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Women cope with 'co-alcoholism' through counseling, workshops

By Mary Courtis
Of the Emerald

For women, growing up in a dysfunctional home can lead to feelings of low self-esteem, the desire to rescue or to take care of others and win their love, an addiction to men and emotional pain, and problems with guilt, depression and substance abuse.

They often are drawn to people with problems that need fixing, and they view chaotic, uncertain situations and relationships as routine. In addition, they often try to control others out of fear of abandonment and personal insecurity.

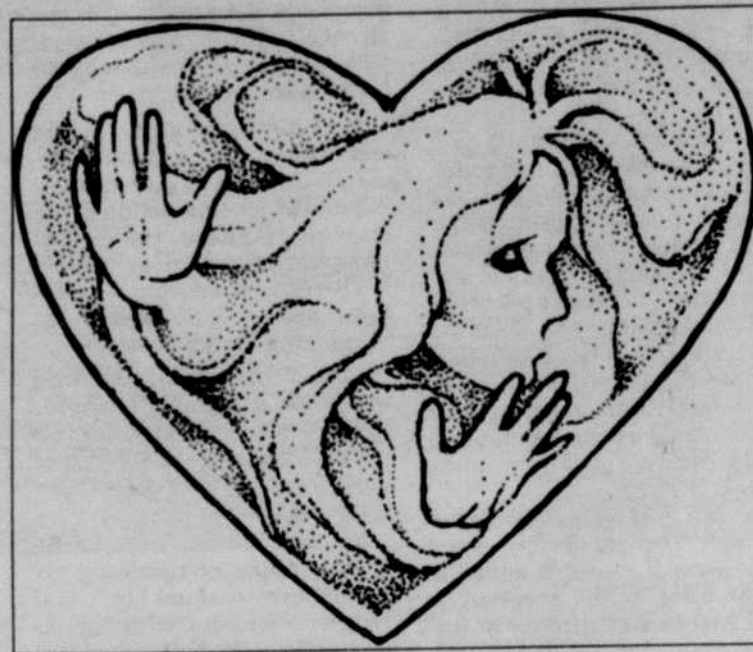
As a result, these women find themselves attracted to alcoholics or other emotionally unavailable and troubled men whom they try to control or manage, repeating the patterns learned during childhood, according to "Women Who Love Too Much," a book by Robin Norwood.

Because women believe they can change a man by just loving him enough, Norwood coined the phrase "women who love too much" to describe them.

But loving too much is not the problem, said Carolyn Hess, a licensed substance-abuse therapist in Eugene.

"Everyone comes from a dysfunctional family to some degree," Hess said. "And the unhealthy patterns we learn as a child can greatly damage our ability to feel and relate."

Dysfunctional families are characterized by alcoholism, other kinds of drug abuse, physical battering, constant arguing and tension or extreme



Graphic by Lorraine Rath

rigidity about money, religion, work, use of time, display of affection, sex or other issues.

These conditions have adverse effects on children growing up, especially in terms of their capacity to express emotion and form satisfying relationships as adults.

"If we're a co-alcoholic, it doesn't mean that we love too much," Hess said. "It means we're obsessed with managing another person and their life. I refer to it as a disease."

Gloria Villagian, a Eugene counselor, agreed.

"I emphasize the word as 'dis-ease,'" she said. "When we live in constant dis-ease, life becomes chaotic. And it can get worse. Dis-ease can kill you."

Suicide, cancer and heart attacks are only some of the dangers the prolonged stress of being a co-alcoholic can produce, Villagian said.

Consequently, it is very important that a person recognize that she has a problem and seeks help, through counseling, friends or some other support group, she said.

"Women should get involved in group therapy," Villagian said. "By doing so, they come in contact with women at different levels of recovery and have a chance to learn new coping skills and receive a wide variety of feedback."

"Just talking to one other friend may keep feeding into the same insanity," Hess added. "In a group you get eight or nine points of view. Personally, I am more in favor of group than individual therapy for this reason."

Both Villagian and Hess, who co-sponsored a workshop last weekend, agreed that participating in a workshop for co-alcoholics was an excellent way for people to start getting their lives back on track.

By attending a workshop, women learn what a dysfunctional family is, the attitudes and behavior patterns it may lead to and utilize role-playing — visualizations and guided meditations to begin dealing with destructive cycles.

"One of the visualizations we do is to have every person get in touch with the black and golden chords that tie us to other people," Villagian said. "The black chords are the false ideas we grew up with, and we visualize pulling them out of our heart and tossing them into the fire. Women can take this technique home with them and do it on

their own, too, if they need to."

Workshop participation also fosters a feeling of commonality and encourages people not to judge themselves or others, she said.

"People often feel like they are the only ones going through this," Villagian said. "By participating in a workshop...they learn that they are not alone. Listening to other people talk can also help us understand our own patterns better."

"We realize that if I had had these experiences, then I would feel that way, too. A support group allows women to take back their power, to see that they have choices, and that they can actively make them rather than just reacting and doing what they have always done."

Hess agreed, saying, "We try to help each individual feel validated as a person."

"Often women invalidate themselves and their experiences, but we encourage them to see that they have a right to be angry, that they deserve happiness and harmony in life, that they can love themselves and learn to express love for others in a positive rather than a negative way."

Both counselors also stressed the need for co-alcoholics to make their own recovery their first priority and commit themselves wholeheartedly to this goal.

The woman must accept that her desire to seek help could interfere with or even end her present relationships, they say. Finding a therapist who knows about her situation and how to deal with it is also a must, as is not getting discouraged if progress is slow.


"What we don't face up to is what hurts us the most," Hess said. "Recovery is a continual process. If it's taken us 30 years to get messed up, you aren't going to turn that around overnight."

Workshop participants agreed with this observation.

"The benefit of all this for me is that I realize I still have a lot of personal growth to do," said participant Donna Reddon. "I'm not finished with my anger, and there are many other issues I still need to work on. But I don't want to quit. The whole process is too exciting."

"I really appreciate the support and caring I've gotten here today from other women," said

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