

**The Nature and Effects
of
Co-dependency Among Christians
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The Nature and Effects of Co-Dependency

Introduction

Co-dependency is a relatively new term in the church when it comes to emotional disorders that interrupt a Christian's normal course of life. Emotional disorders that have been assumed to be a part of the secular world have now become commonplace in the sacred world. In the early 1970s the term was nearly unheard of. Now co-dependency, as well as, a dozen other related terms is common place.

People who profess to know Jesus Christ as their Savior can demonstrate that they are enslaved to many things. While salvation remains simple and yet profound, sanctification for the co-dependent believer becomes a lifetime of struggle. The purpose of this booklet is to provide a recovery system for Christians who are suffering from co-dependency. The goal is to pass along information and methodology already proven to effectively bring hope and happiness to many Christians. Nothing in this work is unbiblical or anti-biblical. Nothing will contradict the Christian experience. What Christians need is relief from psychological burdens imposed upon them by genetics, experience, or both. The Church by and large has not addressed these issues. The goal here is to supplement Christian growth by helping the believer to remove or greatly diminish co-dependent barriers.

Here we will first examine the types of addictions that plague born-again Christians. We will touch on how these addictions affect the self-esteem and the spiritual experience of the Christian. Beyond that we will examine denial, which prevents the believer from achieving a higher level of spirituality in the Christian life. Steps to recovery, the nature and hope of recovery, and the ongoing battle of the co-dependent Christian to maintain victory over his or her condition will be examined.

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Definition of Terms

Co-dependency is a situation in which people look outside of themselves to determine how they feel about themselves.

Contrary to co-dependency, a healthy view of self comes from within, between the person and their God.

Addiction is something that a person believes he must have or act out in order to achieve his or her perception of a normal life. It is a tangible object (usually ingested) or an overt behavior pattern that is usually unpleasant to the addict and to the people closely associated to the addict.

Denial is an intentional refusal to be aware of or acknowledge a personal problem or a conscious decision to ignore it. Denial is a self-distraction or a failure to recognize the problem or a coping mechanism that enables the patient to continue in his or her destructive patterns. Denial is often a coping mechanism which helps the victim survive. It can go on for years.

Enablers are those family members or others known to the co-dependent who consistently support the addict in his life. This enabling allows the addict to continue his/her destructive patterns. The enabler is usually just as sick emotionally and spiritually as the addict and becomes co-dependent.

The Nature and Effects of Co-Dependency

Types of Addictions

We can identify a partial list of addictions that are found not only in unbelievers, but also in believers. An addiction is actually a temporary relief of an internal emotional pain. The substance of addiction or the behavior pattern is simply a temporary medicine for the real problem. It is the same as taking an aspirin for a headache that is being caused by a brain tumor. More and more aspirin is required on a regular basis to medicate the pain. But until the tumor is surgically removed, the headache will continue and probably grow worse. The practice of addiction is really a distraction to keep us from facing ourselves and our problem.

A partial list of addictions might include:

- * Common addictions that are ingested: alcohol, drugs (both legal and illegal), nicotine, food, caffeine.
- * Other addictions that involve the body but are behavioral addictions may include sex, exercise, and participation sports.
- * Overt behavioral addictions: spectator sports, relationships, the need to control, spending, gambling, work, perfectionism, excitement, busyness, religion, cleaning, talking (phone, internet, texting etc. or in person), shopping, arguing, rage, collecting things, hobbies, driving.

The above partial list has many things that have surfaced in the lives of people who claim to know and love the Lord Jesus Christ. It seems that these Christians are truly addicted to one or more of these things which become *the sins which so easily entangle us*, Hebrews 12:1. These repetitious sins in the life of a believer are “quenched” (see 1 Thessalonians 5:19), and “grieving” (Ephesians 4:30) the Holy Spirit. Bible scholars,

theologians, and pastors have various positions of interpretation and application of God's truth in the lives of these addicted Christians. Some say the afflicted are not Christians at all. Others say that it is impossible for a Christian to remain "out of fellowship" for years and years through the practice of these addictions. Others are convinced that Christians still have a sin nature and that the sin nature can be an overwhelming force in the life of a believer who is enslaved to the flesh:¹

For that which I am doing, I do not understand: for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not wish to do, I agree with the Law confessing that it is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is in my flesh; for the wishing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish. But if I am doing the very thing I do not wish, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells within me. I find then the principle that evil is present within me, the one who wishes to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin [Romans 7:15-25].

¹ A man in a city in which I pastored frequently (at least monthly) spent about \$400 per month playing the scratch-off type lottery tickets. Suggestions and admonitions from his family members and friends were ignored by this man. He was truly addicted to gambling. He claimed to be a Christian.

Addicted and afflicted believers never seem to make it to verses 24 and 25 (e.g., *who will set me free* and ff.) to find release and victory over these addictions through the power of the indwelling Christ.

Unfortunately, the teaching of God's Word in Sunday School and Worship Services does not seem to provide the concentrated system of doctrine needed by a Christian addict. Such help or relief must come in council chambers or small group work, which often becomes a support group made up of people with similar emotional afflictions, even if addictions are varied. The 12-step work of Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon is often found to be the regimented discipline that leads to victory. However, words such as "Higher Power" are used to replace words such as "God" and "Jesus Christ". Nevertheless, I have discovered that God is gracious, and that people who follow the 12 Step Program to recovery from addictions are often blessed and helped by God, whatever they call Him.²

Various programs have used different steps, and different numbers of steps are used to aid people in finding relief from their self-destructive behavioral patterns. One common thread that seems to run through the various programs is to assist the person in identifying his own personality flaws or defects that cause repetitious sin, and to help him take responsibility for these defects. Once the individual identifies and takes responsibility for

² Having graduated from Dallas Theological Seminary in 1976, I had occasion to return for seven summers for ongoing education classes. During one of these I spoke with a fellow graduate. As we got reacquainted, I learned that he changed schools in the Dallas area to go on to earn a Ph.D in Psychology. He had opened a Christian Counseling Center in North Dallas which had then been functioning for a couple of years. He informed me that "the Christians are lining up clear back to the street." He had discovered that Christians have a myriad of emotional problems that they bring with them into the Christian life, including addictions.

his behavior, he is in a position to come to God for help. God is not in the business of creating robots or puppets. We are free moral agents whom God has created in His own image. We are free to live our lives apart from God; however, He always holds us responsible for our behavior. Often our repetitious sin becomes the penalty for our behavior.

