

12 Promises of Co-Dependents Anonymous

*"I can expect a miraculous change in my life by working the program of
Co-Dependents Anonymous.*

*As I make an honest effort to work the Twelve Steps
and follow the Twelve Traditions..."*

1. I know a new sense of belonging. The feelings of emptiness and loneliness will disappear.
2. I am no longer controlled by my fears. I overcome my fears and act with courage, integrity, and dignity.
3. I know a new freedom.
4. I release myself from worry, guilt, and regret about my past and present. I am aware enough not to repeat it.
5. I know a new love and acceptance of myself and others. I feel genuinely lovable, loving, and loved.
6. I learn to see myself as equal to others. My new and renewed relationships are all with equal partners.
7. I am capable of developing and maintaining healthy and loving relationships. The need to control and manipulate others will disappear as I learn to trust those who are trustworthy.
8. I learn that it is possible for me to mend—to become more loving, intimate, and supportive. I have the choice of communication with my family in a way which is safe for me and respectful of them.
9. I acknowledge that I am a unique and precious creation.
10. I no longer need to rely solely on others to provide my sense of worth.
11. I trust the guidance I receive from my Higher Power and come to believe in my own capabilities.
12. I gradually experience serenity, strength, and spiritual growth in my daily life.

Introduction

The first time many of us heard CoDA's 12 Promises was in our first CoDA meeting. Others may have found the Promises when we stumbled across a CoDA website. Or a friend may have shared them with us to let us know what they had found in CoDA.

Wherever we first heard these 12 remarkable statements, most of us had a visceral reaction to them. Some of us found hope: "Maybe this is possible for me, too." Others may have been skeptical: "These Promises are nonsense. I'm far too damaged - this could never happen for me."

Whatever our reaction, as we came back to CoDA meetings and applied the Program to our lives, we began to experience some or all of the CoDA Promises. For some of us, they have come gradually, growing little by little over a period of time. Others of us experienced them suddenly. We awoke one day to the realization that we feel different, that we are experiencing freedom and exhibiting an integrity and dignity that we never had before. Often, it's only after we see these changes in other CoDA members that we notice them in ourselves – and we realize that we've changed in the very same ways. The one constant that we see is that CoDA members who actively work the 12 Steps and apply themselves to practicing the 12 Tradition do see the Promises fulfilled in their lives.

The purpose of this booklet is to explore the 12 Promises. We will discuss not only how many of us experience the Promises in our lives, but also how we can use them as tools to further enhance our recovery from the disease of codependence.

Much of this booklet springs from the discussions at workshops on the 12 Promises held by the Experience Strength and Hope Group in Saskatoon in Canada in 2013 and 2019, and by the Progress Not Perfection Group in Winnipeg, Canada in 2017, as well as from a survey of CoDA Conference Endorsed Literature conducted by the Experience Strength and Hope Group in 2013.

Literature

WHAT DO THE PROMISES MEAN TO US?

PROMISE 1

I know a new sense of belonging. The feelings of emptiness and loneliness will disappear.

Many CoDA members describe intense feelings, sometime lifelong ones, of alienation. Some talk about feeling as if they were dropped off as babies by aliens. Others talk about feeling lonely, separate, different and afraid. Still others describe the inability to feel loved or feel valued – even when they know, intellectually, that they are loved and valued. These feelings often provoke a sense of emptiness and a profound loneliness that follows codependents throughout their lives. These feelings may be the prime motivator for many of the “Patterns & Characteristics” of co-dependence.

CoDA's Promise One suggests that we will recover from these feelings and enjoy a new sense of belonging. Often, this is the first Promise we experience – sometimes at our very first meeting! The warm welcome and unconditional acceptance we experience as newcomers can sometimes penetrate our misery and our denial to suggest to us that we've finally found someplace to belong.

For some, the sense of belonging becomes even more concrete when we get involved in CoDA service. Whether at the Group, Intergroup, Voting Entity, or Conference level, service work provides us the opportunity to connect with other recovering codependents in a new and vital way.

