

From Veronica Monet's *Love, Lust and Romance in the Wake of #MeToo*: How Codependency Complicates Consent

I met Jeff my senior year of college. He was several years older than me, having served in the Coast Guard for four years before pursuing his college degree at Oregon State University. I was his new roommate. He and a tall goofy guy named Al, shared a pink two-story house near campus. I moved into the top floor that mostly felt like the attic since the ceiling was slanted at the sides. Still, I had a ton of room and it was a welcome change from the small apartment I had shared with a girlfriend the year before.

But I was now rooming with two guys. I wondered how this might be for me. Would they assume sex with me was on the table? Would I explore sex with either of them as a possibility?

Al was out of the question. I couldn't stand his sense of humor and I found him rather repulsive to look at. But Jeff was a different story. Something about his man-about-the-world stories drew me in. Was it the daring deeds he did in the Coast Guard? Looking back those deeds weren't all that daring. But he had been tasked with the noxious job of fishing dead bodies out of the water when 33 Haitians drowned off the coast of Florida due to their boat capsizing in 1981. Did that impress my young, impressionable self?

Maybe. Or perhaps it was Jeff's African Grey Parrot that attracted me. That parrot loved Jeff and hated me, but as a young girl in college, novelty had its charms. And Jeff himself was intriguing to me. His birth father was Filipino and his mother was a white woman from Texas. For my young and inexperienced self, I suppose that Jeff seemed as exotic as his bird.

One night we both got drunk and we had sex. It wasn't memorable for me, because when I drank I didn't remember much of anything. But having sex seemed to suggest to both of us that we were together now.

Did we talk about that? No. It was just assumed.

Al was visibly annoyed. At the time, I imagined that he was jealous but in hindsight I think it more likely that he was lonely. Now instead of having us to talk to, Al was alone most of the time as we locked ourselves in Jeff's room to talk, laugh and have sex. I would have been annoyed too had I been in Al's shoes.

As senior year was drawing to an end, Jeff made plans to move to San Jose, California. I had lived my whole life in Oregon, and had entertained the fantasy of

living in California since childhood. But I didn't know anyone there, and I was afraid of going there alone. Jeff seemed like my ticket to California!

He agreed to take me with him.

Did I love Jeff?

Not really. I mean I said I loved him, but I thought I was supposed to say that and feel that, so I did what I thought was expected. What I was more passionate about was getting the hell out of Oregon.

As you can see, I wasn't all that evolved at age 22. I had a drinking problem and I was steeped in a culture of codependency.

The author Melody Beattie has written more about codependency than just about anyone, and she says: "When we cross the line into the Codependent Zone, we've usually got an ulterior motive for what we do."

In my experience, those ulterior motives usually lead to hurt. We hurt others when we use them to achieve our aims. And we hurt ourselves when we are less than honest about our motives, because it reduces our chances of achieving the intimacy most of us want.

The culture of codependency also dictates that we don't talk about our deepest truths. Instead we manipulate and acquiesce and assume.

In the above scenario, the fact that Jeff and I just assumed we were a couple after having sex one night is classic codependency. Assuming is the definitive action in this case. And avoiding any conversations about our feelings and intentions is another.

The fact that we simply ignored Al's discomfort with our sexual relationship is yet another common codependent move. It would have been a sign of emotional health and respect for our roommate if we had invited him to share his feelings with us. We didn't have to stop having sex. But we could have talked about how it was shifting the dynamic in our shared living space.

But we didn't do that. And codependent culture is all about NOT talking about "it." Because talking about our feelings and our desires is very vulnerable. Anyone who engages in human connection is to some degree vulnerable, but a codependent would rather die than admit it.

An Overused and Often Misunderstood Term – What Exactly IS Codependent?

After about two years Jeff and I broke up. Or more accurately, he left me because he was sick of my drinking. Perhaps predictably, I quickly got into another relationship. My new boyfriend was an ex-felon with a cocaine habit and our relationship was at times violent. When I finally decided to sober up and extricate myself from this abusive relationship, I knew I needed help. That same year Melody Beattie published her book, *Codependent No More: How to Stop Controlling Others and Start Caring for Yourself*. The year was 1986 and Melody's book was very popular in recovery circles. I found her book, and recovery groups for codependents, very helpful in my quest to free myself from my dysfunctional relationship patterns.

At that time, the term "codependent" mostly referred to people like me who were looking for the strength and support to stop enabling an addict or alcoholic. We were learning that the best course of action was to detach with love, and let the addict hit their "bottom." But fast-forward about thirty years and the term codependency has evolved to entail much more than the relationship between an addict and their enabler.

