

Codependency A Helpful Concept Turned Toxic: A Lesson from Our Own History

A few weeks ago on February 27th, [Melody Beattie](#) died at age 76. For those who may not know the name, she was an author and wrote a best-selling book called [Codependent No More: How to Stop Controlling Others and Start Caring for Yourself](#). It may be hard for readers in our current era to understand how important a concept this was from our current perspective, time and place. Codependency as a concept, in the era it was articulated it was intended to be a helpful tool to assist people in understanding their own behavior in relation to a loved one with a substance use disorder. Her book put words to feelings for many people and helped them to consider change.



Codependency was articulated to explain imbalanced relationships where one person enables another person's self-destructive behavior. It started as a tool of empowerment. Yet it also became part of the pathological drumbeat that led to a lot of damage. The very words codependency and the associated concept of enabling are now so very laden with negative connotations that they cause more harm than help. This final point is perhaps one of the most fascinating and vexing issues we face, processes intended to be helpful over time create additional challenges.

I lived through that era and the proliferation of books on codependency, adult children and related topics. I was in the field when Melody's book came out, it had a lot of value for people attempting to grapple with the dynamics of addiction and healing in families. I used it as a tool to help people get a general sense of some of the dynamics that they were engaged in and making mindful choices to move forwards with things that they wanted in their own lives. Even as a young counselor I recognized that it was critical for people to consider their own actions and to determine which ones were helpful for them and which one they may consider changing in ways that were beneficial to their own goals.

Even then, however, I could see how some of the associated terms and concepts were being weaponized. Specifically, the terms enabling and the associated concept of tough love were deployed in our field so overly broadly as to constrict any behavior that provided love and connection to a loved one experiencing a substance use condition as dysfunctional and wrong. A lot of people were hurt as a result. The very words codependency and enabling became all-encompassing terms. They shifted from helpful concepts to pathology labels, as in *"you are a codependent"* or you *"are an enabler."* William White discussed the book, the Codependency Movement and the backlash on page 296 where he talked about the reasons for the backlash in five points:

1. The definitions of codependency are so inclusive as to lack any clinical utility.
2. The symptomology of codependency in-ordinality targets characteristics that women have been raised to cultivate. Codependency turns social pathology into psychopathology, directing personal energy towards inner healing rather than towards social and political change.
3. Defining the problem of "women who love too much" as psychopathology fails to hold abusive men accountable for their neglectful, demeaning, and violent behavior.
4. The codependency movement creates a milieu in which women bond with each other out of their weakness rather than their strength.
5. The codependency movement infantilizes members ("adult children") and traps them in an immature stage of development.

We have grappled with family healing from addiction for generations. The writings about Bill and Louis Wilson in [A Marriage that Changed the World](#), captured how when AA was formed, it started with spouses attending meetings with the alcohol addicted person leading. Then the recognition by Louis on the need to focus on her own healing, which led to the formalization of Al-Anon in 1953. Suffice to say that there have been efforts to develop broader understanding of healing within the context of families impacted by addiction for several generations.

The impetus for me to write this piece was the passing of Melody Beattie. Her efforts contributed significantly to a focus of effort on healing in the family context, yet I long ago abandoned the terms codependency and enabling as they have become toxic and have no real utility in our era. It is well beyond the time to put the terms out to pasture even as I do think that their origins came from good intention. Over time they became weaponized and ended up being pejorative labels used in overly simplistic ways that caused significant harm.

In considering the arc of the Codependency Movement from helpful concepts of healing, into an industry and then ultimately toxin laden concepts, we need to look no further than the work of William White, and his 35 years of research into recovery history in America. The arc from helpful to harmful is common over the course of our history. This is a reflection on humility. This is not an uncommon dynamic in our history. Much of what we do follows this same arc.

One of the things that several of us writers are trying to do currently is to revisit Bill's work in an attempt to get a new generation to understand what he was writing about. In this context, five years ago, I penned a piece I titled [The Seed Vault of Recovery History and Our New Recovery Advocacy Movement](#). As I said then "I view Bill White's work as essentially the Svalbard Global Seed Vault of recovery. The global seed vault stores seeds in the event that pestilence, drought or other events wipe out essential food crops. It holds the food security of humanity inside its very walls. Bill White has established our recovery seed vault through his vast collection of writings. When the new recovery movement ends, our history and the things that we have learned along the way are preserved within his vault. Accumulated wisdom for future generations to use these seeds to replant and start over." More recently, I [wrote about](#) signs that our movement has lost forward momentum and may be ending. When the end occurs, do not grieve, it shall rise again and hopefully in an informed manner.

The rise and fall of the Codependency Movement is a lesson for us. Considering Bill White's five points listed above. Might we best consider to:

1. Develop definitions with specificity and broad utility to healing.
2. Avoid pathologizing learned human behavior on the individual level and instead focus efforts up stream to address effective and necessary social and political change.
3. Not to fall into narrowly focused interventions founded on overly simplistic concepts that fail to consider broader and often complex dynamics.
4. Focus on strength-oriented solutions rather than pathology-oriented challenges.
5. Address change strategies considering all involved as active agents in the change process and avoid infantilizing or diminishing the capacities of all associated communities.

Rest in Peace, Melody Beattie. You greatly contributed to our field and to the understanding of unhealthy behaviors even as those very concepts were eventually deployed in harmful ways. Perhaps our most important reflection here would be one of humility as we grow to understand how this is a common dynamic in our space, one we can learn from by acknowledging and seeking to learn from our own history. "The only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history" - Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Yet, the recovery lesson runs contrary to this. We can and do change when we are determined to do so.

Sources

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