

# **Creative Codependence: Or How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love Codependence**

**By**

**Jo-Ann Svensson**

Codependence is often seen as a life draining, self-negating way of being. While I agree, I also know that codependence, like all aspects of life, has both its shadow and light. The trick is seeing how to use its (ahem) controlling, far reaching, life draining tentacles as a foundation for a deliciously creative response to life. After all, codependence is nothing but a creative way we learned as children to get our needs met. The quest then is how to use these imaginative and fertile endeavours to get our adult needs met.

Children and adults have similar needs. The difference is in how they get them met. The needs, which include safety, shelter, good nutrition, acceptance and love, when satisfied, provide what I call a feeling that we have “the right to be”. In a healthy environment children get these needs met from sources outside themselves (parents and caregivers) while healthy, centred adults find an internal source. Said another way, children need external, unconditional support to not only survive childhood but to mature into adults that can self validate. In self-validation, adults can, among other things, experience self love and acceptance; know how to support themselves financially, physically and intellectually and, most importantly, know when and where to ask for help when they cant do these things for themselves. If a child grows up lacking external validation, that is, experiences conditional love or safety issues for example, they may end up maturing into an adult that still looks outside themselves for clues that they have a right to be. This looking outside oneself to find worth is the basis for codependence. Most, if not all people exhibit some form of codependent behaviour — none of us had the “perfect” childhood. We all felt at one time or another that we had to prove our worthiness and many of us carried forth those

feelings into adulthood. The question then, since we can't change the past, how do we make these adult codependent behaviours serve us better?

ARC has a technique called “Changing the Defensive Role” that can help with this. We look at how we are doing life, explore the parts involved, develop a relationship with them and then negotiate new terms of behaving. In short, we find a way of doing life that serves us better and start behaving (thinking, feeling) that way. When we do things that serve us in a healthier manner, we tend to like ourselves better and can, therefore, self validate. This self-validation not only helps the young parts of us feel appreciated (loved, accepted, needed) but fulfills our adult needs of self-acceptance; reducing the need for codependent behaviours.

Let me give a personal example. As a child I found that if I acted tough and strong my mother would give me approval (a form of external validation) that was otherwise lacking. In this approval I felt the love and acceptance that I desperately craved and the “proof” that I had the right to be. The funny thing was, while I acted tough and strong, I was actually quite fearful and timid, it was only a role. Despite this, the role proved successful, so much so that I carried this way of being into adulthood. As an adult I would do things that showed others that I was tough and strong: I would hike by myself, resist working in teams, not ask for help (even when I needed it), and never betray that I didn't know something. I gave off this “don't mess with me” attitude that I believed worked well for me. The unfortunate truth, however, was that it alienated people. I was looking at life through a child's eyes and imagining I was getting approval when in fact, I wasn't. This was codependent behaviour: basing my actions and sense of worthiness on what I believed others felt about me. What I thought was feeding me — putting up walls, acting tough, being independent — was actually draining me. I was so busy defending my role, I wasn't living my truth: I was a vulnerable human being that just wanted all of who I was — the multitude of diverse expressions — to be loved.

So how did I change this defensive and codependent role of mine? I figured out a way to help my strong part serve me better. First I developed a relationship with it: I explored where I learned to do it and how it served me quite nicely in childhood. This validated the part and, with new found trust between us, I negotiated some new arrangements. Instead of using my strong part to define me and force other people to validate me, I creatively used it to do some internal housekeeping. This part now bolsters and supports my vulnerable parts and motivates me when my fears or timidity drive me inward. As a result, I can be more real in social situations and, therefore, more seen and appreciated by others. The role was changed and the codependent cycle, at least in that area of my life, evolved into a healthier way of being.

Of course, we are not talking about perfection here. When I am feeling insecure, I may still tell others about something I did that I view as “strong and tough”, just to get a certain form of validation. It rarely works the way I want but ultimately, with awareness, it does help me self-reflect. At these times I add a dose of self compassion and move on. Sometimes it works great, sometimes I just need more time. The point, however, is that we can creatively turn around any of our codependent behaviours to ones that serve us better. Whatever we did in childhood to find a sense of worthiness, whether we were bullies, A-students, people pleasers or athletically inclined, we can use that skill to help us self validate as adults today. It’s a matter of seeing the light and the dark of it: Bullying is the shadow side of assertiveness; people pleasing the shadow side of conflict negotiation. Furthermore, we can use these skills both within and without. Assertiveness, for example, can not only help us make the inner changes we desire but help us communicate effectively to others.

The bottom line is that all these codependent parts really want is to be validated. They want to be fed, sheltered, loved, and accepted. They want to know they have a right to be. These parts learned at an early age that their job was to make

others validate them in this way. They learned this lesson so well that they continue to see it as a viable way to live as adults. Our job then, as healthy, centred adults, is to acknowledge and love these parts, form a relationship with them and help them find healthier ways to serve us. Moreover, it is to accept these parts while also reminding them that even though it feels great to get validation from another, the deeper satisfaction will come from within first. This is about being creative with life: adapting childhood survival skills into tools that can help us thrive as adults and transforming the external validation we depended on in childhood into the self-motivated internal validation that celebrates life.