

Emotional Dependency: A Threat to Close Friendships

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Material taken from Lori Rentzel's "Emotional Dependency Booklet and article from "Love in Action"

Read "The Missing Piece Meets the Big O" and relate to emotional dependency –needing someone or something to make us "whole."

Emotional dependency can range from a powerful romantic attachment to another person to a platonic friendship that has become too ingrown and possessive.

...the condition resulting when the on-going presence and/or nurturing of another is believed necessary for personal security.

To differentiate between the normal interdependency that happens in wholesome relationships and an unhealthy dependency, we'll look at the factors that make up dependent relationships: how and why they get started and how they are maintained.

Characteristics of a Dependent Relationship.

We all have a deep need, placed in us by God, for intimate friendships.

Read Emily's story in chapter 5, pg.98, 99 ... "The Heart of Female SSA" Janelle Harman

Here are some signs that an emotional dependency has started: (can happen in all relationships, not just SSA)

When either party in a relationship:

- Experiences frequent jealousy, possessiveness and a desire for exclusivism, viewing other people as a threat to the relationship. *Want to own one another as their own; wanting to know where the other person is at all times*
- Prefers to spend time alone with this friend and becomes frustrated when this doesn't happen.
- Becomes irrationally angry or depressed when this friend withdraws slightly. *Ignores her own need for space as well as those of her partner and so ambivalence and Irritation with one another will naturally arise. The desire for closeness is in a constant battle with the fear of abandonment*
- Loses interest in friendships other than this one.
- Experiences romantic or sexual feelings leading to fantasy about this person.
- Becomes preoccupied with this person's appearance, personality, problems and interests. *The relationship fosters enmeshment and loss of self. Individual differences, dislikes and likes and interests are suppressed - sameness*
- Is unwilling to make short or long range plans that don't include the other person,

- Is unable to see the other's faults realistically.
- Becomes defensive about the relationship when asked about it.
- Displays physical affection beyond that which is appropriate for a friendship. *Exhibits an intimacy and familiarity with this friend that causes others to feel uncomfortable or embarrassed in their presence. If what you do with another person can't be shared with a bishop then it's probably not ok. Sleep in the same bed, snuggle; would you do that with a heterosexual friend?*
- Refers frequently to the other in conversation; feels free to "speak for" the other.

Other characteristics:

- Rapid intense formation, bond almost overnight; intimate personal things shared
- Resistant to break ups; consumed with care taking

How Does a Dependent Relationship Differ from a Healthy Friendship?

A healthy relationship is free and generous. Both friends are eager to include others in their activities. They experience joy when one friend hits it off with another. In a good friendship, we desire to see our friend reach his or her full potential, developing new interests and skills. A dependent relationship is ingrown, creating mutual stagnation and limiting personal growth. In normal relationships, we are affected by things our friends say and do, but our reactions are balanced. When we're emotionally dependent, a casual remark from our friend can send us into the heights of ecstasy or the pits of grief. If a close friend moves away, it is normal for us to feel sorrow and a sense of loss. If one of the partners in a dependent relationship moves, the other is gripped with anguish, panic and desperation. A healthy friendship is joyful, healing, and uplifting; an emotional dependency produces bondage.

Set-ups for Emotional Dependency.

Anyone can fall into a dependent relationship given the right pressures and circumstances. However, there are a few common personality patterns that consistently gravitate towards each other to form dependencies. The basic combination seems to be the individual who appears to "have it all together" teamed up with one who needs the attention, protection or strength the other offers. Variations on this theme include:

Emotional dependency comes as a surprise to most people.

Mary had spent long hours with Sarah, counseling her and helping her through the struggles of being a new Christian. They seemed to have a great friendship with lots of common interests and a mutual love for the Lord. Sarah felt Mary understood her better than anyone ever had. Even Sarah's husband, Bill, couldn't provide her with the closeness she experienced with Mary. Mary and her husband, Tom, had a fulfilling marriage, but Tom's sales career kept him away from home often. A loving person, Mary willingly invested her time and caring in Sarah, who really seemed to need her. It was rewarding for Mary to see Sarah growing the Lord, and she enjoyed Sarah's obvious admiration.

The shock came when Mary and Sarah found themselves emotionally and physically involved with each other. Neither woman had ever been aware of homosexual feelings before. Both of them loved God and cared for

their husbands. Their friendship had appeared to be Christ-centered, as they frequently prayed and read the Bible together. If what they were doing was wrong, why hadn't God stopped them? Why hadn't they seen the danger signals along the way? Now that they were so closely involved, they couldn't imagine being apart. "What are we doing to do?" they wondered.

