

PRRAEPGDA 2020
Personal and Regulatory Resources in Achieving Educational and Professional Goals in the Digital Age

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AS A RESOURCE FOR CODEPENDENT WOMEN

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Abstract

The relevance to study personal resources lies in the knowledge of the factors that determine one's mental health despite their living conditions. The research aim was to examine emotional intelligence as a coping resource of codependent women. The sample consists of 30 female respondents aged 32 to 47 in close relationships with a chemically addicted person. The results indicate both levels of emotional intelligence slightly lower than the norm, namely, one's poorer ability to understand emotions and consciously manage them, and such emotional characteristics as a feeling of insecurity, emotional coldness, impulsiveness, infantile. In stressful situations related to addiction, the respondents pursue non-productive coping strategies, attempts to establish super-control, seeks social support, and feels determined to solve the problem at any rate. This hinders successful coping with both addiction in a family and their own codependent state. The regression analysis shows that one's ability to understand and analyse their emotions, use them to resolve problems effectively, consciously manage them, and predict their emotional states has a fairly positive impact on their coping patterns. The emotional intelligence incentivises to confront addiction in a family and positively reappraise the situation in the context of personal development. These results support the idea of emotional intelligence being a coping resource in codependent relations.

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Keywords: Emotional intelligence, coping behaviour, codependency.



1. Introduction

Dynamic transformations in modern society, high standards of an individual's productivity in different areas, and challenging conditions for their mental wellbeing and somatic health bring /the/problem of one's regulation and self-regulation and their ability to cope with life challenges and difficulties, and, logically, that of the mental resources that catalyse these abilities. In this regard, an investigation into resources of an individual who suffers from daily stress caused by their family member's dependence on psychoactive substances is of great academic interest.

Addictive behaviour changes whole family system through a formation of codependent relation within it. A codependent person is dependent on the addict's mood and behaviour, experiences daily stress caused by their concerns for an addict's life and desperate attempts to change it. This distorts emotional sphere of a codependent member, lower their abilities for emotional self-regulation, results in ineffective stress coping, and challenges the system of personal resources, primarily, the emotional ones. Nevertheless, psychological studies lack any systematic research into coping resources of codependent individuals, though these data seem relevant for therapeutic counselling and supporting both an addict and their codependent family.

2. Problem Statement

Being a contested concept (Bacon et al., 2018), "codependency" has witnessed increased academic interest on the subject in recent years. Codependency is interpreted as a personality disorder with a complex determination that manifests itself at cognitive, emotional, and behavioural levels. While it was not initially classified as an independent disease, more and more scholars have recently suggest codependency being an independent, complex, and hardly correctable form of addiction that emerges in a family long before an addiction problem and often implies traumatic childhood family experiences, a dysfunctional or incomplete family, and interrupted separation from parental figures (Bacon et al., 2018; Ekimchik et al., 2016; Potter-Efron & Potter-Efron, 1989; Weinhold & Weinhold, 2008; Osinskaya & Kravtsova, 2016).

Systematic analysis of research papers in the field reveals a broad range of personal and emotional traits of those suffering from codependency. Some scholars mention such criteria as external focusing, self-sacrificing behaviour, interpersonal conflict, attempts for super-control, perfectionism, breaking borders in close relationships, low self-esteem, "lack of clear sense of self". The emotional criteria include fear; feeling depressed, anxious, ashamed, guilty, angry, confused, chronically despaired; difficulties in identifying, describing, and expressing emotions (Ghorbani et al., 2017; Osinskaya & Kravtsova, 2016; Potter-Efron & Potter-Efron, 1989; Punzi & Lindgren, 2019). The in-depth study on self-concept of codependents by Bacon et al. (2018) reports that they mention a lack of internal stability, ambivalent and imbalanced life experiences, difficulties in finding and defining their selves, "behaving like chameleons, and overly adapting to environments and relationships to obtain a sense of safety and belonging.". These various emotional characteristics of codependent people suggests a specificity of their emotional intelligence and it being a potential coping resource. The results of some studies may be the basis for this hypothesis. First, emotional intelligence can significantly predict a lot of the coping

strategies: problem-solving, social support seeking, cognitive evaluation, somatic and emotional inhibition etc. (Kiseleva, 2015; Moradi et al., 2011); second, it can positively correlate with well-being (Extremera et al., 2020); third, disorders of emotional intelligence can lead to disorders of the affective spectrum (Pluzhnikov, 2009).

