

Author of the #1 *New York Times* Best seller
Codependent No More

BEYOND CODEPENDENCY



And Getting Better All the Time



MELODY BEATTIE

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And Getting Better All the Time

Melody Beattie

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DEDICATION

One night, in a dream, I saw a group of people. These people were deserving, lovable people. The problem was, they didn't know it. They were stuck, confused—reacting to some crazy stuff that happened long ago.

They were running around in adult bodies, but in many ways they were still children. *And they were scared.*

These people were so busy protecting themselves and trying to figure out what everything meant, they didn't do what they most needed to do: relax, be who they were, and allow themselves to shine.

They didn't know it was okay to stop protecting themselves. They didn't know it was okay to love and be loved. They didn't know they could love themselves.

When I awoke, I realized I was one of them.

This book is dedicated to us, the recovering adult children and codependents. May we each awaken to the beauty of ourselves, other people, and life.

For helping make this book possible, I thank God, Nichole, Shane, Mom, John, Becky, Terry, Ruth, Scott, Lee, Linda, Carolyn, and my readers. Some encouraged and inspired me to write; some had to put up with me while I did.

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“Have you been writing any personal experience articles lately?” the woman asked the writer. “No,” replied the writer, “I’ve been busy having them.”

—RUTH PETERMAN¹

INTRODUCTION

This is a book about recovery.

Actually, this is a book about continuing our recoveries.

I wrote it for people recovering from the ways they’ve allowed themselves to be affected by other people and their problems. I wrote it for people recovering from codependency, chemical dependency, and adult children issues. I wrote it for people struggling to master the art of self-care.

Codependent No More, my last book, was about stopping the pain and gaining control of our lives. This book is about what to do when the pain has stopped and we’ve begun to suspect we have lives to live. It’s about what happens next.

We’ll look at recovery, relapse, doing our family of origin work, and what to do about it after we’ve done it. We’ll talk about relationships. We’ll talk about concepts like surrender and spirituality too.

We’ll talk about many ideas: dealing with shame, growing in self-esteem, overcoming deprivation, sharing recovery with our children, and getting beyond our fatal attractions long enough to find relationships that work.

When I began this manuscript, I had a long list of scattered bits of

Editor’s note: An Endnotes section, which lists footnotes in each chapter, appears at the end of every chapter in this book.

information I wanted to parlay. I wasn't certain how these ideas would fit together. When I stopped trying to control, the book took on, as some do, a unique and occasionally surprising life of its own.

Codependent No More was about beginning our recoveries. This book is about the core issues of recovery: working on the nuts and bolts, and fine-tuning.

In retrospect, it has emerged primarily as a book about growing in self-love, and our ability to affirm and nurture ourselves. A serendipity of that process is growing in our capacity to love others and to let them, and God, love us.

This book is based on research, my personal and professional experiences, and my opinion. Throughout, I'll attempt to attribute all ideas, theories, and quotes to appropriate sources. Sometimes it's difficult to do that in the recovery field because many people say many of the same things.

The case histories I use are true. I've changed names and details to protect people's privacy.

I've included activities at the end of some chapters. You can explore your answers in a separate journal or notebook.

Also, this book is not about how to change or help the other person. It's about knowing it's okay for us to continue helping ourselves, to better lives and improved relationships.

An old adage says, "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." Another, however, says, "You teach what you most need to learn."

Writers, they say, are teachers.

"It is possible," wrote Lawrence Block, "to see everything we write as a letter to ourselves, designed to convey to one portion of ourselves the lesson that another portion has already learned."²

I have learned from writing this book. I hope you gain as much from reading it.

Endnotes

1. Ruth Peterman is a Minneapolis writer and writing teacher. She told this story during a class she taught.
2. Lawrence Block, "Messages for Your Most Important Reader," *Writer's Digest* (June 1988): 68.

SECTION I

RECOVERY

*Recovery is when
fun becomes fun;
love becomes love;
and life becomes worth living.*

I started taking care of myself and it feels so good I'm not going to stop, no matter what.

—ANONYMOUS

I

THE RECOVERY MOVEMENT



Something exciting is happening across the land. Let's take a look.

Carla's Story

Two years ago, Carla thought she was crazy and her schedule was normal.

