

The Codependent Negotiator

The purpose of this brief paper is to provide some basic information about codependency and, then, show how that is relevant to the practice of negotiation.

By way of disclaimer, I am neither a psychologist nor any other sort of mental health professional.

I have practiced family law for over 35 years. I have been a mediator for over 25. As a result, I have picked up some knowledge along the way, enough to be dangerous, some would say. This paper will be based solely upon my anecdotal research.

I consider myself a “negotiation coach”; people actually pay me good money to play that role from time to time, usually in divorce cases.

While I believe that I have earned the right to hold myself out as a negotiation coach, I make no pretense to any expertise as a mental health professional.

For information about codependency from an expert, I recommend *Facing Codependence* by Pia Mellody.

What is Codependence?

Several years ago, I was working with a team of lawyers representing a woman in a complex divorce proceeding. I asked her, “What do you want?” Her response was something like, “You know what he wants me to have, don’t you?”

I noticed that whenever I asked her direct questions, she tended to deflect them, always trying to shift the focus to “him” (e.g. “You know what *he* plans to do?” “He will never agree to that.”), more interested in reading her husband’s mind than her own.

This is one of many characteristics of codependents.

Codependence describes people who have certain personality traits.

It is not a “mental illness.”

It is a term that came out of the AA movement a few years back to describe those who “enabled” the self-destructive behaviors of addicts (an alcoholic is an addict for these purposes).

More recently, mental health professionals have applied this concept to situations that do not involve addicts.

Ask ten psychologists for a definition of a codependent personality (or a “codependent relationship” because, after all, one thing about codependence is that it is not a game of solitaire), and you can expect ten different answers.

One of the most succinct definitions is that a codependent will put the needs of a relationship above his or her own needs to an unhealthy degree.

Underscore “dependent” in the word codependent.

Think “martyr,” but more like a hologram of a martyr.

Here is my spin on that:

When we are children we first attach to primary caretakers whose function is to love and nurture us and make us feel safe and appreciated so that we can grow and learn in a positive environment.

If our caretakers do their jobs, we develop a definite persona, a sense of self, a personality; we become people who know who we are, what we believe, and how we feel about things; we develop values and make decisions and mistakes and learn from our mistakes. In the process, we separate from our primary caretakers.

Sometimes, however, something interrupts that process of maturation, and we grow up feeling unsafe, unsure and unworthy.

The result is a person who does not have a strong “core” (my word for it) and who has little or no experience with healthy relationships (if you don’t get it at home growing up, where do you get it?).

What does one do when that is the case?

The feelings of being unsafe and unsure do not go away; in fact, we may come to believe that we deserve them.

We seek the comfort of someone who has what we do not have: confidence.

We seek an attachment object, someone who has it all figured out (we certainly don't) and who needs our help to make it a reality.

Where we were formerly lost children, we now have purpose: taking care of the narcissist.

Narcissists and codependents go together, like passengers on the same train to self-destruction.

The classic example is the alcoholic husband and the wife who enables his behavior.

But, what if we take the codependent out of the alcoholic marriage context and put him or her at the bargaining table at high-stakes negotiations.

A codependent will not cease to be a codependent simply because they are now in a negotiation; they will simply project their personality issues on to the negotiation process (as does the narcissist).

Let's consider some of the common characteristics of codependents, and then we will address how they impact a negotiation.

Common Characteristics of Codependents

1. They have extreme boundaries: either too rigid or virtually non-existent.

I have known several codependent clients who would text me, but they would not talk to me on the phone; others would have moved in with me and never left (come to think of it, that's pretty much the story of how I woke up one day and found myself in a second marriage).

Codependents are enmeshed in the situation. In part, because they do not have a strong sense of self, they cannot separate themselves from the other person or the conflict or the problem.

They cope with that by extreme avoidance or extreme immersion but rarely with moderation.

Goldilocks was not codependent.

2. They answer direct questions by deflecting.

They often have no core set of values. If you ask them what they like for dinner, they will probably tell you what their children's favorite meal is or what their mother used to cook for them or what Groupon sent them today.

I was trying to work with one woman who seemed to be displaying a plethora of codependent characteristics. I asked her, "What do you know about codependency?"

She gave me a classic response: "Why? Do I seem like I am one?"

3. They tend to be reactive.

Of course, what else can you do when you are coreless? You cannot be *proactive*, so you react to what someone else says or does, like a pinball, careening from bumper to bumper.

One little known fact about pinballs: they do not always like getting bumped.

Because a pinball's needs rarely get met, they are angry, but because they cannot express anger directly for fear of causing turbulence, they react with it.

4. They seek attachment objects.

A codependent without an attachment object is like a lost child.

Left alone, they experience little more than feelings of disconnection, guilt, shame, or whatever cocktail of self-loathing they prefer.

