player. As early as the first grade, his dad said to him, "I don't want you thinking about fun. When you grow up, I want you to become a slugger like Jimmy Foxx. That is where the money is." He drilled into Jimmy's young

head, “You must learn baseball backwards and forwards. The more you know, the better you’ll be.” Jimmy later recounted, “I could tell what a batter should do in any given situation before I could write my name.”

According to Jimmy’s autobiography, one of his biggest concerns was “whether or not I’d ever be big enough or good enough to play major league baseball. My father put the idea in my head, but it became the one burning ambition of my life. I was just as anxious to make it as he was to see me do it.”

Jimmy’s father often warned him about avoiding injuries that could hurt his performance. On one occasion he said, “Remember, son, you grip a bat with all 10 fingers. If anything is wrong with one of them, it can ruin you.” When Jimmy was 17, he

broke his arm in a pickup game of touch football. His dad sobbed like a baby and said, “After all I tried to do to keep you for baseball, look what you did to yourself. Now everything’s gone.”

Jimmy’s life was full of pressure and worry. Along with worrying about becoming a professional baseball player and pleasing his father, he had other concerns too. He worried about his mother’s happiness and making enough money to take care of his parents, his wife, and his baby. His worries eventually became obsessions that took over his life. He became extremely suspicious of anyone who didn’t understand his obsessions, and began to alienate anyone who got in his way.

Jimmy made it to the major leagues in 1952. And he was successful. But the

obsessions shaped by his father's expectations drove him over the edge. In June of 1952, he suffered such a severe breakdown that 7 months disappeared from his memory.

Jimmy Piersall's story is an example of a problem that is more common than most people realize. The term *codependence* didn't exist back then, but today many would see part of Jimmy's problem as an overreliance on his father's approval. He was driven by an unhealthy and impossible goal of trying to control anything that would cause him to fall short of his father's expectations.

Codependency, in whatever form it takes, is a tortured and often misunderstood way to live. People who struggle with this problem live in a personal prison of stress and anxiety that monopolizes their thoughts

and feelings. While they are aware of their misery, they often don't see the underlying problem that is at the root of their trouble.

While most people with codependency don't end up in a severe state of collapse, many can identify with some or all of the following statements:

- I worry too much about a person or problem.
- I feel as if I must stay on top of everything.
- I feel responsible when others are angry or sad.
- I minimize or cover for what others do wrong.
- It seems as though I'm always apologizing for something.
- I have difficulty disagreeing with others.
- I tip-toe around those I'm afraid of.
- I'll do anything to keep the peace.
- I tend to cling to others.
- I want others to take care of me.

- I tend to offer unrequested help.
- I try to fix people's problems.
- I often feel used by those I try to help or please.

If you identify with any of the above statements, please read on. Even though it may be difficult, what you are about to read is written with the confidence that there is a better way to live.

The Problem Of Codependency

We can't change a problem we don't understand. We need to be able to recognize what codependency is, what it looks like, where it comes from, and what effect it has on ourselves and others.

The term *codependency* is professional language that surfaced sometime in the late 1970s. It was used to describe a problem that

developed in family members of chemically addicted people. Professionals who were trying to help people stop using drugs and alcohol noticed something unusual. As addicted persons overcame their problem, their families often began to fall apart. It was as if some family members needed the addict's problem so they could continue taking care of and rescuing the out-of-control person. While they previously resented the addict for having a problem, they later resented him for getting better.

Codependency became a way of describing those persons who resisted giving up their caretaker role as much as the chemically addicted person resisted staying clean. It was as if their whole identity and purpose in life were wrapped up in both adjusting to and trying

to manage the addict's problem.

Professionals no longer limit the term *codependency* to the family members of someone with a chemical addiction. They now apply the term to a much broader group of people. Today, the term *codependency* is used for those who struggle with overreliance and control issues—even if they are not in a relationship with an unhealthy person.

Codependency Defined

Let's attempt to define the problem in a way that lays the foundation for understanding some important spiritual implications. Codependency is overdependence on others. This problem is difficult to see, however, because the overreliant persons are not just being controlled by

others. The irony is that they are also attempting to control the very ones who are controlling them.

The focus of a codependent person's life may include a wide range of people—a spouse, an ex-spouse, a boyfriend or girlfriend, a parent, a teenage son or daughter, a friend, or a family. These other persons may be weak, timid, and unsure, or they may be overconfident, self-righteous, and overbearing. Some codependent people are in a relationship with others who have a serious drinking or gambling problem. Some are in a relationship with a spouse who is having an adulterous affair. Still others are living with someone with an unpredictable temper.

