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**WOMEN'S COPING AND ATTACHMENT PATTERNS: CO-  
DEPENDENT MOTHERS AND CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS`  
ADDICTS**

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***Abstract***

The problem of coping with stress among co-dependent and destructively-related women is relevant for modern science. In the paper it is analysed what is in common in two phenomena “destructive attachment” to a partner and “co-dependency” in close family relations: and the basic concepts are revealed and the characteristics of the phenomena are given. Cognitive-emotional attachment patterns for two groups of women are differentiated, justified and described. The aim of qualitative and quantitative studies is to compare the coping behaviour of co-dependent and destructively attached women, identifying cognitive-emotional patterns of their attachment and coping. A thorough analysis of world trends that determine a similarity and differences in both kinds of women`s behaviour is made basing on updated sources. The results of qualitative and quantitative research reflect specifics of coping with stress by co-dependent and destructively attached to partner women. The findings confirm that for both - co-dependent and destructively attached women, close relationships are a source of stress, only the first ones usually are not aware of this. They are united by a general intention and desire to control the other, and the dissatisfaction of basic needs in the relationships, high tolerance for emotional pain, and super-significance of the relationships with the other. The results of this study are expected to be useful in psychological counselling, psychotherapy, psychological support to women.

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**Keywords:** Coping, destructive attachment, co-dependence, relationships` addicts.



## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Attachment, stress and coping**

Attachment relationships are important throughout their life cycle. Adults' attachment to children, parents, a close relationships' partner is based on earlier types of affection. Modern researchers are focusing on the ties between attachment types, stress, and coping. Studies of coping and attachment to a romantic partner in women who have been victims of physical violence confirm that they are more often resorted to problem-oriented coping, and women from the control group to emotionally oriented one. At the same time, women subjected to physical violence, are more anxious and avoiding attachment to a romantic partner (Shechory, 2013).

An extensive review about the intimate relationships' effect on the suicidal thoughts was conducted by Kazan, Calear, and Batterham (2016). They found that people who reported relationships problems might be at increased risk of suicidal thoughts and behaviour. Breaking-up or poor relationships quality are likely to be important risk factors for suicidal thoughts / behaviour and common causes of attempted suicide.

Thus, there are links between: insecure attachment, addictive behaviour and maladaptive coping; stress level and poor relationships quality; addictive behaviour and insecure attachment types. In basic terms, insecure attachment is a relationship style where the bond is contaminated by fear. This is expressed mainly as reluctance in the relationship and other mixed emotions (as dependence and rejection).

### **1.2. Destructive attachment and co-dependence**

Dependence on psychoactive substances (drugs, alcohol, etc.) is a systemic dysfunction that affects the addicted person's family system. To describe the state of affairs that develops in an addict's family, the term "co-dependency" is widely used. Co-dependency is not an independent disease but is treated as a personality addictive disorder of complex origin. A distinctive co-dependency trait is attachment to an addicted to alcohol and / or drugs person, which manifests itself at emotional, cognitive and behavioural levels. Co-dependency is a multi-level phenomenon with a complex determination (psychological, biological and social).

Co-dependency is often interpreted as a defensive compensatory reaction to an intrapersonal conflict, which manifests itself in extremely contradictory relationships with a significant person and an individualized system of cultural norms, values, rules, etc.

In contrast to addictive disorders, attachment to a significant adult implies a strong, lasting emotional connection with an object, characterized by a well-expressed need for intimacy, which does not always mean the co-dependence phenomenon. Although attachment to a significant person may be of an insecure type (i.e., anxious, avoiding, or ambivalent), but unlike co-dependence, even a vividly expressed insecure attachment does not imply clinical mental changes (Peele & Brodsky, 1991; Kryukova & Grigorova, 2015; Kryukova, Grigorova, & Ekimchik, 2018).

## 2. Problem Statement

### 2.1. Destructive attachment as a new phenomenon in addictive relationship

For both - a co-dependent person and a destructively attached person, an important characteristic of relations with a partner (a son included) is attachment and its manifestation in relations. It's well-known that women are not always inclined to break up close relationship with a cold, inaccessible, unreliable or "toxic" partner; they may stay in insecure relationship with a high level of violence for a long time (Shechory, 2013; Kryukova & Grigorova, 2015). In our opinion, it shows the distorted functioning of the attachment mechanism. This distortion is proposed to be called *destructive attachment* as a generalized type of insecure attachment, distinguished as stressful, associated with chronic personal experience of threatened relationships` breakup and a partner`s loss, and having a negative impact on a woman`s psychological well-being.