What does one do when one is a lost child? S/he seeks out someone, preferably, a strong, confident adult; and, if s/he can find someone who needs his or her help, that is the perfect fit because now s/he can derive purpose from caring and a sense of control while attaching to someone they perceive to have the strong core, which they lack.

Many times, these strong personalities are presented by narcissists, and an unholy alliance is struck.

5. They are people pleasers.

Because a codependent is so enmeshed with “the other,” they are happy when he or she is, and often only when he or she is. Indeed, they often derive self-esteem from the *immediate* responses of others rather than internally.

This means that they may lie.

Codependents don't lie to necessarily deceive for selfish purposes; instead, they lie because they tell people what they want to hear without regard to whether it is true.

Indeed, a codependent may only feel happy when s/he is making someone else happy. This can result in “looking for love in all the wrong places.”

6. They do not take care of themselves.

Poor self-care becomes self-destructive. This unhealthy causality fits nicely, however, with the codependent's need to play the victim.

The Codependent Negotiator

If a person has codependent tendencies, how will that affect their negotiation style or their abilities to accomplish a goal or reach a wise agreement (or any agreement at all)?

1. A codependent will not know when and where to draw the line, procedurally or substantively.

Because a codependent is so challenged when it comes to setting healthy boundaries, s/he will struggle with when, where and how to engage with his or her negotiation counterparts.

This may manifest in a tendency to being too friendly, to the point of being inappropriate or unprofessional (Bill Clinton comes to mind); or they may refuse to engage even though they have good leverage, which they will lose if they do not use (Civil War aficionados may recall Lincoln's problems with General McClellan).

Tactically, a codependent negotiator may "chase a deal" or appease when those are dubious strategies.

Challenges with boundaries, along with tendencies to put the relationship before self-care, may lead to marathon negotiation sessions that last for 12-15 hours, into the wee hours, with a string of dumb moves along the way.

2. A codependent will struggle with the internal dialogue master negotiators understand.

What are my interests? What do I really value? How much have I contributed to the problem?

Codependents tend to avoid introspection because, after all, if they can find anything at all, it is not going to be a happy experience.

To make it worse, codependents, like their narcissistic counterparts, do not like to seek help.

This can lead to unfocused, frustrating negotiations where progress ebbs and flows and one is left wondering whether s/he is making progress or not.

3. A codependent will not recognize a wise agreement and may not even understand the concept.

Wise agreements are based upon a recognition of mutual interests and a balancing of those interests. Without a clear understanding of one's own interests, reaching a wise agreement may only occur by accident.

The goal of the codependent is not to reach a wise agreement; the goal of the codependent is to please the other party or sustain an unhealthy relationship.

That means that, ultimately, they may be "too soft," and do not accomplish as much as they could have. This is particularly true when the parties will have an ongoing relationship after reaching an agreement.

In a divorce context, a codependent may avoid an agreement altogether because they are so enmeshed in the conflict, they cannot conceive of themselves without this enemy in their lives. How else will they play victim?

I have consulted with many divorce clients through the years who tell me that the problem with the marriage is his or her spouse's excessive use of alcohol. My generic response: "Then, your divorce will be more expensive than otherwise. Why? Because alcoholics (and codependents) are *sticky*. Letting go is not a skill they have spent much time developing."

Wise agreements involving codependents will be rare and hard won.

4. Having a bargaining dialogue with a codependent can seem like nailing Jell-O to the wall.

They will give passive and indirect answers to direct questions. Those negotiating with the codependent may throw up his or her hands quickly and say, "I can't do this."

Along with the codependent's tendency to be indirect about his or her needs, the codependent's reactivity may further alienate his or her counterpart.

Solutions

1. **Awareness.** Solutions begin with awareness and self-knowledge. In an ideal world, all codependents would see their own weaknesses and get help. Unfortunately, we do not live in an ideal world, and if a codependent sought help, s/he would probably not be codependent.

2. **Middle Men (or women).** At a minimum, a codependent negotiator should use a middle man. A codependent who insists on negotiating for himself or herself will tend to make blunders like “verbal leaks” and make concessions without reciprocity, when a middle man can profess ignorance about details and plead the right to seek permission before making concessions. Even with a middle man, if the codependent is in charge of the negotiation, critical errors will likely occur.

3. **Negotiation Partner.** A codependent is well advised to not go it alone. That means that s/he should not even go to a car dealership alone. Merely taking someone else along for the (test) ride will provide much-needed perspective, especially if s/he is not enmeshed with the codependent.

3. **Negotiation Coaches.** Finally, if the subject matter is significant, hiring a negotiation coach can be a valuable tool. Again, codependents do not like to seek help, so some urging and nudging may be required to accomplish this. Without some form of outside help, however, the codependent negotiator is unlikely to make wise agreements based upon mutual respect and reciprocity.