

A Sign of Codependency: Compulsive Giving

by

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Acts of giving often begin from a heartfelt place, arising from empathy, kindness, and a sincere desire to help others. However, our actions can also be motivated by our own personal needs and desires, some of which are elusive to us. In those moments, acts of generosity can suddenly leave us feeling confused or overwhelmed, lost in others' emotional pain, or consumed by the problems of the people around us. Ironically, certain acts of giving can sometimes wind up producing opposite results, inadvertent consequences, or even ill will. How, you might ask, does this happen?

The following reflections are some thoughts I have had over the years regarding the fine line between healthy giving and codependency. These thoughts developed from my own awareness that good intentions and deeds can go awry, that good people can do damage with their giving, and that there is a vague, diffuse line between generosity and pathology.

Compulsive Giving: What Need Does it Serve?

First, looking at this from an addiction model, I realized that giving can be compulsive, automatic, and not very conscious. (This is quite different than authentic giving, which feels more like a choice that comes from the heart). The compulsive type of giving is like a reflex – a knee-jerk response that happens without awareness of the other's needs, or our own motivation. And it often serves to avoid uncomfortable feelings.

As with any type of addiction, the compulsive behavior exists to satisfy a need, or to try to produce a certain feeling. I've heard some people say that when they give compulsively, they hope to become indispensable and that they will have a guaranty that the other person will never leave them. Some people feel that over-giving serves to conceal their deeply hidden flaws or inadequacies (which are not as repulsive as they believe them to be). Giving can therefore be like a smoke screen, keeping the person from being potentially revealed, hiding all of their poetic flaws and human qualities. Giving can also make people feel worthy, needed, powerful, desirable, loveable, dominant, more in control – the list could go on.

Ask yourself what the feeling is, that you are trying to achieve. The most important thing to know here is that the need is not bad or wrong, it just is. Actually, we have to love that part, and we shouldn't try to ignore it, deny it, or kill it! It's very precious!

But we shouldn't manipulate to get it. Perhaps there is a part of us that thinks we can't get the feeling, or satisfy the need, just by being ourselves. Maybe we think we are weak or stupid to even have the need in the first place. So, we think we have to control and contort ourselves (and the other) in order to have the feeling/need satisfied. Since the whole thing is really awkward and unattractive, we begin working behind the scenes, so to speak.

So we “use” giving (yes, like a substance), to manipulate in order to get our needs met. And, like a drug, it ultimately stops working while beginning to create problems of its own. The feeling we get is either fleeting or it doesn't occur at all. When that happens, we feel frustration and rage, *usually toward the other person*. We say to ourselves and to the recipient: "I did everything right! In fact, I went far and above what I really wanted to do. It was too much, it even exhausted me. And I didn't get _____ in return." Exactly. What was the “_____”? The “_____” is the need, the thing that the other person wasn't responsible for giving you. They didn't sign up for this!

Separating Love from Codependency

The following is an easy technique that will help you determine whether you are acting compulsively. *Use your body as a barometer*. (That's what therapists do when we work with clients – we notice what we are feeling when we are in the room with someone. It gives us important information about the person we are with, signals shifts that are occurring, and tells us how to next proceed.)

The body will certainly tell you the difference between generosity and pathology – it's guaranteed. I don't know what your body would do, but for me, if I'm manipulating, and giving more than I should be giving, my heart rate increases; everything speeds up; things seem to be rushing past me; the room is spinning; I don't have time to process my feelings; I hate how I feel in that particular moment; I feel a sense of urgency; and I respond to this by moving faster and pushing past all of these uncomfortable sensations. I ignore them. I commit. I say *yes*. Nothing matches up. It's like Elvis Costello's lyrics in *Accidents Will Happen*: “Your mind is made up, but your mouth is undone!”¹

When things speed up, we know we are really in trouble. People in sales know this – that is why they talk really fast. They throw so much information at you so that you don't have any time to consider and reflect. If you did, you wouldn't buy their product. Speeding up is a great way for people to manipulate, or be manipulated. When things are happening too fast, next thing you know, you're buying something (or buying into something) that your wise self knew was the wrong thing for you.

Remember that there is a continuum. You can catch yourself along the way. Even though it feels like we change from normal generosity to over-the-top codependency in just a few seconds, we don't. It generally doesn't happen like that. There are numerous definitive points along the way where, if we pay attention, we might realize we are going into the danger zone. Maybe you felt good about doing the first three things for someone, but then the fourth one was going to keep you up too late, make you miss an appointment, or prevent you from eating a meal. Or maybe you suddenly became aware that the person was taking advantage of your generosity, but you wanted to deny it. Or maybe the other person was emotionally pulling away from you, and you had to speed everything up in order to dazzle them, and ignore your own feelings of rejection.

¹Costello, E. (1979). *Accidents will happen*, In: *Armed Forces*. USA: Columbia Records.

Authentic Giving

On the other hand, you know in your body what authentic giving feels like. When I feel good about giving, there is spaciousness in my chest; I feel lots of room; time actually expands; I feel a flood of joy; I am delighted in the act of giving itself; and I do not feel the least bit pressured or drained. And, I expect nothing back from that person – that they should remember it, return it, enjoy it, or, most importantly – give *me* back the “feeling.”

So, the key is to start noticing the subtleties as they happen, using your body as a reference point. If things start moving too fast for you (internally), just concentrate on consciously slowing yourself down, remember to breathe, begin to comfort yourself, start paying attention, and wait – until you can feel yourself emerge again.

As an alternative to compulsive giving, ask directly for what you want, or ask the other what they really want. This is a brave thing to do. It risks revealing the self, but it is really, really worth it. *This is the sign of authentic giving.*

References

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