Female with destructive attachment to a partner are characterized by chronic anxiety, high concern about close relationships, their stability, etc. All this is a natural consequence of the inconsistency and impulsiveness of partnership, instability of partners' feelings, the tendency to manipulation and violence; as well as the result of high personal anxiety. At the same time, similar characteristics can describe women themselves, destructively attached to a partner, which, however, is not consciously realized by them (Kryukova & Grigorova, 2015; Ekimchik, Kryukova, & Khazova, 2016; Kryukova, Grigorova, & Ekimchik, 2018).

### 2.2. Comparing attachment among co-dependent and close relationships` addicts

Our research shows that females inclined to develop destructive attachment to a partner tend to control a partner intensively, which is their way to find intimacy with him. This controlling tendency has a significant similarity with a description of a co-dependent person`s behaviour.

Criteria of co-dependency are: ignoring one's own vital needs and inattention to oneself (Khazova, 2016); "merging" of all interests with a dysfunctional personality; a desire to control the other`s behaviour and a situation; exaggerated sense of responsibility for the other; breaking borders in intimate relationships; "love mixed with compassion"; conformity and the need to be accepted by the external environment; difficulties in identifying feelings, a confusion or even the complete rejection to feel (among co-dependent the tolerance to emotional pain and negative emotions grow, they "refuse to feel, because it hurts"); fear of being abandoned and lonely; lack of trust in oneself and others; feeling guilty, angry, depressed (Moos, Finney, & Cronkite, 1990; Moskalenko, 2000; Rezvaya, Samsonova, & Kutashova, 2017; Weinhold & Weinhold, 2008).

Our studies of destructively attached women describe their emotional, cognitive and behavioural traits, such as: - dissatisfaction with love and the need to be accepted by a partner; - the contradiction between the strength of attachment to a partner, intensified by unmet and urgent need for intimacy and poor relationships` quality; - "mythologization" of a partner: treating the acquaintance with him as a "unique" highly significant life event; - manifestation of a greater or one-sided initiative in keeping relations with a partner; - difficulties in negative emotions control: irritation, anger and spite, disgust. It is stressed that high control or suppression of one's own emotions and feelings lead to both a short-term

improvement in the relationships, and exhaustion, fatigue (Kryukova & Grigorova, 2015; Kryukova, Grigorova, & Ekimchik, 2018).

The presence of persistent, mainly negative, aggressive feelings, as well as explosive reactions distinguish destructively attached women from both – securely attached and co-dependent. For the latter the experience and anger expression towards the other (a son, first of all) as a healthy response, adequate to the situation, is much more difficult, which usually leads to alienation.

The common features of co-dependent women and destructively attached females are: super-significance of relations with the other, controlling the other and a situation, resistance to experiencing emotional pain and dissatisfaction of own needs in relationships, as well as strong fear of relationships` breaking up, abandonment by the other. It leads to speeding up efforts aimed at maintaining a connection with a frustrating partner, despite the fact that his personal feelings, and needs (as well as one`s own) are mainly ignored or distorted. The differences between co-dependency and destructive attachment are less obvious: in the first case, a woman focuses on the personality of an addicted person, trying to change it through relationships. The analysis of co-dependency and destructive attachment indicates the stressfulness of interpersonal relations in which they arise. A co-dependent person sees the “disease” of an attachment figure as a source of stress. The destructively attached personality identifies the relationships with a partner as stressful.

### **3. Research Questions**

Analysis of the emotional sphere of both co-dependent women and destructively attached to a partner women suggests that their traits influence coping with relationship`s hardships. A number of questions remain open:

3.1 Do co-dependent and destructively attached women cope with stress productively?

3.2 What are their coping specifics? Does the chronic nature of stress permit to speak about special cognitive-emotional patterns and skills among co-dependent and destructively attached?

3.4 What are these patterns and skills in women with co-dependency and destructive attachment?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

To compare coping behaviour of co-dependent and destructively attached women. To identify cognitive-emotional patterns of addicted attachment and coping. To achieve this goal, two empirical studies have been organized and conducted.

### **5. Research Methods**

#### **Empirical study I**

The first study was devoted to co-dependent women`s (partners and mothers) coping with stress in relationships with chemical addicts.

### Research Methods

The Mayer–Salovey–Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test 1998 (MSCEIT v. 2.0), adaptation in Russian (Sergienko & Vetrova, 2010).

Co-Dependency Assessment Inventory (Weinhold & Weinhold, 2008).

Ways of Coping Questionnaire, Folkman & Lazarus, 1988, adaptation in Russian (Kryukova, 2010).

### Sample

The study involved 19 women aged 32 to 47, having close (marital or child-parent) relationships with a chemically addicted person. 3 respondents were in a relationship with alcohol-addict, 16 - with drug addicts.

### Empirical study II

The second study was devoted to coping of destructively attached to a partner women, with lots of stress and frustration in relationships.