Addictions seem to grow worse when not treated. Addictions not only control addicts, but also adversely affect everyone near to them. Life takes on a sort of quiet misery until the victims become so miserable that they “bottom out,” swallow their pride, and walk into the pastor’s office, a support group, or a professional counselor looking for personal help. God may save us from our sins in the experience of salvation, but He evidently does not deliver us from the emotional baggage that was being packed through our years of childhood and adulthood. The local church usually does not have the kind of intensive ministry required to help these Christians dump the excess baggage they bring with them into the Christian life. Some form of concrete, specific steps must be offered and explained to the believer; steps he can courageously follow to find relief from his own destructive patterns. Specific steps are enumerated and examined in a subsequent section.

Self Esteem

Another common denominator among addicted Christians is what is called low self-esteem. “Self-esteem, or self-image,” is how a person sees himself. Most Christians, who are ready to get honest about their problems, will rate themselves below five on a scale from one to ten, where one is low and ten is high. Most of the time, if indeed not all of the time, these Christians do not consider themselves worthy of any kind of a pleasant life or happy feelings.

Addicts may voice criticism as the problems concerning low self-esteem are addressed. Since agape love looks outside of

ourselves to find needs to be met in other people, addicts contend that looking within is a selfish act, or as we look within, we will stop looking without. But they are already quenching the Spirit of God, so that His fruit (see Galatians 5:22-23), which is primarily agape love, is already stifled in the life of these Christians. If one fails to look within oneself and find out what is quenching the Spirit and properly deal with it, God's spiritual fruit will not grow in and through him.

Self-esteem or self-image was mentioned by Jesus in Matthew 22:39 where He said, *You shall love your neighbor as yourself*. Jesus acknowledges the fact that self love, or a good self image, is not only important, but is essential to Biblical spirituality. Evidently if a Christian does not love himself properly, he will never get around to loving his neighbor properly. The use of the adverb "properly" is a synonym for agape love. Hypocrisy among the Pharisees, which Jesus addressed in Matthew 23:13-36, is one of God's least favorite things. The Pharisee was eaten up with self-love and self-righteousness. Since Jesus is quoting Leviticus 19:18 as He speaks in Matthew 22:39, the Law itself commands us to have self-love as a basis for loving our neighbor. If our neighbor is the one who has a need that we can meet (as taught by Jesus concerning the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:33-35), then the selfishness and self-centeredness of the Priest and Levite in that same passage blocked the love of God from flowing through them. Therefore, our introspection is not to be selfish and self-centered (which is the fruit of the flesh, Galatians 5:19-21); rather through introspection we can discover the root causes of our unspiritual deeds.

Jesus used the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:33-37. When a selfish, self-centered lawyer challenged Jesus as to who was his neighbor, Jesus told this now-famous story to try to get the lawyer to look at himself and his own selfish ways. Jesus told some great stories! He wants us to identify ourselves with someone in these stories so that we can learn something

about ourselves.

When negative and unlovable characteristics are found within the personality of the believer, it seems that instead of bringing the self-image further down, the self-esteem **comes up** as these defects are found and acknowledged by the Christian. Examples of these wrongs, defects, or shortcomings might include:

Selfishness, controlling others, manipulating others, harboring anger, resentment, hatred, demanding, lying, conceit, pride, fear, being judgmental, unforgiving, playing God, lust, gossip, perfectionism, independence from God, worry, spending, being critical, jealousy, abuse of food, assuming responsibilities for others, impatient, insensitive, unsubmitive to authority, impulsive, and so on.

Some of these descriptions of defects are very closely related, but also have slight differences. Several of these defects would also qualify on our list of addictions and would also qualify on a list of repetitious sins.³

³ While pastoring in Victoria, Texas I visited with one of the elders of the Church. To my surprise, he lit up a cigarette. Staring at the smoldering cigarette, he said, "This is my most repetitious sin." We do not have to debate the ill effects upon our bodies from smoking, because this spiritual leader quickly admitted the violation of his conscience. According to Romans 14:23, *Whatever is not from faith is sin*. This Christian man could not smoke cigarettes without violating his own conscience and quenching the Spirit of God, which was what he was doing with each cigarette. If love is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, he could never fully come to love God, himself, or his neighbor. His addiction to nicotine is the symptom, not the cause. Deep in this man's heart were one or more defects, repetitious mental attitudinal sins that were causing the addictions and the physical sin of smoking. He was selfish, harboring anger, filled with resentment or pride or fear; he had replaced prayer with worry, he is jealous, impatient, or impulsive. He

For any believer in Christ to unearth one or more of these habitual wrongs is very threatening. He chooses often to deny these short-comings in his life, suppress the subsequent feelings of fear, guilt and shame, only to temporarily smooth over the festering sore of this emotional illness by practicing one or more of the addictions listed above. Unfortunately, the smoking of a cigarette or the eating of a brownie brings a noticeable but very temporary relief. So, the believer continues to reach for his shirt pocket or the cookie jar instead of reaching into his own heart to uncover and deal with the real problem. As Jeremiah said in 17:9, *The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?*

Amazingly, when the Christian “bottoms out” (see page 26), and it seems that every Christian who does so has a different reason for coming to the end of himself, he becomes willing to look into his deceitful and sin-diseased heart to discover one or more of the defects that are plaguing his thought process, speech, and subsequently his addictive behavior. Whenever a believer commits himself to the recovery process and takes all of the steps, some measure of recovery is achieved. It is very important that the co-dependent engage in a complete process of self-examination to discover his defects, acknowledge them, and take them to God for help. It is interesting that the believer who fails in the process of recovery is one who is unable to come out of his denial and engage in the painful process of self-examination. Here again, God is not dealing with puppets. He desires for us to assume the responsibility for our behavior and the underlying causes of that behavior. At salvation, God does not automatically clear up a complicated past.

could be suffering from all of the above and more, but none of us can discover much less weed out these shortcomings in his life. That process of spiritual healing is left between him and God. If he doesn't do it with God's help, it will never get done.

