

Chapter 3. Inner Child Work and Codependency

In our chapter on the multiplicity of everyday life, we discussed the inner child conceptualization of personality as a close approximation of everyday multiplicity. Why so? This perspective views the human psyche as combination of three ego states or sub-personalities: the higher parent, the inner child, and the codependent self. We will examine each of these in detail shortly, but as we do so, let us also consider why this triad of ego states is so compelling. To begin with, from the moment we are born, we are faced with a conflict between our own needs and the needs of those around us. As an infant, I may want my milk at 7 a.m., but my mother has to finish making my brother's peanut butter and jelly sandwich and get him off school before I can have my milk. As we get older, we can simply pursue our own needs, but we soon learn that if we do so without concern for the needs, feelings, and rights of others, others reject us and become upset, and in turn, they don't meet our needs. We learn to meet others needs so that they will meet our needs. Some of us learn this lesson too well, and may later be labeled "codependents," while others do not learn this lesson well enough, and may be called "selfish." The inner child and codependent ego states each have a healthy and an unhealthy component, though the unhealthy component is largely created by the relative absence of the complementary ego state. The inner child is self-centered, in both the healthy and unhealthy sense of the word, while the codependent self is other centered, again, in either a healthy and unhealthy manner. The inner child ego state is genuine and authentic as well as self-focused. It involves our real feelings, our real needs, what we want, and how we feel when we do or don't get it. It includes our playfulness and spontaneity, our curiosity and creativity, our hearty laughter, our passionate interests, and other feelings and needs that seem to come from the core of our self. As we shall see, the term "codependency" can be somewhat slippery, with multiple meanings. For our present purposes, however, we will focus on the other centered component of the codependent ego state. Codependency involves an excessive habit of focusing upon, taking responsibility for, and taking care of other people's feelings and needs. Like self-centeredness, other centeredness can be quite healthy, if balanced by its opposite. Without a balance between self and other, the inner child becomes a brat, a demanding, self-centered, manipulative narcissist with little or no

concern for the needs and rights of others. Likewise, in the absence of due concern for the self, the kind, giving person becomes a flaming codependent, engaged in incessant people pleasing, controlling behavior camouflaged as helping, self sacrificing but resentful martyrdom, etc. The inner child and codependent ego states become useful concepts because in combination, they capture one of the most central conflicts that we experience as human beings, the conflict between our need to satisfy our own needs and the needs of others.

The higher parent ego state is the part of self that manages this conflict. It is the seat of wisdom within the personality. It is also the source of healthy love (not the extremes self-centered or codependent “love”), and the site of our moral integrity and values. If this ego state sounds suspiciously like God, it is because this combination of wisdom, love, and morality is so important to our satisfaction in life that the vast majority of human beings seek a higher power in order to help provide it. Religious believers and atheists can argue ad nauseam as to whether a higher power/God is an imaginary projection of our higher parent ego state, created to give it some divine turbo power, or whether the higher parent ego state is the divinely created and inspired healthiest part of ourselves. Either way, this ego state captures a vitally important set of human characteristics. Thus, I would argue that the trio of ego states in the inner child approach encompasses central human needs, capabilities and conflicts in a user-friendly manner that lends itself well to recovery efforts.

In addition, the inner child approach to recovery is effective, particularly in healing codependency and suppressed family of origin issues. John Bradshaw is arguably the most respected and effective advocate of the inner child method. In his widely acclaimed book, *Homecoming*, he notes, “Three things are striking about inner child work: the speed with which people change when they do this work; the depth of that change; and the power and creativity that result when wounds from the past are healed.” In the paragraphs ahead, we will look more closely at the meaning of codependency, as well as habit model approaches to changing the cognitive and behavioral habits that maintain a codependency trap. Eventually we will wind our way back to the inner child approach as a trauma and ego state model for recovery, and discuss the work of Bradshaw and others to explain this approach to recovery.

In our discussion of normalcy, we noted how, from one angle, healthy adaptation involves a combination of opposing skills on most dimensions, coupled with an ability to move up or down a given dimension in order to produce behavior which is most adaptive to our current situation. We have also examined healthy and pathological variations of our most common disturbing emotions. In a similar vein, ego states can be healthy or self-defeating. In the case of self-centeredness and other centeredness, a healthy overall balance between the two is healthy, despite the need for temporary variations in which emphasis is dominant. Self-centeredness, in the healthy, often neglected form of the term, involves self-enhancement and self-nurturance. Healthy self-centeredness (“healthy narcissism” in Whitfield’s terms) is not overly selfish, and need not occur at the expense of others, if it is balanced by healthy other centeredness, involving due regard for the feelings, needs, and rights of others. Healthy other centeredness respects others needs, without the self-neglect, self-suppression, or self-rejection inherent in the more pathological variant that we call codependency. Some difficulties arise in the use of these terms, as both self-centeredness and codependency have quite negative connotations. But there are healthy versions of each, particularly when each is balanced by the other. We might imagine a healthy personality pie in which the inner child occupies 30%, with the other centered healthy version of the codependent self occupying another 30%, while the remaining 40% involves the higher parent ego state which are amongst other things, guides the balance between the interests of self and others.

Typically, codependents come to my office more often than overly self-centered individuals, as the latter are either in less emotional pain, or too defended to acknowledge the presence and sources of their vulnerable feelings. When I find myself considering the inner child approach to treatment, I am often sitting across from a person whose personality involves 80% codependent self, 10% inner child, and 10% higher parent. In other words, their personality has been hijacked by a codependent need to take care of and take responsibility for others, while their own needs and feelings are suppressed, along with their own wisdom. The inner child approach seeks to restore, or create for the first time, an appropriate balance between these ego states, by developing the wisdom of the higher parent, applying its capacity for love to the neglected inner child, and setting boundaries on the runaway other centeredness of the codependent self.