Today, the term refers to the codependent dynamics in relationships that often do not involve substance abuse or other addictions. In fact, codependency refers to unhealthy relationship dynamics that often exist to greater and lesser degrees in many relationships. Rather than just being a maladapted response to being in relationship with an addict or alcoholic, codependency is actually a dysfunctional family dynamic handed down from our parents, and from their parents, and from their parents' parents. In other words, codependency is a relatively new term but the dysfunctional relationship dynamic it refers to has been around for a very long time.

I like how Melody Beattie defines codependency in her more recent book: "Codependency," she says, "is about normal behavior taken too far." And "It's not so much what we do as why we're doing it."

One of the values of the concept of "codependency" is that it helps us to see when our normal behaviors have gone "too far," and have morphed into dysfunctional patterns in our relationships. Seeing this can help us to move toward healthier patterns that create happier interpersonal interactions.

Taking a look at your less-than-functional coping styles can give you a window into why some of your relationships might not be thriving in the ways you would like them to.

Is it Codependency or Love?

I like to think of codependency as a feeling.

It often feels similar to love. Being polite. Caring for others. Doing what is best for everyone. Doing our part. Contributing to the welfare of others. Falling in love.

Surely these emotions and motivations can be the highest expression of our humanity. But like so many things in life, our intentions often matter more than what we actually do. In fact, we can do the exact same action with different intentions and that action will produce different results. So much depends on our intentions and on the energies that propel our actions.

How then can we know when our love has tipped over into something dysfunctional?

For me, one indication is how I feel in my body. Some forms of love expand my heart. I feel myself letting go of expectations. There is no fear, guilt or resentment.

But other times my “love” carries unexpressed expectations. When my expectations are not met, I can become resentful. Then I might try harder to “love” with the “hope” that my love will be returned or at least appreciated. When it isn’t, I feel angry and might say to the recipient (target?) of my codependent love “After all I have done for you . . . “

Most of us know the sting of hearing those words. One minute we thought someone was giving freely to us, and the next minute we realize we owe a debt we never agreed to.

The other thing I look for is how my intentions and behavior are effecting my emotions and my connections to others. Do I feel happy and free? Or tired and resentful? Are my relationships working for everyone involved? Or are my connections becoming strained and out of balance?

While a common characteristic of codependency is an excessive reliance on people or a particular person for approval and a sense of identity, what many people miss is that excessive reliance on another person can show up in unexpected ways. For instance it can manifest as the need to control others.

The fact that both “weak boundaries” and “controlling behaviors” are codependent coping styles, can be confusing. But whether we allow someone to dominate us or we try to dominate them, our motivation is nearly identical. We are attempting to control outcomes instead of showing up authentically.

Remember the siren call of codependency? “After all I have done for you!” Those words communicate the expectations common to most codependents: “I suffer for you because that is how I express my love and now you OWE me!”

It is a nonconsensual expectation. If the expectations had been discussed and agreed upon, then there might be a legitimate grievance if the agreed upon terms had not been met. But assuming and expecting in the absence of mutual agreement is a

violation of the rights of others. And even when done in the name of self-sacrifice and giving, violating the rights of others never leads to healthy outcomes. Both weak boundaries and controlling behavior work together to create a codependent dynamic. For instance, it may surprise you to know that most intimate relationship violence, is an extreme expression of codependency.

The Codependent Dynamics of Domestic Violence

A person who hits, slaps, pushes or threatens their partner is attempting to control their partner. They use physical and emotional abuse in an effort to achieve that control.

Physical abuse in an intimate relationship is domestic violence and it affects far more couples than is commonly believed. In fact, many couples I coach don't believe they are perpetrating domestic violence even though they may sometimes push or slap each other. But regardless of what they call their abusive behavior, it has a devastating effect on their relationship and their sense of self.

Fortunately, once they learn healthy boundaries as well as anger management and key relationship tools, the impulse to control their partner and the relationship subsides, and the abusive behavior stops.

Most couples who are caught in an abusive relationship dynamic, whether that abuse is physical or emotional, do not comprehend where they begin and end. Consequently they don't respect the autonomy of their partner or themselves. They have bought into a codependent belief that they are entitled to enforce their will on each other, including through manipulation or violence.

A codependent relationship actually takes two codependents. While excessive self-sacrifice and domestic violence might seem miles apart to most of us, the fact is that both dysfunctional behaviors originate in codependent patterns that lack healthy boundaries. Healthy boundaries not only help us heal our codependent patterns. They are the cornerstones of successful anger management, and key components of healing from the relationship dynamics that can lead to domestic violence..