### Research Methods

1. Multi-Item Measure of Adult Romantic Attachment - MIMARA Brennan & Shaver,

(as cited in Kryukova & Ekimchik, 2016);

2. Ways of Coping Questionnaire, Folkman & Lazarus, 1988, Kryukova, 2010;

3. The Experiences in Intimate Relationships, Brennan & Fraley, (as cited in Kazantseva, 2008).

### Sample

The study involved 48 women (23 - 45 years old), who had partnership or marital relationships during 3 to 20 years, and were destructively attached; the control sample was 43 women (25 - 39 years old), who were in partnership or marital relations during 3 to 13 years, and were subjects of various regulatory types of attachment.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1 Empirical study I

We found that co-dependent women in stressful situations most often chose: *positive reappraisal* ( $M = 68.0$ ,  $SD = 20$ ), *self-control* ( $M = 68.0$ ,  $SD = 13$ ), *seeking social support* ( $M = 60.0$ ,  $SD = 20$ ), *planful problem solving* ( $M = 60.0$ ,  $SD = 17$ ) coping strategies. *Accepting responsibility* ( $M = 45.0$ ,  $SD = 23$ ), *distancing* ( $M = 43.0$ ,  $SD = 19$ ), *confrontative coping* ( $M = 42.0$ ,  $SD = 18$ ), *escape-avoidance* ( $M = 40.0$ ,  $SD = 15$ ) coping strategies were chosen by co-dependent less often.

Emotional intelligence data show the decrease of its indicators (identification of emotions, use of emotions to improve the efficiency of thinking and activity, understanding and analysis of emotions, conscious emotional management for personal growth and improving of interpersonal relationships), compared to age norms. The biggest differences are found out in general emotional intelligence; in "strategic emotional intelligence." This indicates that co-dependent have a reduced level of emotional

regulation, limited knowledge about emotions, a reduced ability to understand emotional information and use it to solve life problems.

The direct correlations between co-dependency and coping are in *accepting responsibility* ( $R = 0.525$ ;  $p \leq 0.001$ ) and *planful problem solving* ( $R = -0.611$ ;  $p \leq 0.001$ ). What follows from the obtained correlations: the higher the severity of co-dependency as a maladaptive state, the more a woman is inclined to *accept responsibility* for the addict's problems, his psycho-emotional state and psychoactive substances use. A co-dependent woman recognizes her own role and responsibility for the emergence of a loved one's addiction and his recovery. The dominance of this coping strategy leads to self-criticism and self-reproach, feeling guilty, dissatisfaction with oneself.

It is also revealed that the higher the level of co-dependency, the less frequently co-dependent take real active actions to solve the problem in relations with the addicted: the co-dependent cannot objectively evaluate the situation, cannot plan one's own life as they are wholly focused on an addict's state. If a co-dependent mother uses a planning strategy, is aware of own capabilities, chooses different behaviour patterns (excluding routine or impulsive models of co-dependent behaviour), using all possible resources, the co-dependency level decreases.

Correlations between individual Emotional Intelligence characteristics and coping strategies are discovered: when co-dependents' ability to identify and recognize their own and the other people's emotions increases, they less often choose *distancing* ( $R = -0.519$ ;  $p \leq 0.001$ ). So the development of the co-dependent's ability to recognize what others and she herself feel is associated with a decrease in using *distancing*, a diminished significance of the problem, which contributes to the "meeting" of the co-dependent with a real life situation and noticing other people's feelings. This can create a resource to develop planning coping activities, a transition to a problem-oriented coping.

At the same time, when the level of co-dependent moms' ability to use emotions in solving problems increases, they could more likely resort to *positive reappraisal* ( $R = 0.528$ ;  $p \leq 0.001$ ), which can change their perception as a more controllable phenomenon, totally not threatening their well-being and health. *Positive reappraisal* of the problem could be as an incentive for co-dependent to solve it.

Earlier, we found that co-dependent use *positive reappraisal* more often, but less often choose *distancing*. The interconnections of individual EI indicators with these coping strategies were also revealed, which confirms the ties between co-dependency level and emotional intelligence meanings.

## 6.2 Empirical study II

A high tension of coping among women destructively attached to a partner, have been specified, meaning significant stress, despite active use of all strategies to cope with it. The most intense coping chosen by destructively attached is *self-control* (12.7 points): the desire to master their own feelings, associated with a high level of emotional tension in relationships.