Selfishness is a far more familiar concept than codependency, so let's take some time to elaborate on the meaning of codependency. Melody Beattie, in her groundbreaking *Codependent No More*, and her follow-up, *Beyond Codependency*, discusses the history of this concept, and adeptly describes its various components, as well as elements of recovery. Likewise, Charles Whitfield, the author of the concise gem, *Healing the Child Within*, has also provided us with clear exposition of codependency in *Co-Dependence: Healing the Human Condition*. He describes codependency as a “disease of lost selfhood.” In a similar vein, Bradshaw defines codependence as a disease “characterized by a loss of identity,” noting that codependents rely on someone or something outside of themselves in order to have an identity. He adds that codependency is rooted in “toxic shame,” which he defines as “the internalized feeling of being flawed and defective as a human being.” The parents in a dysfunctional family have unresolved wounds and are needy themselves. When their children's needs and voices interfere with the parents' needs, the parents angrily shame the children. Thereafter, the children experience shame when they are needy. Therefore, they codependently renounce their needs in order to avoid the experience of shame. This suppression and numbing of feelings and selfhood may be supplemented by additional numbing via addictive and other compulsive behaviors.

The development of the concept of codependency is rooted in 19th and 20th century concepts including the unconscious mind, repression and suppression, and the disowning of various aspects of selfhood. Sigmund Freud advanced and popularized trauma focused psychotherapy, and courageously spoke out regarding the impact of sexual abuse of children, despite his subsequent and unfortunate repeal of this theory in favor of Oedipal theory, which essentially blamed the victim. Alcoholics Anonymous was founded in 1935, and the 12 Steps were developed soon thereafter. In what would later be called Al-Anon, spouses and other close relatives of alcoholics eventually banded together in 12 step groups for support in dealing with their own distress and shattered lives. The impact of alcoholic families upon children remained relatively neglected until the 1980s, when self-help groups for adult children of alcoholics (ACoA groups) began to appear, along with increased societal attention regarding the extent and impact of child abuse. The term “codependence” first appeared in the late 1970s, and gained prominence as it was fleshed out in the 1980s, as a condition

often found amongst children of alcoholics and other dysfunctional families. Codependence is a personality adaptation that evolves in the course of the interactions within a dysfunctional family or with a dysfunctional partner, typically originating in childhood, though sometimes as an adult. Over time, it was recognized that the personality traits and strategies that soon came to be known as codependency also emerge in nonalcoholic but equally dysfunctional family and marital relationships. The codependent characteristics commonly found amongst adult children of alcoholics can likewise develop in response to physical and sexual abuse, or consistent emotional abuse or neglect, via exposure to a schizophrenic or disabled parent, a highly controlling or abusive spouse, a strict, shaming fundamentalist religious parent, etc. Under such circumstances, the needs of those around us trump our own needs, and we must mold ourselves reactively around the needs of others in order to emotionally survive, thereby abandoning development of the self. We suppress our feelings, needs, and desires in order to avoid more severe consequences from those we depend upon.

As Beattie and others point out, it is not just our relationship with a dysfunctional partner or family system that demands or invites a codependent adaptation, but it is also the messages and rules of the system which generate this response. These messages and rules are used to protect the addictions, secrets, or power of those around us. And rule # 1 is that no one is allowed to discuss the rules, since any such discussion could threaten the continuance of the rules, as well as the family or marital pathology that the rules protect. Common rules or injunctions include “Don't feel,” “Don't think,” “Don't have problems,” or even “Don't be.” The latter injunction encourages you to be psychologically invisible, so that your feelings and needs do not interfere with the feelings, needs, secrets, addictions, etc. of those around you. It is reflected in the old adage, “Children are to be seen but not heard.” The “Don't feel” injunction is applied to a variety of feelings, such as sadness. “I'll give you something to cry about,” exemplifies the parental prohibition against the expression of sadness. Sometimes we are burdened with “original sin,” which is best illustrated by being blamed for a “forced” marriage of your parents due to pregnancy, or worse still, inheriting your mother's shame if rape resulted in her pregnancy. Common damaging messages, explicit or implicit, include communications to the effect that you are unlovable, not good enough, a bother or burden, and that you are responsible for the distress and

problems of your parents or spouse. In actuality, you are unloved (but not unlovable) because those around you are too damaged to have learned to love, and you are not good enough at abandoning your selfhood to perfectly satisfy the needs and protect the feelings of those around you. But remember rule #1: you are not allowed to discuss this reality. You are not allowed to have a voice. There is no First Amendment in the constitution of dysfunctional families.

In response to these messages, rules, and dysfunctional family dynamics, it becomes adaptive, or at least easier, to develop a host of codependent traits, including emotional and behavioral invisibility. If you are invisible, you don't have, or at least don't express, or perhaps are not even aware of your needs, because they could clash with others' needs. You don't have feelings regarding mistreatment or neglect, because expression of such feelings could invite them to guilt or shame you. You don't express thoughts or opinions that could challenge the system, and you don't have the self-worth needed to demand better treatment. As Whitfield notes, the narcissistic partner "demands perfect mirroring," while the codependent partner participates in the invalidation of oneself, and is "preoccupied with mirroring the other." Mirroring essentially involves validation. Developmentally, children's feelings, perceptions, etc. are mirrored or validated by healthy parents. As Bradshaw notes, "... a child has no way of knowing who he is. Every one of us was a we before we became an I." Lack of validation and suppression of a child's feelings and perceptions invites a child to distrust his or her own experience of self, and to increasingly disown oneself. In such a family (or marital) system, the path of least resistance involves suppressing your thoughts, your feelings, your needs, and your self-worth, while attending to the needs and feelings of others. You learn that you are responsible for their feelings, and that if you neglect this primary responsibility, your consequences will include additional assaults upon your self-esteem. You have little inherent worth in such a system, and given your youth and vulnerability, you are extremely dependent upon those around you to supply you with at least conditional worthiness. But you must fulfill the conditions. As the days roll into weeks, months, years, and eventually two decades within such a family trap, it is not surprising that the thoughts and behaviors that comprise your codependent adaptation become relatively entrenched. And the kicker is that your codependent personality is complementary to, and therefore attracts the same type of partner that trapped you to

begin with. Your marriage then reinforces your already pronounced codependent behavior, and the trap is recycled.

