

# TOWARD MINIMIZING THE CODEPENDENT TRAP OF ENABLING

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William Penzer, Ph.D.

## INTRODUCTION

When I read about codependency I often become confused. It is difficult for me to distinguish between the disease of codependence and appropriate family interaction and support. From certain angles all relationships seem laced with codependent components. The question always arises as to when helping, morphs unwittingly, into enabling?

I am finally able to describe healthy and helpful support and interaction with a loved one. I also can share when that becomes a trap of codependence so often linked to addiction, anxiety and low self- esteem. This article is an effort to clarify this complicated, typically gray area. These distinctions and associated boundaries are important in our dealings with those we love, especially when those we love do not consistently love themselves.

## DEPENDENCE, CODEPENDENCE AND INTERDEPENDENCE

We all start life completely dependent on others for our survival. The infant, by definition, is incapable and insufficient. Hard as it is to believe, we all began our journeys from that helpless position. Slowly, the developing person gains competence. Starting somewhere about age four slight movement toward codependence begins. The parent or surrogate leads the way and the child slowly fills in some of the blanks. Adults may choose the clothing, but the child

can put most of it on. The adult may still have to tie the child's shoe laces. Problems occur when the adults still have to tie the adult child's laces or the equivalent.

If all goes according to plan the relationship shifts more towards interdependence in adolescence. Dad may drop off and Mom picks up the teen from work on the weekends. The "inter" component is that the teen is earning money and saving for a car. With that car a higher level of interdependence is reached. With adulthood, the once child and teen functions more autonomously. His/her behaviors now begin to parallel those of the parents.

It should be obvious why codependence between two adults is unhealthy. It perpetuates parent to child scenes. It stifles the confidence of the person in the Identified Dependent (ID) position and erodes self-esteem. These inappropriate transactions generate anger in both directions. In addition, the irony of the well intended Codependent (CD) enabler is that they perpetuate the ID's dependency. This is why understanding the guiding philosophy behind bananas can be critically important to the ID and CD's sanity and survival.



## WHAT IS A BANANA?

Banana is a reminder word that refers to comments, questions or actions that create a parent to child- like interaction between two adults. This fosters a codependent and enabling relationship which fuel problems of all kinds. A vicious cycle of ID helplessness and CD helping (aka rescuing) is set in motion. It is when the CD tries to over -control the ID in the name of love, that they lose sight of the fact that they have no control whatsoever. By trying to prevent a disaster the CD can, by saying or doing bananas, actually cause it to occur. The bananas philosophy discourages the CD's words and actions from conveying a parent to child / I-Thou feeling to the ID. Bananas can be "critical" parent to "bad" child, "intrusive" parent to "inadequate" child or "sarcastic" parent to "sensitive" child interactions. In many instances the CD's reactions may be understandable and oftentimes even justifiable. They are just not helpful. In fact, they can be downright hurtful!

If you don't like using the word bananas, then don't. Come up with a different word if that is helpful. Or just use the concept without having a reminder word. It is the idea, not the word which is important.

## WHAT ISN'T A BANANA?

A BOUNDARY IS NOT A BANANA.

Examples are:

- You can live in this house as long as you don't drink, drug, gamble or whatever the problem behavior(s) are.
- You can drive the car or the kids around as long as you are clean and sober.
- I will divorce you if you don't get help and stay clean.

A SURVIVAL INTERVENTION IS NOT A BANANA.

While the tough love school might disagree, there may be times when life and limb are on the line and bananas are no longer relevant. Each situation needs to be evaluated individually, carefully and sensitively.

A DISABILITY CONDITION CAN MITIGATE BANANAS

Many addicts are dual diagnosed. Anxiety, panic, phobia, OCD, Bipolar Disorder, Depression, etc. are serious and often paralyzing. In these situations a medical disability framework can be helpful. No one would accuse a family of someone with a serious physical disablement (i.e. CP, Muscular Dystrophy, Paralysis, etc.) of doing a banana by being there in a supportive way. Psychiatric disablements need to be similarly considered on a person by person, situation by situation basis.

## A CD PROTECTING HIM OR HERSELF IS NOT A BANANA

Any situation where the ID's actions or lack thereof could cause problems, expenses or other liabilities for the CD is not a banana.

