

SECTION I: ADULT-CHILD-OF-AN-ALCOHOLIC (ACOA) TRAITS

Therapist's Overview

UNDERSTANDING CODEPENDENT BEHAVIORS

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. Implement a plan for recovery from addiction that reduces the impact of adult-child-of-an-alcoholic (ACOA) traits on sobriety.
2. Decrease dependence on relationships while beginning to meet one's own needs.
3. Reduce the frequency of behaviors that are exclusively designed to please others.
4. Choose partners and friends who are responsible, respectful, and reliable.
5. Overcome fears of abandonment, loss, and neglect.
6. Understand the feelings that resulted from being raised in an addictive environment and reduce feelings of alienation by seeing similarities to others raised in nonaddictive homes.

ADDITIONAL PROBLEMS FOR WHICH THIS EXERCISE MAY BE USEFUL

- Borderline Traits
- Dependent Traits
- Partner Relationship Conflict
- Sexual Promiscuity

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE CLIENT

The "Understanding Codependent Behaviors" activity is for clients with patterns of co-dependent relationships, enmeshment, and boundary issues. It teaches clients about addictive relationship dynamics, then heightens motivation by focusing on the threat this poses to recovery, ending by directing clients to further exploration of issues of co-dependency. Follow-up may include discussing the issue with the therapist, group, and sponsor; support group referrals; bibliotherapy; and videotherapy (e.g., *Rent Two Films and Let's Talk in the Morning* by John W. Hesley and Jan G. Hesley, also published by John Wiley & Sons).

UNDERSTANDING CODEPENDENT BEHAVIORS

Codependency is addiction to a relationship. A codependent tries so hard to “fix” or “save” someone else that his/her own life is left in turmoil. No one can control anyone else—other people’s troubles are mostly due to patterns only they can change, so trying to change them leads to one painful disappointment after another.

1. There are reasons we’re drawn to relationships in which we try harder to solve our partners’ problems than they do. These patterns are often related to having grown up with parents or other adults who suffered from alcoholism, other drug addiction, or other addictive disorders, and may echo our childhood relationships with those adults. Have you been in painful relationships for any of these reasons?

- ☐ You felt needed.
- ☐ It was intense and exciting from the start.
- ☐ You felt intensely and “magnetically” drawn to them.
- ☐ They made you feel strong, smart, and capable.
- ☐ The sex was incredible.
- ☐ You identified with the hardships they’d suffered—your heart ached for them.
- ☐ You felt that you could help them and change their lives.

2. Here are signs of codependent relationships. Again, please check off any you’ve experienced:

- ☐ Manipulation and mind games take up a lot of time and energy.
- ☐ You’re often worried that the relationship will fall apart, so you walk on eggshells.
- ☐ You keep your partner away from your other friends and family because they don’t get along, or you don’t think they would.
- ☐ One of you spends a lot of time rescuing the other from problems, again and again.
- ☐ You try hard to impress your partner and keep secrets; you fear your partner would reject you if he/she knew about parts of your life or past.
- ☐ You get in heated arguments that don’t make sense to either of you.

EXERCISE 1.A

- _____ The relationship became very intense very fast when you first got together.
- _____ One or both of you feel a lot of jealousy and insecurity about the relationship.
- _____ The relationship is never boring, but it's usually stressful.
- _____ You go back and forth between feeling abandoned and feeling smothered.
3. There's a strong connection between stress and relapse. Looking at the items you checked for question 2, how could a stressful relationship lead you to relapse and how do you feel about that risk?
- _____
- _____
4. Most people who get into codependent relationships don't just do so once. Each of us has a type we're most likely to be drawn to. What unhealthy patterns do you see in the people you find attractive?
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Be sure to bring this handout back to your next session with your therapist, and be prepared to talk about your thoughts and feelings about the exercise.

UNDERSTANDING FAMILY HISTORY

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. Implement a plan for recovery from addiction that reduces the impact of adult-child-of-an-alcoholic (ACOA) traits on sobriety.
2. Decrease dependence on relationships while beginning to meet one's own needs.
3. Reduce the frequency of behaviors that are exclusively designed to please others.
4. Eliminate behaviors that are dangerous to self or others.
5. Eliminate self-defeating interpersonal patterns in occupational and social settings.
6. Choose partners and friends who are responsible, respectful, and reliable.
7. Overcome fears of abandonment, loss, and neglect.
8. Understand the feelings that resulted from being raised in an addictive environment and reduce feelings of alienation by seeing similarities to others raised in nonaddictive homes.
9. Learn new ways to interact with the family in adult life.
10. Obtain emotional support for recovery from family members.

ADDITIONAL PROBLEMS FOR WHICH THIS EXERCISE MAY BE USEFUL

- Childhood Trauma
- Family Conflicts
- Parent-Child Relational Problem

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE CLIENT

The "Understanding Family History" activity may be used effectively with clients experiencing shame, confusion, or anxiety as a result of seeing themselves repeat negative behaviors seen in childhood caretakers. It may be useful in couples therapy, since many ACOA individuals form relationships with partners with similar backgrounds. For clients struggling with acceptance and forgiveness of their parents or of themselves, this activity may help in understanding the roles of addiction and powerlessness in distorting values and behaviors. It may also be useful for clients who have parenting issues in recovery to understand the roots of their children's behaviors.

UNDERSTANDING FAMILY HISTORY

It's important to understand the role of family history in addictions, not to assess blame but for your own recovery and your family's future. This exercise looks at how family history affects us.

1. As a child, what did you learn about drinking, drug use, or other addictions in your family?

2. What problems, if any, did your family have because of these behaviors (e.g., violence, divorce, financial problems, dangerous or illegal activities, or other worries)?

3. Please describe the typical atmosphere in your family when someone was drinking, using drugs, or engaging in other addictive patterns, and its effects on you then and now.

4. Here are some common patterns in families struggling with addictions, related to the unspoken rule "Don't talk, don't trust, don't feel" that develops as other family members, especially children, try to avoid confrontations or disappointment due to the inability of addicted adults to be nurturing and dependable, or to cope with the emotional pain that is the result of that inability. For each pattern, give an example from your childhood and an example of how you can make healthy changes now.

a. Dishonesty/denial

(1) Childhood example: _____

EXERCISE 1.B

- (2) Working for healthy change: _____

- b. Breaking promises
- (1) Childhood example: _____

- (2) Working for healthy change: _____

- c. Isolating/withdrawing
- (1) Childhood example: _____

- (2) Working for healthy change: _____

- d. Emotional/physical/sexual abuse and neglect
- (1) Childhood example: _____

- (2) Working for healthy change: _____

- e. Influencing others to act in self-destructive ways
- (1) Childhood example: _____

- (2) Working for healthy change: _____

- f. Confused roles and responsibilities (e.g., children taking caring of adults, people blaming others for their own actions, etc.)
- (1) Childhood example: _____

- (2) Working for healthy change: _____

5. What good relationship patterns from your childhood do you want to continue and pass on?
- _____

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