"Well, almost normal," said Carla, an elementary school teacher and the thirty-five-year-old daughter of a well-groomed, professional family.

From 6 to 8 a.m., Carla worked at a day-care center. From 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., she taught grade school. From 2 to 6 p.m., she taught at an after-school latchkey program.

To save a woman from being sent to a nursing home, Carla had moved in with an Alzheimer's victim. So at 12:30, Carla rushed home to make lunch for her roommate. At supper time, Carla rushed home again to make supper for her roommate.

Several years earlier, while working at the state prison, Carla had befriended, then fallen in love with, an inmate (a phenomenon peculiar to many people who identify with codependency). After washing the supper dishes, Carla hurried to the prison to visit him. At 9 p.m., Carla dashed home to put her roommate to bed.

In her spare time, Carla volunteered forty hours each month to the county mental health center. And she taught Sunday school.

Besides those volunteer activities, Carla had offered use of her home, rent-free, to a family she met at the prison visiting room. She was able to do this because she had left her home standing empty when she moved in with the Alzheimer's patient.

"I thought I was doing everything right. I was doing everything people expected of me. I was being good to people. I was being a good Christian. One thing I couldn't understand was why everyone was mad at me," Carla says. "The other thing I couldn't understand was why I felt crazy and wished I was dead.

"The relatives of the woman I lived with got angry at me for telling them how sick she was and how much care she needed. My boyfriend was mad at me. My bosses were upset because I kept getting sick and missing work. And the woman living in my house got angry because when she began working, I started asking for rent money.

"I didn't know how I felt," Carla says. "For as long as I can remember, I couldn't remember feeling joy, sorrow, anything! I knew I was physically sick. My legs and feet were swollen so badly I couldn't walk some days. But I didn't go to the doctor because I didn't want to bother him.

"I didn't want to bother the doctor," she says, shaking her head. "Things were crazy, but they were about to get crazier."

The woman living in Carla's house became so indignant about paying rent she moved out. Carla moved back into her home. Within days, the furnace went out, the sewer pipe collapsed, the basement flooded, and gophers chewed through the gas line and the house almost blew up. A neighbor selling his property used the wrong land description and instead sold Carla's house, and a pheasant flew through the bay window, decapitated itself, and ran through the house like a dead chicken.

"Just like me," Carla recalls.

Soon, Carla's boyfriend, an alcoholic, was released from prison. Within two weeks he started drinking and disappeared from her life.

"I bottomed out. This was the culmination of over thirty years of fail-

ure,” Carla says. “I felt like a failure professionally and personally. I had gone from one hundred fifteen pounds to over two hundred pounds. I had been married and divorced twice, both times to successful professional men who physically or verbally abused me. Now, I had been rejected by a prison inmate. This was it. This was the end! I hadn’t drank for fifteen years, but I started drinking two quarts of vodka a day. I wanted to die.”

Carla didn’t die. Instead, someone handed her a book about codependency. From reading it, she learned that although her behaviors were a little crazy, she wasn’t. She was battling codependency. She also learned a recovery program was available to her, one that promised to change her life.

Although she’s worked at recovery for only a year and a half, Carla has worked hard at it. She regularly attends both Al-Anon and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. She goes to workshops on codependency, shame, and self-esteem. She also works with a therapist experienced with codependency recovery issues.

“I got mad at the therapist,” Carla recalls. “I was a professional; he was a professional. I went to him expecting him to do his job: fix me. He told me he couldn’t do that. I learned there wasn’t a magic cure. I learned I had to do my own recovery work.”

Although she didn’t find a magic cure, Carla describes the changes in her life in eighteen months as “dramatic.”

“I’ve done a lot of grieving, but at least I’m feeling. I’m feeling feelings for the first time in my life. I’m feeling sad, and I’m feeling happy.

“I’m still busy, but I’m not running around like a chicken with its head chopped off. I’m choosing to do the things I’m doing, instead of feeling like I have no choices. I’m setting and reaching goals. That feels good,” Carla says.

Carla is still struggling to undo the financial chaos connected to her codependency. “But at least I’m struggling for and toward something. I now have money in my checkbook. I can take myself out to eat. And I’ve even started buying myself new clothes. That’s different. I used to shop

at secondhand stores and deliberately chose the worst items there, the things I thought nobody else would want. I didn't want to take any clothing away from the poor people," she explains, "the ones who really needed it."