Failure to recognize and properly deal with ones complicated past is one of the major problems facing the Church today. It is delightful to hear the testimonies of people who are delivered from their addiction to alcohol, nicotine, food, etc., the moment they come to Christ. But for every testimony concerning instant, miraculous deliverance from plaguing addictions, I hear nine more testimonies of people who know and love Jesus Christ, but remain enslaved. This is a conundrum.

Denial

One of the most interesting and challenging concepts in seeking to help emotionally ill Christians is denial. Some have addressed denial as an intentional refusal to see a personal problem. Others have called this a conscious decision to ignore. Another has described denial as self-distraction, or a failure to recognize.

Whatever terms are used to define it, denial seems to be a coping mechanism that enables the patient to continue in his destructive patterns, refusing to recognize and deal with his own personal contributions toward his addiction. We will observe later that the unchecked addictions tend to worsen, so a period of denial is usually unhealthy.

It seems that denial is an emotional escape to allow one to avoid the pain of recovery. As intense as the emotional pain is already deep within the heart of the co-dependent, he somehow cannot face the additional pain of honestly dealing with his “stuffed” feelings. “Stuffing” of feelings is an important part of the problem. It is an emotional installment plan where one becomes more and more filled in the subconscious with a extremely burdensome debt. But without knowing how to deal with our emotions, we cannot cope with even making small installments - getting in touch with our feelings - and paying off this huge debt.

Feelings are a gift from God to help us perceive and properly respond to the environment around us. Feelings are not facts. When we “*stuff* our feelings” instead of *feeling* them, we interrupt this very useful tool from God. “*Stuffing* our feelings” instead of *feeling* them and *moving* to a proper response leads to a limited and sometimes distorted view of life.

When co-dependency begins in childhood (and it usually does, usually in early childhood) the child learns early on to “stuff” (or, suppress), and comes to believe that he is not entitled to his feelings. While we are created in the image of God with an eternal soul that has a heart, mind, will, and conscience, we learn to function on partial power. We learn to function with only the mind, the will, and a distorted conscience, failing to exercise only small portions of the heart. It is little wonder we cannot learn to love ourselves, others, or God. It is because we have been taught that feelings are not allowed. The emotional pain becomes so intense that the human psyche uses this defense mechanism, this survival technique, called denial.

Unfortunately, this denial technique and all the repressed feelings are carried into adulthood. These feelings down deep in the subconscious are like a grain of sand to an oyster. The oyster secretes a substance to cover the grain of sand that is smoother and more tolerable to the soft body of the oyster. The coated grain of sand is still not supposed to be there so the oyster applies another layer of secretion and the process goes on until a pearl is formed.

This analogy begins to break down in the human soul because God never designed us to operate on only a diminished part of our personality. The Bible says in 1 John 4:8, that *God is love*, and since we are created in God’s image, we are to experience the same kind of compassion, the same kind of unconditional love toward God, toward others, and toward ourselves as God Himself feels. In the suppression of our feelings of pain, sorrow, grief, and anger, we also suppress the feeling of

love. Love is never meant to be simply a word on a page; rather it is to be felt and experienced, to be given and to be received. Such is the dynamic between the Creator and His Creation. But since we have fallen into sin, part of that fall has included the grievous process of “stuffing” feelings. Initially a child who does not learn how to receive love or give love; and ultimately as a Christian, the adult quenches and grieves the Spirit of God, failing in the process to feel and receive and give love in his or her relationship with God. Love of self and love of others, literally becomes impossible. The afflicted Christian begins to imitate what he perceives as love, having never actually experienced it for himself. Life becomes a blur of living from one addictive experience to the next. Human relationships are strained, difficult, and become more of a struggle than a blessing.

The divorce rate among evangelical Christians can be traced to co-dependency for much of the cause. Relationships are strained, marriages fail, and families are broken up, usually because someone continues in denial. For the Christian who is hurting badly enough, the pain of recovery becomes the lesser of two evils. He becomes sick and tired of being enslaved to his addictions and living life in a state of bewilderment. He may walk into the pastor’s office and ask, “What is wrong with me?” This becomes his glorious step *out of denial*. He finally would rather face the pain of admission and embarrassment and self-disclosure to the pastor or counselor, rather than to remain in his state of denial. Such people have exhibited great courage, and with intense therapy often find significant relief within a few months. Their homework never seems to be quite finished, however, and recovery for them becomes a process, not an event. Since the level of pain is different for every person and their tolerance for pain, the length of denial always varies.⁴

⁴ There appears to be no emerging pattern in length of denial. The intensity of denial is also deeply interesting. One adult with whom I worked had shown measurable signs of recovery and was able to verbalize his new-found appreciation of feelings. But this 55 year old

One of the basic characteristics of denial is that the person suffering from co-dependency comes out of denial “whenever he is ready”. The “whenever he is ready” is a mystery from case to case. It seems that no one, including spouses, family members, friends, pastors, or counselors, can do or say anything that causes a person to come out of denial. However, certain case histories of interventions become an exception to the rule. For example in the book “As We Understood”, published by Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, Inc. 1993, on pages 127-129, the following testimony appears:

