



Annelisa MacBean
PHD PSYCHOLOGIST

THE DANCE BETWEEN CODEPENDENTS and NARCISSISTS

By Ross Rosenberg

We therapists live for moments when everything “clicks” and our clients arrive at an understanding that had eluded them until that moment. There is nothing more rewarding than when a well-placed analogy or metaphor creates the breakthrough moment. When spot-on, the resulting “lightbulb” reaction or “aha” moment is priceless.

Of all of the metaphors I use in psychotherapy, the “dance” has been the most provocative and powerfully impactful with my clients who are codependent. It has helped them understand their predilection for choosing “dance partners” who are ultimately controlling and harmful. It has also assisted them in coming to terms with their seemingly magnetic attraction to narcissistic romantic partners. Over time, the dance metaphor developed into one of my favorite psychotherapeutic techniques because it helped to facilitate perception of rigid thought patterns, break down systems of denial and enable emotional and intellectual understanding of dysfunctional relationship dynamics.

The dance metaphor works because it almost perfectly aligns with what we know about real dancing partnerships. For example, compatible dancers are well matched in their approach or roles: one always needs to be the leader and the other the follower. The leader always navigates the dance with precision, and the follower acquiesces seamlessly. These two choose songs to dance to that they know completely and intuitively. They are exquisitely attuned to the other’s dancing style, moves and idiosyncrasies. To an onlooker, it appears that they dance with ESP, each knowing and predicting the other’s moves before they happen.

Individuals who are codependent “dance” so well with individuals who are narcissists because their pathological personalities or “dance styles” are complementary. In other words, they are perfectly matched partners. Their well-matched dance preferences bond them together in a resilient and lasting partnership, even if one or both partners are unhappy, resentful or angry. As well-matched dancers, they perform magnificently on the dance floor because they instinctively expect each other’s moves. They dance effortlessly with each other, as if they have always danced together. Each knows his or her role and sticks to it. But it is dysfunctional compatibility that is the driving force behind this dynamic dancing duo.

As perfectly compatible dancing partners, the narcissist dancer is the “yin” to the codependent’s “yang.” The giving, sacrificial and passive nature of the person who is

codependent matches up perfectly with the entitled, demanding and self-centered traits of the individual who is narcissistic. Like human magnets, codependents and narcissists continue their rocky and seemingly unstable relationship because of their opposite dance roles or, as I refer to them, their “magnetic roles.” The lasting bond created by these perfectly matched human magnets or dysfunctional dancers is interminably powerful, binding them together despite myriad consequences or shared unhappiness. Although their rollercoaster relationship provokes more anxiety and disconnect than happiness, both seem compelled to continue the dance.

These perfectly matched dancers always seem to nail their dance routines, which is to be expected because they have been practicing their passive and predictive dance moves their whole adult lives. The dancing skills of someone who is codependent are distinctly connected to the person’s reflexive dysfunctional agility — the ability to be attuned to the cues, gestures and self-serving movements of their narcissist partners. In almost every facet of their life, individuals who are codependent pride themselves on knowing what people want and need, almost before their friends, family members or partners know it themselves. Hence, the codependent person is adept at anticipating his or her narcissist partner’s moves, while still experiencing the dance as a positive experience.

Conversely, “dancers” who are narcissistic are drawn to codependent partners because they are allowed to feel dominant, secure and in control in an activity that brings them much attention, praise and appreciation. They habitually choose or fall in love with codependent dance partners because they are given open and tacit permission to be the center of focus, lead the direction of the dance and, ultimately, determine where, when and how the dance will proceed. In other words, the narcissist’s grandiosity, entitlement and need to be in control are not only allowed by his or her codependent partner, but also paradoxically make the partner feel safe and secure in the dance.

The dance metaphor has been instrumental to my work with codependent clientele because it helped them understand their persistent dysfunctional attraction pattern to hurtful and selfish narcissistic romantic partners. It also helped them in breaking their perpetual and reflexive patterns of choosing dance partners who initially felt perfect but eventually revealed themselves to be so wrong — even harmful — for them. As a relative who sadly is a narcissist once told me when explaining the nature of relationships: “The soul mate of your dreams is gonna become the cellmate of your nightmares.”

Therapy that utilizes my dance metaphor consistently provokes a deeper understanding of dysfunctional relationship patterns. Over time, my clients have developed the confidence, insight and feelings of personal efficacy and power to break free from their dysfunctional relationship patterns. Released from their propensity to fall in love with narcissists, these “recovering” codependents are finally able to fall reflexively, if not magnetically, into the arms of a loving, desirable and emotionally healthy dance partner.