Chronic stress caused by ambivalent relationships, feelings, and actions, inadequate understanding of events and its causes demand an effort to cope with a situation or emotionally process it. However, theorists most often focus on defence mechanisms of codependents that have been already intensively studied. They mention immature mechanisms which are aimed to reduce anxiety but ineffective for adaptive emotion regulation and prevent symptom reduction (Punzi & Lindgren, 2019). Though data on codependent's coping are inconsistent, they suggest that low codependency implies more active coping strategies, seeking for positive reappraisal and opportunities for personal growth; on the other hand, high codependency involves a more passive, "wait and see" attitude, inability to find resources for coping, troubled relationships' enhancement, and self-change (Kuzmin & Potapova, 2016), which, according to some scholars, indicates one's acceptance of / support for an addiction (Horváth et al., 2019). However, some results report successful stress coping among codependents who manage to distance themselves from an addict and focus on their own needs (Horváth et al., 2019).

3. Research Questions

Analysis of the problem opens up important questions.

1. Does the emotional intelligence of codependents have specifics?
2. How do codependents coincide with chronic stress in a relationship with an addict?
3. Is emotional intelligence a coping resource for codependent women?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of our research is to study potential resourcefulness of codependent's emotional intelligence for coping).

5. Research Methods

The following methods were used: the Mayer–Salovey–Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT v. 2.0, 1998) adaptation in Russian Sergienko and Vetrova (2017) to measure emotional intelligence, intensity of emotions, one's ability to regulate and use them for problem solving; Codependency Assessment Inventory (Weinhold & Weinhold, 2008); Ways of Coping Questionnaire by Folkman and Lazarus, adaptation in Russian Kryukova (2010); "Man in the rain" projective technique (Zinkevich-Evstigneeva & Kudzilov, 2003).

Statistical tools: descriptive statistics, the Spearman rank correlation coefficient, hierarchical multiple regression analysis.

The sample consisted of 30 females (32-47 years old) in close (marital or child-parent) relationships with a chemically addicted person. The respondents are clients of Kostroma support groups for families of addicts

6. Findings

Codependency diagnostic suggests that the respondents demonstrate different number of psychological and behavioural codependency characteristics. Thus, 31 % of the respondents has a high (score of 51-61), 59 % – an adequate (that of 40-50), 10 % (only 3 females) – a low codependency level (that of 33-39).

Research data on the respondents' emotional intelligence and its components reveal insignificantly lower-than-average indices: only approximately 16 % has a lower level of general and experiential emotional intelligence (EI) where the latter is one's ability both to recognize (identify) their own and other people's emotions in verbal and non-verbal forms and to effectively incorporate this information into cognitive processes (to improve cognitive function). Thus, 37 % and 58 % of the respondents are characterized by a rather high (above average) level of general and experiential EI. However, the percentage of those with lower levels of strategic EI (understanding/awareness of and managing one's emotions and those of others) is larger: 32 % is characterized by lower indices of overall strategic EI; 26% – by lower ability to understand and analyse emotion; strategic EI of 22-48 % has above-average indices. No extremely low indices were recorded; 16% of the respondents demonstrates a high level of managing their emotions. Interestingly, we identified no correlations between EI indices and levels of codependency.

Overall, we conclude that the respondents' EI and its components are adequately developed; the sample is characterized by difficulties understanding emotions, reasons for those, their transition to different stages, relations between them as well as attempts to manage one's emotions and those of an addicted person, which is crucial for developing one's self-concept and relations with their environment (Sergienko & Vetrova, 2017). The "Man in the Rain" projective drawing confirms the respondents' feeling of insecurity (16 %), emotional coldness (28 %), difficulties communicating with the environment (10 %), impulsiveness (10 %), infantile (5 %). All these, as mentioned above, are key characteristics of codependency.

The analysis of coping behaviour shows that codependents in stressful situations are likely to use the following coping strategies: positive reappraisal (M = 68, Std.Dev. = 20), self-control (M = 68, Std.Dev. = 13), seeking social support (M = 60, Std.Dev. = 20), planful problem solving (M = 56, Std.Dev. = 18). Basically, this choice of coping strategies is typical for the age (see data from Kryukova, 2010). The rest are less likely to be reported where the least preferable coping strategy is escape-avoidance (M = 40, Std.Dev. = 15). Our study proved the known evidence that codependents prefer to use different coping strategies simultaneously as they feel hesitant about the choice and often do not know which strategy would serve best. This strategy blending – "a general resource coping factor" contributes to successful general coping with a difficult situation (Horváth et al., 2019).

These data are partially confirmed by the analysis of the "Man in the Rain" projective drawing that revealed unconscious components of one's perception of a difficult situation and codependent's self-perception specificities in it. Thus, 47 % reports having necessary coping resources; 53 % adopts active coping strategies. 58 % constructively responds to a difficult situation; their coping behaviour is characterized by a preference for various effective coping strategies. This behaviour pattern demands much energy, certain efforts, collecting information and implies outside help, analysis, and planful

approach in order to cope with a problem. 32 % demonstrates an efficient system of defence mechanisms to match the situation.