As suggested earlier, some codependent people may be depending too much on those whose behavior is neither inappropriate nor

out of control. For instance, one wife tried to keep her husband home because she was threatened by his interest in any activity that didn't include her. His interests were neither out of line nor out of balance. The problem was that his wife was overdependent and so insecure that she felt she had to keep him to herself.

Codependency is a matter of degree. To some extent, we are all controlled by the actions and opinions of others. In some ways, we all try to control others. Controlling and being controlled by others, however, *characterizes* those who are codependent. They latch on to the people they try to save, take care of, appease, or intimidate because they rely too much on them.

What Does Codependency Look Like?

Codependent people have countless ways of trying to manage others and their problems.

The Caretaker.

This is not the *caregiver* who is needed by a seriously incapacitated person.

Neither is the caretaker someone who helps those who are in need (1 Th. 5:14). If a friend is sick and you run an errand or watch her kids, that is not caretaking. Caretakers try to do for others what they could and should do for themselves.

Caretakers over-anticipate what others need so that they can help. They try to be the hero, eager to fix problems. They feel responsible to change other people's moods. They offer family members unwanted advice or remind them of something they

need to do. They monitor their spouse's consumption of food or alcohol. They seem to want problems to solve so that they can feel needed and in control.

The Rescuer. This is not the courageous person who takes personal risks to help people in dire need. Rather, it is the one who bails others out of the consequences of poor choices. Rescuers enable rather than confront problems that others create. They cover for others' glaring mistakes. For example, a rescuer will work an extra job rather than confront a family member who consistently wastes money on drugs and gambling that is needed to pay bills. They'll do homework for intelligent but unmotivated teenagers. They'll screen unwanted phone calls for family members. They'll hide a spouse's sexual or gambling

addiction. They "protect" and "defend" others by making excuses for their inappropriate behavior. They clean up messes that their irresponsible adult children create. They control by picking up the pieces and minimizing the seriousness of a problem.

The Pleaser. This is not the one who is trying to be considerate of the real needs and feelings of others. Instead, pleasers try to do or be what they think others want them to do or be. They are preoccupied with making others happy and not disappointing them. Pleasers readily agree with others so they will avoid confrontation. They are overly accommodating and compliant. They have a different face for every crowd. They strive to live up to the standards of others, even those that are unrealistic. They control others by doing or saying

almost anything for anyone, anytime.

The Helpless Victim. Everyone has weaknesses, but those who play the role of the helpless victim choose to be weak unnecessarily. They don't just want to be helped, they want to be taken care of. Unlike the caretaker, they need others to take care of them. They send the subtle yet loud message, "I'm too weak to handle life. I need your involvement and cooperation if I'm going to make it." They manipulate others to feel sorry for them. They pressure family and friends to understand and excuse their inability to handle life. Wanting others to be around them all the time, they absorb attention like a dry sponge. They control others through weakness.

The Intimidator. Families and churches need strong leaders, but they

don't need leaders who intimidate and lord it over others (1 Pet. 5:3). That, however, is what intimidators do. They get things done—their way. Many are pushy, even without raising their voices. They leave the impression that they know it all. They use knowledge to control. They can be cordial and friendly, as long as others agree with them. But when crossed, they turn mean. Some intimidators even go so far as to verbally and physically abuse those who dare to disagree with them. Behind the tough exterior, however, is an insecure heart that is terrified of losing control and being abandoned by the very people they intimidate.

What Drives A Codependent Person?

Although the faces of codependency differ, the driving motivations are similar. A careful examination of codependent people reveals that fear, misplaced trust, and poor examples drive them to control and be controlled by people.

Driven By Fear. All of us are afraid of something. But codependent people are gripped with an inordinate amount of insecurity. Much of the way they think and relate is motivated by a fear of disapproval, rejection, or anger. They often have a nagging dread that something terrible is going to happen if they don't stay in control.

King Saul, Israel's first king, was driven by fear. After being confronted by the prophet Samuel for

allowing his soldiers to disobey God's orders, Saul finally admitted, "I was afraid of the people and so I gave in to them" (1 Sam. 15:24).

Codependent people are controlled by a similar fear. Some worry about what others might do or think if they fail. Others worry about what they might lose if they aren't needed. For example, one mother continued to cover up her adult son's irresponsible behavior because she was afraid that others would view her as a bad parent. Another woman who described herself as a "smother mother" was afraid her children might not love her if they didn't need her to manage their lives. One man was so afraid of his wife's anger that he wouldn't risk confronting her about her out-of-control spending problem.

