

Codependence *and the Power* of Detachment

by Karen Casey

Introduction

I STILL VIVIDLY recall my first reading of *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am?* by John Powell. When I got to page thirty-eight, I was stunned to read a description of my most common response to the behavior of the significant people in my life. Powell was walking down a New York City street with his journalist friend, Sidney Harris. They stopped at a newspaper vendor's shack to pick up the morning edition. The vendor was an extremely unpleasant man who not only ignored Harris when he said good morning, but also didn't thank him when Harris told him to keep the change. Powell immediately asked his friend why he was so kind and generous to such an ungrateful, mean-spirited individual. Harris replied, "Why should I let him decide what kind of day I am going to have?"

I realized at that moment that I had spent my entire life letting the actions or words or mere glances of others trigger my behavior, my feelings, my attitude, my self-assessment, and thus my plan for each day, as well as my imagined future. And I had never realized it. It simply had not occurred to me that I could or should be the one to decide exactly who I would bring to the party every day of my life.

How others act does not need to affect how we think or act. There are countless situations and people we have no control over. A friend's angry outburst, a motorist's failure to see our car in a busy intersection, a spouse's relapse into alcohol or drug use--all of these things may upset us. But that upset can be brief if we keep the power over our own feelings.

There is a difference between letting the reactions of others take over our life and respecting others' opinions while maintaining our own perspective and integrity. Failing to understand that difference creates the inner chaos that keeps many of us stuck in old, unproductive behavior and filled with uncertainty and anxiety. Letting someone else decide who we will be, how we will act, and what we will feel implies that we have given up our own life in exchange for whatever the other person wants us to be. When we adopt opinions that aren't consistent with our personal values, we are not living our own lives. We are not free.

Coming to understand and eventually celebrate our powerlessness over people, places, and things is the key to our freedom--freedom from enmeshment, freedom from the fear of rejection, freedom from the fear of failure, freedom from the fear of success. We are blessed, every one of us, with gifts that are needed by others who are traveling this path with us. But until we are free to see who we really are, we will not be able to recognize that which we have been created to give. And until we can care deeply for others from a more objective perspective, we will not be able to give our special gifts to the world around us.

The women and men you will get to know throughout this book will offer you glimpses of

the trauma of attachment, more generally labeled codependency. Codependency isn't a twentieth-century phenomenon, but in the last quarter of that century, we began to recognize this form of dependence on others as a malady of sorts. Fortunately it is now being discussed in therapy sessions, Twelve Step meetings, and books galore.

The opposite of the unhealthy attachment of codependency is detachment. Detachment is the ability to care deeply about a situation or another person from an objective point of view. We are able to care but not be controlled by or invested in how another person responds to us.

Healthy detachment wears many identities. Letting others take care of their own affairs and not doing for others what they need to do for themselves is detachment. Not creating or preventing a crisis when it's clearly not our business to be involved is detachment. Not manipulating others to carry out some aspect of their lives according to our wishes rather than according to their own plan is detachment. It is neither kind nor unkind to be detached. It is simply being in charge of the only things we need to be in charge of.

Newcomers often think that disinterest is detachment, and sometimes disinterest is the only way they can begin the real process of detachment. I could not get my mind around the concept of detachment when I first heard it. But choosing to be uninterested in what someone else was doing, or, for me, even feigning disinterest, was a beginning. Up until that point, I had no idea how to move my focus away from any person who was significant in my life at that moment.

Detachment is a concept that I and many other people struggle with. Far too many of us grew up in households that couldn't prepare us to know ourselves as competent, worthy people because our caregivers--sometimes parents, sometimes older siblings--didn't recognize their own worthiness either. From the women and men I spoke with, I heard hundreds of examples of successful and unsuccessful experiences of detaching from the frequent, real or imagined, negative behavior of others in our lives. From them I also discovered some shortcuts to changing behaviors that are counterproductive to lives of inner peace. And they demonstrated the joy that they have come to know from being able to detach--from their ability to be independent and compassionate, yet no longer clingy and obsessed with getting constant approval from others.

Be assured that this book is not fostering total independence--not by a long shot. We all need others in our lives. Instead, it is about developing a healthy *interdependence*--that is, independence that frees all of us to be all we can be, but still allows us to get an appropriate amount of support and encouragement from other travelers.

All the stories in this book have one thing in common: there is now peace where before there was pain. There is now willingness to turn the other cheek rather than insisting on being right. Detachment isn't rocket science. It isn't beyond anyone's understanding. All it takes to change how we see our lives, how we live our lives, how we envision our lives for the future, is a willingness to look at the possibilities.



STILL ADDICTED TO APPROVAL

In the third year of my sobriety and following the completion of my Ph.D., I took a job that I was not well prepared for and had a boss who was demanding and demeaning. My well-worn habit of making another person my “god” was accelerated on that job. Having lived that way since childhood and having never really freed myself of the need to please others at any cost, I found that with a boss such as mine, all of my old responses were easily triggered. I was addicted to approval, period!

I also began to understand my need for control--control over what another person was thinking about me. It was a constant need in nearly every relationship in my life, as much as I did not want to admit it. As diligently as I tried, I continued to scan the expressions of others, particularly the expressions of my boss and my significant other, for my “control fix.” Getting the fix one needs in order to continue living from one minute to the next, whether from a drug or from the praise of a person, is a debilitating way to live. I wouldn’t say that the addiction of codependency is more harmful than addiction to alcohol or other mood-altering chemicals, but I can’t say that it is less harmful either.

Eventually the pain of my work environment and my boss’s behavior sent me into outpatient treatment for codependency, and I hurried back to Al-Anon, the program I had sought help from before I got sober myself. I had begun my journey in Al-Anon in 1975, as a desperate measure to try to change the drinking pattern of the significant person in my life. I didn’t glean from that first meeting that Al-Anon wasn’t created for that purpose. In fact, I came home with an Al-Anon book and eagerly read it from cover to cover. At the next meeting, when asked how I was doing, I said that I was fine--I had finished the book! The other group members laughed and suggested I begin reading again, this time reading only the page for the day. The book’s title, *One Day at a Time in Al-Anon*, had not even registered when I picked it up that first night.

What I had not yet fully understood was that I had only a moment-by-moment reprieve from codependent feelings, and these moments were the direct result of my willingness to look only to my Higher Power for my good feelings. I am so grateful to have been introduced to the concept of a Higher Power in Al-Anon. It relaxed me to envelop myself in the comfort of “a god” as I understood him, a comfort that was always there when the comfort from a partner might not be.