Carla has made other advances too. She's learning to say no. She's learning to stick up for herself and her rights, instead of fighting only for the rights of others. She's beginning to look back to discover the origins of her codependency (family of origin work).

"My family wasn't bad or awful," Carla says. "They were good, smart, professional people. Although my father abused prescription drugs for about two years, my parents weren't obviously addicted or dysfunctional. They were close. We had some fun times.

"But there were subtleties," Carla adds. "I learned how to be a martyr. I always felt I needed to be perfect. I never felt good enough. I didn't know how to deal with feelings. We lived in a small community. During one phase of my childhood, my parents' political stance caused us to be ostracized by the town. I felt so rejected. And I learned how to reject *myself*. I started believing something was wrong with me."

Besides looking back, Carla has begun to look around. She's noticing how codependency has permeated her life.

"I have two groups of friends: other codependents who want to complain about being victims, and the people who want to use and mistreat me. I'm working at changing my friendships. I'm also reevaluating my professional life. My codependency influenced my career choices. Most of my jobs demanded a lot and gave me little in return. Of course, I gave and gave on my jobs, then got angry because I felt used. Now, I'm learning to set boundaries at work. Some people are getting mad at me for changing, but I'm not feeling so used.

"I'm learning to stop asking why people are doing this to me," Carla says. "I've started asking why I'm allowing them to do this to me."

Relationships with men are still a weak spot in Carla's recovery. "I'm still attracted to the sickest man in the room, the one who needs me the

most," Carla admits. "But at least I've started to get red flags. That's new. I always used to get green lights."

She says she has much work left to do on self-esteem but has begun to accept herself. "I do a lot of work with affirmations. I've got my bathroom mirror pasted full of them. That helps. It really does.

"Sometimes I still let other people control me. Sometimes I'm not sure when it's okay to want approval from people, and when it's a codependent behavior. I'm not always sure when it's okay to give, and when I'm doing caretaking stuff. And sometimes I get scared.

"But the best thing that's happened to me is I've begun to feel peaceful," Carla says. "For the first time in my life I want to live, and I believe there's a purpose for my life.

"My relationship with my Higher Power, God, has improved. I'm not in control of my life, but by working my program, it's become manageable. I know Someone is caring for me and helping me care for myself.

"And," Carla adds, "I'm proud of my recovery."

Recently, while paging through a photo album, Carla found one of the few pictures taken of her when she was a child. She rarely allowed people to photograph her because she hated the way she looked.

"I was surprised when I saw this picture," Carla says. "I wasn't ugly. There wasn't anything so terribly wrong with me, like I thought there was. It's sad I've spent so many years of my life believing there was."

The other day, when Carla walked into the student bathroom at the grade school where she works, she found a sobbing fourth-grade girl curled up behind the trash can. The girl, a beautiful child with long dark hair, had tried to smash the bathroom mirror.

Carla asked what was wrong. The girl said she hated herself, she hated the way she looked, and she wanted to die. Carla gently scooped up the child, carried her into the office, and referred her to the school psychiatrist.

"I cried for her, and I cried for me. But it wasn't all tears of sadness," Carla says. "I cried because I felt relieved. At last we have hope."

Our Stories

That's the good news, and that's what this book is about: hope for Carla, hope for the little girl who hates herself, hope for you, and hope for me. This book is about hope for continued recovery from this problem we've come to call codependency.

Many of us have found that hope. By the numbers, we're flocking to Twelve Step meetings, workshops, and therapists—to get help for ourselves. We're demanding (well, “inquiring about,” at least initially) our birthright, our right to be, our right to live, and our right to recover.

Celebrities are publicly declaring themselves adult children of alcoholics. Men, women, and young children (not just adult children) are beginning their searches for hope. I've heard from older people who have just begun their recoveries. “I'm seventy-five years old and I feel like I'm just learning to live,” said one woman. “But at least I'm learning.”

Codependent jokes have emerged. Did you hear about the codependent wife? Each morning, she wakes her husband and asks him how she's going to feel that day.