Driven By Misplaced Trust.

All of us need and depend on other people. It's appropriate for family members to want each other's love and acceptance. Friends rely on friends. But people with codependency need and depend on others too much. Something vital is missing inside them, which they rely on others to fill.

Leah, Rachel's older sister and Jacob's first wife, was a woman who seemed to need her husband's love too much. From the start of a marriage that was arranged in deception, Jacob let it be known that he loved Rachel more than Leah (Gen. 29:30). Being second in Jacob's eyes broke Leah's heart. She apparently thought, however, that if she gave Jacob children, he would finally love her. After giving birth to the first of six sons, she made a statement

uttered by many codependent wives, "Surely my husband will love me now" (v.32). Later, after her third son was born she stated, "Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons" (v.34). Her desire for Jacob's love was legitimate, but it seems to have become the focus and consuming goal of her life.

Codependent people make others so important that their ultimate joy and fulfillment in life hinges on others' love, approval, and presence. They believe they will not be happy unless others accept them, pay more attention to them, need them more, or become what they want. One woman, for example, was so desperate for her dysfunctional family to become close that she ran herself ragged trying to make them want to spend

time together. Another woman knocked herself out trying to please her critical mother and gain her acceptance.

Driven By

Example. The sins of one generation are passed on to the next generation by parental example. For instance, the Bible tells the sad story of how all the kings of Israel who rejected the house of David followed the sinful example of their forefathers (1 Ki. 22:52-53).

Many codependent people grew up in homes where they saw a mother or father obsessively please or take care of others. They may have grown up with one parent who had a destructive addiction while the other parent made excuses or pretended the problem didn't exist. Others may have had parents who handled their insecurities by acting helpless or by intimidation. Nearly every

day, they saw codependent patterns of relating, which slowly rubbed off.

Codependency is a learned behavior. But there comes a time when we all must take responsibility for the way we've chosen to handle life. Children have no control over the kind of example their parents provide, but they *are* responsible for either following that example or rejecting it.

What's Wrong With Codependency?

There's a lot wrong with codependency! It doesn't work. It creates more problems. It's a violation of love. And it's a sign of an unrecognized problem.

It Doesn't Work.

No matter how skillful people are in their

codependent strategies, they cannot completely control anything or anyone. Life continues to be unsafe and disappointing. Friends and loved ones may comply temporarily, but eventually they resist and resent being controlled. When codependent people increase their efforts, they become even more controlled by the person or problem they are trying to change. It's a vicious and exhausting cycle.

It Creates More Problems. Deep inside, codependent people know that despite all of their efforts, life is getting worse, not better. The following are some of the major problems codependency creates:

Resentment. It's often a well-kept secret that resentment simmers in the hearts of those who can appear kind and accommodating. They may act agreeable and compliant,

but they end up resenting those they try to take care of, rescue, and appease. For example, one wife complained, "After all I've done to make my husband happy, he still cheats on me." A father admitted, "I've done so much for my son. I've bailed him out of so many tight spots. But he still won't have anything to do with me unless he needs something."

Martha, who may or may not have been over-dependent on people, is a New Testament example of a person who was resentful because no one seemed to notice or appreciate her sacrificial efforts. Her sister Mary was getting all of Jesus' attention, even though Martha was the one who opened up her home and was doing all of the work (Lk. 10:38-42).

People with codependency identify with Martha's resentment.

Family members don't appreciate their sacrifices. Friends don't listen to their advice or give them approval and attention. People don't understand their needs or weaknesses. They feel used, angry, and misunderstood.

Even though they're resentful, codependent people remain afraid and overdependent, so they keep doing or asking for more and more—only to get the same disappointing results. And the resentment that builds may eventually lead to complaining (sometimes a lot), withdrawing, exploding, or expressing resentment in subtle ways. Many conceal their resentment for years, even from themselves. It took one wife 8 years, for example, before she woke up and realized how angry she was for allowing her husband to force his will on her. Others hide their frustrations for only short

periods of time, sometimes striking out regularly at innocent family members and friends.

Stress. Worrying about what others think or need and trying to be everything for everyone generates unhealthy levels of stress. A child, for instance, who takes on the impossible job of keeping a family happy and together will pay a great price. Pleasing others leads to a never-ending search to figure out what people want. Stress builds because what seems to please one day rarely works the next.

