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Psychological features of women's codependency during the midlife crisis

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Abstract. The relevance of the research is conditioned upon the rapid spread of the problem of codependency, which has a destructive impact on the psychological state, and social and personal development of a person. The purpose of the research is to determine the psychological traits of codependent women in the period of midlife crisis. The research methodology is based on the methods of critical analysis, synthesis and generalisation of scientific and methodological literature. In the course of the study, the concept of codependence is defined, and the factors of its development are identified. It has been established that the main factor that becomes a prerequisite for the emergence of codependency is upbringing in a dysfunctional family. The psychological features of women's codependency and their manifestations are described. It has been established that codependent women are characterised by low self-esteem, a desire to control others, using psychological defence mechanisms, self-sacrifice, and caring for others, forgetting about their own needs and feelings. The author analyses the midlife crisis as a factor of personality transformation and a period with a high opportunity to free oneself from codependency. It is determined that during a midlife crisis, a person tries to reassess their life, achievements, and behavioural patterns. The author argues that the midlife crisis can have both destructive consequences, including the loss of the meaning of life, and constructive ones, which are manifested in the discovery of new meanings. The results of the scientific research are designed to generalise theoretical data on the problem of codependency and identify the psychological traits of codependent women. The theoretical significance of the research lies in the systematisation of scientific approaches to the study of codependent personality and the identification of psychological traits of codependent women in the period of midlife crisis

Keywords: personality; dysfunctional family; Karpman's triangle; dependence (addiction); low self-esteem; psychological boundaries; identity

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INTRODUCTION

The problem of codependency remains one of the most pressing in modern society. The number of people suffering from both chemical and non-chemical addictions is increasing worldwide. Most foreign and Ukrainian researchers have explored codependency, pointing to the link between family dysfunction and the development of addictive behaviour. In her research, V. Bozhenko (2020) identified the psychological aspects of the phenomenon of codependent relationships in a couple. J. Lampis *et al.* (2017) explored the role of self-differentiation and dyadic adaptation in predicting codependency. A. Lymankina

(2022) identified modern approaches to understanding the definition of the phenomenon of codependency. B. Weinhold and J. Weinhold (2006) considered codependency as an acquired dysfunctional behaviour. N. Tkachenko (2022) explored the specifics of the relationship between the type of attachment and codependency in adults. Codependency, as a form of addictive behaviour, is developed in interpersonal relationships, primarily with close family members. Despite a significant number of models of addictive behaviour, the psychological features of women's codependency during the midlife crisis remain insufficiently understood.



S.-H. Chang (2018) explored a model of codependency development based on Bowen's concept of differentiation to determine the relationship between self-differentiation, codependency traits, and family withdrawal dysfunction. Z. Happ *et al.* (2022) interpret codependency as a dysfunctional pattern of relationships with others. The correlation between family members and personality type was explored by M. Orbon *et al.* (2021).

Among the Ukrainian researchers who have explored the problem of codependency, it is important to note the work of T. Vakulich (2012), in which she identified the specific features of women's codependency in the family. The influence of the family as a factor in the development of codependent behaviour has been examined by O. Nikonova (2014), O. Savchuk (2005) etc. V. Kanevskyi and S. Dovzhuk (2021) identified the role and types of emotional mechanisms that influence the development of codependency. The study of the behaviour of codependent persons is devoted to the work of V. Ivanchenko and A. Zastelo (2021) (psychological characteristics of codependents with a tendency to addictive behaviour), D. Sushko (2019) (codependent behaviour in the context of scientific research).

Despite the growing interest in the problem of codependency both in society and among scientists, there is a need for research in this area, as there is a significant lack of such studies and contradictions between the definitions of the concept of "codependency" based on clinical and theoretical generalisations, and the lack of clear psychological traits inherent in a codependent personality.

During the midlife crisis, women have the opportunity to transform their identity and "free themselves" from codependency, but it is necessary to consider the specifics of this crisis and its combination with the psychological traits of a codependent personality. This issue is not sufficiently covered in the psychological literature, which confirms its relevance.

The purpose of the research is to identify and characterise the psychological traits of codependent women in the period of midlife crisis.

Objectives of the study: to theoretically examine the specific features of the midlife crisis in women; to identify the psychological features of codependency.

ANALYSIS OF PREVIOUS STUDIES

The analysis of different theoretical approaches allows an understanding of the phenomenon of codependency both as a secondary phenomenon associated with chemical dependence and as a disorder of personality development that is developed in early child-parent relationships. In this regard, the opinion of J. Bowlby (1969) is important, who believed that the development of codependency is based on an incomplete process of separation, the lack of symbiotic relationship between mother and child, which results in the incompleteness of one of the most important stages of development in early childhood – the stage of establishing psychological autonomy. These women do not feel their psychological boundaries, do not accept their own identity, and suppress their feelings, as they constantly focus on the

desires, purposes and needs of other family members, forget about themselves, and become powerless to solve their problems and meet their needs.