Your codependency may be extreme and obvious, in response to an extremely dysfunctional family system, or more subtle and difficult to detect if developed in the context of milder dysfunction. Either way, you are likely to display some degree of the following characteristics. To begin with, you are likely to be other centered, focusing upon the feelings and needs of others far more than your own. You are likely to feel that your satisfaction depends upon the satisfaction of others. Likewise, you are likely to feel that you are responsible for their satisfaction. Your notion of responsibility in relationships becomes entirely twisted. You feel responsible for others' feelings, for their distress, their positive or negative outcomes, and you experience codependent guilt if you do not carry out this responsibility. Their blame and anger reinforce your guilt, as they export responsibility for their well being, while you import it. After being treated for years as if you have no intrinsic worth, you have little self-esteem, and what little you have is conditional, based on whether or not you are good enough in meeting others' needs. You may find yourself compulsively working and striving for perfection, trying to fill enough accomplishment and approval squares to feel okay about yourself, even though no amount of check marks will compensate for your core conviction that you are unworthy. You erect a façade to conceal your real feelings, needs, and shame. Unfortunately, even if someone does appear to love you, you are aware at some level that they do not love the real you, and therefore you discount the value of their love. You become a caretaker, and thereby attract damaged partners who need caretaking. When they inevitably take more than they give, you feel unappreciated and become a resentful victim. When your resentment accumulates sufficiently, you are likely to periodically explode, only to feel guilty afterwards. Looking at this from the vantage point of Karpman Drama Triangle, partners rotate between the rescuer, persecutor, and victim positions. When you're rescuing is not appreciated, you feel victimized, and when you express your resentment, you become the persecutor in the eyes of your partner, who is now the victim. When you cannot fix them with any amount of giving, rescuing, and caretaking, you become frustrated and feel inadequate, blaming and further victimizing yourself. You do not yet know that the key to escaping this triangle is movement from the victim to the survivor position, in which self nurturance and self empowerment via

assertiveness and responsibility replace self-pity, helplessness, and blaming of self and others. In the absence of sufficient support for your autonomy as a child, you find that you have little independence or initiative, and no voice. "No" is missing in your vocabulary. You may find yourself with a spouse who likewise inhibits your independence, your friendships, and any activities that interfere with your caretaking responsibilities. They may be codependent as well, dependent upon your caretaking and therefore jealous and resentful of any pursuits which take you away from them. In many cases, their codependency may be more disguised than your own, as you adopt a more submissive stance to accommodate to their more obvious form of control, which conceals their own underlying dependency.

Coming from a family environment that felt so out of control, you also try to take control of your current environment. If your parents were out of control, or if they failed to validate and support you, your ability to trust them was damaged. To some extent, this distrust generalizes to the world as a whole. If your environment is untrustworthy, and cannot be safely relied upon, then you had better take control of your environment yourself. But in such a family or marriage, your need for control cannot be exercised on top of the table, so you resort to more indirect strategies, manipulating under the table as best you can. If you are accused of being too controlling, you plead, "I'm only trying to help." Since you were punished for being yourself and expressing your real thoughts, feelings, and needs in your family of origin, you learned not to be open, honest, genuine, or authentic. Even in your 30s or 40s, you may find yourself saying "I don't know who I am," because you have not allowed yourself to become yourself during all those years of suppressing your real feelings, opinions, desires and needs. After forfeiting your selfhood in order to maintain your marriage, you produce children, and find yourself excessively sacrificing your needs in order to meet theirs. Motherhood is a genetic invitation for codependency. Healthy maternal nurturing is also the source of the attachment needed to produce emotionally secure children. It makes the world go around. Motherhood involves genuine responsibility for the needs of helpless infants and dependent children. But codependent mothering involves excessive responsibility for the needs of one's children, at the expense of one's self. When your marriage falters, you may find yourself turning to your children for vicarious satisfaction, because you never learned to satisfy yourself. You may become

enmeshed with them, enabling them to be overly dependent, and less responsible because you take excessive responsibility for them. Your codependent relationship with your parents recycles in a codependent marriage, and ultimately in codependent relationships with your children, who then recycle it in their own relationships, just as you recycled your own parents' wounds. During their adolescence, they may rebel in the course of their awkward attempts to establish their missing autonomy, rejecting you in the process. Even in the absence of such rebellion, their departure leaves you with an even emptier nest than in most families, precipitating a midlife crisis. Having failed to develop your selfhood, and then attracting a partner who insists that you sacrifice yourself while caretaking for them, you immerse yourself in your children, living vicariously through them, only to feel a massive void once they leave.

Even writing this is depressing, much less living it. Depression is about loss, and codependency guarantees loss of satisfaction of one's needs, and more basically, loss of selfhood and self-esteem. But this pattern is all too frequent amongst mothers who seek psychotherapy. And it is not just the mothers. While motherhood and our respective gender roles invite the above pattern amongst women, some men find themselves in the exact same position. For most codependent men, however, codependency is displayed in a more obvious controlling manner. In a gross generalization, men are more likely to act out, resort to overt anger, dominance and control, and are more likely to abuse substances to numb the vulnerable feelings that we are taught to suppress and deny in the first place. By securing an accommodating partner who is dependent upon us for their security and self-esteem, we not only arrange to receive more than we get, but we choose a partner who is often too dependent to leave us. If our love is a selfish, codependent love, we may find that restricting our partner's other attachments, discouraging her education and independence, and further damaging her low self-esteem leaves her even more dependent upon us, which in turn maintains our own dependency security. In the traditional, mutually codependent relationship, male codependency is more camouflaged than the female version, both because husbands often pursue more independent activities and relationships while wives stay at home as the default parent, and because control is less obvious than submission as a means of maintaining dependency. In a healthy relationship, there is plenty of room for both independence and

intimacy. Healthy love promotes the growth and independence of one's partner, which in turn promotes appreciation and intimacy, and a win-win relationship.

If you find yourself in the above paragraphs, you are likely to experience at least a low-grade depression. But what are you to do about it? Earlier, we distinguished between the habit model and the trauma model, arguing that the combination of the two approaches promotes the most effective recovery process. We must change the cognitive and behavioral habits that maintain our codependency, though it is also helpful to revisit and resolve family of origin issues which initiated and maintain these codependent habits. We will soon visit the inner child approach to psychotherapy, which is designed to address family of origin issues, and revise your relationship with yourself, via ego state work promoting the development of the real self/inner child, while decreasing the prominence of the codependent or false self. First, however, we will address the needed changes in our codependent habits.