# ZERO BANANAS

### TYPES OF BANANAS

As bananas typically cause conflict and are part of the codependent trap, we generally want to avoid or limit them. While they may very well be an inevitable part of human relationships—especially those based in emotional pain and problems—our goal is to minimize them as much as possible. Healthy, problem solving oriented interactions are those that maintain adult to adult boundaries. It might be helpful to look at different types of bananas and their related levels of toxicity as measured by degrees of ripeness. On this scale, the riper the banana the more hurtful the impact. The following are my subjective assessment of severity:

Ripeness

Addiction Related

Did you go to a meeting ? Is South Beach, Vegas a healthy place for you to go? Do you have a sponsor yet? Are you using again? Where were you till 3am last night?

10+

Health Related

Did you take your medication today? You need to go to the doctor, I made an appointment for you. I looked it up on Google. I called the pharmacist and she said...

6 – 9

Work Related

I think you should be a... Go look for a job today. You are a lazy so and so. Why can't you work hard like your sister? I don't think that's a good job for you.

4-8

Social Related

Can't you even get a date? It's time you found a wife/husband already. I don't like you hanging out with those people. Computer dating is for losers. You are not supposed to be dating for one year.

4-8

Giving Information With a Message

I read an article that talked about jobs. Here is this interesting book about drug addiction. Here are applications for a job at.... Here is a list of local AA meetings.

2-6

NOT BANANAS, BUT LIKELY TO CAUSE THEM!

Ripeness

Gathering Information:  
Listening to calls. Checking voicemail and e-mail. Having "spies"

0 to ID  
(unless

report in. Setting up hidden video cameras or tapping phone line.

caught)  
10+ to CD

Worry and Anger Related:  
Waiting for the other shoe to fall.  
Terrified about a relapse, angry about ID not working, being responsible, etc.

0 to ID unless  
it converts  
Into bananas  
10+ to CD

### A COUPLE OF BANANAS IN RELATIONSHIPS WHERE CODEPENDENCE EXIST

There really is not that much difference between enabling between parents and adult children and relationship partners. An added issue is when children of the partners exist and are being hurt by the problems. Often these innocent children feed into enablements of all kinds in last ditch rescue missions to preserve the family unit. The key question is what price preservation?

There are obvious protective issues (i.e., pulling car keys, shutting down access to credit or cash, preventing interaction with kids while high or drunk, etc.) and banana issues. The latter include:

- Bail outs and rescue missions.
- Repeated bargaining and well intended, but false promises.
- Not reporting abuses to authorities.
- Not expecting ID to participate in treatment.
- Allowing sex to be used as a manipulation.
- Looking the other way for the “good” or survival of the family.
- Trying to cure or control the disease/disorder.
- Not being able to pull the plug on the relationship despite it having died.

Clearly, the same CD-ID banana interactions exist in these relationships as in parent to adult child situations. Similarly, the emotions are the same in both as is the perpetuation of dependency. Fundamentally, the ID is dependent

and the CD's efforts to alter that unwittingly lead to greater dependencies. Since the CD can't pull the ID out of the hole into which they have fallen, the CD needs to avoid banana based missteps that only dig the hole deeper. Sometimes, love has to become a bit tougher to be helpful. This can be accomplished by making some different and difficult choices about doing the opposite of a banana.

#### WHAT IS THE OPPOSITE OF A BANANA ?

- Letting go with or without love.
- Accepting that the ID may be disabled, but more than able to become clean and sober. Easily accessed resources exist if the ID chooses to take advantage
- Affirming daily, if need be, that the CD cannot cure or control, but can contribute.
- Allowing the Serenity Prayer to be the guiding influence.
- Helping the ID in proportion to how they are helping themselves.
- Knowing that the above encouragements are easier said than done, but worth pursuing.
- Seeking out support individually or in a group setting to learn new ways of dealing with long standing problems.
- Trying to ensure that all CD-ID interactions respect the adult choices of both parties.

Isn't it time that you tried to eliminate/minimize bananas from your repertoire? As a first step, begin to pay attention to your behavior and try to identify obvious bananas. Catch yourself slipping on a peel and commit to doing it a little bit differently. Try to embrace these four C's:

- You can't CONTROL another adult!
- You can't CURE an adult with a problem!
- You can't CHANGE an adult's habits!
- You can CAUSE future problems!

You CAN embrace a zero bananas philosophy or learn to do that with support! Keep in mind that this philosophy offers a framework rather than a rigid set of principles. Hopefully, you will find it as a helpful guide in making decisions as to how to handle a variety of issues, problems and decisions in trying to help the ID find an adult path upon which to walk the rest of his/her journey. Equally important, is that it helps the CD to avoid or minimize further pain, suffering and loss. There comes a time when enough is enough and an alternative approach is called for in order to finally escape from the trap of codependence and enabling. Implied in this philosophy is a healthier alternative for all parties involved. We are hopeful that it will be helpful .