A crisis is a holistic change in a person's personality caused by the appearance of neoplasms. Age-related crises are associated with qualitative changes that occur in the sphere of social relations of the individual, in the sphere of their activity and consciousness. C.G. Jung (2017) believed that during a midlife crisis, a person seeks to change the developed ideals, and behavioural patterns, and "free themselves" from the influence of others. Considerable attention to the midlife crisis was paid by E. Erikson (1950). Contemporary researchers who have examined the psychological aspects of a person's experience of a midlife crisis include H. Rud (2018), who identified the specific features of exacerbation of intrapersonal contradictions and character traits as psychological factors that influence the emergence of a midlife crisis.

Due to the significant medical and social significance of chemical dependence, researchers and professionals in the fields of medicine, psychiatry, and counselling initially focused on it, and many scientific studies have been devoted to its analysis. Codependency as an important element of the personality structure has only recently been explored by foreign and Ukrainian psychologists. Initially, studies of this phenomenon were conducted in the United States, then in Europe, and now in Ukraine. Theoretical substantiation of the concept was provided by E. Larsen (1985), who considered codependency as a character defect. According to M. Murray (2021), a codependent person is a person who sacrifices themselves. P. O'Brien and M. Gaborit (1992) associated codependency with interpersonal interaction and self autonomy. T. Cermak (1998) proposed to recognise codependency as a "mixed personality disorder" and described the criteria for its diagnosis.

Throughout life, people face age-related crises. Every time they overcome a crisis, they move to a new level of life. One of the most dangerous age crises is the midlife crisis.

A midlife crisis is associated with an internal problem characterised by a loss of meaning in life. A person falls into a state in which their personality ceases to function as it used to. Habitual patterns of behaviour cease to work and bring pleasure.

Developmental crises of adulthood have been explored mainly in Western psychology. The problem of age-related crises of the middle-aged personality was examined by C. Grof (1993), E. Erikson (1950), C.G. Jung (2017) etc. Their research examined the crisis from the perspective of individual development, professional fulfilment and personal relationships, most frequently – intra-family relationships. Individual personality development and crisis were central to the works of E. Erikson (1950) and C.G. Jung (2017), who highlighted the existential experiences of a person during this transitional period and the change in their values. O. Zubchenko (2021) examines the midlife crisis from a Jungian perspective. The study by S. Kuzikova and T. Shcherbak (2020) identifies the psychological

features of the midlife crisis. The influence of family values and standards on the ability to overcome crises and traumatic experiences of previous generations in one's life was explored by L. Hrydkovets (2017; 2018).

Analysing the works of researchers on codependency and midlife crisis, it can be concluded that they have identified the specific features of the midlife crisis in women and the psychological features of codependency.

PSYCHOLOGICAL FEATURES OF CODEPENDENCY

There is no universally accepted definition of codependency, thus it is necessary to describe the phenomenology of this condition. The following definition can be used as a general one.

A codependent personality is a person who seeks to fully control the behaviour of a close addict and does not care about meeting their own life needs.

Codependents can be: people who are married or in a love relationship with a chemically dependent person; parents, brothers and sisters of a chemically dependent person; people who grew up in dysfunctional families.

Since the early 1980s, this phenomenon has become quite relevant and has been actively explored. Many scholars have proposed their definitions, which cover this concept from one side or another. Some believed that it was a disease, while others associated it with psychological and emotional disorders.

The American researcher S. Wegsneider-Cruse (1985) believes that codependency is a constant focus of thoughts on another person and dependence (emotional, social, sometimes physical) on that person. Sometimes this addiction becomes a pathological condition that affects other relationships.

According to T. Cermak (1998), codependency is a personality disorder associated with the need to control the situation to avoid undesirable consequences: inattention to one's own needs; violation of personal boundaries; merging all interests with a dysfunctional personality. Other manifestations include depression, stress-induced somatic diseases, and denial.

Codependency has a destructive impact on a person's life, causes psychosomatic illnesses and disrupts adaptation (Koliada & Huivan, 2021). Codependency is influenced by many factors. These include living with a chemically dependent person, insufficient social support from others, and the need to overcome difficulties. The most important factor in codependency is the parental family. Codependency has its roots in childhood, and childhood trauma is a significant factor in its development. Growing up in a dysfunctional family shapes the psychological characteristics of a personality that provide the foundation for codependency.

