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# Psychological Markers of Codependent Behavior: Theory and Practice

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## Abstract

**Introduction.** The purpose of the article is an analytical review of scientific approaches to the study of the features of psychological markers of codependent behavior. Modern approaches to the study of this phenomenon from the point of view of theoretical and practical aspects, reflecting the fragmentary nature of the representation of this concept, are considered. There are not only several definitions of the concept of "codependency", but also many approaches to its study. Based on the theoretical analysis of various approaches, the author's definition of the phenomenon was proposed, which reflects the scientific novelty of the study. **The theoretical justification** of the problem under study was carried out on the basis of the analysis of literary sources, comparative analysis and generalization of foreign and domestic approaches to the term "codependency" under study, approbation of the author's interpretation of the term under study. **Results.** Based on the analytical review, psychological markers of codependent behavior are identified, manifested through a learned set of behavioral forms, adaptation disorders, and various personality disorders. It is shown that the description of psychological characteristics related to the phenomenon of codependency is quite extensive, but it is not systemic. The ideas are outlined not only to continue the study of psychological markers of codependent behavior, but also to search for genetic factors that cause this behavior. **Discussion.** We have identified the interpretation of the term "codependency" as a phenomenon manifested in dependent behavior caused by a change in value-semantic constructs and a lack of necessary competencies, formed under the influence of negative experience of dysfunctional relationships with significant others. This definition combines a number of approaches and enriches them with a look through the prism of the deep features of a person who exhibits codependent patterns of behavior.

**Keywords:** codependency, psychological characteristics of personality, dependent relationships, codependent women, aggression, anxiety, depression, suicidal readiness

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## Introduction

The problem of addictions at the present stage of global development of society is becoming increasingly threatening and widespread. The use of various psychoactive substances, a tendency to gambling, other types of non-chemical addictions can lead to an increase in cases of domestic violence, a deterioration in the quality of life, can provoke antisocial behavior, contribute to the growth of crime and the manifestation of other social and psychological problems (Baykova, 2016; Baykova, Merinov, 2018; Lukashuk, Somkina, Baykova, Bychkova, 2015; Lukashuk, Filippova, 2015, Momeñe, Jáuregui & Estévez, 2017).

In the socialization, rehabilitation and correction of an addict – dependent personality, an important place is occupied by the person next to him (family member, partner). Such a partner can be defined as codependent (Rezvaya, Samsonov & Kutashova, 2019; Pukaev, 2016). Studying the peculiarities of their personality, identifying psychological markers and describing behavioral and coping strategies will allow providing psychological support and assistance at a qualitatively new level, which in turn will contribute to achieving psychological well-being in families faced with addiction problems (Merinov, Shustok & Lukashuk, 2015). The purpose of the article is to study the features of psychological markers of codependent behavior. Modern approaches to the study of this phenomenon from the point of view of theoretical and practical aspects are considered (Birch, 2017; Birch & Isaeva, 2018; Petrova, 2016).

The phenomenon of codependency has been in the focus of attention of researchers since the middle of the XX century. The works of domestic and foreign authors present various approaches to the interpretation of this phenomenon. It is also important to remember about the different etiology of this concept.

Any of the addictions (alcohol, drugs, gambling addictions) can provoke codependent relationships. However, a review of empirical results of studies of the phenomenon of codependency has shown that most studies are fragmentary and still focus only on users of psychoactive substances, extending little to family members who also suffer from the consequences of dependent behavior (Merinov, 2016; Merinov et al., 2016; Rybakova & Krupitsky, 2018).

Within the framework of the 1st US Conference on Codependency in 1989, it was determined that codependency is "a stable state of painful dependence on compulsive (that is, unmanageable) forms of behavior and on the opinions of other people, formed when a person tries to gain self-confidence, realize his own importance, define himself as a person" (Ermakov P. N., Kukulyar A.M., Kolenova A.S., 2018, p. 5). Further, the phenomenon was developed in works that are more of a practical nature and are aimed at psychotherapy and rehabilitation of this type of patients (Ermakov P.N. et al., 2018).

Considering the phenomenon we are investigating through the prism of classical and modern, domestic and foreign studies, mainly conducted over the past 5 years, we can conclude that

there are several trajectories in approaches to studying the phenomenon of codependency, an overview of which will be presented below.

### **Theoretical justification**

A report published by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime indicates that about 29.5 million people worldwide have problems with drug use (United Nations, 2017). Based on these values, we can talk about the ever-increasing nature of the problem of codependent relationships in the mainstream of psychological knowledge.

Recently, the etiology and psychological characteristics of the concept of “codependency” have been developed in various psychological studies. It has been found that problems with physical and emotional well-being and health are becoming more common as the level of codependency increases, which leads to adverse health consequences for family members (Bortolon et al., 2017).