I know this to be true, and not just because I helped many couples to heal violence in their relationships. I have personally made this healing journey as well.

In the early 90's, I experienced domestic violence in my first marriage. Just three weeks after our wedding, my husband tried to stop me from talking by putting his hands around my throat. I was shocked and frightened, but thankfully I knew how to assert my healthy boundaries in response to his violence.

Fortunately he let go of me, and left our apartment. As soon as he left, I immediately reported what had happened to the police. I then changed the locks to our apartment and obtained a restraining order. I also informed my husband about a

six-month program for men overcoming their violence. I let him know that if he enrolled in the program, I would delay divorce. If he completed the program and his behavior improved, I might consider reconciliation.

It wasn't a threat. I wasn't trying to convince him. In fact, if I had tried to manipulate his decision with pleading or threats, it is almost certain that he wouldn't have responded well. But when I asserted a clear and definite boundary, and left the decision to him, he chose to undertake the training.

I am happy to report that he did complete the program, and his behavior did improve. We reconciled and afterwards enjoyed fourteen years of marriage. My husband took what he learned about overcoming violence to heart and never hurt me again. It was a stunning turnaround, and one that I will forever admire and appreciate.

I learned that the belief that men cannot change this kind of behavior is just a myth. The inspiring reality is that all of us, no matter how painful and destructive our patterns may be, can learn how to disagree without resorting to violence or other forms of abuse.

Healthy Boundaries Are Key

The journey from a relationship mired in dysfunctional patterns to a healthy partnership requires each member of the relationship to learn how to assert healthy boundaries. And it also requires each person to learn how to fully respect the boundaries of the other.

Like many spouses who want their partner to do something about their anger, I thought the solution to our marital woes would be as simple as "fixing" his problem. Little did I know that even though I was not responsible for his violence, I was playing a part in our unhealthy relationship dynamic. I thought it was just my husband who needed to change, but I was wrong.

It came as a shock when my husband started saying no to things he used to put up with. But one of the things I had to learn when my husband became nonviolent, was that the new him also had new boundaries!

One of his first boundaries was taking time outs when things got heated between us. At first I thought he was just trying to shut me up again. But because he remained calm in the face of my anger and he came back later when things cooled down and offered to continue our conversation, I began to realize that he was not trying to manipulate me. And I actually started to feel jealous that he could stay calm while I continued to lose my temper. In this way, I began to realize that I too had an anger problem.

It was not simply him that needed to change. I needed to learn new ways of being in relationship too. And I find this is true for all relationships as they evolve from dysfunctional patterns to healthy habits. Both partners have to learn new relationship skills for their partnership to heal and thrive.

Unfortunately, in the 90's there were not a lot of resources for women with anger management problems. Culturally we were still in denial about the fact that people of any gender can perpetrate abuse. For that reason, it took me longer to learn how to handle my emotions without resorting to abusive behaviors. And this may surprise you, but the person who taught me the most valuable tools for managing my anger was my husband. I will be forever grateful to him for helping me to become a nonviolent and less angry person.

It was my assertion of a healthy boundary that led to his learning how to be nonviolent. And then it was his assertion of healthy boundaries that led to my learning how to be less abusive as well. Healthy boundaries really are the key to moving from codependent and dysfunctional to interdependent and blissful.

The essential ingredients to a healthy boundary include:

1. Keep the focus on your feelings and behavior
2. Decide what you find acceptable and unacceptable treatment of you
3. Assert your healthy boundaries by calmly communicating them to others
4. Know what actions you will take if your boundaries are violated
5. Follow through by taking those actions when your boundaries are violated

What do think is the number one reason most of us fail to assert our healthy boundaries? It's because we are afraid that in doing so, we will create distance with our loved ones. That's why many of us tolerate things until we can't stand it any longer, at which point we are more likely to explode in frustration.

Fortunately, there's a way to greatly reduce (or even eliminate) this risk. And that's to follow your healthy assertions with what I call a "redirect."

A "redirect" takes the connection to someplace more satisfying for both of you.

Here's an example of how a redirect can work to create boundaries and intimacy simultaneously. When Jerry and Linda asked me to coach them, they were at an impasse. For years, Linda had agreed to sex with her husband Jerry even when she wasn't in the mood. Over the years she had grown used to enduring some touch that made her skin crawl. She felt guilty about her feelings and wanted to be a good wife, so she kept her feelings to herself and just prayed the sex would be over soon. After ten years of doing this, Linda had become numb to sex.