For many, this sense of belonging is also enhanced by sponsorship. We experience the love and acceptance that our sponsor has provided us. Then we consider the love we feel for a sponsee who has placed their trust in us and the satisfaction we see that that sponsee's growth. In the midst of these considerations, it is easy to feel that we are a part of a greater whole – a chain of recovery in which we are a single link, or river in which we are a part of the flow.

We realize that we are a part of something bigger than ourselves.

Literature

PROMISE 2

I am no longer controlled by my fears. I overcome my fears and act with courage, integrity, and dignity.

Promise Two is built on an assumption that some of us may have resisted as newcomers, that codependence is an illness built on fear. As we progress in our recovery, we learn how true that assumption is. We learn that in the midst of our illness we are always afraid OF someone, or FOR someone. We learn that fear is the bedrock on which our codependent patterns are based.

In Step 4, we examine our fears. We might find that we are afraid of criticism or other people's anger. Maybe we're afraid of ridicule. We may be afraid of excessive attention or, ironically, of being ignored. Ultimately, we may realize that all of these stem from two core fears: rejection and abandonment. We are afraid that others won't accept us or that, having appeared to accept us, they will now reject us. We also realize that these fears are founded on a lack of self-esteem. We don't consider ourselves worthy, so we naturally conclude that others see us the same way.

In the process of working the steps, we face our fears and ask a loving Higher Power to release us from them. We gain self-esteem by performing esteem-worthy acts. The traditions guide us in dealing with others from a place of equality and self-respect. As we practice these new behaviours, we notice that less and less of our actions are being driven by our fears.

At first, these new behaviours may feel wrong. They may even feel fake. "I'm not courageous or dignified," we may think, "I have no integrity." But our sponsors guide us in applying the recovery tool of "acting as if." We "act as if" when we do the things that a courageous person would do, even if it terrifies us. We "act as if" when we do the things a person of integrity and dignity would do. And as we practice these new behaviours, as our fears loosen their grip on us, acts of courage, integrity and dignity gradually begin to feel more natural to us.

Literature

PROMISE 3

I know a new freedom.

What, exactly, does a new freedom mean to us? Freedom from what?

For some, it is freedom from the fears we described our 4th Step inventory. For others, it is freedom from expectations (by ourselves or others). It might be freedom from the control of someone else's personality, or from our own compulsions.

For some of us, it is the freedom to finally be ourselves.

Prior to recovery, many codependents describe the grip of their codependent patterns by saying, "I had no choice." The program tells us that we always have choices. Our sponsor helps us to see those choices and our Higher Power supports us in them.

Once we have accepted life on life's terms and we've worked through that things that have been blocking us from our Higher Power, our choices expand. We begin to see the hand of a Higher Power in our lives and we find the freedom to act on the will of that Higher Power, rather than being trapped in our old ways.

Endorsed

Literature

PROMISE 4

I release myself from worry, guilt, and regret about my past and present. I am aware enough not to repeat it.

Some codependents arrive in Co-dependents Anonymous mired in worry, guilt and regret – paralyzed by shame. The CoDA literature helps us to understand the dynamics of the shame we have carried. Then our sponsor and our CoDA friends help us to see our lives from a different perspective.

We learn the difference between acceptance and resignation. We accept that the events of the past actually happened and that we don't have the ability to go back and change them. We accept today's situation as a reality, rather than fighting it with the wishful thinking that we learn is called denial. Acceptance of the facts of our past and present finally allows us to explore our options and take different actions. We apply ourselves to the Program. In working the steps, particularly Steps 4 through 9, we learn to see the difference between shame and our earned guilt. Reliance on a Higher Power, rather than on others releases us from our shame, and we make amends to discharge ourselves of our earned guilt.

Having accepted our mistakes and made amends to put things right, where we could, we find that we no longer have to carry the burden of worry, guilt and regret. We can walk the earth as free men and women without the constant fear of our past codependent patterns.