Although my husband had been sober for a year, there was still unpleasantness at home and a good A.A. friend urged me to join Al-Anon. The group was brand new and all of us were newcomers. So we began at the beginning and went through the 12 steps. The first 11 did not seem to apply to

male cannot remember anything of his childhood before the age of 18. The only glimpses of memory into an 18 year childhood are unpleasant experiences of a brief nature, and the recovery process is automatically hindered by this intense level of denial. It is difficult if not impossible for this patient to go back and dig out the pearls that lie beneath the 18 years and layers of suppressed emotions, especially when the memories of those years have been totally blocked out. In another case, a middle-aged woman came to me for counseling; we met for an hour on Tuesday afternoons. She had been seeing a psychiatrist for 17 years who kept her on anti-depressants and other medications. She wanted me to help her find the root cause of her depression. After about three sessions, I uncovered an important occurrence in her childhood involving her father. However, as we approached the event, she changed the subject, and did not want to discuss or face what had happened. I accepted her denial as a challenge, and allowed her to return on Tuesday afternoons for one hour. I guided the conversation toward her relationship with her father on each of these afternoons for two years. She was never able to address the subject, and her denial remained firm. She continued to be dependent upon anti-depressant medications from the psychiatrist, as well as, upon food.

me, “powerless over alcohol?” It was my husband who had the drinking problem. “Remove my shortcomings?” I was the one who was holding everything together. I decided to ignore the preliminaries and jumped immediately to the middle part of the 12th step in carrying the message to others. Needless to say, the problems continued at home. One day, several years later, as I walked toward a busy intersection with an Al-Anon friend, I continued in my usual fashion about my husband and his lack of improvement. Unexpectedly, my friend grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me. “I am tired of hearing your whining complaints”, she said. “It’s time you really began working on you, beginning with the first step.” I was so stunned by her reaction that I listened. After we both calmed down, we discussed the first step and the meaning of powerlessness. It made good sense; why hadn’t I heard it before? A curious sense of relief came over me. I sensed I was still making my life miserable because I couldn’t release the controls. As I look back at that incident today, I realize it was the beginning of a spiritual awakening that made me ready to go back over the steps and apply them with greater care to my life.

Such a testimony tempts the counselor to think about beginning the session by taking the patient by the shoulders and giving them a good shaking! Here is at least one case where the physical and verbal intervention of a loving friend was an obvious part of bringing a person out of denial. Many are familiar with the family counseling technique of “intervention”, where the family members and friends gather together around the alcoholic or drug addict to intervene to confront the addict who is killing himself with his drug of choice.

My personal experience in using intervention has not been entirely successful. It seems to work in behalf of the addict about 50% of the time, where the alcoholic or drug addict submits himself to entering an alcoholic or drug treatment center. But

with the cutback of state supported facilities and rising medical costs, treatment centers are becoming fewer and fewer. The problem then becomes that if we use intervention, as the woman did in shaking her friend, what might be the next step? For the Al-Anon, it is usually a serious working of the steps, as in the testimony above, or it is attending Al-Anon for the very first time. In small church rural areas, support groups that provide adequate information and loving exchanges to get a co-dependent the help that he needs are almost nonexistent. Therefore, getting someone out of denial is one problem; the help beyond that is another problem.

Another strange phenomenon in dealing with people in denial is that they seem to bounce back and forth in and out of this condition. One day they seem totally ready to face their painful, emotional state, but the next day they act as if it has never existed. This is similar to people working their way through the six stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance, and memorialization. Just as a person going through a grieving process seems to fluctuate from one stage to another or seems to be in two stages at once, the co-dependent struggles with denial. One day he is aware and in touch with the reality and severity of his emotional condition, the next day he is not.

Those in denial also struggle with low self-esteem, and this bottled up emotional pain has caused them to practice one or more of the addictions previously listed. When some degree of progress is achieved in one particular area (such as cigarette smoking, but the emotional disease itself has not been adequately dealt with), the co-dependent simply exchanges one addiction for another. When the smoking disorder comes under control but the emotional pain is still there, the drug of choice may become food. The excuse is often made that the taste buds have now revived since the cessation of a daily dose of nicotine through cigarette smoking. Then the co-dependent, who is not really in recovery, uses the pleasant tasting food to nurture himself in place of the

nicotine. I have deliberately chosen these two addictions for illustrations because the abuses of both of these activities are, by and large, socially acceptable. *Enablers* (see paragraph, “Enablers,” below) around the addict may go on providing either the nicotine or the food, and are really a serious part of the problem. So, being in denial or out of denial is insidious and evasive, difficult to see, difficult to define, and complicated by the environment of family and friends.

For the Christian, the grace of God becomes an essential factor of recovery. In the sovereignty and grace of God, certain Christians “come out of denial” and are able to effectively deal with their emotional illness. They are usually assisted by a counselor or professional therapist who is trained in these matters, or they seek out a group that practices some sort of step-study and recovery program. More and more churches are developing this type of ministry. Sadly, many Christians continue in their denial, sometimes even to the end of their life, without ever knowing the joy of recovery.

Enablers

To further complicate the situation, the addict-co-dependent is usually surrounded with *enablers*. A word about enablers: enablers themselves are often co-dependent. These enabler-co-dependents, who have not chosen mind-killing and body-killing drugs, have a rather common characteristic: *caretaking*. They decide to step in and fix the problem. They decide to take matters into their own hands and solve the problems, usually in the life of someone else, probably someone very near and dear to them. As caretakers, these people exhaust themselves in caring for everyone around them and in the process fail to care for themselves. Frustration begins to set in because the *enabler-co-dependent* soon discovers that whatever he is doing is never enough. The enabling does not change his own problematic behavior or attitude. Amazingly, the insanity of the co-dependent-enabler kicks in to cause him to simply try the

same thing over and over, expecting a different result. Nothing changes except the tension level, which rises higher and higher. The human psyche has an amazing tolerance. The alcoholic keeps on drinking and the co-dependent keeps on enabling (keep in mind that according to my definition, the alcoholic is also a co-dependent). So now we have two sick people in denial; one destroys himself and the other helps him to do it. Both are sick, both need help, and both are in denial.

The success stories of people coming out of denial are as varied as the people one meets. Sometimes the alcoholic is the first to bottom out, and either walks into an AA meeting or a treatment center to seek help. If a treatment center is the choice, the recovery program often brings in the enablers, the family members who have been a big part of the emotional problems. While AA has helped literally thousands of people sober up, one major weakness seems to be that the enabler (the Al-Anon) may go for months or even years in his illness before ever walking into an Al-Anon meeting. However, sometimes the reverse is true. The enabler-co-dependent becomes so frustrated and so unhappy that he is the first one to seek help, either from his pastor, a friend, or a counselor who eventually will be able to help him or guide him to a source which will best address his needs.