Not surprisingly, Jerry was feeling more and more distance in his relationship with Linda, and the sex was becoming less and less satisfying for him. He longed for the

days when Linda showed more passion and desire for him, and wondered what he was doing wrong. But every time he asked Linda to tell him how she felt, she was vague and noncommittal. It was as if she just wanted to avoid the topic and cling to the status quo.

The dilemma that Jerry and Linda were experiencing is far more common than you might think. Many wives and girlfriends have endured unwanted or less than enjoyable sex in order to maintain connection with the man they love.

But it doesn't have to be this way.

In their coaching sessions, I began teaching both Linda and Jerry how to assert a boundary with a redirect.

It took time and effort, but gradually I was able to help Linda reconnect with her true preferences and desires. It turned out that she was still in love with Jerry and she really did desire a passionate sex life with him. However, she wasn't enjoying certain things that he did during sex, and had no idea how she could tell him without hurting his feelings.

I asked Linda to assert her boundaries with a redirect. For instance, when Jerry tried to initiate oral sex without first spending time kissing and holding her, Linda would now say "Jerry, I really want you to go down on me and before you do, I want to gaze into your blue eyes and feel your lips pressed against mine." When Jerry pinched her breasts too hard, Linda would now say "Honey, my breasts are craving your tender caress. Will you please hold them gently?"

For Jerry's part, he knew that something was missing, but he thought their sex was pretty good. He just wanted Linda to be more passionate and enthusiastic like she used to be. Like many husbands and boyfriends, Jerry had so normalized obligatory sex that he didn't realize Linda was having sex out of a sense of duty. Nor did he realize that she didn't like some of the things he was doing during sex.

You might wonder how a married couple could be so disconnected around their shared sex life. There are many reasons that a similar pattern emerges for many couples. One factor is how heterosexual couples date and how those dating habits translate in marriage. While women often use sex to get and keep a man, and bring that attitude into their marriages, there are many men who will take what they can get, and they bring that attitude into their marriages as well.

This is a sad state of affairs for all concerned, but none of us need settle for the status quo. We can break free from old habits so we can enjoy the relationship we desire.

Research confirms what many of us know intuitively, that men initiate sex far more often than women do, even in long-term relationships. That means many men focus

on trying to get their wives or girlfriends to agree to sex. Unfortunately, getting past a “no” becomes the primary goal rather than tuning into whether she actually desires sex. And most men do not realize how much it hurts them when they accept obligatory or reluctant sex from their wife or girlfriend.

I knew Jerry needed to be more solidly connected to his own desires and feelings, so he wouldn't settle for boring sex that his wife wasn't into. I asked Jerry if he could imagine no longer accepting obligatory sex from his wife. He was afraid that if he said no to that sort of sex, they might never have sex. Plus, even though he had long been suspicious that Linda was faking orgasms, she would never admit it. And when he asked her what he could do to make her feel more pleasure, she seemed more interested in “getting it over with.” For Jerry, it felt like he was in a no win situation. Linda wouldn't initiate sex, she rarely said yes to sex, the sex she did say yes to seemed to bore her and when he asked for her input she acted annoyed. He had no idea how to move forward.

Obviously Jerry needed to learn many skills sets in order to be able to show up intuitively and empathetically. I helped him up his game in a variety of ways that lead to heart connection and embodied touch. You will find a detailed description for increasing intuitive touch, sexual empathy and passionate presence in chapter ().

It took some work to help Jerry get into deeper contact with his feelings and desires, but gradually he did. Because one way to connect more solidly with our own feelings is to ask our partner about their feelings, I suggested that Jerry express more curiosity about Linda's moods and preferences.

For instance, if during sex, it became apparent to Jerry that Linda was getting bored or shutting down emotionally, he would now stop the sexual interaction while staying lovingly and passionately connected to her. He would stop moving, but would not pull his body away from her. Then he would look into Linda's eyes and say something like: “Honey, I am feeling a bit disconnected from you in this moment. Is there anything you want to say to me? Anything you want me to know? I would love to know what you're feeling right now.” While Jerry would be halting the sexual interaction, he would keep his body and his voice intimate and loving. This would invite more intimacy and connection while holding the new boundary of not accepting obligatory sex from Linda.

What Jerry and Linda did for their marriage produced wonderful results for them, and profoundly revitalized their sexual connection. And it demonstrates the power of a “redirect,” which is one of the five steps in my Exquisite Partnership Formula.™

This formula is a game changer, and while it works especially well when applied to sexual interactions, the same general principle is equally helpful in all kinds of situations where you want to assert a boundary, but are concerned that doing so might push someone away, when that is not your intention or desire.