Endorsed

Literature

PROMISE 5

I know a new love and acceptance of myself and others. I feel genuinely lovable, loving, and loved.

For many of us, the core of our codependency is that we never felt “lovable, loving, and loved.” The desperate desire to feel loved, to belong, harmed our self-esteem and led us to compliant behaviors that further damaged our already low self-esteem. The fear of rejection and abandonment fuelled our attempts to control others. Our fear of being hurt drove us to practice avoidance.

In CoDA we met fellow members who were committed to loving us until we could love ourselves. They modelled unconditional love for us and supported and applauded our efforts to behave in loving ways. One day, perhaps out of the blue, the thought may occur to us, “These people, and my Higher Power, love me - therefore I must be lovable.” The logic is irrefutable. Working the steps allows us to engage in estimable acts and we slowly build self-esteem. Eventually, we may suddenly realize that we like our selves; we respect ourselves; we even love ourselves.

We realize that we love these people in our groups and others in our lives and we learn new ways to express that love. We stop confusing love with approval or sex and find that, once we love ourselves, we can be loving toward even the difficult people in our lives.

Endorsed

Literature

PROMISE 6

I learn to see myself as equal to others. My new and renewed relationships are all with equal partners.

“Ladder thinking” is a hallmark of the disease of codependence. Most of us saw the people around us as above us (and to be obeyed) or as beneath us (to be “fixed” or “saved”).

In many of our relationships, we were dependent on the approval of others and our relationships were automatically out of balance. Dependence on external approval meant that we would hand all of our power to anyone that asked for it, or seemed to ask for it... or might ask for it. Since nobody respects a doormat, our self-esteem plummeted.

In other relationships, we may have seen the other person not as a person, but as a locus for problems we could solve. We reasoned that if they were such a mess, the noble thing to do (and we thought we were so very noble) was to step in and fix the problem for them. At first, they were often grateful and we gained a temporary boost to our ego. But in solving their problems, we took control (or the illusion of control) of a swath of the other person’s life. We had to. We were much more qualified to be in charge than they were. If, and when, the other person realized how we viewed them, they may have been hurt or offended.

In CoDA, the 12 Steps cultivate humility in us. Humility is not humiliation, but rather a proportionate and realistic view of ourselves with respect to others. We learn to “identify, don’t compare.” The 12 Traditions teach us that the only person responsible for solving another’s problems is them (*Tradition 7*). We learn to see where we stop and another person begins (*Tradition 4*). Most of all, we learn that we are all equal (*Tradition 2*).

Without the pressure to jockey for position on an imaginary ladder, we are free to be ourselves. We learn to relate to others exactly where they are – and they do the same with us.

Literature

PROMISE 7

I am capable of developing and maintaining healthy and loving relationships. The need to control and manipulate others will disappear as I learn to trust those who are trustworthy.

Many of us discovered at an early age that trusting others often resulted in pain or disappointment. Growing up in a dysfunctional family system is inherently unstable and unpredictable. We learned that asking for what we want and need in a straightforward manner gave others the power to hurt us. In reaction, we learned to apply methods of control or manipulation to get our needs met. Over time, our patterns of control and manipulation inevitably drove others away.

In CoDA we were asked to consider the real source of the problem. Was it that other people are universally untrustworthy? Or were we, perhaps, surrounded by and attracted to people who were untrustworthy? Were we trusting too much or were we simply trusting the wrong people? CoDA introduces us to relationships with sponsors and other recovery friends who are there for us – friends who go to great lengths to be there for us and to offer us a safe, respectful environment. These are friends who are trying to live a life of honesty and authenticity. They're not perfect, but they try to say what they mean and do what they say.