Some AA members maintain that “falling off the wagon” is actually part of recovery, and it is common for the alcoholic entering recovery to have “slips”. So it is with the Al-Anon, co-dependent-enabler who enters recovery. Unfortunately, his return to denial is much more subtle than the alcoholic who goes back to his drinking. The co-dependent can return to his manipulating and controlling, his perfectionism, his eating, or any other of the addictions listed above. Most of these addictions are socially acceptable and camouflaged in normal human daily activity. The co-dependent can return to denial, and it may be days or weeks before he realizes that he has “fallen off the wagon”.

Sadly, the affordable rehabilitation and treatment centers are on the decline. Treatment centers usually use a 30 to 90-day intensive therapy approach, isolating the patient not only from his drug of choice, but also from the people who enable him or trigger him in his seemingly endless struggle against a deadly emotional disease.⁵

Pseudo-recovery

If all of the above is not complicated enough with the co-dependent going in and out of denial with his addictions or changing from one addiction to another, there is the problem of having a “pseudo-recovery”. Pseudo-recovery is when the patient *thinks* that he is out of denial and into recovery. One strange phenomenon that often appears is that the Al-Anon Program, the 12 Step Program, or Serendipity Group in the local church, becomes the new drug of choice. Making meetings, getting a sponsor, reading literature, talking to friends, seeing the counselor, all become a new set of diversions that allow the co-dependent to become deeply involved in and use these activities like drugs, and still remain in denial. The co-dependent can “talk the talk,” but is not “walking the walk.”

⁵ During a 35 year pastorate, and especially the last 22 years since being involved in Al-Anon, I have been requested by many families to perform the funerals of their loved ones who have reached the ultimate destination of this unchecked disease. What can be said? How can we comfort families and friends who desperately wanted to help, and others who were a very real part of the problem, as we stand in a solemn assembly of hurting people grieving over the loss of another casualty in an emotional war called co-dependency. Some of these funerals have been from suicides. Some included a history of intervention of which I was a part. Sadness and grief and confusion and helplessness are the feelings of the day. What can we say, what can we do, for others that are on this same road of self destruction? May God guide us to some new answers for these old problems plaguing the church.

Recovery and Reprogramming

In addition to working a strict set of steps that help the believer to identify and take to God his or her besetting sins for forgiveness and victory over them, there seems to be a very helpful body of information which is important in recovery. Many of the principles involved in this body of information are Biblical, perhaps saying the same thing as the Bible albeit in different words. Many of these principles are extra-Biblical, yet helpful, and minister to people in recovery. Both Biblical and extra-Biblical principles seem to be helpful to almost everyone in recovery. The principles in an Alcoholics Anonymous or AI-Anon recovery program are often referred to as slogans, but their literature only records a few of these slogans. There are many more that are part of the oral tradition of these recovery programs that have been available since 1935. New literature is helpful in this area because it is beginning to record all of the principles and slogans. It is the purpose of this section to make such literary records.

In an almost universal way, people are referring to improvements in co-dependency as a recovery process. Recall our definition of co-dependency: *when a person looks outside of himself to determine how he feels about himself, he is co-dependent*. A healthy view of self comes from within, between the person and his God. The most common phrase seems to be “recovery is a process, not an event”. For born-again Christians, failure to enter a recovery process results in a continuous practice of addictions described earlier. Such practice of addictions results in grieving and quenching the Holy Spirit so that His fruit is interrupted in the life of the believer. My research in the study of dozens of cases reveals that most Christians were “set up” for co-dependency through childhood experiences. Their parents fail to nurture their children (Ephesians 6:4, *bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord*). The verb translated, “bring them up”, is the Greek word *ektrephei*, which is translated

“nourishes” in verse 29 of Chapter 5. The word “nourishes” means to pamper, to feed, to promote health and strength. When children are not spiritually and emotionally nourished in this way by their parents, it results in a form of conditional love. Evidently, this subsequently trains the child to love himself conditionally and creates a mental and emotional atmosphere for co-dependency. Recovery then becomes a life-long process of “reprogramming the computer”. In computer parlance, the old adage, “garbage in, garbage out”, is fulfilled in the life of a child who is loved in conditional ways and is not nourished in the spiritual things of the Lord. Parents cannot give to the child what they themselves never had. Thus, this condition or “disease” is passed on from generation to generation, often showing up in terribly addictive and destructive patterns such as alcohol and drugs. It would be interesting to conduct a separate study to see if there is any correlation between childhood co-dependency patterns and the modern day rise of teenage suicide.

Four of the most helpful principles used in reprogramming are as follows:

- * The serenity prayer: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.”
- * I cannot control people, places, things or weather.
- * I make mistakes, but I am not a mistake.
- * The 3 C’s: I did not *cause* it, I cannot *cure* it and I cannot *control* it.

Some observations about these four principles are in order:

a. Serenity is simply a word on a page when it comes to the suffering of co-dependency. Co-dependents have lost their serenity and peace of mind by trying to change things which they

cannot change. Their focus and energies are spent outside of themselves instead of changing the things that they can, such as their own attitudes and destructive behavior patterns. They need God's wisdom to see the difference between things they cannot change and things they can.

b. One of the characteristics of co-dependency seems to be the misguided conclusions that the co-dependents can control people, places, things, even the weather, to restore some measure of serenity to their troubled minds. A simple statement that they cannot control everything returns them to the reality that they are not God. Playing God and trying to control their entire environment is a common mistake of co-dependency.

c. It seems co-dependents have been placed into an environment that brings down their self-image. They begin to struggle to raise that self-image by controlling and changing the very environment that has made them sick. Since they cannot control people, places, things, or weather, they are continually failing by making the same mistake over and over or trying to control or change the wrong thing. They begin to feel like a mistake themselves.⁶

d. The "it" of the 3 C's would refer to alcoholics and alcoholism; however, it can come to refer to anything that is frustrating the life of a co-dependent. Often it is the shaming environment of the parents who were not alcoholics but who were addicts to the use of shame to manipulate and control their children. When the co-dependent discovers that he is not to blame and that he is not the cause of his unhealthy environment, it seems to bring him great relief. He comes to learn that he cannot cure it or control it. His energy and strength may now be redirected along a God-given

⁶ During my high school years we played 30 football games and lost at least 20. Several of my friends were football players; they wondered why we had a football team at all. That is the way a co-dependent feels; everything they do is wrong. They feel like the source itself is a mistake, therefore everything that comes from that source is a mistake.

path of working on himself toward the restoration of his serenity. We have all heard our parents say, “You ought to be ashamed of yourself.” God has never said that to His children.