The need to treat codependent family members is evidenced by a number of physical and psychological symptoms noted in numerous studies (Askian, Krauss, Baba, Kadir & Sharghi, 2016; Lima et al., 2019; Silva, Oliveira, Silva, Algeri & Soares, 2019; Zielinski et al., 2019).

Most authors adhere to the position that the overwhelming number of codependents experience significant psychological stress (Dias et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2019), complain of severe fatigue, lack of sleep and anxiety (Bortolon et al., 2017; Lampis, Cataudella, Busonera & Skowron, 2017; Lima et al., 2019), depressive experiences, emotional overload as a result of refusal of prescribed treatment (Vederhus, Kristensen & Timko, 2019; Zielinski et al., 2019), as well as an increase in the number of refusals from treatment with antidepressants (Rohden et al., 2017).

The use of psychoactive substances, in addition to significant losses in the life of the consumer, creates negative and lasting consequences for other members of the family system. The social status of such codependents may be in distress due to living with a problem drug user (Ahmad-Abadi et al., 2017; Lima et al., 2019; Vederhus, Kristensen & Timko, 2019; Zielinski et al., 2019). The suffering caused by such family members is described by the authors from the perspective of the presence of symptoms of physical and psychological diseases, changes in family relationships, situations of violence and various economic problems (Ahmad-Abadi et al., 2017; Askian et al., 2016; Bortolon et al., 2017; Lampis et al., 2017; Panaghi, Ahmadabadi, Khosravi, Sadeghi & Madanipour, 2016; Tamutiene & Laslett, 2016; Ulusoy & Guçray, 2017).

A number of researchers indicate that interventions aimed at meeting the specific needs of family members affected by the problem of drug use by a loved one are effective in reducing physical and psychological symptoms and characteristic symptoms of codependency (Ahmad-Abadi et al., 2017; Bortolon et al., 2017). Most codependents are characterized by self-sacrifice of their own needs in order to prioritize the needs of psychoactive substance users (Askian et al., 2016; Silva et al., 2019; Vederhus et al., 2019; Snetkov, 2017.).

Moreover, there are works that highlight the peculiarities of a person's experience of guilt and, as a result, the characteristic behavior of the victim. These works allow us to characterize codependent personalities and identify the following types:

1. Aimed at interaction (realize their aggression on others, but also expect help from them);
2. Exaggerating, but refusing to help;
3. With a high victim identity (auto-aggressive, sacrificial, manipulative);
4. Insecure and dependent on others (Andronnikova, 2017).

Studies showing manifestations of an extreme form of sacrifice and autoaggression – suicidal

readiness - are also described. A study of the autoaggressiveness of the wives of men suffering from alcohol addiction has shown that women who have a history of episodes of auto-destruction, autoaggression and suicidal attempts are usually more likely to marry an addict (Perminova, 2017; Karpushina, 2017). It was also described that the following types of autoaggressive behavior are characteristic of people who exhibit love addiction: suicidal thoughts, passive fantasies about death, self-harm (Buzik, Efimova, 2019). Pronounced suicidal risk in codependent individuals can be localized exclusively in one sphere of life – for example, risky victim behaviors caused by a sacrificial position were described (Zhukova, 2016; Serebryakova, 2018). At the same time, the conducted studies show that in these families, the husband who uses psychoactive substances can show manipulative tendencies through autoaggression and sacrifice (Polkova, 2018).

Suicidal activity of codependent women, as a rule, is characterized by reactivity, in combination with the position of the victim provoking the implementation of autoaggressive behavior, which undoubtedly includes them in the risk zone (Merinov et al., 2015, Somkina, 2016). Thus, it is shown that the presence of autoaggressive tendencies in the experience before marriage can become a marker for creating a family with a dependent person, consolidate the possibility of implementing this specific behavior (Merinov et al., 2015). Taking into account the complexity of the psychological portrait of a codependent woman prone to suicidal risk, domestic scientists have proposed a phased adaptation plan that provides for a contract, group classes in parallel husband-wife logic (Merinov et al., 2015).

Codependency is often characteristic of individuals with borderline and dependent personality disorder, which should be taken into account when trying to explain the relationships found between codependency and anamnestic data, as well as psychopathological (for example, childhood) violence, depression and insecure attachment. According to the authors, every second codependent person meets the five criteria necessary for the diagnosis of borderline personality disorder in DSM-IV-TR, and every seventh codependent meets the criteria established for the diagnosis of dependent personality disorder (Knapek, Balazs & Szabo, 2017). The authors indicate that 31% of codependent people have borderline traits; in addition, 31% of codependents have dependent traits. On the other hand, 16% of codependent people seem to be classified as "pure" codependents (Knapek et al., 2017).