Depression And Addiction. Some who can no longer deny that their efforts to change people and protect themselves don't work begin to ask themselves, "What's the point?" and just give up. Others, who can no longer tolerate or protect themselves from the pain

of life, resort to alcohol, sexual adventure, shopping, television, or staying busy to escape. But they always end up being enslaved by whatever they use to escape and control the pain of life.

Health Complications.

Many medical professionals believe that when people hold problems inside, pretend that all is fine, or obsessively worry they put themselves at risk for a variety of health problems, some of which are life-threatening.

It's Unloving. Loving others means caring about them and working toward their best interest. No matter how you cut it, rescuing others from their own irresponsible behavior is not in their best interest (Prov. 19:19). It enables them to continue living carelessly and sinfully. The same is true of caretaking. It is unloving because it doesn't allow others to

take responsibility for themselves. It keeps them from growing up. It's also unloving to manipulate and strong-arm people into doing what you demand.

Eli, the high priest of Israel during the time of the judges, illustrates this form of unloving behavior. His two sons kept for themselves the choice meats from the animals used for sacrifices. They also were sexually involved with the women who served at the tabernacle. Eli knew about their sin, but he refused to confront them. God had this to say about Eli: "His sons made themselves contemptible, and he failed to restrain them" (1 Sam. 3:13). If Eli had shown tough love and removed his sons from their positions of leadership, he may have gotten their attention and turned their lives around. Instead, he failed to love them and did nothing.

It's A Sign Of An Unrecognized Problem. Codependency stems from a problem that is often unseen and buried deep in the human heart. Although faced with the enormous difficulties of life, codependent people add to their pain an even greater problem—a *determination to manage life apart from God*. Instead of wanting and trusting in God, they are committed to managing life and protecting themselves through their own codependent means.

Though it often goes unnoticed, many codependent people take matters into their own hands because they've given up on God. They may trust Him for eternal life, but they doubt His ability to handle daily fears and disappointments. Many don't trust God because they believe He's failed to protect and provide for

them in the past. They believe their pain and disappointment justifies handling life on their own.

The Path To A Better Way

Codependency is a path that many of us have followed. At one time or another, most of us have been in relationships in which we've needed others too much and trusted in our codependent strategies more than God.

Learning to trust God instead of codependency is like jumping from a sinking ship during a raging storm. God is calling us to abandon ship and to trust Him to rescue us. But we don't hear His voice. Either we are too preoccupied with patching up the leaks and keeping our ship afloat or we're waiting for better options to come along. Some of us have even gone below deck,

resigning ourselves to the fact that we are going down with the ship.

And even if we do hear His call, we hesitate. Our crippled vessel may be taking on water faster than the *Titanic*, but we resist jumping. The wind is fierce and the waves are high. And who knows what lurks beneath the water's surface? God says He's there for us, but we have our doubts. Trusting Him seems to make as much sense as swimming with hungry sharks. We would rather take our chances and wait for someone else to come along who seems more reliable. In the meantime, our sinking ship and our efforts to fix it seem safer, so we remain on board.

The good news is that God is patient and persistent. Although we continue to doubt Him and rely on our codependent strategies, He continues

to call us to trust Him.

The rest of this booklet will describe a path that leads to something greater than codependency. The path to a better way of living looks different for everyone, but at the core it involves (1) admitting the truth and (2) struggling through the process that is needed to entrust ourselves more completely to the One who made us for Himself.

Admitting The Truth. God longs for us to have a confidence in Him that goes beyond trusting Him for salvation. But the process requires a level of honesty about life and ourselves that most of us avoid. We pretend that life isn't that bad. Even worse, we pretend that we trust in God when we really trust more in others and in our codependent ways.

None of us will find a better way by pretending life is better than it is or

that we are what we *should* be. Only when we honestly admit the truth—about (1) our hurt and disappointment, (2) the style and goal of our codependency, (3) the failure of codependency, (4) the hurt we've caused ourselves and others, and (5) our commitment to live independently of God—will the Spirit of truth help us discover a better way.

1. *Admitting the truth about our hurt and disappointment.* Pain is a part of everyday life. But emotional pain in life can be so deep that it subtly lures us away from God into self-protection and an idolatrous way of life. This level of pain is experienced by those who grew up in a rigid, angry home where there was little if any love. It is known by those who were arbitrarily subjected to abuse at the hands of neglectful parents, angry school teachers,

mean neighbors, or abusive babysitters. It is familiar to those who were abandoned or who lost a close family member or friend.