However, 32 % of the respondents reports feeling helpless, unable to cope with difficulties without outside help; a family member’s addiction completely occupies their life being its permanent background; 21 % tries to avoid any difficulties, feel concerned about possible failures, and are influenced by their external environment. 42 % unconstructively responds to an addiction; their behaviour hinders the resolution of the situation; 68 % employs defence mechanisms to escape reality and avoid problems. The higher level of codependency, the less likely codependents are to adopt planful problem solving ($r = -0.566, p \leq 0.05$).

We carried out multiple regression analysis to determine the role of emotional intelligence in codependent’s coping. The values of four strategies (distancing, planful problem solving, positive reappraisal, confrontation) can be predicted by the variable of emotional intellect, though the coefficient of determination is rather low - in the range of 30-38 %, which suggests low predictive ability of the mode 1 (table 1).

Table 1. The impact of EI on coping mechanisms

	Confrontation F(2,35) = 10.80 p < 0.000	Distancing F(3,34) = 5.48 p < 0.003	Planful problem solving F(2,35) = 7.66 p < 0.001	Positive reappraisal F(3,34) = 5.17 p < 0.004
Incorporating emotions into cognitive processes				$\beta = 0.262$
Experiential EI		$\beta = -0.258$		
Understanding and analyzing emotions	$\beta = 1.645^{***}$		$\beta = -0.822^{***}$	
Managing emotions		$\beta = -0.781^{**}$		$\beta = -0.561^*$
Strategic EI	$\beta = -1.232^{**}$	$\beta = 0.571^*$		
General EI			$\beta = 0.456^*$	$\beta = 0.534$

Note: *p<0,05, **p<0,01, ***p<0,001

Surprisingly, all the EI components except for ability to understand emotions are predictors of coping strategies, though both one’s ability to incorporate emotions in cognitive processes and the total score of experiential EI are included in the regression models, they have no impact on dependent variables. It suggests that a clear understanding of one’s and an addict’s current emotions are not significant for a codependent female (probably as these emotions are most often the same - anger, anxiety, fear, depression) in order to cope with an addiction, as none of them facilitate cognitive processes, promote right decision and rational, mental resolution of the situation since the one is unsolvable in principle.

We observed that the components and total scores of strategic and general EIs may have a polar opposite impact on the same coping behaviour pattern - while some may act as an incentive to follow it, others may work the other way. We consider inconsistent coping and strategy blending (Horváth et al., 2019) a possible explanation of the phenomena. Considering the total scores solely, we can observe a

positive impact of strategic EI, which implies reducing confrontation with the situation by means of both risky, non-adaptive behaviour and further distancing from the situation through to one's cognitive efforts. On the other hand, being predicted by general EI, planful problem solving and positive reappraisal implies both successful coping and processing one's experience in the context of personal growth, coping resource accumulation and acquiring.

As the sample consists middle-aged females, mothers and wives of addicts, all of which are clients of a codependency support group, possible therapeutic effects of such groups and recovery programs should be taken into account when extrapolating the results to a larger group of codependents.

7. Conclusion

7.1. General characteristics of emotional intelligence sampling

We can generally conclude from the research results on emotional intelligence and its components that the sample is characterized by neither high, nor low levels of EI. Rather, we observed adequate scores which are slightly below the norm. The indices showed the largest decrease in one's ability to understand emotions, i.e. one's knowledge of complex emotional data, emotional language, correlation between and interdependence of emotional states, which affects both one's self-attitude and their attitude to an addicted person.

7.2. The systemic nature of coping in a situation of codependence

Codependent's coping behaviour patterns are characterized by a simultaneous use of different coping strategies which is related to the complexity of the situation itself as it cannot be coped with by efforts of a single person, on the one hand; and contradictory and inconsistent behaviour of a codependent which is caused by complex systemic nature of codependency as a personality disorder, on the other hand.

7.3 Emotional intelligence as a coping resource

Emotional intelligence can serve as a coping resource for codependent females in a situation of their significant one's addiction. Strategic and general EIs contribute to successful coping most substantially as a disincentive for non productive coping behaviour strategies and an incentive for productive ones: planful problem solving and positive reappraisal.

7.4. The prospect of using results

The results can be further used as a basis for codependency support framework improving the knowledge of codependency mechanisms and its effects on families and individuals at different personality levels.

Acknowledgments

The study is financially supported by Russian Foundation for Basic Research, project 20-013-00435A “Mental Resources of Individuals with Typical and Atypical Development: Phenomenology, Dynamics, Factors of the Formation in Ontogenesis).

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