You will learn more about the Exquisite Partnership Formula, and how you can create more intimacy even when you assert boundaries, in Chapter ().

How and Why We Learn to Be Codependent

Our needs change a lot depending upon our stage of life.

For instance, as babies and children we are utterly dependent upon the adults in our life. We would not label the baby or child as codependent.

But codependency could apply to children insofar as they have learned that, in order to survive, they must tamp down their authentic emotions, refrain from expressing their true feelings, and surrender their healthy boundaries.

In a codependent home, the child quickly learns that it is dangerous to be authentic and share their truth, so they learn instead to say and do the things expected from them by the adults in control. It's a perfectly reasonable survival technique. But it damages the child's sense of self and makes it very difficult for the child to share their emotions and assert healthy boundaries with anyone.

Unfortunately, these children are more likely to be abused by a teacher or fellow student. As teens, they are more likely to submit to abuse from a boyfriend or girlfriend. They might blame themselves if they are raped or someone hits them. And of course they often grow into adults who control and/or care-take. Again, both controlling and caretaking are codependent patterns because they both negate healthy boundaries and rely upon dysfunctional emotional patterns with another person.

Another stage of life where we are super dependent on others is often old age. But if we have eliminated our codependent patterns by then, we can rely upon the caretaking of others without the impulse to hide our true feelings, to manipulate or control others, or to give up our truth or our healthy boundaries. If we have healthy boundaries, we can be utterly dependent upon the caretaking of others, without actually being codependent.

If you feel like others owe you (or you owe them), then you might be resorting to codependent thinking. Codependency compromises your level of authenticity and your ability to assert and honor healthy boundaries.

But if you are able to show up fully, speak your truth honestly, assert your boundaries with comfort, accept the boundaries of others without fear or resentment and accept care from others without feeling guilty, indebted or resentful, then you are well on your way to creating healthy and life-affirming relationships.

Codependent or Interdependent?

There is a ton of information available about codependency -- but very little about moving away from codependency and toward interdependence. It's as if we've gotten stuck on identifying the problem, but never found our way to solutions. However, as I have lived into my experience of healing from codependent patterns, I have discovered many solutions that lead to interdependent relating.

Over time I have learned how to be partnered in a way that embraces interdependence instead of codependency. And this is what I teach my clients to do in their relationships as well. Of course, achieving interdependence looks different for different people and different relationships.

As part of my quest for healthier relationship dynamics in my life, I find it helpful to do things that take me out of my comfort zone. For example, asserting boundaries without pulling away emotionally can be difficult for me. So I try to do it often. In my family of origin, I learned to either go along to get along, or to rebel. But calmly and lovingly assert a boundary? No one ever showed me how to do that. And when I tried to do it, I was typically criticized for being rude or uncaring.

But I have learned as an adult that keeping my heart open while I say no is actually a deeply empowering act.

What about those situations where the stakes are really high? Then it can feel like I am putting my life at risk. In those moments I know I am truly growing into some new territory, because my intense fear was originally meant to warn me of what my family of origin expected. As a child my life often did depend upon conforming to the dysfunctional family system. But I get to grow past that now. Fortunately, we all get to grow past the fears instilled in us as children so that we can truly thrive as adults.

Interdependence allows for the fact that we are social animals and we don't do well alone. We need each other. But we need to engage our connections in a way that preserves our individual identities, honors our healthy boundaries, and amplifies the healing and creativity that can occur in partnership.

We will talk more about how you can transform codependent aspects of your relationships into interdependence later in this chapter. Right now, let's look at how codependency complicates consent.

Codependency and Consent

While the prevailing conversation on codependency is oriented toward the individual, I believe that codependency is actually a family dynamic that involves all

the players. Our parents and family teach us how to be codependent and unfortunately, many of us hand it down to our children!

In order to pull back the curtain so we can clearly view the codependent dynamic and how it cripples our connections and complicates consent, we have to step away from our training and popular romantic themes in order to get a full view of how our personal lives are impacted.

For instance, proscribed gender roles can lead men and women to feel entitled to certain things in their relationships. Some women might feel entitled to have their date pay for dinner or their husband provide for them financially, while they take care of the house or raise the kids. Some men might feel entitled to sex if they cover most of the expenses in a relationship or marriage.