The study by L. Berezovska *et al.* (2021) identifies two groups of factors: social (experience with addicted people) and psychological (tendency to addictive behaviour, lack of self-confidence). According to the researcher, the signs of codependency are: fear of loneliness and attempts to avoid it at all costs; the willingness of the individual to humiliate themselves and do things that are unpleasant to receive

praise; inability to make decisions independently; feeling helpless; and vulnerability.

According to B. da Costa *et al.* (2017), a codependent person has feelings of guilt, sadness, fear, regret, denial, and control of the other.

Consider the psychological features of codependency more closely. One of these traits is low self-esteem, which is fundamental to this problem and generates others. Codependent people are completely dependent on external evaluations and on relationships with other people. Due to their low self-esteem, they often criticise themselves but do not like to be criticised by others. They do not consider themselves good people, are afraid of making mistakes, and feel guilty when they spend money on themselves or indulge in some kind of entertainment (Cermak, 1998). Codependents are ashamed of the problem of a loved one's chemical dependency. They keep this problem secret. They try to hide it from their friends and acquaintances, and even from their families.

Low self-esteem drives a codependent personality when they seek to help others. As they do not believe that they can be valuable on their own, they seek to attract attention.

Codependent women try to control a dependent loved one (husband, son, etc.). They believe that they can control everything: they can "forbid" their husband to drink alcohol; they can control the perception of their family by others through a positive impression; they believe that others see their family as they portray it.

Codependents use various means to control others: persuasion, threats, advice, and coercion, they emphasise the helplessness of the dependent person. In addition, they use manipulation and guilt as a means of control. Attempts to take control of almost uncontrollable events cause depression. Codependents view the inability to achieve the purpose of control as their defeat and loss of meaning. If the defeat is repeated, it aggravates depression. Another result of controlling behaviour is frustration and anger.

"Saving" others is the "vocation" of codependents. Caring for others crosses normal boundaries. The behaviour of codependents stems from the belief that they are responsible for the thoughts, feelings, actions of others, for their choices, desires and needs, and for their well-being. They take responsibility for other people, but are completely irresponsible for their well-being: they sleep poorly, eat poorly, and do not meet their own needs. By "saving" the addict, the codependent person contributes to the addict's continued use of drugs or alcohol. Then the codependent gets angry as attempts to "save" them fail. It is a destructive form of behaviour for both the addict and the codependent.

The desire to "save" codependents is intense enough that they may do things they do not want to do. They say "yes" when they want to say "no", satisfy the needs of their loved ones when they do not ask for it and do not even want anything done for them. Codependents constantly give more than they receive from a loved one. They speak for the other, think for them, and believe that they can control their feelings. In joint activities, they do more than they would have to do. Such "care" implies the helplessness of

the other, their inability to do what the codependent loved one does for them. All of this makes the latter feel needed. When “rescuing” an addicted loved one, codependents follow certain patterns known as S. Karpman’s “Dramatic Triangle” (Fig. 1) (Karpman, 1968).

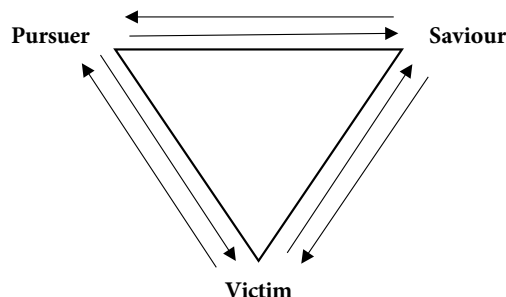


Figure 1. The dramatic triangle of S. Karpman

Source: S. Karpman (1968)

If a codependent person does not learn to identify the moments when they become a “saviour”, they will constantly allow others to put them in the position of a victim. In fact, codependent people themselves participate in the process of their own victimisation. The change of roles in the triangle evokes intense emotions. The time spent in a particular role is not fixed, it can be several minutes, days or even years.

Most of the actions of codependents are motivated by fear, which can be related to anything. When a person lives with a sense of fear, they develop a progressive tendency to stiffen their body and spirit, and fear restrains their freedom of choice. The world in which codependents live is filled with anxiety and the expectation of bad news. In such circumstances, they become more rigid and tighten their control, trying to maintain the illusion they have built.

The emotional palette of codependents, along with fear, includes other adverse emotions: shame, anxiety, despair, guilt, anger, hatred, and rage. Sometimes they have lost the skills of recognising and understanding their feelings as their attention is focused on satisfying the needs of others, and they have lost their sense of self. Codependents get used to distorting their feelings, having learnt from their parents’ home that they can only experience “allowed” feelings.

