

Emotional Dependency or Emotional Responsibility

By Dr. Margaret Paul

Are you dependent upon something external to you for your good feelings, such as food, drugs, alcohol, money, approval, attention, sex? In this article, find out what it means to be emotionally responsible rather than emotionally dependent.

Emotional dependency means getting one's good feelings from outside oneself. It means needing to get filled from outside rather than from within. Who or what do you believe is responsible for your emotional wellbeing?

There are numerous forms of emotional dependency:

- ? Dependence on substances, such as food, drugs, or alcohol, to fill emptiness and take away pain.
- ? Dependency on processes such as spending, gambling, or TV, also to fill emptiness and take away pain.
- ? Dependence on money to define one's worth and adequacy.
- ? Dependence on getting someone's love, approval, or attention to feel worthy, adequate, lovable, and safe.
- ? Dependence on sex to fill emptiness and feel adequate.

When you do not take responsibility for defining your own adequacy and worth or for creating your own inner sense of safety, you will seek to feel adequate, worthy and safe externally. Whatever you do not give to yourself, you may seek from others or from substances or processes. Emotional dependency is the opposite of taking personal responsibility for one's emotional wellbeing. Yet many people have no idea that this is their responsibility, nor do they have any idea how to take this responsibility.

What does it mean to take emotional responsibility rather than be emotionally dependent?

Primarily, it means recognizing that our feelings come from our own thoughts, beliefs and behavior, rather than from others or from circumstances. Once you understand and accept that you create your own feelings, rather than your feelings coming from outside yourself, then you can begin to take emotional responsibility.

For example, let's say someone you care about gets angry at you.

If you are emotionally dependent, you may feel rejected and believe that your feelings of rejection are coming from the other's anger. You might also feel hurt, scared, anxious, inadequate, shamed, angry, blaming, or many other difficult feeling in response to the other's

anger. You might try many ways of getting the other person to not be angry in an effort to feel better.

However, if you are emotionally responsible, you will feel and respond entirely differently. The first thing you might do is to tell yourself that another person's anger has nothing to do with you. Perhaps that person is having a bad day and is taking it out on you. Perhaps that person is feeling hurt or inadequate and is trying to be one-up by putting you one-down. Whatever the reason for the other's anger, it is about them rather than about you. An emotionally responsible person does not take others' behavior personally, knowing that we have no control over others' feelings and behavior, and that we do not cause others to feel and behave the way they do - that others are responsible for their feelings and behavior just as we are for ours.

The next thing an emotionally responsible person might do is move into compassion for the angry person, and open to learning about what is going on with the other person. For example, you might say, "I don't like your anger, but I am willing to understand what is upsetting you. Would you like to talk about it?" If the person refuses to stop being angry, or if you know ahead of time that this person is not going to open up, then as an emotionally responsible person, you would take loving action in your own behalf. For example, you might say, "I'm unwilling to be at the other end of your anger. When you are ready to be open with me, let me know. Meanwhile, I'm going to take a walk (or hang up the phone, or leave the restaurant, or go into the other room, and so on). An emotionally responsible person gets out of range of attack rather than tries to change the other person.

Once out of range, the emotionally responsible person goes inside and explores any painful feelings that might have resulted from the attack. For example, perhaps you are feeling lonely as a result of being attacked. An emotionally responsible person embraces the feelings of loneliness with understanding and compassion, holding them just as you would hold a sad child. When you acknowledge and embrace the feelings of loneliness, you allow them to move through you quickly, so you can move back into peace.

Rather than being a victim of the other's behavior, you have taken emotional responsibility for yourself. Instead of staying stuck in feeling angry, hurt, blaming, afraid, anxious or inadequate, you have moved yourself back into feeling safe and peaceful.

When you realize that your feelings are your responsibility, you can move out of emotional dependency. This will make a huge difference within you and with all of your relationships. Relationships thrive when each person moves out of emotional dependency and into emotional responsibility.