If you've been deeply wounded, and all of us have, facing your hurt and the effect it has had on you may seem to make as much sense as pouring salt into an open wound. You would rather forget the cutting remarks of a critical parent or what it felt like to be left by someone you love. You may even blame yourself for what others did to you. If you deny the deep pain of life, however, you may end up being controlled by it. And if you never face your pain long enough to see it from heaven's perspective, you leave yourself wide open to believing Satan's lie that God is not good and can't be trusted.

2. *Admitting the truth about the style and goal of our codependency.* This

requires that we take the time to ask God to help us identify and acknowledge the specific ways we relate when we are afraid and overdependent (Ps. 139:23-24). Honesty requires us to admit that the goals behind pleasing or rescuing or caretaking are not as innocent as we may think (Prov. 16:2).

Some may be misled into thinking that the Bible actually encourages codependency. For instance, Jesus exhorted us to go the extra mile (Mt. 5:41). And the apostle Paul said that we should look out for the interests of others (Phil. 2:4). The difference, however, between what the Bible says and what a codependent person does is the *goal*. An honest look inside the heart reveals that the goal of pleasing or taking care of others, for example, may not be as selfless as it looks.

We need to make the difficult admission that the main goal behind constantly adjusting our life to others, while at the same time trying to control them, is *self-protection*. We may have experienced such devastating pain and loss that we commit ourselves to never getting hurt again. For example, many of us guard ourselves by not asking for much and not upsetting others. If we just take care of people, give them what they want, or gloss over their problems, we believe they won't get angry or leave. Others of us protect ourselves by controlling what people think and do. We imagine that people won't abandon us as long as they are under our subtle or overt control.

Another goal of codependency is to get what we believe we can't live without—approval and attention. We may be hooked

on approval and attention like an addict is hooked on a drug. Consequently, we need to admit that we often please or act weak to get our next “fix.”

Many people with codependency are so controlled by a painful past that they are unknowingly driven to repair it. They mistakenly believe that if they can restage the pain from their early relationships, they can fix what went wrong. They wistfully believe that this time they can make the angry person love them or the alcoholic stop drinking. One woman, for example, grew up taking care of a father who fell apart in the face of anything unpleasant. She married a man just like her father, thinking that she could change him and get what she never received from her dad. Instead, she ended up having to be the strong one and coddling her

husband's feelings just as she did with her father.

3. Admitting the truth about the failure of codependency. Our codependency may seem to make us happy and safe, but it doesn't work. It doesn't truly keep us safe. It doesn't assure lasting approval and attention. And it doesn't fix our past. Living codependently is like trying to hold water in a container that is cracked and full of holes (Jer. 2:13).

4. Admitting the truth about the hurt we've caused ourselves and others. Although others have deeply hurt us, it's vital to admit that the harm our codependent strategies bring on ourselves often exceeds the harm that's been done to us.

Pleasing and taking care of others opens us up to greater struggles with stress, depression, and guilt. Allowing our fears to control

us puts us at risk for a variety of health problems. Pleasing others and acting helpless or self-sufficient causes more stress, dishonesty, and tension in relationships.

One of the hardest things to admit is that we often set ourselves up to suffer with resentment. For example, we may resent others for not knowing our needs, yet we don't tell them what we need. Sometimes we tell others to go ahead with their plans, but we resent it when they do.

Without realizing it, codependent people can also hurt others. They can be so focused on avoiding further harm to themselves that they overlook how they hurt people. Those who are too quick to rescue others deprive them of the consequences that are often necessary for change to occur. By doing too much for others, they prevent them

from growing. Many rob others of the chance to help by keeping their needs to themselves. Some strike fear in the hearts of others with their intimidation.

5. Admitting the truth about our real problem— a commitment to live independently of God.

The most serious threat to our well-being isn't our painful past. It isn't our fears and insecurities. It isn't that a spouse, friend, or parent won't change and become who we want. Nor is it that we don't pray or read the Bible enough. If we are to break the pattern of codependency, we need to honestly admit that our real problem is our tendency to manage our world without God. In our understandable desire to live without pain and struggle, we protect ourselves and rely on someone other than Him for our fulfillment and happiness.

Codependency is not just the result of fear, neediness, and a lack of good examples—dynamics that were set in motion during early relationships. It occurs when we replace God and wage our own personal crusade to take control of our lives.

The way out of codependency, therefore, must include an admission of our real problem. Finding the better way requires more than admitting our pain and how we've hurt ourselves and others by our codependent strategies. It also requires us to see how we have tried to handle life apart from our God. These are painful admissions, but they invite us to struggle through a process that leads to a better way.