Anger plays a prominent role in the life of a codependent person. They feel hurt, vulnerable, angry and usually tend to live with someone who feels the same way. Codependents are afraid of their anger and the anger of others, thus they repress, suppress, and suppress their anger. Due to the suppression of anger, they can cry a lot, commit rash acts, be hostile, get sick, etc.

The mental state of codependents frequently includes shame and guilt. They are ashamed of their behaviour and the behaviour of their loved ones. They do not have clear personal boundaries, therefore shame can result in social isolation. To avoid shame, codependents do not visit or invite friends over.

Codependents use all forms of psychological defence: minimisation, rationalisation, displacement, but most often denial. They try to ignore the problems or pretend that

nothing serious is happening, and they easily believe lies. Sometimes they try to distract themselves with something to avoid thinking about the main problem. Denial helps codependents to live in a world of illusions, as the truth is very painful for them. Denial is the means by which they deceive themselves. Codependents deny the signs of codependency. It is this ability to deny that prevents them from motivating themselves to address their own needs, allows codependency to progress, and keeps the entire family in a dysfunctional state.

According to Yu. Kashpur (2019), in codependent relationships, loyalty takes on the meaning of an emotional burden. A codependent personality assesses the object of loyalty as a weak and helpless person who needs to be “saved”, thus, perceiving their actions through the prism of usefulness for the partner.

Thus, codependency in its various manifestations is one of the most common problems that prevent women from living a full life. Middle-aged women are particularly susceptible to this form of relationship destruction, as they feel a constant desire for approval from others, are unaware of their desires and needs, are unable to feel true intimacy and love, and tend to maintain “toxic” relationships.

FEATURES OF THE MIDLIFE CRISIS

During the midlife crisis, women with codependency can undergo an identity transformation and free themselves from codependency. Consider the specifics of this period.

Middle age is the age of mental productivity, when a person can find the strength to achieve significance in society, in the family, and in their own eyes by expanding the boundaries of their self, returning to the meaning of their life, and understanding their existential nature. At this age, needs such as the realisation of one’s creative potential, the necessity to pass on knowledge to the next generation, correction of activities, care for maintaining relationships with family and friends, and preparation for a peaceful old age become more acute (Aleksandrov, 2015). Therewith, the totality of a person’s experiences at this age is uneven. One of the specific features of middle age is the subjectivity of the individual. During this period, people frequently feel depressed and lonely. All the basic existential problems (loss of meaning, isolation, etc.) become more acute, the need to find a purpose and self-realisation sharply increases, and several specific social and psychological problems arise (maladjustment, a complete change of values, social loneliness, change of social status), depression, apathy, anxiety.

For most people, the transition to middle age goes unnoticed. A midlife crisis is typical for those who avoid introspection and use defence mechanisms of denial, trying to ignore the changes that occur in their lives (Bayer, 2010).

According to C. Grof (1993), crises have a positive impact (psychotherapeutic and developmental) on the individual and help to rid them of mental disorders such as neuroses and depression. He identified the most common signs of a crisis: anxiety, panic, the actualisation of phobias, and a reassessment of the meaning of life.

Changes in middle-aged women occur on several levels: cognitive, physiological, emotional and volitional, etc. During a period of normative crisis, women go through a period of critical self-evaluation and reassessment of what has been achieved in their lives up to this point, analysing the authenticity of their lifestyle. The critical period can be successful if, as a result of overcoming the symptoms of the crisis, the individual finds more productive ways of interacting with others, and new patterns of behaviour, i.e. uses the crisis for personal development.

Codependent women, after a difficult experience in a dysfunctional family and destructive addictive relationships, may feel the need to change their lives and form their lifestyle, a model of behaviour different from that developed in childhood, during the midlife crisis. During this period, a woman strives to be an individual, not like her mother and grandmother, she tries to change her loyalty to her family. In addition, she tries to change codependent relationships by developing a new identity.

Women with codependency during the midlife crisis may be disappointed in their chosen profession, as their choice of education may have been influenced by their parents' opinion and they have no interest in specialisation. Relationships with the opposite sex may be unsuccessful due to the tendency to love addiction (codependency) or avoid addiction (counterdependency), and difficulties may arise in establishing close, trusting relationships (Sorokina, 2014).

In the self-awareness of a person of this age, age reflection can be traced as a consequence of a decrease in self-esteem and a negative attitude towards one's abilities and potential. In addition, the spiritual experiences of the individual are actualised: current values and meaning are revised, the previous ones are frequently devalued, and new ones have not yet been established in the individual's mind, which manifests itself in a sense of meaninglessness of existence and loss of hope.