In 2007, following an inspiring breakthrough therapy session with one of my clients, I decided to consolidate all of my ideas about the codependent/narcissist dance phenomenon into an essay titled “Codependency, Don’t Dance.” The essay flowed from me with ease because I had been contemplating and talking about these concepts for more than five years. I would later realize that the ideas had been marinating in my mind ever since I made the promise to myself that I would put an end to my own penchant for dating, falling in love with and marrying narcissistic women. I have no doubt that if I hadn’t figured out how to change my own dysfunctional dance pattern, the dance “light bulb” never would have appeared above my head.

The essay was an immediate hit with my codependent clients because it seemed to galvanize their understanding of their own dysfunctional and self-defeating relationship choices. It represented my own truism about the psychotherapy process: You can’t change a long-standing dysfunctional pattern until you first understand what it is and where it comes from; the deeper the understanding of the internal processes, the more apt the therapy experience is to yield positive results.

Since writing this essay, it has become the most requested piece of my written work and is also included in my book, *The Human Magnet Syndrome: Why We Love People Who Hurt Us*. I’m honored and grateful that the essay has helped thousands of people to analyze and, ultimately, understand their seemingly mysterious and habitual relationship patterns with narcissists. What follows is an excerpt of the essay:

When a codependent and narcissist come together in their relationship, their dance unfolds flawlessly: The narcissistic partner maintains the lead and the codependent follows. Their roles seem natural to them because they have actually been practicing them their whole lives; the codependent reflexively gives up their power and since the narcissist thrives on control and power, the dance is perfectly coordinated. No one gets their toes stepped on.

Typically, codependents give of themselves much more than their partners give back to them. As “generous” but bitter dance partners, they seem to be stuck on the dance floor, always waiting for the “next song,” at which time they naively hope that their narcissistic partner will finally understand their needs. Codependents confuse caretaking and sacrifice with loyalty and love. Although they are proud of their unwavering dedication to the person they love, they end up feeling unappreciated and used. Codependents yearn to be loved, but because of their choice of dance partner, find their dreams unrealized. With the heartbreak of unfulfilled dreams, codependents silently and bitterly swallow their unhappiness.

Codependents are essentially stuck in a pattern of giving and sacrificing, without the possibility of ever receiving the same from their partner. They pretend to enjoy the dance, but really harbor feelings of anger, bitterness and sadness for not taking an active role in their dance experience. They are convinced that they will never find a dance partner who will love them for who they are, as opposed to what they can do for them. Their low self-esteem and pessimism manifests itself into a form of learned

helplessness that ultimately keeps them on the dance floor with their narcissistic partner.

The narcissist dancer, like the codependent, is attracted to a partner who feels perfect to them: Someone who lets them lead the dance while making them feel powerful, competent and appreciated. In other words, the narcissist feels most comfortable with a dancing companion who matches up with their self-absorbed and boldly selfish dance style. Narcissist dancers are able to maintain the direction of the dance because they always find partners who lack self-worth, confidence and who have low self-esteem — codependents. With such a well-matched companion, they are able to control both the dancer and the dance.

Although all codependent dancers desire harmony and balance, they consistently sabotage themselves by choosing a partner who they are initially attracted to, but will ultimately resent. When given a chance to stop dancing with their narcissistic partner and comfortably sit the dance out until someone healthy comes along, they typically choose to continue their dysfunctional dance. They dare not leave their narcissistic dance partner because their lack of self-esteem and self-respect makes them feel like they can do no better. Being alone is the equivalent of feeling lonely, and loneliness is too painful to bear.

Although codependents dream of dancing with an unconditionally loving and affirming partner, they submit to their dysfunctional destiny. Until they decide to heal the psychological wounds that ultimately compel them to dance with their narcissistic dance partners, they will be destined to maintain the steady beat and rhythm of their dysfunctional dance.

Through psychotherapy, and perhaps a 12-step recovery program, the codependent can begin to recognize that their dream to dance the grand dance of love, reciprocity and mutuality is indeed possible. Through therapy and a change of lifestyle, codependents can build (repair) their tattered self-esteem. The journey of healing and transformation will bring them feelings of personal power and efficacy that will foster a desire to finally dance with someone who is willing and capable of sharing the lead, communicating their movements and pursuing a mutual loving rhythmic dance.

In conclusion, it is my belief that all codependents, if motivated and committed to a healing and engaging psychotherapy process, are able to stop their insanity-inducing dance with narcissists. Developing a non-wavering belief in one's self-worth and commitment to the ideal of healthy and resilient love, we all can finally experience personal and relational joy. The quote that best captures my philosophy of the codependency recovery process comes from George Eliot: "It's never too late to be what you might have been." Or, as I might say it, "It is never too late to dance with the partner of your dreams."

Ultimately, the dance is between the distracted distortions of the human ego and the truth of what and who we have always known ourselves to be is the dance of all dances.

*Becoming awake and aware of **that** relationship dance is at the root of sustainable self-worth and self-esteem.*