Long before Mary and Sarah were involved homosexually, they'd entered into an emotionally dependent relationship.

Like Mary and Sarah, they don't see the problem coming until it has hold of them. However, dependencies don't happen in a vacuum. Definite elements in our personalities and situations can set us up for binding relationships. Sins and hurts from the past leave us vulnerable, too. Having an awareness of these set-ups helps us to know when we need to exercise special caution in our relationships.

Personality Set-ups: Who Is Susceptible?

Although these pairs appear to include one strong person and one needy person, they actually consist of two needy people. The "strong" one usually has a deep need to be needed. As often as not, the one who appears weaker actually controls the relationship. We've talked with people who have been "weak" in one relationship and "strong" in another, and sometimes these elements aren't apparent at all. A balanced friendship can turn into a dependent relationship if other set-ups are present.

Situational Set-ups: When Are We Most Vulnerable?

Certain times in our lives find us feeling insecure, ready to grasp hold of whatever security is available to us. Some of these times include:

- Life crises - relationship break-up, death of someone close, loss of job.
- Transition periods - adjusting to new job, moving to new home, getting engaged or being newly married, starting university, becoming a Christian.
- Peak pressure periods - final examinations week, deadlines at work, personal or family illness, holidays such as Christmas.
- When we're away from the familiar and secure - vacation, camp, conferences,
- We're also vulnerable during times of boredom or depression.

Ask: What is the best way to avoid trouble and recognize our need for special support during these times? How do you plan ahead for these needs to be met in healthy ways? These might include:

- sharing our burdens with a support group,
- scheduling a series of appointments with a counselor or bishop,
- increasing our contact with family members
- and most important, cultivating our relationship with Jesus through special quiet times.
- Also, there's nothing wrong with letting our friends know we need their support!

Problems only develop when we lean too much on one particular friend to meet all our needs. If we stay so focused on what we're not getting we will miss what we could have received – what HF has in store for us.

Roots: Why Are We Prone to Dependency?

In a dependent relationship, one or both people are looking to a person to meet their basic needs for love and security, rather than to heavenly Father. Unless underlying spiritual and emotional problems are resolved, this pattern will continue unbroken. Typical root problems that promote dependency include:

Sometimes hurts from our past leave us with low self-esteem, feelings of rejection and a deep unmet need for love. Bitterness or resentment toward those who have hurt us also opens us up for wrong relationships. These sins and hurts need to be confessed and healed before real freedom can be experienced. This can happen through confession and prayer, both in our personal times with the Lord and with other members of the body of Christ.

Commit to work on underlying problems

Emotional dependency is a painful thing to discuss. Most of us have experienced this problem. *None of us are exempt from the temptation to draw our life and security from another person*, especially when that person is handy and cooperative. Dependent relationships can form in opposite and same sex friendships. They can happen between married couples and between parents and children. But in the heart of the Gospel, there's a message of truth that can free us from self-seeking relationships. For a lot of us, that really is good news!

Part 2

These relationships are often maintained through manipulation

Maintenance through Manipulation.

Some typical forms of manipulation used to begin and maintain dependencies:

- Finances - combining finances and personal possessions, moving in together.
- Gifts - giving gifts and cards regularly for no special occasion, such as flowers, jewelry, baked goods, and gifts symbolic of the relationship.
- Clothes - wearing each others' clothing, copying each others' styles.
- Romanticisms - using poetry, music, or other romanticisms to provoke an emotional response.
- Physical affection - body language, frequent hugging, touching, roughhousing, back and neck rubs, tickling, and wrestling.
- Eye contact - staring, giving meaningful or seductive looks; refusing to make eye contact as a means of punishment.
- Flattery and praise - "You're the only one who understands me."
- Conversational triggers - flirting, teasing, using special nicknames, referring to things that have special meaning to both of you.

- Failing to be honest - repressing negative feelings or differing opinions.
- Needing "help" - creating or exaggerating problems to gain attention and sympathy.
- Guilt - making the other feel guilty over unmet expectations: "If you love me, then ... " "I was going to call you last night, but I know you're probably too busy to bother with me."
- Threats - threats of suicide and backsliding can be manipulative.
- Pouting, brooding, cold silences - when asked, "What's wrong", replying by sighing or saying, "Nothing".
- Undermining partner's other relationships - convincing him others do not care about him, making friends with partner's other friends in order to control the situation.
- Provoking insecurity - withholding approval, picking on partner's weak points, threatening to end the relationship.
- Time - keeping the other's time occupied so as not to allow for separate activities.