When the co-dependent learns and begins to apply these first four simple principles in reprogramming, a light of hope appears at the distant end of his tunnel.

Bottoming Out

Before reprogramming and the correction of old destructive behavior patterns occur, each person must come to the end of himself or herself. This is called “bottoming out.” It is when a person becomes sick and tired of his life as it is, his unhappiness and his misery, and becomes ready to listen to any input from God through a human agency. This human agency takes many forms: pastors, professional counselors, Alcoholics Anonymous, Al-Anon, Over-eaters Anonymous, etc. These become a source of information to help “reprogram their computers.” This process of reprogramming is an integral part of the process of recovery. Recovery simply means that the person has done an about-face. They refuse to wander aimlessly in the deep forest of despair. They want a guide to begin leading them back into the light of day away from the frightening and lonely experiences of addiction. They are sick of being sick.

Once this point is reached, once they “turn the corner,” they become ready to listen. The alcoholic who says he needs to quit but is still drinking has not bottomed out. He is still in denial and does not realize that his self-destructive behavior is life threatening. It threatens the life of his physical body, the life of his marriage, the life of his family, and the life of his respectable position in the community. Here is HOW the program works. The H stands for *honesty*, the O stands for *openmindedness*, and the W stands for *willingness*. When the addict or co-dependent bottoms out, he finally is ready to get honest about his destructive behavior, he finally opens his mind to learn how to turn his life

around, and he finally becomes willing to learn something new and try something new. His insanity can be defined as doing the same thing over and over, expecting different results. Another cliché that is found in the recovery program about the time one bottoms out is the phrase, “no change, no chance.” If he does not change his destructive behavior patterns, he has no chance of finding happiness in this life. One of the essential keystones to success is **change**: We must be willing to change. We discover that we are not bad people trying to become good, but we are sick people trying to become well.

The lives of most co-dependents have been spent in playing the role of the victim; thus they have developed what I call a victim attitude. The co-dependent wants someone to swoop in and rescue him instead of becoming his own rescuer. (See Appendix 2). If someone does move in to rescue him, then he moves into a position of becoming a persecutor, moves the rescuer into the role of the victim, and criticizes how the rescuer is trying to rescue him. He has a great deal of difficulty moving from the role of the victim to the role of being his own rescuer. He becomes so accustomed to living in the problem, that it feels strange to him to move over and live in the solution.⁷

We have said that for the alcoholic, “falling off the wagon”, is part of recovery, and so it is with every person addicted to anything. The co-dependent will find himself persecuted by the same people who were accustomed to keeping him in the role of the victim. Once again he will feel comfortable and at home in this terrible position. He will have fallen off the

⁷ Acceptance is vital to finding the answer to problems. If the co-dependent accepts himself as living in the problem and takes responsibility for choosing to remain in it, the decision to move becomes easier. He must become his own rescuer by admitting that he has been a large part of the problem. Having accepted his role as victim and persecutor, he is now in the position to move to the position of rescuer, accept himself in that position, and learn to live in the solution.

wagon and returned to old destructive behavioral patterns. But this time he will not want to remain in that position long. He will have tasted the sweet honeycomb of hope provided only from the position of self rescue. Being a victim has no hope. It is a position of despair and helplessness and unhappiness. Being a rescuer has the hope of a better future and an improved situation.

Acceptance of oneself carries an added blessing. When one learns to accept himself as he really is, he will begin to accept others as they really are. If loved ones closest to him have been his tormentors and his persecutors, then he begins to accept them in that role. This acceptance of others as they are does a strange thing. When coupled with the resolve that one cannot change other people, it simply causes him to move out of harms way, to take himself out of the role of the victim and into the role of rescuer. The persecutor has become very accustomed to his role, and will become quickly frustrated in his onslaughts toward a rescuer. His efforts will prove to be fruitless and so he begins to look for another victim. "My heart aches at the prospect of another person being victimized, but at least it is not me anymore."

Common Denominators

While digging into the past of someone who has bottomed out and is starting to get honest, we find many common denominators. One of these common denominators has to do with when the child was placed into the role of being a victim. At whatever age that happens (which often happens very early), emotional growth and maturity stops. Only through intense counseling and therapy is the victim able to go back and adequately deal with the shame and degradation of being victimized. Once that courage level is reached and bottled up emotions are dealt with, emotional growth begins again and spiritual maturity becomes a reachable goal.

Another common denominator among co-dependents is

resentment and harboring anger. Resentments seem to come from not getting what we want or losing what we have. Resentments are negative feelings that have an incredible way of piling up over the years. The feeling of resentment can be used by the person seeking recovery like a spade in the hand of someone digging in the garbage dump. Those feelings of resentment will take one to what is really rotting in his soul: hurt, shame, and being victimized. Co-dependents usually do not realize how many layers of pain and trauma are buried in their subconscious. The process of digging down to the problem includes pain and suffering and unpleasantness, like ripping open a plastic bag filled with rotting fruit. But, "If we continue to do what we have always done, then we will continue to get what we always got." One must dig out, deal with and discard the rottenness.

