LETTERS
To the Editor

Codependency: A Clear Perspective

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The authors combine the phenomena of the mother-daughter relationship; nurses caring for nurses; nurses caring for clients; and women caring for women with the disordered state of codependency. Attributing codependency to any and every human experience happens so regularly that it can be no surprise that this term is, as the authors note, reduced to a national buzzword and a notion. It is disappointing, however, to see it happening in nursing literature.

Codependency is a crippling disorder that interferes with an individual’s ability to sustain mutual relationships. At its essence, codependency is the result of the mother being unavailable to be “responsive to the child’s interest.” The child grows up with an inner emptiness that sets in motion a lifelong yearning to find unconditional love. This journey is driven by self-blame, low self-esteem, and a compulsion to please others. Relationships are attempted with the hope and belief that the mother’s love will be found, the void filled, and the importance of the individual’s life validated.

It seems to me that the problem with applying the Growth in Connection perspective to codependency is in the area of self-identity. Between the healthy mother and daughter, there is the “ability to differentiate whose feelings are whose. The growth of self in both mother and daughter unfolds together... in the growth of the relationship.” The opportunity for this kind of authenticity is precisely what is missing in the childhood of the codependent individual.

The authors state that “women who do not grow up in families where mutuality and authenticity existed may need to learn whose feelings are whose and to recognize that their lives have become unmanageable.” How is this to be done?

The authors criticize Beattie’s work, but the emphasis Beattie places on self-identity is not inappropriate; it is what is missing from Malloy and Berkery’s article. Since identity in codependency is blurred at best, the codependent wraps all of life around external relationships. The codependent lacks insight into the necessity for self-identity and believes that the basis for relationships is to please others. Relationships are not so much burdensome as they are disappointing and confusing. They cannot be used to expand any kind of growth for anyone.

Separation, according to Beattie, is not an ultimate goal. It is instead a step that allows a disconnected person to discover who she is before attempting mutuality. Attempts at mutuality without identity will end in symbiosis and festering of the destructive patterns of the codependent.

Comparing codependency with the love that unfolds between mother and daughter and/or with the caring of nursing intervention is illogical. The mother-daughter relationship is derived from a bond that necessitates that the mother first have the ability to love unconditionally. Professional nursing demands a capacity to care for others for others’ sakes.

It is believable that some women and some nurses avoid personal needs through the caring of others. Codependency does exist on a continuum. However, comparing women and nurses who have some characteristics of codependency with those who have the fully developed disordered state of codependency seems similar to comparing situational anxiety with panic.

The statement that “everyone is codependent to the extent that we all struggle to attain or preserve a relationship as best we can” is damaging. The caring, reciprocal nature of a woman, integral to her sense of well-being, is reduced by this kind of thinking. More grave, though, is that this point of view will serve to enhance the denial of those who actually suffer from codependency.

The work of Jean Baker Miller and her colleagues at the Stone Center in Wellesley, Massachusetts, adds a previously missing piece to the development puzzle. The Growth in Connection view seems relevant as a perspective for the practice of nursing. It especially seems applicable as a framework for the teaching and learning of the mother-daughter relationship. Malloy and Berkery present a moving description of the dynamics between mother and daughter in healthy development. However, the focus of the article is not parenting; it is codependency. Perhaps they would consider reworking the article and renaming it “Parenting: A Feminist Perspective.”

The value of attempting to explain nursing as a piece of the codependency syndrome eludes me. Codependency has nothing to do with caring. The image of codependency is one of instability, and the process of codependency is about being unrelated. When we meet a colleague whose life is tormented by chaotic relationships, let us help her find treatment and separate her problems from her practice of nursing. Nursing and codependency each deserve our attention, but they are separate matters that need to be treated as such in our scholarly inquiry.

Mary H. Mullaney
Associate Professor of Nursing
University of Maine at Fort Kent
Fort Kent, Maine