Slowly, perhaps, it dawns on us that we're not obligated to trust those who have proven themselves untrustworthy, but that there are at least a few trustworthy people in the world. Perhaps some of the trustworthy people were there, in our lives, all the time. We couldn't see them because we were so focused on the untrustworthy ones, but now we are free to offer at least a little bit of trust to someone that won't betray us. The little bit of trust that we've cultivated grows, and we are able to use it as the cornerstone for a new kind of relationship. We begin to experience relationships based on mutual trust and respect. We learn that the only healthy love – the only reliable love – is unconditional love, so we stop putting our trust in those who put a price tag on love.

We become more trustworthy ourselves, as we grow. We become more open and honest with the people that have been open and honest with us. We begin to enjoy real intimacy with others, without exposing our vulnerabilities to those who don't deserve it. We begin to enjoy real, healthy, and loving relationship.

PROMISE 8

I learn that it is possible for me to mend—to become more loving, intimate, and supportive. I have the choice of communication with my family in a way which is safe for me and respectful of them.

Codependence kills communication. Driven by self-centered fear, some of us have been constantly on our guard in communicating with those around us. In the past, when we've let our guard down, we've been misunderstood or misquoted or mischaracterized. We've been hurt. Often, we've responded to the hurt by redoubling our guard and either walking on eggshells or shutting down. Eventually, the pressure of stuffing our feelings would build to the point that we could no longer control it, and it came out in an explosion of rage completely out of proportion to the situation at hand.

Some of us have tried to "control" communication by filling every silence, no matter how brief, with our own views. We were afraid to let others speak for fear of what they might say.

We learned that we could keep ourselves safe, or we could be respectful of others, but we were unable to do both at the same time.

In CoDA, we work the 12 Steps in order to heal from the wounds of our past. No longer in the clutches of that pain, we are free to take a new, more loving and supportive approach to those around us. Our sponsor, our CoDA friends and the CoDA literature all offer suggestions in the form of their own experience, strength and hope. If it worked for them, maybe it will work for us.

We apply some of these suggestions and we develop new methods of communication based on the principles we learned in the 12 Traditions. We begin to be able to risk intimacy, knowing that we can establish boundaries. And because they're our boundaries, we can adjust them, as necessary.

It's an imperfect process of trial and error, but eventually we find that we have developed the capacity to communicate openly, honestly and directly, in a respectful way and without surrendering to abuse by another.

PROMISE 9

I acknowledge that I am a unique and precious creation.

Low self-esteem is often the starting point for our codependence. Because we lack our own esteem, we seek esteem from others. As we chase the esteem of others, and get ever more desperate for someone else's recognition or approval, we engage in codependent patterns that further damage our self esteem. Often, we find ourselves in a downward cycle of approval seeking driven by low self-esteem that is aggravated by our approval seeking behaviors motivated by low self-esteem...and so on. It's a vicious cycle.

Our CoDA friends show us a different path. It starts when the members of our CoDA group treat us as valued members of the group. They see value in us, so we begin to suspect that we may have value.

There is an old saying in recovery circles: "If you want self-esteem, perform estimable acts." In CoDA, we work the 12 Steps and we try to practice the 12 Traditions in all our affairs. We make amends where we have caused harm. We engage in acts of service, not for any reward, but because it's the loving thing to do. At first, we may show up early to the meeting to set up chairs because we are trying to "earn" our place in the group. Eventually, we do it simply because we feel good about ourselves when we do. Nobody else needs to see or to be involved.

Some of us, prior to recovery, felt "odd" or "different." In CoDA we begin to appreciate the value of being different. After all, the old timers tell us, "If any two of us were identical, one of us would be unnecessary." We find that the principles we are practicing in the 12 Steps and 12 Traditions allow us to channel our unique character into productive and useful paths and we begin to embrace our uniqueness.

Eventually, we realize that we are both unique and precious.

Literature

PROMISE 10

I no longer need to rely solely on others to provide my sense of worth.