These habits are to be found in our patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving. Since our thoughts and core beliefs are so central in generating our feelings and behaviors, we will start there. Responsibility is a core issue. Who is responsible for what? While we influence each other's feelings and behaviors, we are each primarily responsible for our own feelings and behaviors. While certain behaviors, such as a slap in the face, or a nice gift, may lead to a predictable response most of the time, the common response is not guaranteed. Based on the characteristics of the receiving party, the response may be atypical. We are not simply passive reactors. The way that we perceive an action, the anticipated consequences, and the nature of our personality and our relationship with the other party all contribute to our response. People may invite us to respond in a certain way, but they do not make us do so. Some invitations are stronger than others. But we all have the capability of resisting even strong invitations. Ultimately, I am responsible for me, and you are responsible for you. I am responsible for my feelings and behavior, and you are responsible for yours. Failure to accept this basic principle of responsibility is an invitation for excessive blame, anger, and guilt. If we blame others for our behavior, we become irresponsible and angry. If we blame ourselves for others behavior, we become hyper responsible and guilty. Codependents have typically been trained in childhood to take responsibility for their parents' well being, and tend to

consistently take responsibility for others' feelings, behaviors, and welfare. This excessive responsibility for others, and blaming of oneself, sets up excessive guilt, which in turn powers codependent behaviors such as caretaking, rescuing, and ostensibly well intended, controlling attempts to change and improve one's partner. At the same time, depending excessively upon one's partner for satisfaction involves an abdication of responsibility for oneself. It is as if the Serenity Prayer has been turned upside down, as the codependent individual accepts distressing circumstances which he or she could find the courage to control, while attempting to control people and events beyond his or her control. Trying to control people or circumstances beyond your control is a sure recipe for feeling out of control yourself, while failing to control things within your control is a recipe for helplessness. And this is just what the codependent person experiences on an emotional level: guilt, anger, helplessness, and feeling out of control. Accordingly, the first principle of recovery from codependency, on a cognitive level, is that I am responsible for myself, and you are responsible for yourself. While this principle can in some cases be taken too far, and used as an excuse for ignoring others rights and feelings, codependents operate so far to the other extreme of this dimension that this risk is negligible for them. Appropriate cognitive boundaries set up appropriate feelings and healthy behavioral boundaries. An accurate attribution of causality reduces both codependent guilt and characterological anger. Knowing where I stop and you start lays the groundwork for healthy detachment and limit setting in one's behavior. The very first step in the Codependents Anonymous (CoDA) 12 step program reads "We admitted we were powerless over others – that our lives had become unmanageable" (see The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions Workbook). Recognition that we are powerless over others, yet powerful over ourselves, is an empowering realization. It reverses the distortion of responsibility that operates as a core cognitive component of codependency.

Secondly, codependent individuals have been trained, explicitly or implicitly, to feel unworthy, less than, not good enough, or worthless. This is typically a core belief that is often quite resistant to change. It is core, because it developed so early. It functions as an axiom, or a set of embedded, invisible lenses, through which you view yourself and your relationships with others. In a dysfunctional family, the parents' needs take precedence over the needs of the child, far beyond the healthy,

usual balance between the two. A child soon learns that it is dangerous to press one's feelings and needs in such a family. In a dysfunctional family, you are forced to choose between your dependency security and your selfhood. Children tend to idealize their parents as a means of feeling safe in their attachments (and often demonize them as teenagers as a means of detaching). In a dysfunctional family headed by wounded adult children as parents, you can give up your voice and receive conditional love, for you can exercise your voice/selfhood and be punished and rejected. At a tender age, the vulnerable young child may wisely choose to give up his or her voice and self in order to preserve one's attachments and security. A paradox emerges, in that to protect yourself you have to abandon yourself. In black-and-white terms, the choice is between viewing yourself as a good child with sick parents, or a bad child with ideal, safe parents. Since dependency trumps autonomy in early childhood, you accept the twisted reality that your parents are healthy, and that it is you that are lacking. You abandon yourself in order to protect yourself. As Bradshaw notes in *Homecoming* (1990), codependence "is rooted in toxic shame—the internalized feeling of being flawed and defective as a human being... Once toxically shamed, a person loses contact with his authentic self. What follows is a chronic mourning for the lost self. The clinical description of this state of affairs is dysthymia or low-grade chronic depression."

This core belief, that you are not good enough, powers a variety of codependent behaviors, including reliance upon others for self-esteem, which ironically is stubbornly resistant to compliments, praise, and success. If you cannot fill your own self-esteem cup, you are likely to hold it out for others to fill, and pay an exorbitant price, including excessive people pleasing, a compulsive and perfectionistic need for accomplishment and praise, and a wholesale suppression of one's own needs. Thus, the second cognitive principle of recovery from codependency is that every human being has inherent value. Even if we do not like our circumstances, our feelings, our behaviors, relationships, etc., we must strive to accept ourselves unconditionally. Intellectual acceptance of this principle is a starting point that allows us to gradually improve our self talk, feel entitled to and pursue pleasurable activities, and otherwise nurture ourselves. We are not children anymore, or at least, in recovery parlance, we are "adult children." As such, we are nowhere near as vulnerable as we were when, as young children, we unconsciously chose to abandon ourselves in order to protect ourselves.

Now, as adults, the requirements for emotional survival involve rediscovering and rescuing our true self, learning to esteem ourselves, and reviving our voice in order to protect ourselves from those who would take advantage of our codependent tendencies. It is time to reverse our childhood choice, and assert the value of selfhood over the value of relationships when the two conflict, while reassuring ourselves that there are potential relationships in which you can have both. Combining the principles of responsibility and self-acceptance, we must accept responsibility as the primary provider of our own emerging self-esteem. We must commit to learning to value ourselves, rather than exporting this responsibility to others. We must reverse our early core beliefs, and allow ourselves to view ourselves as lovable, worthy, and good enough, rather than unlovable and lacking.

Thirdly, we must commit ourselves to acceptance of reality. Whatever the reality may be regarding our self and our relationships, we must learn to be honest with ourselves. This cognitive honesty is a precursor to honest, genuine, and authentic behavior with others, and is a prerequisite if we are to accurately assess our circumstances. Awareness and acknowledgment of reality precede and motivate necessary changes in reality. How can you be honest with others if you can't even be honest with yourself? How can you constructively change your life if you allow yourself to distort and suppress your awareness of your feelings and needs so much that you don't even know what has to be changed? A capacity to tolerate negative feelings, at least temporarily, is absolutely essential if one is to benefit from the wisdom of such feelings. Vulnerable feelings such as sadness, fear, and frustration allow us to identify what is wrong with our lives, and motivate us to make changes. Honesty with oneself involves permission to listen to one's own real feelings and needs, and to realistically appraise how our relationships satisfy these needs. Cognitive and emotional honesty set the stage for behavioral honesty, i.e., authenticity. This is not to say that cognitive changes must entirely precede behavioral changes. In some cases, changing behaviors will lead to different feelings, which in turn facilitate cognitive changes (e.g., asserting yourself, despite your anxiety, may in some cases lead to greater respect and less exploitation by others, which feels better, and may lead you to think differently about yourself and your relationships). But focusing upon these three cognitive issues, specifically

responsibility, self-acceptance, and honesty/reality, is a good starting point for managing the cognitive flank of recovery from codependency.