Struggling Through The Process. Giving up our dependencies and efforts to control isn't easy. It doesn't

happen overnight. We aren't naturally inclined to be honest with ourselves long enough for the kind of struggle that is necessary to break loose from a way of life and view of God that is lodged firmly in our hearts.

We must allow time for a new understanding to take root in us. As we prayerfully question and think through our despair, doubt, and disappointment, we will slowly begin to understand God's way of thinking. While much of our struggle will be alone with God, it's important to include a few close friends, a wise pastor, or an insightful counselor. The process is always more beneficial when caring people are involved (Gal. 6:2).

Struggling With Our Despair. God sometimes gets our attention by allowing "severe mercies" into our lives. One of those mercies is the temporary

despair that sets in when our codependent strategies fail. When we can no longer deny that our system of managing life is breaking down and making things worse, we gradually lose hope in our old ways. As the night falls on our codependency, we may feel confused and helpless. But the good news is that struggling with the torment we've brought about by relating to others out of fear and overdependency is making room for a deeper hope.

God actually wants us to enter the darkness and anguish of self-imposed despair. That is why He expressed the following words of disappointment in His children who went out of their way to find other gods: "You were wearied by all your ways, but you would not say, 'It is hopeless.' You found renewal of your strength, and so you

did not faint" (Isa. 57:10).

In other words, when their search for more idols turned up empty, God wanted them to admit, "It's hopeless." He wanted them to face despair and give up their foolish chase. Instead, they strengthened themselves and pressed on with their search for more idols.

Despair can be our teacher. If we pay attention, despair will expose what we are living for more than anything else. It will help us see what we work so hard to get and believe we can't live without—the approval and acceptance of others. In other words, self-imposed despair reveals our idolatry.

Struggling with despair also has the potential to stop idolatry in its tracks. Facing the reality of despair can make us so restless inside that we will want to cut loose our idols. The pain of despair can cause us to

lose confidence in ourselves to manage life and weaken our stubborn grip on life. The torment of despair can be so intense that we may seriously consider a different path that involves more than simply rearranging our circumstances so that we feel better. In the throes of despair, we can begin to see that there is more to life than codependent efforts to assure the respect and attention of others.

The pain of despair can increase our willingness to hope in what God wants us to hope for—the growth of our own character and a stronger sense of His calling in our lives. There may or may not be much hope for our circumstances to get better or for a relationship to improve. Because we can't assure that others will deal with their own sin, they may still get angry and leave. Those we care about

may go on making self-destructive choices. Relationships may still tragically end. Families may still grow further apart. Although our heartache continues, we can begin to embrace a deeper hope that God is at work in us (Phil. 1:6) and is calling us to live for a purpose that is greater than ourselves (2 Cor. 5:15). We may not understand it all, but we can grow in the hope that He is changing us in ways that can draw others to Himself.

Surrendering to the hope that we can become more like Jesus Christ gives us more reason to give up our false gods rather than give up on life.

While we can't bear the sins of others as Jesus did, we can learn to follow His example. Jesus didn't live to protect Himself. He wasn't controlled by the approval of others. Neither did He try to

take control of the lives of those He loved. Instead, He entrusted Himself to His Father in heaven—even to the point of death. As we reflect on the way He trusted His Father, and as we focus on the outcome of His way of life, we can begin to find light in our own darkness. The apostle Paul's strange exhortation to "rejoice in our sufferings" begins to make sense. Suffering with the pain of despair, while turning our eyes to the Father in heaven, ultimately leads us to a hope that "does not disappoint us" (Rom. 5:3-5).

Struggling With Our Doubt. Though it often goes unnoticed, everyone with codependency has serious doubt about God deep in their hearts. We doubt His love and goodness because we've been hurt so much. Whether we believe He caused our hurt or merely allowed it, the fact that

He could have prevented it leaves us in a battle to trust Him.

Many of us see doubt as an enemy. We try to silence its whispers by pretending it doesn't exist. We fail to realize that while doubt can be an enemy of faith, it also can have a positive side. There is another way to view doubt that allows us to see it as an ally of faith. If we struggle with it honestly, doubt can prompt us to search for God by asking the hard questions surrounding our hurt and disappointment. Questions like: "Where were You?" or "Why didn't You protect me?" or "Why have You allowed so much pain and hurt in my life?"