Yes, these expectations are being questioned more and more. Modern dating can involve sharing expenses. Today, marriage often involves shared childcare and household upkeep. And more and more couples are actually sitting down to discuss their division of labor and financial responsibilities.

However, many of the couples I work with, even young couples in their 20's and 30s', have never talked about these things. Instead they have fallen into patterns of behavior that were handed down by their parents or practiced by their friends or reflected in the culture and popular media. Rather than explore each other's feelings about those patterns, they avoid the discomfort of asking and simply assume they are both satisfied with the arrangement.

When it comes to housework, the gender gap persists to this day. On average, in most two-income households where both people work, the woman will do more work every year in the form of household chores. Research varies but consistently points to this discrepancy, whether it's 4 extra hours a week or 2 extra weeks a year. It doesn't matter if she makes more money than him, she will still do more housework in the long run. In fact, some studies indicate that she may do even MORE housework if she makes more money than him. There are multiple theories on why that is the case, but the general theme seems to be that both women and men worry that the man is being emasculated when she earns more than he does. Either she will choose to do more housework or he will choose to do less housework. In both cases, the discrepancy in housework results from an attempt to "affirm his masculinity."

Most of us might not associate money and household chores with sex and consent but they can and do impact each other a great deal. That impact varies from person to person and from relationship to relationship, but by asking the right questions, we can locate the emotional truth that impacts sex and consent in our individual lives.

For instance, how might a woman feel when her man approaches her for sex if she is earning more money than he is? Might she feel like she “should” say yes because saying no might “undermine his masculinity?” Or might she be resentful about how hard she is working, and feel inclined to say no to sex?

In those relationships where the wife or girlfriend is making more money and doing more housework, sex and consent are impacted in various ways. He might not feel “masculine enough” and she might resent what she perceives as his “laziness and selfishness.”

But if he makes more money than she does, might she feel like she “owes” him sex? Might he feel that she “owes” him sex?

And what if she is performing more childcare, emotional labor and household chores than he is? Will she be less open to sex if she feels overworked, overwhelmed and underappreciated? Or might she dutifully engage in sex in order to “further fulfill her role as wife?”

These aren’t farfetched scenarios. I actually encounter all these relationship dynamics and more in my practice as a relationship coach. Many boyfriends and husbands have bluntly told me that since they are “paying for everything” their girlfriend or wife “owes them sex.”

And many girlfriends and wives have shared with me that they feel guilty if they say no to sex. After all, their thinking goes, “he works so hard and takes such good care of me.”

It isn’t just marriage and long-term relationships where the codependent dynamic of “owing” each other and assuming instead of asking plays out. It happens in dating and hookups too. Some men can feel like women owe them sex because they paid for the date.

“Polite” Women and Entitled Men

Women have been taught to be “polite” and believe it not, that training most certainly effects consent. Rather than offer a clear “no,” many women will say something vague or confusing such as “not really feeling it” or “I don’t know” or “maybe later.”

Given the fact that men are still expected to initiate most sex, this can lead to confusion about her true feelings. Should he push more? Will she feel like he isn’t a “real man” if he doesn’t “try to seduce her?”

And here’s something that isn’t talked about much but it is still a big factor for a lot of couples: “If he knew how to seduce me, I would get in the mood but since I am not in the mood he has failed to seduce me.”

In my experience, both men and women can buy into this thinking by putting all the pressure on the man to figure out the best way to get her interested in sex and intuit the difference between her “weak no” which is actually inviting him to “try harder” and her “real no” which is telling him to “back off.”

Most boys and men grow up with a paucity of touch. It can begin when a boy’s father stops kissing him and redirects their affection to more “manly” demonstrations such as tented hugs and slaps on the back. Ever seen two men walking holding hands? Did you assume they were gay? Would you assume that about two women walking holding hands?

While many women are subjected to slut shaming, a lot of men fear being labeled “gay” even if that is their sexual orientation. Being perceived as “feminine” is a sure way to be bullied and even beaten. For that reason, most males learn to eschew affectionate touch unless it comes from a female. And because they can only satisfy the deep human need for touch through women, that need is often sexualized and can be tinged with a sense of entitlement. Sometimes what we see as entitlement is actually desperation.

When men have been habitually denied touch, they can grow increasingly desperate. And when that reaches a critical point for many men, it can lead to an aggressive and resentful approach to sex – one that aims to take whatever they “can get” even if enthusiastic consent is lacking.

Why Women Sometimes Have Trouble Saying No

Remember my college boyfriend, Jeff? Well we did move to San Jose, California and we got an apartment together. In the beginning, I enjoyed my first live-in boyfriend and the little home we created together. But soon enough I began to question my sexual orientation. And I did not have words to talk about what I was going through.