These three concepts are also useful in organizing your thoughts regarding changes in codependent behavior. Behaviorally, Beattie recommends that we initially focus our recovery efforts on detachment. Given the fact that this set of chapters is focused on connectedness, you might ask why we are focusing on detachment, or disconnection. As we have noted previously, one angle on mental health involves the development of combinations of opposite skills, in this case, connectedness and autonomy. Codependency involves enmeshment, an excessive connection with others, at the expense of autonomy and connectedness with oneself. The balance between connectedness with self and others, or between selfhood and relationships, or autonomy and intimacy, must be restored. As we have seen, establishment of responsibility requires us to develop a cognitive understanding of what we are responsible for, and what we are not. Behaviorally, this understanding must be expressed in the development of boundaries. For codependent individuals, boundaries tend to be either lacking, or overly rigid. There is a rigid boundary guarding against disclosure of the real self, further protected by the inauthentic behavior of a codependent façade or mask. This is coupled with porous, inadequate boundaries against influence by others, resulting in excessive responsibility and caretaking for the needs and feelings of others. Anne Katherine's book, *Boundaries: Where You End and I Begin*, is a good starting point if you feel a need to explore the concept of boundaries further.

Behaviorally, a correction in the codependent imbalance between self and other requires some degree of detachment from others, as well as investment in self. As Beattie notes, detachment does not require wholesale detachment from others, though irrevocably unhealthy relationships may need to be terminated. In most cases, we don't need to detach from the person, but rather, we need to detach from our obsession regarding that person (e.g., an adult son's drug addiction). We need to develop greater independence, and an increased focus on developing our own satisfaction in life, while accepting our lack of control over and excessive responsibility for others. Detachment does not mean that we do not care about or love others; it means that we stop obsessively worrying about their feelings and needs, and stop trying to manipulate them into meeting our needs or becoming who we want them to become. The Al-Anon concept of "detachment with love" is

applicable here. We love others for who they are, and express our love within boundaries, while detaching from our own need to fix them. We detach from the self-created chaos of preoccupation with their every feeling and need. We detach not so much from them, but from our own obsessive preoccupation with them. We learn not to over personalize their feelings and reactions. It's not all about us. Those around us have their own feelings, struggles, and issues. We care about those we love, but we don't need to instantly react and wrap ourselves around their axles. In Beattie's terms, we don't allow ourselves to be blown about by every wind. Rather than being a leaf in their wind, we become our own wind, creating what we need in our own lives, seeking happiness and acceptance within ourselves rather than through others. We do not have to personalize or internalize their anger or rejection, unless we have violated our own moral values. We learn to distinguish between moral guilt and codependent guilt, and learn to resist being guilted into taking unearned responsibility for their feelings, needs, and struggles.

Rather than being a moon in orbit around someone else, we reach escape velocity and achieve planetary integrity of our own. To do so, we not only detach with love from them, we also develop our own autonomy and self-acceptance. On a behavioral level, we develop the self-acceptance needed for autonomy via affirmations as well as self nurturing, pleasurable behavior. Affirmations involve positive self messages which are personally created to replace the negative messages which we internalized from our parents or previous lovers. A good starting point is to take a sheet of paper, and write "Their old messages and rules" as a heading on the left side, while writing "My new messages and rules" as a right side heading at the top of the page. Next, complete the left side of the page with the messages and rules you have internalized. As we noted above, old messages and rules may include "Don't feel" (Don't express negative feelings), "Don't have a voice" (Don't assert yourself), or "Don't have problems" (Don't be a burden), "You are bad/unlovable" (referring to your identity not just your behavior), and "Don't talk about the rules or messages" (Don't notice the craziness around you). These messages and rules are the foundation of your codependent self. They are the inhibitory, suffocating straitjacket which prevents you from freely exercising and developing your selfhood. Break out of the straitjacket on the right side of the paper. Across from each old message or rule, create your own new message or rule. Affirm your right to have feelings, needs, opinions, and a personality of your own,

the right to love yourself and to be worthy of being loved, the right to speak out regarding the injustices and craziness around you, etc. Don't allow this to be only a temporary cognitive exercise. Incorporate it into your behavior by voicing your Bill of Rights aloud as affirmations each morning, or at other times when you find the old messages ruling you. Supplement your positive self talk via prayer, opening yourself up to God's love and guidance if you are religiously inclined. You are developing a higher parent to guide your personality, in place of the codependent self, and a divine Higher Parent/higher power can inspire you in this process. Accept others complements rather than explaining why you don't deserve them. Give yourself positive self-regard, and accept it externally as well.

Likewise, engage in self-affirming behaviors in addition to this positive self talk. Surround yourself with people who affirm your value, while distancing yourself from those whose acceptance is highly conditional. Take the time to pursue pleasurable activities, and tell yourself that you deserve them, rather than devoting your life solely to satisfying others' needs. Rediscover what it means to have fun, to be spontaneous, to have childlike glee, and to relax. In doing so, you may initially feel like a fish out of water, and experience tension or guilt while trying to relax and enjoy yourself. Do so anyways, reassuring yourself that the feelings will eventually come along for the ride. Arrange the time for a therapeutic massage, a pedicure, a yoga class, a jog, a concert or play, participation in a bowling or softball league, etc. Do it on your own, without having to be accompanied by your partner. Affirm your right to time for yourself, time to experience and enjoy pleasure and relaxation. Get off the codependent treadmill and develop a new balance between your needs and others'.