These are common ways manipulation is used to hold dependent relationships together. Some of these things are not wrong in and of themselves. Honest praise and encouragement, giving of gifts, hugging and touching are important aspects of godly friendship. *Only when these things are used for selfish ends -- to bind or control another, to arouse responses leading to sin -- do they become manipulative.*

Why Are Dependencies Hard To Break?

Even when both parties realize a relationship is unhealthy, they may experience great difficulty in breaking the dependency. Often those involved will begin to separate, only to run back to each other. Even after dependencies are broken, the effects may linger on for some time. Let's look at some reasons why these attachments are so persistent.

There are benefits.

We usually don't involve ourselves in any kind of behavior if we don't believe it benefits us in some way. As painful as dependency is, it does give us some gratification. The fear of losing this gratification makes dependent relationships hard to give up. Some of the perceived benefits of an emotional dependency include:

- Emotional security
A dependent relationship gives us the sense that we have at least one relationship we can count on. This gives us a feeling of belonging to someone.
- Intimacy
Our need for intimacy, warmth, and affection might be filled through this relationship.
- Self worth. *Our ego is boosted when someone admires us or is attracted to us. We also appreciate feeling needed.*
- Relief from boredom
A relationship like this might add excitement and romance when life seems dull otherwise. In fact, the stressful ups and downs of the relationship can become addictive.
- Escape from responsibility. *The focus on maintaining the relationship can provide an escape from confronting personal problems and responsibilities.*

- Familiarity. *Many people don't know any other way of relating. They are afraid to give up the "known" for the "unknown".*

We can't see it as unhealthy or wrong.

In modern history, romantic or emotional love is viewed as a law unto itself: when you "love" someone (meaning: when you have intense romantic feelings for someone), anything you do with that person is "OK". Viewed in this light, dependent relationships seem beautiful and noble. Especially if there is no sexual involvement, dependent attachments are easy to rationalize. Genuine feelings of love and friendship might be used to excuse the intense jealousy and possessiveness present in the dependency.

Also, we may not be able to see how a dependent relationship separates us from God. "I pray more than ever", one woman told us. What she didn't mention was that she never prayed about anything but her dependent relationship. Sometimes people say, "This friend draws me even closer to God." What usually has happened is that the emotional dependency has given them a euphoric feeling that masquerades as "closeness to God". When the friend withdraws even slightly, God suddenly seems far away!

Root problems are not dealt with.

We might end a dependent relationship by breaking it off or moving away. However, if we still have unhealed hurts, unfilled needs, or an unrepentant heart, we'll fall right into another dependent relationship or return to the one we left. Dealing with the surface symptom rather than the real problem leaves the door open to future stumbling.

Spiritual influences are overlooked.

When we ignore the Spirit's correction, we make ourselves vulnerable to the adversary's oppression. Those who willingly enter dependent relationships become candidates for spiritual deception. Wrong begins to seem right to them and truth begins to sound like a lie. When breaking free from dependent relationships, we sometimes overlook the importance of spiritual warfare: prayer, fasting and deliverance. If emotional ties have gone deep into a person's life, especially if sexual sin has been involved, there's the need to break the bonds that have formed between the two people. When dependency has been a lifelong pattern, ties need to be broken with all past partners as well. If the spiritual aspects are not dealt with thoroughly, this sin pattern will continue.

We don't want to give up our relationship.

Counselors know the frustration of going through all imaginable steps of counseling, support, and spiritual warfare on behalf of a counselee only to realize this individual has no interest in changing. People in dependent relationships sometimes say they want out, but they really want to be relieved from the responsibility of doing anything about the problem. They hope talking to a counselor will free them from the pressures of their conscience. Meanwhile, their desire and intent is to continue having the dependent relationship. Sometimes the bottom line is this: an emotional dependency is hard to break because the individuals involved don't want it to be broken.

Part 3

Healing from the grips of emotional dependency - which can deeply affect our ability to relate to others - is found through our relationship with Christ. In exploring "The Path Out of Dependency", we look at suggestions coming directly from others who've battled this, yet now are learning to enjoy relationships that reflect God's design and intent.

The Path Out of Dependency.

The tendency to draw our life and security from another human being is a problem nearly everyone faces. However, it's only after we encounter repeated frustration and sorrow in emotionally dependent relationships that we hunger for something more satisfying. We long to find contentment and rest in our relationships with others, but how do we break the old patterns?