It was 1982 and the word “bisexual” was not commonly used. I had first heard it come from the lips of Elton John when he referred to himself as bisexual during a television interview. But the term mostly evoked suspicion and derision.

But while I knew I still liked male bodies, I was becoming aware of the fact that I also desired sex with women. I had very little support in my coming out journey, with the result that I mostly experienced confusion and self-hatred.

And I completely lacked the ability to explain what I was experiencing to Jeff. Although I still found men to be sexually attractive, it was becoming clear to me that I no longer desired sex with Jeff. But rather than tell him so, I found ways to avoid sex with Jeff. Most nights I would pretend that I was asleep when he turned toward

me with sexual desire. And once he gave up, rolled over and started to snore, I would masturbate quietly while lying next to him in bed.

It's a sad picture, isn't it?

Well, I was most definitely expressing codependent behavior! Avoiding conflict and manipulating circumstances is codependent. And it gets us, and the people we love, into a lot of trouble.

There were other factors that also shaped my inability to express my needs and assert my boundaries with clarity and an open heart. These affect many women and complicate the terrain of consent. For example,

1. Most women have been taught to be "nice" instead of saying what they really want and what they really feel.
2. Some women may be afraid of confrontation so they resort to codependent patterns such as downplaying how they feel and what they want in an attempt to avoid a negative reaction from the other person.
3. Many women have learned that "going along to get along" can literally save their lives. When the other person is bigger and stronger, it is sometimes wise to avoid challenging that person, especially if that person is prone to be violent.
4. The vast majority of women have lived under the thumb of a Sexual Double Standard for thousands of years. That has trained them away from frank conversations about sex or any connection to their true sexual desires or lack of them.

Why Men Sometimes Have Sex They Don't Want

Believe it or not, some men, in fact many men, have sex when they don't want to.

Shocking huh?

It should not surprise us to learn that men are just as human as women when it comes to sexual desire. But unfortunately most of us have bought into the myth that men want sex all the time and will take any sex they can get – unless of course their moral script prevents that. But if all other things are equal and the man doesn't have to be concerned with violating his moral standards, then of course he is going to say yes to sex if the opportunity presents itself.

After all, men love sex and can't get enough of it. Right?

Wrong.

Research indicates that men are just as impacted by stress, fatigue, and feelings of being emotionally disconnected from their partner as women are. But if that is true, why are men more likely to have sex when presented with the opportunity?

It turns out that men are often more concerned about living up to the myths about men and sex than they are about connecting to their true feelings and finding the courage to express their true preferences.

So while a man might feel like saying “Not tonight Honey,” he is more likely to oblige a sexual invitation lest he be seen as less masculine or “gay.” What this means is that many men are not only performing masculinity, but they are also performing sex.

It isn't just women who suffer from the Sexual Double Standard. Men do too. But they feel the pressure of that artificial and unfair mandate from the opposite direction. While women feel pressure to deny having sexual feelings, men feel pressure to deny the lack of sexual desire.

This is such a powerful cultural mandate that some men even INITIATE sex when they do not want it!

Better Boundaries Equal Better Sex

Many of us confuse the emotional walls we construct to protect ourselves from being hurt, with the healthy boundaries that create safety in intimate relationships. But here's how you can tell the difference:

Walls are barriers intended to prevent us from getting hurt, but because walls are constructed by our fear and/or anger, they may also prevent us from connecting in a satisfying way with others. We can erect walls by appearing angry, defensive, fearful or fragile. Silence or nonstop talking both create walls to intimacy as well.

On the other hand, healthy boundaries invite communication and connection in a safe context. The safety that healthy boundaries create is based upon what we do if our boundaries are violated. Rather than try to control others, we simply have a plan for how we will respond to boundary violations. Our response is always about our own behavior. We might remove ourselves from the situation in that moment, or we might decide to terminate the relationship entirely. But we don't attempt to control others with threats, guilt or other forms of manipulation.

You can think of healthy boundaries as being similar to the lines that define a tennis court or a football gridiron or a baseball diamond. All of these boundaries are created in order to facilitate sports that humans play with each other. And by having those boundaries, we create the space in which those games are played.

Similarly, in our personal relationships, healthy boundaries define where each of us begins and ends. If we realize we are separate people and if we know how to respect our differences, then we will be empowered to become more emotionally intimate. That simple understanding about healthy boundaries creates the safety in which both emotional and sexual intimacy thrives.