Thirdly, in addition to boundaries and self-affirmation, practice authenticity. Develop honesty with yourself and others regarding your feelings, needs, opinions, and meaning in life. Initially, this involves listening to your real feelings and desires, rather than automatically suppressing them while caretaking for others. In Beattie's terms, honor yourself. Awareness is followed by self-expression, as you voice your feelings, needs, and perceptions. You thereby become more authentic and genuine, allowing yourself to be and become yourself. This does not mean that you abandon all boundaries and inhibitions. We are not talking about black-and-white, but rather, an improved shade of gray. We are not required to be open with anyone, particularly those who would

harm us, and none of us are an open book with strangers. But in our close relationships, we cannot have selfhood nor emotional intimacy unless we reveal ourselves. If you are not accepted for who you are in relationship, you may need to take your self elsewhere. Surely, amongst seven billion people, you can find a handful of relationships involving mutual acceptance and enjoyment of each other. Seek them out, and allow yourself to be real, genuine, authentic, and open in these relationships. Codependent suppression of yourself produces a slow emotional death. Find safe relationships where you can come alive and spontaneously express yourself.

Having examined recovery from codependency via a habit model that promotes changes in both cognitive and behavioral habits, we will now proceed to the trauma and ego state model. This model emphasizes both family of origin work designed to address unresolved abuse and neglect, and an ego state approach focusing upon multiplicity and the interactions between sub-personalities. These ego states include the inner child, or true/real self, the codependent or false self/mask, and the higher parent. We noted earlier that the concept of codependency is somewhat slippery or confusing at times, involving multiple meanings. Codependency typically has two meanings, specifically, "other centered," and "false self." These two meanings are often consistent, in that ones false self or mask often involves pronounced other centeredness and self-suppression. Codependents often "act in," reenacting their childhood abuse, neglect, and suppression against themselves. But not necessarily so. Others "act out," identifying with the aggressor/parent, and reenact their abuse against others. Imagine that you have the unholy, restricted choice of being a victim or a persecutor. This choice begs for a third option, which actually involves recovery work, but in the absence of awareness of, or willingness to pursue such recovery, many wounded children will gravitate toward persecution of others rather than oneself, and move toward compulsive self-reliance rather than codependent reliance upon others. A perfect example is the epitome of human evil, Adolf Hitler himself. As Bradshaw notes in *Homecoming*, Hitler was beaten, humiliated, and shamed by a sadistic father who was himself the illegitimate son of a Jewish landlord. Hitler is the personification of acting out behavior, as he cruelly reenacted his own abuse against millions of Jews, converting his shame regarding his Jewish ancestry into genocidal acting out against Jews. Likewise, when we look at the backgrounds of sexual predators against children, we

typically find that they were sexually abused as children themselves. While some childhood sexual victims act in, and display increased vulnerability to repeated victimization as adults, others act out their unresolved wounds against others. An imbalance between self-centeredness and other centeredness can go in either direction, codependent other centeredness of the type reviewed above, or narcissistic overindulgence of the self. Picture the typical bully, or the prototypical “biker chick” in spiked black leather with a matching snarl (no offense intended to non-snarling bikers). These individuals respond to their early wounds by erecting a façade of invulnerability and aggression designed to frighten off potential additional persecutors. Thus, the “codependent” or false self includes both the traditional “other centered” codependent who tends to be emotionally self-abusive, and the self-centered, aggressive, acting out individual. Accordingly, the “codependent self” can be a confusing term, which is perhaps best replaced by the term “false self,” which encompasses both the acting in and acting out types of reaction to childhood wounding. The term “false self” also highlights the differences between one’s defensive façade, and one’s suppressed “true” or “real” self, also known as the “inner child.” We will use the hybrid term, “codependent/false self” when describing this ego state, but please keep in mind the dual meaning of codependency, as well as the applicability of inner child work to those who are compulsively self reliant and self centered.

Inner child approaches all involve ego state work, promoting interaction between ego states, though there is some variation in which the ego states are emphasized. Most begin by focusing on the rediscovery, rescuing, and nurturance of the inner child by the healthy adult part of self, sometimes referred to as the “higher parent.” Other approaches, including my own, involve the promotion of interactions between all three ego states. My preference for the latter approach comes from the fact that some clients are so entrenched in the “critical parent” habits of the codependent/false self that their attempts at higher parenting sometimes slip back into criticism of the inner child. That is, confusion sometimes arises between the higher parent and the codependent/false self/critical parent. For this reason, it is sometimes useful to pursue exercises designed to highlight the differences between the two, including dialogue and debate between the higher parent and the codependent/false self, as well as triologue between all three ego states. Three chair exercises, in which each ego state gets to voice its

feelings and prospective, with the client moving spontaneously from one chair to the chair of whichever ego state wishes to respond, is typically quickly effective in helping a client distinguish between their higher parent and their critical parent or codependent/false self. It should be noted in this regard that the term “critical parent” can be an apt synonym for the codependent/false self, specifically because this ego state, at its core, often involves an internalization, or “introject” of one's most critical parent in childhood. We internalize the messages of our parents, for better or worse, and critical messages, which essentially involve a rejection of the true self, are encoded into the false self, which then becomes an internal critical parent designed to keep the inner child in line, in order to prevent further criticism or abuse by the real parents.

In addition to distinguishing between the higher parent and the codependent/false self, clients often need initial help in developing their higher parent ego state before contacting their inner child. As noted earlier, clients who benefit from the inner child approach often present with a roughly 80/10/10% split between the codependent/false self, the inner child, and the higher parent. Awareness of and access to the higher parent ego state sometimes needs to be bolstered from the outset. I have found two approaches useful for this purpose. We previously noted that the higher parent contains many of the healthy qualities of a “higher power” or God, specifically wisdom, unconditional love, moral integrity, and firmness. Traditional, other centered codependents, by definition, experience great difficulty delivering love to themselves. By using their religious resources, they can use their experience with a higher power to activate and inspire the presence of their own higher parent ego state. Most of us are quite familiar with the inherent nature of a wise and loving God, and can therefore either simulate God's love, or allow it to pass through oneself toward the inner child. A second approach involves what I have previously referred to as the “codependent sleight-of-hand technique,” and involves the application of your maternal or paternal nurturing skills to yourself. As we noted in the self-nurturance chapter, most of us have experienced being a healthy, nurturing parent at least some of the time, when we are at our best with our children. And most other centered codependents are very adept at nurturing others, but largely incompetent in nurturing themselves. I am very attached to the notion of activating the healthiest part of a client to heal their most damaged part. But how can we help such clients to apply these nurturing skills to themselves, when they are

largely opposed to themselves? The answer: pretend your child is someone else. Better still, pretend that your inner child is your own child. This codependent “sleight-of-hand” is usually effective in allowing the higher parent to do an end run around the critical parent/codependent/false self in order to administer one’s maternal/paternal love to one’s own inner child. Thus, we can use both religious and healthy parental resources in order to fully immerse ourselves in the higher parent ego state before approaching our inner child.