The high comorbidity of codependency is described in a number of works. So, it can be a factor for the formation of Internet addiction in adolescents (Apenok, 2015). An interesting description is the phenomenon of stalking (stalking the object of love), which in a number of manifestations can be observed as a pathological manifestation of attachment, which can manifest itself in psychotic patients with delusions of love charm (Egorov, 2015).

Low adherence to treatment in family members of people who drink alcohol may be associated with the cumulative damage that has developed in the family system. The experience of violence, social isolation and stigmatization associated with problematic alcohol use by an individual may reduce treatment adherence (Shapoval, 2016, Tamutiene & Laslett, 2016).

In codependent relationships, family members in the presence of an addict with chemical dependence had psychological characteristics of suppressing their emotions. The belief that they can solve problems by neglecting their own needs for the sake of the needs of others causes them more family dysfunctions and a lower quality of life (Vederhus et al., 2019). The authors propose the SCCS scale, which is an effective tool for solving the life situation of affected families. This scale can help clinicians focus on family members within health services, especially within health care services.

People suffering from codependency realized that they had a weak will necessary to understand their "autonomy and self-esteem" (Anderson, Rempusheski & Leedy, 2018). A close relationship between alcohol dependence and codependency existed in women suffering from alcoholism. Shyness and anxiety were associated with codependent characteristics, including externally required confirmation (Prata, et al., 2017).

A significant correlation between codependency and perceived health, functional abilities, as well as anxiety and codependency was found by the authors (Sanchez-Roige, Palmer & Fontanillas, 2019). Anxiety, therefore, acts as a significant variable between codependent behavior and a tendency to self-destruction. It was found that there is a close relationship between low self-esteem and codependency.

As a separate direction, it is worth considering the specifics of the psychological relationship of the attending physician with the dependent and his co-dependent relatives.

Dias et al. (2021) note the peculiarities of the influence of the attending physician's personality on the specifics of the addict's recovery process. It is indicated that the position of inaction adopted by some experts in the fight against the use of psychoactive substances contributes to the joint illness of drug addicts and codependent family and community members.

Reducing adherence to treatment is a complex process without an established standard form (Aristizábal, 2020). When correcting codependent behavior, it is also important to follow the prescriptions of medical professionals aimed at preventing health problems, reducing symptoms of diseases and improving the effectiveness of medical interventions. These requirements include mandatory attendance at scheduled meetings and maintaining focus on compliance with the regime. Compliance with medical prescriptions will contribute to changing habits and improving mental health (Bortolon et al., 2017), reducing the assessment of the level of codependency (Foulds, Newton-Howes, Guy, Boden, & Mulder, 2017).

The specificity of the genealogies of HIV-infected patients with codependency is confirmed by the following factors: a high frequency of mental and behavioral disorders caused by alcohol abuse, as well as mental and behavioral disorders caused by opiate abuse, comorbidity of pathologies in families of codependents and their spouses, accumulation of chemical addictions and other similar addictions, personality disorders and affective disorders. It was also found that in accordance with the ICD-10 criteria, the following clinical signs of codependency were manifested in HIV-infected patients: mental and behavioral disorders caused by alcohol abuse (9.7%), mental and behavioral disorders caused by opiate abuse (15.0%), depressive episodes (14.1%), recurrent depressive disorders (34.5%), somatoform disorders (13.3%), hysterical personality disorders (32.7%) (Litvinova, 2017).

It is proved that comorbidity of pathology is a key sign of clinical manifestations of codependency of persons married to HIV-infected injecting drug users. It has been established that hereditary factors, the phenomenon of assortative mating and HIV infection of the spouse as the main chronic stress factor are involved in the formation of clinical manifestations of codependency (Gunko, Viltaniuk & Stepanyuk, 2019).

It was revealed that a high level of codependency was associated with an increase in mental health problems among parents who have children with intellectual disabilities. This implies that there is a certain family dynamic that strongly influences how people relate to each other. Perhaps one component of the family system can create ripple effects and cause interference in the specifics of family interaction (Marques, 2020; Nordgren, Torkel, Svensson & Johnson, 2020).

Parents of mentally retarded children may be at high risk of developing codependent behavior,

experiencing depression, stress and anxiety regardless of gender (Lampis et al., 2017).

The authors suggest that, in fact, only characteristics related to gender roles can influence codependency. Gender and its impact on mental health can also be understood through family systems. The ways parents interact with each other may deteriorate due to underlying mechanisms related to interdependence within the family (Lampis et al., 2017).