Consider, for example, a difficult period in the life of Gideon. Judges 6:1-5 explains the context for Gideon's struggle with doubt. The Israelites were going through a time of

enormous oppression at the hands of the Midianites because of their own idolatry. For 7 long years, the Midianites ruthlessly swarmed over Israel's land during the harvest season like an army of locusts. They ruined and stole most of the crops and killed their livestock. They crushed Israel's spirit and left the people of God in a state of poverty and hunger.

When the angel of the Lord came to Gideon at the beginning of the harvest season and said, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior" (v.12), Gideon's response was, basically, "Yeah, right." Listen to his doubt and struggle as he spoke: "If the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all His wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, 'Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?' But now the Lord has abandoned us and put

us into the hand of Midian" (v.13).

God didn't reprimand Gideon for asking questions. Nor did God explain the issue of Israel's idolatry as being the cause of their oppression. God allowed Gideon to struggle and search by letting him ask honest questions from his heart. Asking God hard questions about difficult circumstances prepared Gideon to see God in a new way, and his faith began to increase.

In his search, Gideon came to believe that God was working in ways he could not see. Gideon's doubts and fears didn't completely go away. That's why he tore down his father's altar to Baal under the cover of darkness (v.27) and put out the fleeces before agreeing to lead Israel into war against the Midianites (vv.36-40). But he couldn't ignore a fresh

wave of confidence that God was up to something big. Even though he still struggled with doubt, he stepped out in faith against the enemy.

As we honestly face our own doubts, God will show His ability to work in difficult circumstances. He may not show Himself to us as often as we'd like, but He does it more than we realize. Honest struggle with doubt sets the stage for encounters with God that can increase our confidence in Him. The Lord promises that He will reward those who search for Him (Heb. 11:6). How? When? Where? He doesn't tell us. That's part of the mystery of God. Nonetheless, we are to keep searching for Him by struggling with the tough questions of life without succumbing to bitterness or settling for simple or pat answers.

Eventually, a truth that

is deeper than our painful disappointments can begin to fill our hearts. We can begin to surrender to the perspective that God can use anything to bring about His good purposes. Our faith can expand as our hearts discover God's presence in our lives. We discover that although God allows certain tragedies to occur, He can take what was intended for harm and use it for good. That is the inspiring message of the troubling Old Testament story of Joseph. He was hated, betrayed, and sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. Yet God used the harm done to Joseph to bring about a greater good (Gen. 50:20).

Struggling With Our Disappointment. As we work patiently through our doubt and despair, a question still remains—what are we to do with disappointment? The good

news is that wrestling with the disappointment of life and the disappointment of our sin presents yet another opportunity to redirect our hearts to God.

The Disappointments Of Life. It's no secret that our lives often fall short of our expectations. Some of us have lost so much. Early relationships weren't what we wanted, and our present relationships aren't much better. Yet most of us would rather keep busy and pretend these disappointments don't exist. Some try to escape the pain through a variety of addictions.

Honestly struggling with disappointment, however, is a better way. God can use these disappointments to help us discover how much we want Him—the One for whom our hopes and desires were made.

We won't realize how much we want God unless

we are honest about our disappointments. Only by facing them can we cooperate with God's Spirit. Only by facing life will we discover that God occasionally leads His children into the wilderness of loss. There He lovingly lets us become so hungry and aware of our emptiness that we start to want Him more than anyone or anything (Dt. 8:2-3).

If we stay in our disappointment long enough, we can eventually make another discovery—that God cares for us far more than we ever realized. We may not sense His involvement as much as we would like. There will still be times when we won't feel His loving arms around us. But His seeming lack of care actually makes us want Him more. And as we slowly realize that our desire for Him is our deepest longing, we put

ourselves in a better place to recognize Him when He makes His presence known.

Disappointment doesn't go away until heaven. But struggling with the inconsolable ache of life can reveal, little by little, a desire for God that will begin to fill our hearts. That's what Asaph discovered while struggling with disappointment. He wrote, "Whom have I in heaven but You? And earth has nothing I desire besides You" (Ps. 73:25). Surrendering to our desire for God frees us to resist the urge to control or escape pain.

The Disappointments Of Our Own Wrongs. Struggling with the disappointment of our sin doesn't mean that we just try to stop making wrong choices. If that's all we do, we become self-reliant moralists. Struggling with our moral and spiritual

faults means that we acknowledge our helpless condition.

It's frightening to admit that we've wanted to rely on others more than God. We feel vulnerable when we realize that we've pushed God away and harmed others with our codependent strategies. Yet, this is where we can encounter the amazing kindness of God (Rom. 2:4).

