

## 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 his/her own needs, build confidence, and practice assertiveness.
3. Reduce the frequency of behaviors exclusively designed to please others.
4. Begin to choose partners and friends who are responsible, respectful, and reliable.

### ADDITIONAL HOMEWORK THAT CAN BE APPLICABLE TO CLIENTS WHO EXPERIENCE ACOA TRAITS

- Am I Teaching My Children Addictive Patterns? Page 246
- Building My Support Network Page 97
- Correcting Distorted Thinking Page 106
- Corresponding with My Childhood Self Page 67
- Forming Stable Relationships Page 56
- How Far Have I Come? Page 414
- Setting and Maintaining Boundaries Page 71
- Understanding Family History Page 8
- Using Books and Other Media Resources Page 400
- Using My Support Network Page 346
- What Did I Want to Be When I Grew Up? Page 404
- What Do I Want for My Children? Page 251
- What's Happening in My Early Recovery? Page 111

### ADDITIONAL PROBLEMS FOR WHICH THIS EXERCISE MAY BE USEFUL

- Borderline Traits
- Dependent Traits
- Oppositional Defiant Behavior
- Partner Relationship Conflict
- Sexual Promiscuity

## SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE CLIENT

The “Understanding Codependent Behaviors” activity is intended for the client whose recovery is complicated by current codependent relationships or by a history of repeated enmeshment, rescuing, and boundary issues. This activity teaches the client about relationship addiction and the characteristics of such relationships, then heightens motivation by focusing on the risk to recovery that such situations present. It ends by offering hope and directing the client back to the therapist for guidance in working on issues of codependency. Follow-up may include discussing this issue with the therapist, group, and program sponsor; referral to CoDependents Anonymous; bibliotherapy; and videotherapy, with viewing and discussion of films such as *When a Man Loves a Woman* or others that are recommended in the book *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* means “addiction to a person or a relationship.” A codependent person works so hard to control and fix someone else that his/her own life is in turmoil as a result. Because no one can really control anyone else, and others’ troubles are mostly due to patterns only they can change, a codependent person is in for one painful disappointment after another.

1. There are reasons we get drawn into codependent or addictive relationships, in which we try harder to straighten others out than they themselves are trying. Have you ever been addicted to relationships with dysfunctional partners? If so, was it for any of these reasons?

\_\_\_\_\_ You felt needed.

\_\_\_\_\_ It was intense and exciting from the start.

\_\_\_\_\_ You just naturally felt 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. If you have gotten into relationships for these reasons, how have they usually turned out?

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3. In codependent relationships, people use each other to try to feel the way they want to feel—just as they would use drugs. The telltale signs of this are clear. Here are signs of an addictive or codependent relationship. Again, please check off any that apply in your own experience:

\_\_\_\_\_ 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 work hard to impress each other and keep secrets about yourselves, because you each fear that the other would reject you if he/she knew about some parts of your life or past.

\_\_\_\_\_ You get in heated arguments that don't make sense to either of you.

\_\_\_\_\_ 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.

4. Again, if you have gotten into this type of relationship, how has it usually turned out?

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5. Looking over the items you checked off for question 3, does this sound like a stressful situation? \_\_\_\_\_ There is a strong connection between stress and relapse. When you started drinking, using, or doing other addictive things, was stress relief one of your reasons? \_\_\_\_\_ Do you think a stressful relationship could make you more prone to relapse? \_\_\_\_\_ How do you feel about this risk?

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6. Most people who get into codependent relationships don't just do so once. Each of us has a pattern, a type of person we find most attractive and feel most at home with. If we grew up around the type of relationships described previously, those kinds of partners are the ones we're most drawn to and most likely to attract. Have you ever met someone with whom you shared a strong magnetic attraction? \_\_\_\_\_ Describe that situation and what happened in the relationship over time:

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7. Now that we've identified and studied this problem, what can you do about it?

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8. There are many resources to help people avoid codependent relationships or change them into healthy ones. What have you already seen or heard of any of these resources?

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9. Once you've identified the problem and figured out what you want to do, you don't have to work on it alone. What goals would you set for working on this in therapy?

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How will changing your relationship patterns affect your chances of staying clean, sober, and happy?

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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 ACOA traits on sobriety.
2. Reduce the frequency of behaviors exclusively designed to please others.
3. Begin to choose partners and friends who are responsible, respectful, and reliable.
4. Help friends and family understand how they can help by avoiding codependent behaviors.
5. Learn new ways to interact with the family in adult life.

### ADDITIONAL HOMEWORK THAT CAN BE APPLICABLE TO CLIENTS WHO EXPERIENCE ACOA TRAITS

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### ADDITIONAL PROBLEMS FOR WHICH THIS EXERCISE MAY BE USEFUL

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

## **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 in recovery who have parenting issues to understand the roots of their children’s behaviors.

## UNDERSTANDING FAMILY HISTORY

It's important to understand the role that family history plays in the development of addictive behaviors, both for your own recovery and to improve things within your family. Biological, psychological, and social factors combine in different ways for different people to influence the development of these patterns. This exercise looks at how family history and patterns affect us.

1. As a child, whom did you see drinking, using drugs, gambling, eating compulsively, or practicing other addictive behaviors in your family? \_\_\_\_\_ How old were you when you first understood what they were doing? \_\_\_\_\_ What effects did this have on you?

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2. What did you learn about drinking, drug use, and/or other addictions from your family?

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3. What problems, if any, did your family have as a result of these behaviors (for example, violence, divorce, financial problems, dangerous or illegal activities, or other worries)?

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4. Please describe the typical atmosphere or mood in your family when someone was drinking, using drugs, gambling, or engaging in any other addictive pattern:

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5. Families with addictive patterns often interact in some common ways. For each of the following patterns that you have experienced, give an example from your childhood and an example of how you can make positive changes now.

a. *Dishonesty / denial*

- (1) Childhood example: \_\_\_\_\_

- (2) Working toward positive change: \_\_\_\_\_

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b. *Breaking promises*

(1) Childhood example: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

(2) Working toward positive change: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

c. *Isolating / withdrawing*

(1) Childhood example: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

(2) Working toward positive change: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

d. *Emotional / physical / sexual abuse and neglect*

(1) Childhood example: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

(2) Working toward positive change: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

e. *Influencing others to act in self-destructive ways*

(1) Childhood example: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

(2) Working toward positive change: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

f. *Mixed-up roles and responsibilities (such as children taking caring of adults, or people blaming others for their own actions)*

(1) Childhood example: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

(2) Working toward positive change: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

7. How does your family of origin still affect your alcohol and/or other drug use, other addictive behaviors, ineffective or self-harming behavior, or recovery efforts?

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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.