Fear is another common denominator. Inside every one of us is a basic psychological resistance to change. Change is absolutely essential to an improved life and getting back on the road towards spiritual maturity. But we resist change. We fear that we will lose something that we have, such as a relationship with our loved ones - who are busy victimizing us! We hate the way we are feeling but sometimes the fear of losing a bad relationship results in never taking the steps of change toward a better relationship. I know a woman who stayed married to a physically abusive husband. She said, "I would take the beatings at night so I could get the hugs in the morning." We fear that we will not receive something we want, such as happiness and fulfillment in life. But we are caught up in the insanity of doing the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result. We keep giving in to degrading situations that have never yet provided the peace and happiness that we so desperately desire. Yet our *fear* of change can be more powerful than our *desire* to change. Acceptance means simply admitting that there are people, places, things and weather which we cannot change. Once we accept that which we cannot change, we take the spotlight from others of whom we have been so critical and toward whom we have been so angry, and put the spotlight onto

ourselves. Now we can see clearly some of the things that we need to change in ourselves. We discover that we have been voluntary victims, and we can do something about that.

Through the process of being open-minded, we begin to learn some new things. Early on we discover that we don't have to have everything we need before we can be happy. Happiness and serenity and peace have much more to do with the state of mind and attitude. Heretofore, the computer has had a bad program. Our previous programming was telling us that if we could simply control the environment around us then we would find happiness, which leads us to the next common denominator of manipulation and control. The victimized child may grow up to marry, have children, take a job and become a world class persecutor himself. Through manipulation and control techniques, the co-dependent takes great strides in passing his dysfunction to the next generation. Such manipulation and control becomes a fulltime job. Happiness and serenity and peace become more words on the page, never to become a real part of the co-dependents experience.

The person in recovery learns to ask himself, "What do I want right at this moment to make me happy?" Usually the answer involves something to help relax the person mentally, physically, emotionally and psychologically in the midst of a storm of details filling a frenzied world. The person in recovery learns that he only needs to see what is in the headlights of the car. He doesn't have to see the whole, big picture around him, much less control it. He does not even have to see the entire highway to the end of his journey, but only what is right in front of him. He learns to live life on life's terms and take one day at a time. He continues to make mistakes, but then learns from those mistakes. He learns to forgive himself, and in the process learns how to forgive others. He learns how to take responsibility for his own behavior and let others be responsible for their own behavior. He seeks to be happy, joyous and free, instead of seeking another painful experience of being victimized. He learns

that he has choices. He also learns that he is responsible for the choices he makes, and that the good thing about decisions is that he can always make another one. He breaks free of the pre-programmed idea that he is locked into a course of action and cannot change the direction of his life. The experience of recovery becomes exhilarating. Just as the life of the victim fed upon itself to make matters worse, the life of being in recovery feeds upon itself so that recovery begins to accelerate.

Maintenance

Maintenance is a term that is given for a Christian who is in a noticeable degree of successful recovery. The degree of recovery varies from Christian to Christian but, some of the common denominators for a Christian in recovery are (1) a higher level of serenity, (2) a more noticeable degree of happiness, (3) a discernable presence of humility, (4) a marked improvement in the love of self and the treatment of others, (5) the enjoyment of a more “normal” life which includes more rational thinking, more sanity, and a hope toward the future of continued improvement.

The Christian in recovery learns to do at least four things in the maintenance of his new-found happiness. I believe that this newly found happiness is the greater level of spirituality, mentioned earlier, which actually results from the believer learning how to stop quenching and grieving the Holy Spirit of God in his life.

Because of deep-seated thought patterns and behavioral patterns, the work of recovery never seems to be complete. Furthermore, the sin nature and the devil tend to compound the problem. New family members or new acquaintances that come into our lives who try to manipulate and control us renew the challenge to learn and apply the basic principles of recovery. For a Christian, the basic principles seem to fall into four categories:

* We must do whatever it takes to get ourselves right with God.

*We must do whatever it takes to get ourselves right with ourselves.

*We must do whatever it takes to get ourselves right with others.

*We must do whatever it takes to **stay** right with God, with ourselves, and with others.

These four principles are Biblical, and many people are learning and applying these basic ideas. In fact, under the common grace of God, I have discovered people who do not know God through the Lord Jesus Christ, yet through the practice of these four basic principles have found serenity and a peaceful state of mind. Unfortunately, I have also discovered that these four basic principles are not found in most churches or in most Christian circles. To learn and apply these basic Biblical principles, a Christian may have to go outside the local church to find help.

Many local churches appear to be caught up in a less-than-personable study of God, worship of God, and service to God. They may have an ill-defined approach to getting right with God, themselves, and others. The evidence of such a statement can be seen in the immoral conditions of leaders, church feuds and splits, and the general unrest of Christians either moving from church to church or warming a pew in a local church without ever getting involved in a deep, spiritual, meaningful way. The solution to co-dependency is not found at the corporate level, only at the individual level. We live in an emotionally sick society which has infiltrated its way into the lives of individual Christians and into the life of the church. Salvation is an individual, personal experience. But while a person may be delivered from the penalty of their sins by trusting in Christ and

become a child of God on their way to heaven, they are not delivered from the penalty of their past. That deliverance takes a lifetime of struggle for those who are willing to work at it.

Summary

In summary: first, the Christian co-dependent in recovery learns to use his humble state to continually observe himself honestly to find defects or flaws or repetitious sins (whatever we choose to call it) without feeling like this is an attack against his self-worth and his self-esteem. The believer has come to the point of being able to see himself as separate from his behavior. When he commits errors of thought processes, verbal blunders, or unacceptable behavior, he can see it, admit it, accept it, and make constructive decisions toward correcting it. In short, “he stops beating himself up” for the normal failures and shortcomings of a sinner saved by grace.