And as counter-intuitive as it may seem, I have seen over and over again that better boundaries can lead to better sex!

Steps to Heal Codependency So Your Sex is Truly Consensual

Rooting out our codependent patterns is not an easy task. We have to see and then let go of our training that tells us to “be nice” rather than authentic. We have to learn how to assert healthy boundaries while creating more intimacy. We have to move beyond assumptions and find the courage to be curious and ask questions.

And that is NOT something very many people know how to do in nonsexual situations let alone while navigating the often confusing and intoxicating emotions present in a sexual context.

Asserting healthy boundaries during sexual interactions can seem difficult. But once you understand how to do it, your life will become far more joyful and healthy. And you will be well on your way to developing a relationship where you and your partner can rely on each other while also maintaining your autonomous and authentic identity.

Below is a list of ten things you can do to shift the codependent dynamics in your relationships to the interdependent dynamic that fosters fulfilling and enlivening interactions with others.

Ten Steps to Move Past Codependent Traits:

1. Put the Focus Back on You
2. Eliminate Expectations of Others and Start Meeting Your Own Expectations
3. Don't Obsess or Worry About the Other Person – Detach with Love
4. Don't Judge or Label Yourself or Others
5. Pursue Your Own Interests and Joy
6. Meditate and/or Start a Spiritual Practice
7. Don't Try to Change or “Fix” Others
8. Journal Your Feelings – Emphasis on Feelings instead of Logical Analysis
9. Practice Self-Love and Self-Acceptance
10. Get Professional Help and/or Find a Support Group

These are steps you can take to heal and transform all your connections to others. Everything begins with healthy boundaries. I need to know where I end and you begin. I need to grasp the fact that what I want might not be what you want. And that despite my best efforts to anticipate what you want or what is best for you, the better, healthier course of action is almost always for me to simply ask you what you want and need. In doing so, I show respect for you. When I respect myself as an individual with unique desires, it is easier for me to respect you as an individual with unique perspectives and desires too.

During a sexual interaction, if I want to move away from the confusion that codependent patterns can create, I can choose to stop assuming, stop attempting to read the other person's mind, and start asking questions. And rather than ask loaded questions designed to push my potential sexual partner into agreement with my sexual agenda, I will ask open-ended questions such as:

How are you feeling right now?
Do you know what you want?
Do you know what you do not want?
How can I help you feel safer and more seen?

These questions may not seem sexy, but they most definitely CAN lead to great sex.

When we are authentic and we invite true intimacy, we free each other to feel fully. And sexual passion thrives when it is fed with honesty, vulnerability and mutual respect.

Of course, it's also important that you stay connected to how you are feeling. Does your stomach get tight when you agree to a particular sexual behavior? Maybe then you need to say no to that.

Do you habitually feel anxious when you say no to requests from others? Does the very idea of saying "no" make you feel guilty? This can be a sure sign of codependency in the form of people pleasing. The goal is to move past your fear and speak your truth with confidence.

If you aren't sure how you feel, mix it up and try new responses to situations. In order to break the old patterns it helps to get out of your comfort zone and do something new. That could be as simple as saying no to something you are unsure of, and then suggesting something else. I have found this particularly helpful when I don't know what I think or feel. Saying no helps me to contact my inner compass so I can feel my true desires. Often on the other side of that no I discover a powerful yes to something else – even if the something else is simply suggesting that we do the very thing I just said no to.

Interdependent Sexual Joy and Power

When our sexual passion surges, it can be tempting to coax our lover into sex we think they will enjoy as much as we will.

And sometimes that may work.

But too often we are left with the nagging feeling that our partner doesn't return our passion as fully as we wish they did. And if we have agreed to sex we weren't all that into at the time, we might feel a bit manipulated or even coerced.

This can happen even when both participants have agreed to sex because they did so for different reasons. And while consenting adults are free to engage in sex for any reason they please, it is crucial that we know why we are saying yes to sex. It is also important that we know why our partner has agreed to our sexual overtures.

When our sexual interactions are weighed down with unexamined assumptions and unexpressed expectations, we limit the ecstasy that sex can bring to us and to our partner. We settle for sex that might be obligatory rather than enthusiastic. Worse, we override our aversions, and over time this desensitizes our bodies so that sex becomes routine and boring.

Really great sex requires healthy boundaries and open communication. When we give our relationship this gift of mutual respect and unconditional acceptance, we embark upon a sexual journey that can be truly healing, that can bring enormous amounts of love to our lives and hearts, and that can even transcend our wildest imaginings.

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