How then do we approach our inner child, who is typically in hiding, suppressed from awareness? A variety of resources are available for this purpose, although each emphasizes the need to pursue such inner child work under the guidance of a psychotherapist who is well versed in this type of psychotherapy. As Bradshaw notes in *Homecoming*, inner child work, which he terms “original pain work,” is grief work which involves age regression, that is, approaching, re-experiencing, and expressing suppressed, disowned feelings from childhood. The danger of this approach, in the absence of external support and guidance, as well as proper pacing of such work, is that one can get lost in the pain of the inner child, and become dissociated from the present, essentially cut off from the support of the higher parent ego state and one’s adult sense of self. Proceeding at a pace that minimizes the likelihood of being overwhelmed by childhood pain, and being armed with both the containment and self-nurturance skills discussed in our trauma section, as well as the guidance of a therapist, help to minimize this risk.

Having noted this caution, there are several books which provide considerable help in understanding and pursuing contact with the inner child or true self. Charles Whitfield’s *Healing the Child Within* is an excellent and concise starting point for understanding inner child concepts. His follow-up workbook, *A Gift to Myself: A Personal Workbook and Guide to Healing the Child Within*, is a helpful guide for inner child exercises. Likewise, Oliver–Diaz and O’Gorman’s *12 Steps to Self Parenting* is followed up by O’Gorman and Oliver–Diaz’ *Self Parenting 12 Step Workbook*. This workbook, and Lucia Capaccione’s *Recovery of Your Inner Child*, are two excellent resources for nuts and bolts help with exercises designed to facilitate the inner child recovery process. We will return to them shortly. First, however, I will focus our

attention on the techniques discussed in John Bradshaw's acclaimed book, *Homecoming*.

Bradshaw details a series of steps for pursuing original pain work and reclaiming your child's self, applying each of these steps to possible injuries in four separate developmental stages of childhood, specifically infancy, toddlerhood, preschool, and school-age years, followed by adolescence. He emphasizes the need for grief work, that is, grieving our childhood losses, which may include a lack of healthy parenting and validation, a loss of childhood itself if we were prematurely pressed into becoming pseudo-adults, and loss of selfhood, which Bradshaw refers to as "our sense of I AMness." Grief work involves not only an intellectual understanding of these losses, but also the emotional experience and expression of the pain associated with these losses. Feeling the pain, and cathartic expression of the pain are essential if such pain is to dissipate, and thereby lose its power as the motivational fuel behind our false self and self-numbing compulsive behaviors.

Bradshaw's first step in this process involves "debriefing," which involves identifying and talking about your injuries, as a precursor to re-experiencing and expressing the pain associated with these injuries. "Sharing" this understanding of your injuries with a best friend, therapist, clergy member, or sponsor, someone who is capable of listening, witnessing, and validating your original pain, is a second preliminary step. The heavy lifting begins with the third step, "feeling the feelings," in which you allow yourself to actually experience the pain which you fled from as a child. This is followed by a fourth step, "writing letters," which essentially involves providing support and validation to your child self via a letter to him or her, as well as a response from your child self, all the while allowing yourself to experience the feelings on both sides of yourself, while re-bonding. Bradshaw notes that the fifth step, "affirmations," is one way of giving yourself what you didn't get as a child, providing yourself with "emotional nutrients" via repeated positive messages or affirmations. Digressing a bit at this point, my experience has been that ego state affirmations are often more powerful than traditional affirmations. If you simply write affirmations on paper or voice them to the mirror, you are essentially delivering them to your adult self. While this may be beneficial, such messages may have more impact if they are delivered to the most damaged part of yourself, the rejected, abandoned, and disowned child self. In this vein, Rokelle Lerner's *Affirmations for the Inner Child* is a helpful resource. Finally,

Bradshaw's sixth step involves inner child meditations, again for each developmental stage. He provides a script, which is essentially self hypnotic, for these powerful meditations.

Bradshaw further notes that people sometimes feel angry or disgusted when they make contact with their child self, adding that such feelings reflect a “severe level of toxic shame” involving the shaming of ourselves in the same way that we were originally shamed. I would add that such reactions reflect the involvement of the codependent/false self or critical parent side of self. When this occurs, I will typically encourage timeout for a dialogue between the higher parent and the codependent self. Such dialogue allows the codependent self to express his or her objections to inner child work, as well as his or her imported disgust with the child's self. These feelings are conveyed directly to the higher parent rather than the inner child, since the latter produces additional wounding of the child self. While Bradshaw's approach essentially involves interaction between the higher parent and inner child ego states, I typically find that the codependent/false self is typically alive and active, repeatedly poking its head up during this process in order to block contact with, nurturance and affirmation of the child self. After all, the entire purpose of the codependent/false self is to numb and block the painful feelings encapsulated within the true self or inner child, while erecting a façade designed to distance oneself from the shame which lies at the core of these disowned feelings. By pursuing a dialogue between the higher parent and the codependent/false self, the higher parent can question the false self regarding its perception of the lifelong success or failure of its codependent strategies. The higher parent can also help the codependent self come to terms with its own brainwashing, that is, its internalization of destructive messages and rules from dysfunctional parents. In this process, some realignment typically occurs, in which the codependent/false self reflects upon and experiences some doubt regarding its strategies, and becomes hesitantly willing to allow the higher parent to at least experiment with an alternative strategy for dealing with childhood pain. We noted earlier that the higher parent is essentially the internal equivalent of a loving God. Our perception of God involves not only wisdom, love, and moral integrity, but also firmness. The higher parent utilizes its capacity for gentle and loving firmness by setting limits on the interference of the codependent/false self, while validating the past efforts of the inner codependent/false self in guaranteeing emotional survival within a

dysfunctional family. Nonetheless, these efforts are identified as anachronistic, as adaptive strategies which were the best one could do to survive as a child, but which can now be replaced during the safety of adulthood. The codependent/false self is praised for encapsulating and thereby protecting the true self from destruction by dysfunctional parents, but encouraged to climb on board for the adult task of reclaiming the child self. Once this dialogue is successfully pursued, the codependent/false self can typically take a backseat to the higher parent, and restrict itself to hypervigilant monitoring from the backseat. Its backseat driving will gradually decrease as successful higher parenting of the inner child proceeds, particularly as the spontaneous and creative energy, playfulness, and intoxicating joy of the disowned self is released. Periodically, three chair work is pursued, including dialogue, forgiveness, and connectedness between the inner child and the false/codependent self. The codependent self is not disowned, as this would unnecessarily repeat, in reverse, the disowning process that necessarily occurred in childhood. Rather, the codependent self is praised for its role in guaranteeing emotional survival during childhood, and is reduced (from perhaps 80% to roughly 30% of the personality) to its rightful position as the healthy other centered portion of personality which monitors the rights and needs of others. In concert with the inner child and higher parent, the other centered self cooperates to provide a balance between self and other. This process is integrative, in that it promotes cooperation between parts of self, recovery of the most disowned part of oneself, and a balance between parts.