A comparative analysis of destructively attached women's versus a control group women's coping (Mann-Whitney U-test) reveals the following differences: the first are more likely to choose *distancing* under stress in relationships ( $p \leq 0.002$ ). It means that more often use of cognitive efforts aimed at *avoiding* the problem, serves reducing its significance. This is probably due to the greater severity of the experiences they have in relationships, as well as the inability to get rid of the source of stress and

suffering, that is, to break up traumatic relations. Destructively attached women are more likely to use *accepting responsibility* when coping with negative emotional experiences than women from a control group ( $p \leq 0.154$ ). Probably, this may be a consequence of the desire to control the situation and relationships in general.

On the other hand, it is possible that negative feelings experience in these women don't push them to seek support from a partner. They are also influenced by cultural and gender stereotypes, according to which a woman is a "home hearth keeper", responsible for the well-being of close relationships. Destructively attached women are more likely to use *escape-avoidance* coping with negative feelings than members of the control group ( $p \leq 0.001$ ). On the one hand, the inability to inoculate chronic stress, without breaking up the relationships with a partner, leads to maximum isolation from stressful influence; on the other hand, the use of this strategy is not productive in the long term.

Attachment components are matching the choice of individual coping in destructive attachment relationships: - the level of *distancing* is only influenced by such attachment component as self-support ( $\beta = 0.5$  at  $p \leq 0.01$ ). The effect of this indicator explains 30% of the variance; - the choice of *escape-avoidance* strategy is significantly influenced by the combination of factors ( $R = 0.79$ ,  $R^2 = 0.62$ , with  $p \leq 0.001$ ): frustration ( $\beta = -0.26$ ), self-support ( $\beta = 0.3$ ), jealousy ( $\beta = 0.51$ ) and clinging to a partner ( $\beta = 0.6$ ). Thus, attachment characteristics encourage women to avoid direct solution of the problem, to use unproductive coping in relationships; - the choice of *positive reappraisal* is influenced by attachment components ( $R = 0.82$ ,  $R^2 = 0.67$ , with  $p \leq 0.001$ ): jealousy ( $\beta = -0.59$ ) and frustration ( $\beta = 0.67$ ). Dissatisfaction with basic needs in intimate relationships encourages destructively attached to evaluate stressful events positively, however, jealousy, also inherent to them, reduces the possibility to use this strategy.

Thus, we have found that destructive attachment and its components - frustration, self-support, jealousy, *clinging* to a partner, are predicting the choice of unproductive coping strategies in hard situations: *distancing*, *escape-avoidance*; it also has a controversial influence on *positive reappraisal*.

Correlation analysis reveals that the longer female attachment addicts are in a relationship, the less often they turn to *seeking social support* ( $R = -0.238$ ,  $p \leq 0.05$ ); *self-control* ( $R = -0.23$ ,  $p \leq 0.05$ ); more often refer to *positive reappraisal* ( $R = 0.231$ ,  $p \leq 0.05$ ). In our opinion, this result is associated with a decrease in an individual's internal resources for self-support and appeal to others, including a partner; with a decrease of social inclusion and negative symptoms of non-coping accumulation. At the same time, the difficulties of both getting out of relationships and productive coping with stress induce them to re-evaluate the significance of the events taking place, to reflect negative experiences, which can also be a source of development and personal growth in destructively attached.

## 7. Conclusion

1. The analysis of attachment patterns in co-dependent and destructively attached women points to their common intention and desire to control the other, dissatisfaction of own needs in relationships, high tolerance to emotional pain, super-significance of relations with the other. Individual emotional intelligence is a coping factor in co-dependent women.

The difference between attachment patterns lies in the fact that co-dependent manifest an excessive “merging” with an addicted personality, inability to distinguish their own feelings from the other’s, identification difficulties. The destructively attached women do not cling to a partner, however, they have huge fear to lose him, become alone combined with aggressive, negative reactions to a partner. Both co-dependent and destructively attached women create stressful attachment relationships, only the first, unlike the latter, are not aware of this.

2. Analysis of coping shows that both female groups prefer coping strategies like *positive reappraisal* and *self-control*, which contribute to keeping stressful relationships. Their coping productivity is questionable, since they contribute to ill relationships, prevent emotional response to stress, and cannot use problem-oriented coping.

3. Coping patterns of co-dependent and destructively bound women are different. Destructively attached women prefer *distancing*, *accepting responsibility*, and *escape-avoidance*. The combination of these strategies helps reduce relationships` stress, but does not drastically change the situation. For co-dependent women these strategies are not preferred ones, they often resort to: *positive reappraisal*, *self-control*, *seeking of social support*, *planful problem solving*. In fact, a co-dependent woman does not want to distance from the source of stress, to avoid contact with a difficult partner, on the contrary, she tends to be actively involved in the problem, which reduces her ability to recover her own resources and choose *positive reappraisal* to identify relationships as unsatisfying.

4. Both groups` specific coping patterns cannot be adaptive for such uneasy situations.

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