

Assuming Another's Responsibility

By Tish Vincent

The managed care company offices were in an old Victorian house in downtown Lansing. Therapists had to walk down a steep flight of stairs to meet with individuals who were there for assessments or therapy. On this particular day, my 3 p.m. assessment sat sullenly beside his mother in the elegant living room, his appearance somewhat slovenly.

The man was seeking a mental health and substance abuse assessment because he had been caught driving drunk and had marijuana in the car. His mother was adamant about accompanying him to the assessment. She said it was important for her to explain that her son could not find a job, that he was a good boy, and she hoped there was something I could do to get him out of trouble with the law because if there were consequences from the criminal justice system, his life would be ruined.

The man I was assessing was 45 years old. His mother was 68. She sat in my office in clean, worn clothing, a scarf tied about her head, anxious and frightened for her son.

Codependency

The term “codependency” has been used in the therapeutic community for almost 40 years. In brief, it describes a relationship or situation in which family members, friends, and coworkers of an addicted individual assume responsibility for that individual's actions and choices. We see codependency among family members, friends, and coworkers of the mentally ill, also.

During decades of treating those with mental illness and substance use disorders, I have used the term “locus of control.” Individuals in the throes of mental illness or addiction feel like victims of circumstance. None of their trouble is their fault. They have an external locus of control. They do not see themselves as acting on their lives; they see people and events acting on them. A woman explains that she was stopped by

a police officer because he envied her new sports car. She does not believe the real reason he stopped her was because she was weaving as she drove on the sidewalk with a blood alcohol level of .28.

Those close to her buy into her external locus of control because they're desperate to help. They may start driving her around or help buy a car that is less attractive to police officers. They fret when she is sitting in jail and ask others for help to lessen her consequences.

Detachment

Just as addicts must risk abstaining from their substance of choice, codependents must risk allowing their loved ones to suffer the consequences of their choices. In my many years practicing as a therapist, I have observed that is often more difficult for codependents to stop assuming responsibility for their loved ones' choices than for addicts to start assuming responsibility for their choices.

I have learned to expect anger when I intervene with addicts and call attention to the effects of their addiction. Addicts seek help when consequences are barreling down on them like a freight train. Though angered by hearing they need to stop using, they are usually motivated enough to try because their backs are against a wall.

Intervening with an addict's family, friends, and coworkers is much more challenging. Codependent individuals want to save their addicted family member or friend. They want to be the savior riding in on the white horse to find the solution—a new job, a new spouse, a better wardrobe, a better counselor, a better lawyer, a fresh start in another community, something, anything! They are often frantic, desperate, and angry at the person pointing out that their efforts to help are enabling the addict to continue using.

In my many attempts at intervention, my sad observation is that the path to addiction remains clear if the codependent

person fails to seek help to stop enabling the addict. Enabling is not a conscious choice; it's just what codependents do.

Codependent professionals

Therapists, psychiatrists, and attorneys can be codependent, too. They enter the picture to offer professional guidance and sometimes lose their way in the perfect storm of addiction. If you find yourself worrying that a consequence of an addict's behavior may ruin his or her life, it's time to seek solutions for yourself.

Two resources are Al-Anon Family Groups¹ and *Codependent No More* by Melody Beattie.² Helping addicts is counterintuitive. As long as you feel you can save them, you are powerless to help them. Hope appears once you admit powerlessness, respect the force and reality of the addiction, and allow addicts to experience consequences and take responsibility for their choices.

Seeing that mother trying so hard to save her son that day was chilling. I do not know which paths they have traveled since. I hope she found a way to hold him accountable instead of pitying him. ■



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ENDNOTES

1. Al-Anon Family Groups <<http://www.al-anon.alateen.org/>> [accessed February 19, 2014].
2. Beattie, *Codependent No More: How to Stop Controlling Others and Start Caring for Yourself* (Center City: Hazelden, 1992).