

SCENE

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Lonne Sterling and Christine Michaels, Licensed Mental Health Counselors (LMHC) and Certified Employee Assistance Professionals (CEAP) and the co-founders of the Center for Change of Florida, have worked in the mental health, employee assistance and substance abuse fields for over 25 years. Their Center provides clients with outpatient counseling and area businesses with Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services. Together they have established a reputation as dynamic professionals, each bringing unique and varied experiences to their practice.

The Center services a diverse client population dealing with a broad range of mental health issues, such as mood disorders, relationship and family problems, anger and stress management, grief and loss, addictions, eating disorders and relapse prevention. The Center's staff is highly skilled, utilizing a brief, solution-focused, therapeutic approach and techniques such as EMDR and Hypnotherapy.

For further information or assistance call the Center for Change of Florida at (941) 955-5518.



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'No' is a Complete Sentence

The holidays are upon us. Like most of us at this time of year, you probably have a 'To Do' list that would give any reasonable person nightmares. Chances are you're frazzled, fatigued, anxious and irritable. Maybe you're even thinking, "This feels just like last year when I also took on more than I could handle and couldn't say no". For you, this scenario will probably be a once-a-year occurrence; for others, the inability to say no becomes a way of life. The mental health profession has identified this behavior as **one** characteristic of "codependency." For codependents, many of the following statements will also ring true.

My self esteem is determined by the approval and/or disapproval of you
I am not aware of my feelings and wants; I am aware and feel responsible for yours

My fear of being rejected by you determines what I say and do

My focus is on pleasing, protecting, blaming and/or controlling you to do things my way

My self esteem is bolstered by solving your problems and relieving your pain

Your interests, values and dreams take precedence over mine

I have difficulty forming and/or maintaining close relationships

I am a perfectionist and place too many expectations on myself and you

I have difficulty making decisions and value your opinion more than my own

I tend to minimize, alter or deny the truth about how I feel

I tend to judge everything I do harshly, and by your standards

The term co-dependent was originally applied to the relationship between the alcoholic and the alcoholic's family. The family members of an alcoholic appeared to be as addicted to the relationship with the alcoholic as the alcoholic was addicted to the alcohol. In time, therapists began to see this dysfunctional dynamic also operating in relationships where there were no chemically dependent members. Now, a codependent is generically defined as someone who inappropriately takes responsibility for the feelings, thoughts, behaviors, problems, choices and life course of others and avoids responsibility for his/her own.

In her book *Facing Codependence*, Pia Melody identifies five core symptoms of codependence. The codependent has difficulty: experiencing appropriate levels of self esteem; setting functional boundaries; owning one's own reality; acknowledging and meeting one's own wants and needs; and experiencing and expressing one's own reality moderately.

A healthy self-esteem is unaffected by external, adverse events and remains in tact even when bombarded by negative or painful feelings. For example, a person with strong self-esteem will continue to feel worthwhile even when insulted or rejected by another. The self-esteem of codependents, on the other hand, tends to exist in one extreme or the

other, either they see themselves as worth less than or as superior to others. If codependents have any kind of esteem, it is what Pia Melody terms "other esteem", based on external things such as appearance, financial success, social status and material possessions.

Developing boundaries is a core issue for codependents. Boundaries give us a sense of ourselves and differentiate us from others. Essentially boundaries exist for our protection and ensure that our behaviors are appropriate. When our boundaries are in tact, we know we have separate feelings, thoughts and realities and we know who we are in relationship to those around us. In other words, we know where someone else ends and we begin. This is not true for codependents who have no clear boundaries. This may account for why codependents tend to remain in abusive situations.

You will often find codependents complaining that they "don't know who they are." Pia Melody believes that this complaint is directly related to the difficulty of owning and experiencing the four components of one's reality -- our body, thoughts, emotions and behavior. Codependents are not in tune with all or some of these parts. For example, they may have difficulty seeing their appearance accurately; be out of touch with thoughts and feelings; or not see how their behavior affects others.

Codependents experience not being in touch with their wants and needs in four different ways: (1) They know their wants and needs but expect others to care for them and **wait** for them to do so; (2) They acknowledge their wants and needs, attempting to meet them but would rather go **without** then ask for help from others; (3) They are **not conscious** of their wants and needs; and (4) They get their wants and needs **confused**, often inappropriately substituting one for the other.

The most visible symptom to others of codependence is a person's inability to be moderate. Codependents live in extremes. "They are either totally involved or totally detached, totally happy or absolutely miserable. The codependent believes a moderate response to a situation isn't enough, only **too much** is enough." For example, codependents dress immoderately or flamboyantly; they think in black and white terms; they feel little or no emotion or have explosive ones; they either trust everyone or no one. Codependent parents discipline children severely or not at all.

However you define codependency, it is basically a reactionary process originally formed to survive a dysfunctional or abusive family system. Most codependents adopted these behavior patterns for protection from emotional and physical pain and to satisfy unmet needs. Ironically, the recovery from codependency begins with feeling the pain so assiduously being avoided. Codependents need to confront symptoms and experience the discomfort of thinking, feeling and doing things differently. Help is available through psychotherapy, Twelve Step Programs such as CODA and Alanon, and self-help materials. Whatever path you chose, start by practicing saying 'No,' **it is a complete sentence.**