



SHIFTING GEARS: THE ADULT CHILD AND SUCCESSFUL THERAPY

By: Tarpley M. Long

Over the ten years I have worked with ACOAs and other codependents, my clients have presented me with an almost bewildering array of problems. Despite their diversity, however, a number of unifying themes have emerged.

Most codependents grew up in families in which basic human feelings such as anger and hate were denied, but negative and destructive behavior was tolerated. A major goal in therapy is to reverse this, so that feelings are accepted and acknowledged, but destructive behavior is controlled.

The denial of feelings takes a tremendous toll on children. ACOAs and other codependents seek treatment because they feel bad. This "feeling bad" translates into either anxiety: a state of fearing some calamity will occur in the future, so one's present circumstances seem dangerous, or depression: a sense that something terrible has already occurred and one's current state of misery and suffering is the result.

Like all clients, the codependent wants relief from anxiety and depression and wants life to be different. Some basic shifts in attitudes and behavior are necessary if therapy is to be considered effective.

Here are three shifts that most ACOAs must make in order to change their lives:

- **The shift from "workaholic" to creative worker.**
Many adult children are successful in their work at the beginning of treatment. Often they report their work devours them. Over time, as they identify and work through their pathological dependency, enough psychic energy is freed up to allow for pastime pleasures, hobbies and artistic endeavors. The result is that work is infused with new energy, allowing for advancement at an even more rapid pace, although actual time spent at the office may be less.
- **The shift from people pleasing and compliance to an empathic attitude.**
The successfully treated adult child is forgiving of and accepting of both self and others, especially of affects that were formerly denied because they were so frightening to acknowledge and own: rage, destructive wishes, hatefulness and terror of being alone. The term "giving" takes on new meaning; no longer depleted by one-sided relationships indulged in obsessively to maintain self esteem, the treated codependent feels enriched by reciprocal giving.
- **The shift from clingy, fearful child to independent adult capable of parenting a child.**
The successfully treated individual possesses both the confidence and willingness to manage an emotional life. It naturally follows then that there is a new ability to transmit to off-spring an attitude of excitement over knowing all about one's feeling life, as well as the pleasure derived from the knowledge that one can control one's self in the face of even intense emotional stirrings.

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