Codependency even made the pages of *Newsweek* magazine.¹

The important idea here is we've lost our invisibility. We're recognizing ourselves, and others are recognizing us too. More help and hope has become available to us—from teddy bears that tell us it's okay to feel what we feel, to in-patient codependency treatment programs where we can deal with our inner child (the part of us that feels, plays, and needs to be nurtured) and where we can address our family of origin issues (our messages from the past that control what we do today—like a computer program). And we're taking advantage of it.

We're part of a groundswell movement, a tremendous movement that's come into its own time. We're saying, simply and clearly, enough is enough, and we've suffered enough. It's time to do things differently.

For years, we called chemical dependency and other disorders “family diseases.” Now, we're believing our own words. At last, as Carla said, we have hope. Practical hope. The word *codependency* may label a problem, but to many of us it also labels the solution: recovery.

Many of us have suffered, and are still suffering to some degree, from a relationship with a dysfunctional person. Sometimes that person appeared in our childhoods, sometimes in our adult lives. Usually, we've had relationships with more than one dysfunctional person; this pattern began in childhood and repeated itself as we grew older.

Discovering that many of us have suffered to some extent from codependency has affirmed one of my earlier beliefs: it's okay to be codependent. It has to be; there are so many of us. But it's even better to be recovering.

Some of us have been recovering for a long time; others are just beginning the recovery experience. Some of us are working on dual or multiple recovery programs; for instance, recovery from codependency and chemical dependency, or recovery from codependency and an eating disorder. We may not always be certain what it means to be recovering or where our recovery programs will take us, but we're going there anyway.

We may be codependent "not as much" while we're striving to be codependent no more, but we're getting better all the time. And that's good enough.

What does the future hold?

The word *codependency* may disappear. Media and public attention may subside. But no matter what we call it, recovery from codependency is more than a fad. We've started the journey of self-care and self-love. Although there may be a few detours and resting places along the way, we're not going to stop now.

Let me wrap up this chapter with an anecdote about my son, Shane, who loves video games. Recently, he got involved playing a particular game. This game offered about forty levels of skill, each deeper and more complicated than the last, to those who could overcome the obstacles, avoid the pitfalls, stay empowered by the power source, and not get killed by the enemy.

Shane was playing well enough, but couldn't get past a certain level of play. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't go any further. After a while, he stopped believing it was possible to go further.

Then one day a friend stopped by, and my son watched her play the game. She'd been playing longer; she'd watched an older brother play; she'd learned a few tricks. She could jump, hop, and scurry her way down to the deepest levels.

Watching her was all it took. After that, with confidence and ease, my son began to play at increasingly deeper levels. He got unstuck. He broke through.

That's what this book is about: believing we can go further than we've ever gone before. Let's love ourselves for how far we've come. Let's see how far we can go. And let's go there together. We each have to do our own work, but doing it together is what makes it work.

Endnotes

1. Charles Leerhsen, with Tessa Namuth, "Alcohol and the Family," *Newsweek* (18 January 1988).

*What's a codependent? The answer's easy.
They're some of the most loving,
caring people I know.*

—LONNY OWEN¹

2

RECOVERY



In spite of the emergence of the word *codependency*, and so many people recovering from it, it is still jargon. No standard definition exists. We haven't agreed on whether codependency is a sickness, a condition, or a normal response to abnormal people. We still haven't agreed on whether it's hyphenated: *codependency* or *co-dependency*?

What most people have decided is this: whatever codependency is, it's a problem, and recovering from it feels better than not.

If codependency is so common, why bother to call it anything? Why not just call it normal? Because it hurts. And recovery means learning how to stop the pain. In this chapter, we'll explore what it means to do that.

To explain recovery, let me indulge in a metaphor. In 1982, a fire nearly destroyed my home. I learned some truths then about fires.

The fire's not over when the fire truck leaves. Repairing fire damage can involve an extensive, sometimes frustrating rehabilitation process.

A fire can smolder for a long time before it bursts into flames. The fire in my home smoldered quietly, but dangerously, in a mattress for hours

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A pioneering voice in self-help literature, Melody Beattie has endeared herself to readers who long for healthier relationships. She has written a host of top-selling books, including *Codependent No More*, *The Language of Letting Go*, *52 Weeks of Conscious Contact*, *The Grief Club*, and *The New Codependency*.

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