Before we start exploring the different elements in overcoming dependency, we need to grasp an important truth: **there is NO FORMULA that leads us to a transformed life.** Lifelong tendencies towards dependent relationships can't be changed by following "ten easy steps". Jesus Christ desires to do an intimate and unique work within each of us by the power of His Spirit. Change will come as we submit to Him and cooperate with that work. The guide-lines we're considering here illustrate ways God has worked in various people's lives to bring them out of emotional dependency. Some of the suggestions apply to gaining freedom from a specific relationship; others pertain to breaking lifelong patterns. All represent different aspects of a whole picture: turning away from forms of relationship rooted in our "natural man" tendencies and learning new ways of relating based on our new natures in Christ.

Elements In Overcoming Emotional Dependency

Making a commitment to Honesty.

We've covered some reasons why dependencies are hard to break. One reason was that as a result of the deception that sets in, we can't see dependency as necessarily wrong. This deception is broken when we are honest with ourselves, admitting we're involved in a dependent relationship and acknowledging our dependency as sin. Then we're ready for honesty with God, confessing our sin to Him. We don't have to hide our confusion, our anger, or any of our feelings, we just need to pour out our hearts to Him, asking Him to give us the willingness to obey His will in this matter. The next challenge is being honest with another person. We can seek out a mature brother or sister in Christ and confess to them, "Look I'm really struggling with my feelings towards someone I work with. I'm getting way too attached to her. Could you pray with me about this?" As we "walk in the light" in this way, we can be cleansed and forgiven. If we're aware of specific ways we've manipulated circumstances to promote the dependent relationship, we can ask forgiveness for these actions, too. The deeper the honesty, the deeper the cleansing we'll receive. In choosing someone to share with, the best choice is a stable, trustworthy Christian who is not emotionally involved in the situation. This person can then intercede for us in prayer and hold us accountable, especially if we give them freedom to periodically ask us "how things are going". Extreme caution needs to be used in sharing our feelings with the one we're dependent on. "Hey, I'm really attracted to you. I think I'm getting dependent". It's better to seek

the counsel and prayer of a spiritual leader before even considering this step, and even then, we need to ask the Lord to shine His light on our motives.

Introducing Changes in Activities: Gradual Separation.

Whether the dependency has been mutual or one-sided, we usually begin to plan our lives around the other person's activities. Do not totally avoid another member of the body of Christ. However, we do recognize that a "parting of the ways" is necessary in breaking dependency. For example, we don't recommend that a person stop attending church just because the other person will be there. But we do know that placing ourselves unnecessarily in the presence of the person we're dependent on will only prolong the pain and delay God's work in our lives.

Allow God To Work.

This sounds so obvious, but it's not as easy as it seems! After we confess to God that we're hopelessly attached to this individual and are powerless to do anything about it, we invite Him to come in and "change the situation". The Lord never ignores a prayer like this. Some people begin to confront us about this relationship, but we assure them we have it all under control. Our friend decides to start going to a different Bible study, and soon we find a good reason to switch to the same one. The Holy Spirit nudges us to get rid of certain record albums, but we keep forgetting to do it. We ask God to work in our lives, but then we do everything in our power to make sure He doesn't! I've learned from my own experience that thwarting God's attempts to take someone out of my life only produces prolonged unrest and agony. Cooperation with the Holy Spirit brings the quickest possible healing from broken relationships.

Preparing for Grief and Depression.

Letting go of a dependent relationship can be as painful as going through a divorce. If we acquaint ourselves with the grief process and allow ourselves to hurt for a season, our healing will come faster. If we repress our pain and deny ourselves the time we need to recover, we'll carry around unnecessary guilt and bitterness. Some people have said that they found the Psalms to be especially comforting during this time of "letting go".

Cultivate Other Friendships.

Even if it's difficult, scary, and our hearts are not in it ... we need to do it. Our feelings will catch up later, and we'll be glad we've made the investment in the lives of our new friends. The Lord will choose relationships for us if we'll let Him. Willingness to accept the friends He gives us will deepen our relationship with Him as well. He knows just the relationships we need to draw out our special qualities and chip off our rough edges.

Discover God's Vision for Relationships.

If we love another person as God loves him, we'll desire to see that man (or women) conformed to the image of Christ. The Lord wants to bring forth qualities in us that reflect His character and gifts that enable us to do His work. In a recent issue of the Desert Stream newsletter, Andy Comiskey said, "At the onset of any friendship, we must choose a motivation. Either we mirror a friend's homosexual desirability or his/her new

identity in Christ. This may sound tough, but our willingness to be disciplined emotionally might just make or break a friendship. When we exchange another's best interests for our own neediness, we run the risk of losing the friendship." If we desire an exclusive emotional involvement with this friend, then our desires are in conflict with what the Lord wants. We need to ask ourselves, "Am I working with God or Against Him in the person's life?"