In my own approach to the child work, I will typically begin by enhancing a client's experience of the higher parent, and conducting higher parent dialogue with the codependent/false self as necessary if interference with higher parenting is prominent. Such interference is often subtly evident when clients tell me that they could not find or obtain a response from their inner child. Thus, prior to contact with the disowned child self, I bolster the position of the higher parent, both overall, and in relation to the codependent/false self. My initiation of higher parent/inner child contact essentially follows the first step of O'Gorman and Oliver-Diaz's twelve step approach to self re-parenting. Like Bradshaw's initial step of debriefing, this first step starts by talking about your injuries as a child, via a life story, but infused by the perspective of your child self. This is then followed by a letter to your inner child, sharing your feelings about him or her, followed by a

response from your child self, and subsequent dialogue. Subsequently, one can proceed through the 12-step re-parenting exercises provided by O'Gorman and Oliver-Diaz. Alternatively, I have found the following this first step work, three chair work as well as triologue involving journaling conversations between all three ego states, under the direction of the higher parent, can move the reintegration process along quite nicely. The goals in this process include 1) establishment of the higher parent ego state, as the new, guiding center point of personality, 2) development of a relationship between the higher parent and the inner child, which both allows self love/acceptance to emerge, and promotes access to the considerable talents, creativity, and spontaneity of the previously disowned child self, 3) a decrease in the influence and power of the codependent/false self, without disowning it or discounting its value as a watchdog for the rights and feelings of others, and 4) restoring or creating an appropriate balance between the inner child and the codependent/false self, although the latter term is now a misnomer, as we are creating a balance between healthy self-centeredness and healthy other centeredness.

In the event that initial attempts to establish dialogue with the inner child are unsuccessful, we must take a step back and determine whether the silence is due to the interference of the codependent/false self, or resistance from the inner child. In the event of the former, dialogue between the higher parent and codependent/false self, as discussed above, is often productive in reducing such resistance, thereby facilitating contact with the child self. In other situations, such resistance may emanate from the inner child, due to distrust and feelings of abandonment. Remember that in response to abandonment and abuse of the child, codependent individuals have essentially abandoned their true self as a means of emotional surviving within the family. You have not only been abandoned, but you have adaptively abandoned yourself. So why should the abandoned, disowned self trust any parental part of yourself? Given this history of external and internal abandonment, the disowned child is often wary of any re-parenting process. Capacchione notes that in such circumstances, it is often helpful to write a letter of apology to your inner child, seeking forgiveness. A love letter to the inner child can also be helpful. Both approaches begin with acceptance of the understandable fact that the disowned child naturally feels resentful for being disowned, and will require some proof of the trustworthiness of the higher parent prior to

risking reattachment. If you imagine having made a major parenting mistake with your actual child, you may have to resort to an apologetic monologue before your distrusting, pouting child is willing to become vulnerable in a dialogue. Following this one-way attempt at repair, productive dialogue between the higher parent and the abandoned child self it is more likely to proceed.

Capacchione's *Recovery of Your Inner Child* stands on its own as a complete set of well-crafted inner child recovery exercises. Her entry into dialogue with the inner child begins with a drawing of the child self, using the non-dominant hand in order to facilitate a self-portrait from the child's perspective. Subsequent dialogue with the inner child takes place in an imaginary setting which feels safe and comfortable to the inner child, and is pursued by writing with the non-dominant hand when writing from the inner child ego state. She and others believe that the use of the non-dominant hand better accesses the deeper, often sealed off emotions, and nonlinear, intuitive talents largely contained within the right side of the brain. Whatever the proper explanation, the use of one's non-dominant hand when expressing the inner child ego state is often found to be more effective than use of the dominant hand, just as your personal handwriting is likely to be more effective than use of a keyboard. In the course of her workbook, Capacchione provides exercises designed to help your child self express previously suppressed feelings via both drawing and writing, and exercises to promote dialogue between the higher parent and inner child, as well as acceptance, embracement and nurturance of the child self. These exercises include drawing, writing about, and safe physical expression of anger, as well as expression of grief. As noted above, trust building exercises are provided, to activate the "nurturing or protective parent" in place of the "critical parent." In addition, Capacchione provides drawing and writing exercises designed to bring the critical parent out of the shadows and into the open light of day, where she/he can be dealt with more directly, via assertiveness from the empowered child self. Finally, she provides exercises designed to give "birth to the magical child." The payoff for all of this painstaking work in recovering, accepting, and cherishing the disowned part of yourself is not only self acceptance, but also recovery of the playfulness, unbridled spontaneity, free-spirited creativity, emotional expressiveness, and joy in the moment capabilities. These talents were suppressed initially by your parents, and then by your parental introject, the codependent/false self,

in order to emotionally survive life with your parents, but are now liberated via the leadership of your higher parent.

As you can see, different authors take somewhat different approaches, and some prefer to access and dialogue with the codependent/false self far more than others. The exercises also differ, though they all aim toward re-owning, embracing, and nurturing the disowned child self. Explore these approaches and follow whichever attracts you most on a gut (child) level, but preferably under the guidance of the psychotherapist who is well practiced in this type of recovery work. A combination of the habit and trauma/ego state models is ideal, focusing on replacement of codependent cognitive and behavioral habits, as well as going to the scene of the original crime, one's childhood injuries, while using the healthiest part of oneself to heal the most damaged and disowned part of self. In addition, participation in a 12 step group can be invaluable, particularly a Co-Dependents Anonymous (CoDA) group if one is available in your area, or perhaps an Al-Anon group if it is appropriate to your circumstances. This combination of psychotherapy, twelve-step group involvement, and active use of the literature on codependency and inner child work will typically be optimal for your recovery.