It is at this very point of helplessness, however, that we must be aware of another common mistake. Once we admit our many failures, we can get so caught up in beating ourselves up that we don't accept God's forgiveness. Our preoccupation with self-contempt may feel like godly sorrow, but it can actually be an attempt to stay in control, escape our helpless condition, and atone for our own wrongs. Contempt turned inward

can be a refusal to humble ourselves before God, who is waiting to lift us up (Jas. 4:10).

Instead of hating ourselves, it is far better to remain at the mercy of the only One who can atone for our sin. There is only One who bore the full punishment of our sin. Jesus is the One who was raised from the grave after 3 days to show that by His sacrificial death He paid our moral debt in full. By dying in our place, He carried out the most amazing mission of forgiveness and rescue ever executed.

Only by throwing ourselves on the mercy of God can we be in a position to accept His forgiveness. Only by the immeasurable price Christ paid can we know that this is not a cheap forgiveness. The agony experienced by our Savior on the cross shows how much God hates the sin

that has brought such pain and darkness into His world. Yes, He hates our sin. But His desire to forgive us is even stronger.

This amazing desire is also the point of the New Testament story of a wayward son. It was “the prodigal” who did the unthinkable. He left home and squandered his inheritance (Lk. 15:12-13). Yet it was the father who longed for his son’s return. When the son finally came home, helpless and broke, his father celebrated his return (vv.20-24).

The story of the prodigal son illustrates God’s forgiving heart. He doesn’t shame and condemn us when we return. Instead, He is waiting to forgive and to celebrate our homecoming! He doesn’t want to punish us for rebelling against Him, because Jesus took our punishment during that

awful, unforgettable day on a hill outside of Jerusalem.

Because of God's amazing grace, codependent people can honestly embrace their strong disappointment in the ways they've mishandled life. As we surrender the disappointment of our own sinfulness to the wonderful, life-changing truth of God's forgiveness, we can begin to thankfully worship and abandon ourselves to a better life that is possible because of God's mercy.

Living The Better Way

We will never be totally free from codependent tendencies until we see Christ face to face. Those of us, however, who begin to admit our misplaced trust can also begin to discover something that is better than our doubt, despair, and disappointment. In the process we can start to become people who find a better way—living *for* God and others, and living *with* God and others.

As our faith, hope, desire, and appreciation for God grows, we will learn to enjoy Him more than anyone or anything else. To our delight and surprise, we will also find an increased capacity to enjoy the people in our lives. But we will do so with a new freedom. We will increasingly see everything other than God as being

secondary pleasures that are made to be enjoyed but not depended upon.

It is when we pant for God like a deer pants for water (Ps. 42:1), especially in the throes of loss and heartache, that we discover there is more to live for than the pursuit of good times.

In a path that is better than codependency, we can also open ourselves to receiving and giving love. We can start to take down our walls of self-protection and let people in. Rather than just doing things for others, we can allow others to do things for us. Instead of clinging to others out of over-dependency, we can let them go without reluctance. And we can learn to give to others for their sake. Instead of trying to make others change for our good, we can learn what it means to invite them to change for their good. Instead of always being in charge, we can learn to be

flexible and considerate of others' thoughts and opinions. Instead of rescuing others, we can allow them to take responsibility for their choices. Instead of always adapting ourselves to what pleases others, we can express our needs and stand against what is destructive.

If we detach from unhealthy dependencies and relate differently to others, some will not like these changes in us. We will have taken back the power they've had over us. Some will attack us with words or try to make us feel guilty. This is not, however, a time to fall back to our old codependent ways. Instead, this is a time to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). (See *When Words Hurt* CB011 for more discussion on how to lovingly confront.) It will be a time for us to show our new conviction that God alone is worthy of our deepest hope and confidence (Ps. 56:4).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

From Bondage To Bonding by Nancy Groom (NavPress, 1991).

When People Are Big And God Is Small by Edward T. Welch (P&R Publishing, 1997).

OTHER RBC COUNSELING BOOKLETS

When We Just Can't Stop—overcoming addiction (CB961).

When Hope Is Lost—dealing with depression (CB973).

When Words Hurt—verbal abuse in marriage (CB011).

When Help Is Needed—a biblical view of counseling (CB931).

When Forgiveness Seems Impossible—knowing when and how to forgive (CB941).

When Anger Burns—dealing with angry emotions (CB942).

How Can I Live With My Loss?—the process of dealing with grief and loss (CB921).

When We Don't Measure Up—escaping the grip of guilt (CB971).

The complete text of all the RBC booklets is available at www.discoveryseries.org.

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