The midlife crisis results in a reassessment of one's choices: spouse, career, and life purposes, and sometimes it leads to divorce and a change of profession (Breusenko, 2000). For a woman with codependency, this period can be particularly crisis-ridden, as resistance to necessary changes increases due to rigidity. Therefore, it is important to support a woman at this moment. It is very important that they understand that they have their own needs and interests and that they should implement themselves as a person. Overcoming the age crisis, a codependent person transforms their identity, developing new opinions and beliefs, and a new model of behaviour.

Thus, it can be said that a midlife crisis can have a detrimental effect on a person and can help them get rid of codependency by reassessing their own life and building a new model of interaction with others. This conclusion was made based on an analysis of the literature on the midlife crisis. According to this statement, it can be said that during this period, it is necessary to help the codependent, to teach them to live for themselves, and not just to please others.

If a codependent's mid-life crisis is particularly acute, they need help from a psychologist who will help them learn to control themselves, and manage their emotions, which will gradually lead to a rethinking of their own lives and building a new model of behaviour through an identity transformation.

CONCLUSIONS

In the course of the theoretical study, it was determined that the phenomenon of codependency is a very common and understudied phenomenon today, which has not yet been clearly defined. The majority of both foreign and Ukrainian researchers only describe it, but the interest of researchers in this phenomenon is growing, which allows them to accumulate and systematise theoretical and empirical data.

The author identifies the main psychological features of codependency, which include: low self-esteem; the desire to control, care for and "save" others; distortion of feelings; a tendency to denial; psychosomatic diseases caused by stress, depression, etc.

In addition, the research has established that in the period of middle age, a person comes to understand the need for change, but that this change should already occur at the individual level and be expressed in self-development, self-learning, self-education, and self-realisation. Everything that happens to a person at the physical and psychological level must be understood by the individual, and the result of this process can either advance the personality to a qualitatively new level or lead to anxiety, depression, neurosis and other disorders that do not allow the individual to realise themselves in a new age period.

The analysis of the thematic literature has identified that a midlife crisis is not necessary for every individual. This period has a positive impact on personal growth and transformation. Codependent individuals are the most susceptible to this age-related crisis, as they are the ones who experience serious emotional breakdowns. A codependent person is always trying to satisfy the needs of a significant other by sacrificing themselves, and in times of crisis they resort to analysing their lives and realising their helplessness, thus, the crisis can be very acute, but overcoming it will help them to "free themselves" from codependency.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that the purpose of the research has been achieved. The scientific originality of the research is that the understanding of the specific features of the midlife crisis in codependent women is expanded and the psychological features of codependency are identified. Areas for further research include conducting an empirical study to determine the level of codependency, self-esteem, and anxiety in middle-aged women.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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Психологічні риси співзалежності жінок у період кризи середнього віку

Анотація. Актуальність дослідження зумовлено стрімким поширенням проблеми співзалежності, яка деструктивно впливає на психологічний стан, соціальний та особистісний розвиток людини. Мета статті – визначити психологічні риси особистості співзалежних жінок у період кризи середнього віку. Основу методології дослідження становлять методи критичного аналізу, синтезу та узагальнення науково-методичної літератури. У процесі дослідження визначено поняття співзалежності та з'ясовано чинники її формування. Установлено, що головний чинник, що стає передумовою виникнення співзалежності, – це виховання в дисфункціональній сім'ї. Охарактеризовано психологічні риси співзалежності жінок та їхні прояви. Установлено, що співзалежні жінки характеризуються низькою самооцінкою, прагненням контролювати інших, застосуванням психологічних механізмів захисту, самопожертвуванням, вони піклуються про інших, забуваючи про власні потреби та почуття. Проаналізовано кризу середнього віку як чинник трансформації особистості та період з високою можливістю звільнитися від співзалежності. Визначено, що в період кризи середнього віку особистість намагається переоцінити своє життя, досягнення, модель поведінки. Обґрунтовано думку про те, що криза середнього віку може мати не лише руйнівні наслідки, серед яких втрата сенсу життя, а й конструктивні, які проявляються у віднайденні нових смислів. Результати наукової статті спрямовано на узагальнення теоретичних даних проблеми співзалежності та визначення психологічних рис співзалежних жінок. Теоретичне значення статті полягає в систематизації наукових підходів до вивчення співзалежної особистості та визначенні психологічних рис особистості співзалежних жінок у період кризи середнього віку

Ключові слова: особистість; дисфункціональна сім'я; трикутник Карпмана; залежність (залежний); низька самооцінка; психологічні кордони; ідентичність