Resolve The Deeper Issues.

The compulsion to form dependent relationships is a symptom of deeper spiritual and emotional problems that need to be faced and resolved. Self-analysis is the least effective way to uncover these problems. The most effective way is to go directly to the Lord and ask Him to show us what's wrong. "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, Who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him." (James 1:5) Another effective way is to go to those God has placed in positions of authority over us and submit to their counsel and prayer. For some, a long-term counseling relationship will help us face the sins we need to repent of and the hurts that need healing. For others, a small covenant group that meets regularly for deep sharing and prayer will help tremendously. Sometimes personal prayer and fasting draws us to God and breaks sin bondages in a way nothing else will. The desire to find our identity and security in another human being is a common problem with a myriad of possible causes. Confession, repentance, deliverance, counseling, and inner healing are means the Lord will use to bring purity and emotional stability into our lives. The healing and forgiveness we need are ours through Jesus' atonement. We can receive them by humbling ourselves before Him and before others in His body.

Prepare For The Long Haul.

Sometimes victory escapes us because we prepare for a battle rather than a war. Whether we are trying to gain freedom from a specific attachment or from lifelong patterns of dependency, we need to prepare for long-term warfare. We need to know ourselves: our vulnerabilities, the types of personalities we are likely to "fall for", the times when we need to be especially careful. We need to know our adversary: know the specific lies Satan is likely to tempt us with and be prepared to reject those lies, even when they sound good to us! More than anything, we need to know our Lord. We need to be willing to believe God loves us. Even if we cannot seem to feel His love, we can take a stand by faith that He does love us and begin to thank Him for this fact. As we learn of God's character through His Word, we can relinquish our images of Him as being cruel, distant, or unloving. A love relationship with Jesus is our best safeguard against emotionally dependent relationships.

Is There Life After Dependency?

Though overcoming dependence may be painful for a season, it is one of the most curable ailments known to man. Often people are so healed that they cannot even conceive of the extent of their former bondage to dependent relationships. The immediate reward in giving up a dependent relationship is **peace with God**. Even in the midst of pain over the loss of the dependency, **we experience peace, relief, and joy as our fellowship with God is restored**. "It's like waking up after a bad dream" one woman told us.

Peace with ourselves is another blessing we receive. It's much easier to like ourselves when we are not scheming and striving to maintain a relationship we know God does not desire for us. When we have relinquished a dependent attachment, we are no longer tormented with fear of losing the relationship. This, too, brings peace to our hearts.

In the aftermath of dependency, we **discover a new freedom to love others.** We are members of one another in the body of Christ. When our attentions and affections are wrapped up totally in one individual, other people in our lives are suffering for it. They are not receiving the love from us God intends them to have.

Individuals who have given up dependent relationships say they **discover a new caring and compassion for people that's not based on sexual or emotional attraction.** They find they are less critical of people and less defensive. They begin to notice that their lives are founded on the real security found through their relationship with Christ, not the false security of a dependent relationship.

And, finally, overcoming dependency brings us a **freedom to minister to others.** We can only lead others where we have been willing to go ourselves. When we are no longer rationalizing wrong attachments, we have new liberty in the Spirit to exhort and encourage others! Our discernment becomes clearer, and spiritual truth is easier to understand and accept. We become clean vessels, fit for the Lord's use.

In our desire to remain free from this problem, we need to remember that hiding from people is not the alternative to dependency. Dependency is a subtle counterfeit to the tremendously rich and fulfilling relationship the Lord intends for us to have through Him. If we are trying to overcome dependency, let's remember that Jesus is not harsh with us. He will teach us to love people in a holy way, and He knows that this takes time. There is a battle between the flesh and the spirit in every way of our lives - relationships are no exception.

End: read last pages of "the Missing Piece" must rely and accept ourselves first

The drawings are simple but effective, and the story is one that we all can relate to. The Missing Piece starts out alone and is looking for someone or something to complete it. By the end of the story, The Missing Piece realizes he doesn't need anyone to complete him. He is already complete.

It's the journey of a character becoming a "whole" person...independently being able to "roll" by itself. It also hints that to be happy in a relationship you must be your own independently happy person...you can't rely on others to complete your deficiencies. To have meaningful relationships We must first accept ourselves and God in our lives