Secondly, the Christian co-dependent in recovery has made a huge turn around. He has now stopped focusing upon himself, his problems, and the frustrations that his relationships with people bring, and has started focusing primarily on his relationship with God. This is the true cure for co-dependency. From one perspective this cure could be called unfortunate because there is nothing about recovery that is “once-and-for-all.” Everywhere we read and hear that “recovery is a process, not an event.” But from a better, correct perspective, the nature of true recovery is very fortunate because it brings the believer into a dependent relationship with God. The believer is not co-dependent, but dependent upon God. God never intended his creatures to live independently from Him. So, where one child learned from a nurturing family in a natural and loving family atmosphere to depend on God and has learned about life and the enjoyment of life, another raised in a dysfunctional family who becomes a co-dependent must learn the same thing through an agonizing process of recovery.

The third characteristic of a Christian-dependent in recovery is an overwhelming desire to share his experience, strength and hope with others. This Christian is in the interesting position of being able to fulfill 2 Corinthians, Chapter 1:3-4:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our afflictions so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort which we ourselves are comforted by God.”

The co-dependent Christian in recovery recognizes others in the same predicament and reaches out to comfort them. And so, there is hope in passing along our spiritual successes to the next generation of the church.

Appendix 1

The Twelve Steps of Cleansing

These twelve steps are borrowed and revised from Alcoholics Anonymous. The twelve steps of AA have helped thousands find sobriety. The revisions that I suggest (see below), I believe to be very useful in determining the personality defects of anyone, especially co-dependants who are addicted to people, places and things.

All of us have personality defects which were either passed down to us from our parents in our genes, or developed from the environment in our family life. These 12 steps embody universal principles of emotional and mental recovery, applicable to everyone. When we strive for an ever-deeper understanding of these steps, God will give us the wisdom to apply these principles to our lives and with His help experience victory over our personality defects. The steps will also help us discover our assets, also seeking God's help to develop our assets for His glory. This will give us a greater peace of mind, show us how to get more enjoyment out of life, and have better human relationships with the people around us.

Whoever becomes willing to follow these steps will discover the blessing that they can apply to all kinds of addictions, not to just alcohol.

1. We admitted we were powerless over _____, that our lives had become unmanageable.⁸

(Honestly fill in the blank as to what you are addicted to).

2. We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could

⁸ "We" indicates that this program cannot be worked alone.

restore us to sanity.

(Our insanity is doing the same thing over and over expecting a different result).

3. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

4. We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

(One way to complete step 4 is to use these three phases):

■ Complete this sentence: “I feel resentment toward _____.” This list of people will probably be the closest to us and will include ourselves. Start with the most recent and work backwards as far as you can remember.

■ Start at the top of your list and complete this sentence: “I feel resentment toward _____ because_____.” The further down your list, the shorter will be your answers.

■ Now, reread what you have written in Phases one and two above. Honestly answer this question: “What are my assets and defects?”

5. We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

(In Step 5, the writings of Step 4 are read to the sponsor, someone who has gone through this process and can be trusted. Then, the writings in Step 4 are burned. Consider the smoke as an offering to God).

6. We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

7. We humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

(Keep your list of assets and defects. Watch how God

begins to strengthen your assets and diminish your defects).

8. We made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

(This list is usually the same list we made in the first phase of Step 4, or is very similar. Remember it will probably include yourself).

9. We made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

(The others may include yourself, so we do not do direct amends if it would result in injury to ourselves. Perhaps “living amends” is possible, where we simply treat the person better than before, without making “direct amends”).

10. We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

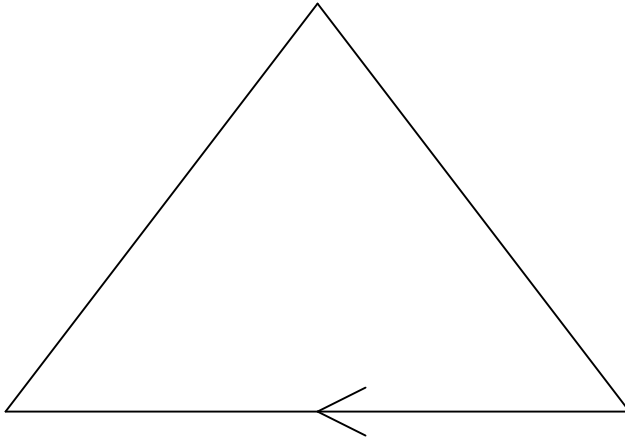
11. We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

(Revised March 30, 2011, Dr. Roger A. Hubbard)

Appendix 2

Persecutor



Rescuer

Victim

Move Left, Become your own rescuer

The persecutor could have been one's own father or mother who victimized the co-dependent. It may have been violent, such as sexual abuse, physical abuse, or verbal abuse (such as "shaming" or name-calling). It may have been non-violent such as neglect, or non-nurturing (such as absence of hugging and kissing and verbal encouragement). Non-nurturing can be very subtle, such as conditional love ... "I love you if ...". One example would be when a child brings home a "B" report card and the parents demand an "A" report card. A "B" report card may be the best the child can do.

To compensate for the emotional pain, one becomes co-dependent upon another person or substance or activity. He looks outside himself to find relief and love and happiness and

fulfillment in life. God's design does not include co-dependency. So the solution is NOT to move into the persecutor role. (Molested children often grow up to become child molesters).

The solution is to move oneself into the Rescuer role, or become ones own rescuer. This is accomplished by entering some kind of recovery program. This may be a 12-step Al-Anon recovery program or in a local church. It may be with a counselor or a pastor who is familiar with the co-dependent recovery process.

One will discover many other Christians who are working on learning how to be their own rescuer. In the Victim role, self-esteem has been damaged, perhaps even destroyed. This low self-esteem tells one to continue hiding, to keep on doing things that do not lead to happiness and higher self-esteem. For example, low self-esteem will keep sending one to the refrigerator to feel better. To some effect, the food does make one feel better... temporarily. But the side effect is added pounds that make one feel worse.

There is hope: the real, long-lasting solution is a recovery program. The best of these include other people who understand pain. They will sympathize but not become an enabler. They will encourage one to enter a program of recovery, but will not advise on how to form it or work it. The beneficial effect of becoming ones own Rescuer is that it moves one out of the Victim role.

If you feel led by the Lord to apply these suggestions to your own life, and they work for you, we welcome you to recovery.

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