Parents who have children with intellectual disabilities report symptoms of depression and anxiety. Parents of children with physical disabilities have a decrease in sleep quality indicators. Psychological stress can be reasonably confirmed by the measure of the perceived burden of parents to care for a child with mental retardation. This burden is largely due to unmanageable workload, financial difficulties, being in a social position, undesirability and loneliness. Guilt was common with the burden of caring for parents with intellectual disabilities (Nordgren et al., 2020).

There are a number of other studies devoted to the search for biological markers of codependent behavior. It has been shown that women with codependency had autoaggressive destructive behaviors and alcoholism in the family history, which may be a risk factor for the development of addictive disease and somatoform disorders (Rozhnova, Kostyuk, Malygin, Enikolopov & Nikolenko, 2020).

The phenomenon of codependency as a non-chemical form of addiction includes psychological and genetic components. The autoaggressive vector of the personality of codependent individuals contributes to destructive forms of behavior and the formation of disorders of the mental and physical spectrum and psychosomatic pathology. The hereditary burden of alcohol dependence on the pedigrees of codependent women indicates the presence of a genetic factor in the pathogenesis of the analyzed form of addictive disorder and indicates the feasibility of studying the genetic component using molecular genetic technologies (Rozhnova et al., 2020).

### ***Conclusions on the theoretical justification***

After conducting a theoretical analysis of the literature, we can conclude that the term "codependency" is considered through the specifics of psychological and behavioral states, as a learned set of behavioral forms, adaptation disorder, illness, manifestation of personality disorders, and so on, which emphasizes its specificity and versatility.

So, codependency is a phenomenon manifested in dependent behavior caused by a change in value-semantic constructs, a lack of necessary competencies and formed under the influence of negative experience of dysfunctional relationships with significant others. This definition is highlighted in the context of this study and is relevant at the present stage of psychological research.

The study of interrelated subjective factors influencing the manifestation of codependent behavior and the identification of its markers make it possible to outline further prospects for research within the framework of psychogenetics of behavior, expanding the concept and creating new, fast and highly valid diagnostic methods for this phenomenon.

### **Discussion**

Thus, based on the theoretical analysis of various approaches, we proposed the definition of the term "codependency" as a phenomenon manifested in dependent behavior caused by changes in value-semantic constructs, lack of necessary competencies and formed under the influence of negative experience of dysfunctional relationships with significant others. This definition combines a number of approaches of domestic and foreign authors who concentrate their research in the field of personal and psychological traits of codependents (Artemtseva & Galkina, 2015; Birch,

Isaeva, Gorbatov & Antipina, 2016; Buzik & Efimova, 2019; Gagai & Selezneva, 2016; Yezin, 2018; Kolenova & Gurtskoy, 2019; Suntsova & Faizova, 2018; Lima et al., 2019).

On the other hand, this definition enriches psychological approaches by looking through the prism of the deep characteristics of people who exhibit codependent patterns of behavior, unlike those authors who focus exclusively on somatic and behavioral aspects manifested in codependent individuals (Bashmanov & Kalinichenko, 2015; Biktagirova & Garifullina, 2018; Bulatnikov & Zaretsky, 2017; Golovanova, 2016; Egorov, 2015; Somkina & Zhukova, 2017; Karpushina, 2017; Kayasheva & Efremova, 2016; Korablina, 2019; Litvinova, 2017; Moskalenko, 2016; Nechin, 2016; Pakulina, Lazarev & Filatov, 2016; Perminova, 2017; Pleshakova, 2018a; Pleshakova, 2018b; Polkova, 2018; Polukhina, 2018; Salomatova, 2019; Aristizábal, 2019; Robertson, 2018; Rohden et al., 2017; Weiss, 2016).

At the same time, we see the prospect of developing studies of codependent behavior in the aspects of searching for its genetic predictors, since the groundwork for this has already been laid in the works of Mandel and co-authors (2018), Martynova (2016, 2017), Osinskaya and Kravtsova (2016), Birkeland et al. (2017), Ehsan & Suneel (2020).

#### Conclusion

Thus, the analysis of the psychological characteristics of codependents showed that the phenomenon of codependency is manifested in emotional, behavioral and cognitive aspects; it is characterized by a sufficiently high comorbidity with emotional disorders and other dependent forms of behavior (dependence on surfactants, non-chemical addictions, Internet addiction, etc.)

At the same time, a theoretical review of classical and modern studies allowed us to develop a new definition of the phenomenon of codependency, describing the personal causes of codependency in a practical perspective.

We have described the prospects for modern studies of the features of the phenomenon of codependent behavior, which consist in the need for family genetic analysis and the establishment of the connection of genetic predictors with the results of individual psychological diagnostics.

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### **Conflict of Interest Information**

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.