“If I didn’t have low self-esteem, I wouldn’t have any,” quips one CoDA member. In the past we often had no sense of self-worth. Our behavior was dictated by a need for someone else’s approval and we adopted patterns of behaviour that were harmful to ourselves and others. We couldn’t be honest about our thoughts and feelings with others. What if they were the wrong thoughts and feelings? We couldn’t set boundaries. What if someone else didn’t like our boundaries? We couldn’t look after our own needs. Someone else’s needs were always more important. Often, we bankrupted ourselves (emotionally and physically, if not financially) trying to buy someone else’s approval and acceptance.

In CoDA we gradually build our self-esteem. Our progress through the 12 Steps and our work in applying the 12 Traditions contributes to a sense of self-worth that we may never have experienced before. We gain self respect by practicing the principles of Tradition 4 (autonomy) and Tradition 7 (being self-supporting). We begin to realize that our opinion is just as important as someone else’s (Tradition 2).

Ultimately, we grow to realize that our opinion about ourselves, and that of our Higher Power, are the only ones that really matter. We can separate ourselves from the need for someone else’s approval. We know that we are worthwhile and important, just as we are.

Literature

PROMISE 11

I trust the guidance I receive from my Higher Power and come to believe in my own capabilities.

If Step 2 was a revelation for many of us, Step 3 was a lifesaver. How long had we wandered through life, rudderless and without direction? Lost, we latched onto others and made them our Higher Power. We became easy prey for abusers and manipulators.

In Step 2, we are introduced to a Higher Power of our own understanding. The only requirements on our own definition was that it be a “loving” power (*Tradition 2*) and “greater than ourselves” (*Step 2*). Many of us were amazed at the idea that such a power could exist, and would be there to provide guidance and strength when we needed it.

In Step 3, we were asked to make a decision to follow the guidance of that power to the best of our ability. Suddenly, our decisions were no longer determined solely by the self-interest of the imperfect people we obsessed over. We no longer “turned our will and our lives over to the sickest person in the room.” Instead, we tried to do the things that a wiser, kinder, more loving Higher Power wanted for our benefit.

In time, our work through the rest of the Steps helped us to become more consistent at hearing the guidance of our Higher Power, and at following through on that guidance. Our decision-making and our choices became less frantic and more considered. We learned that “My will is a constant urgency; God’s will is a calm certainty” and we began to be able to tell the difference between the calm quiet direction of our Higher Power and the strident demands of our codependence.

As we became more consistent at pausing and consulting our Higher Power before taking action, we experienced more success. It became easier to trust our Higher Power and our successes proved to us that we could walk through life with courage, integrity, and dignity (*Promise 2*).

Literature

PROMISE 12

I gradually experience serenity, strength, and spiritual growth in my daily life.

It has been said that when we stop growing, we stagnate. Stagnation can be defined as dying very slowly. That's what many of us were doing before coming to Co-Dependents Anonymous.

When we honestly work the 12 Steps and practice the 12 Traditions, we change and grow. We can't help it. We don't even have to believe it will work when we start. It just happens.

Our newly-found relationship with a Higher Power equips us with a new source of guidance and strength. Our daily practice of Step 11 brings us into closer contact with that Higher Power and relieves us of our fears. We begin to see glimmers of that peace of mind we call serenity. We begin to be able to take risks and experience successes.

Our work in the 4th Step inventory helps us to see the reality of our lives more clearly. Our work in service to CoDA helps us to learn patience and tolerance. Our inventory work and amends in Steps 8 and 9 helps to free us from guilt and shame over our past actions. All of these things contribute to our feeling of serenity.

Carrying the message of CoDA to others in Step 12 is often described as our greatest opportunity for spiritual growth. As we work with newcomers and sponsor others in CoDA, we cement our own relationship with the Steps and with our Higher Power, and we grow.

It doesn't happen overnight, for most of us. Looking back through these promises, we are sometimes surprised at how many of them have become true for us. At other times, we are excited by how much more growth is in store for us. As it says in the CoDA Welcome, "We have all learned to survive life, but in CoDA we are learning to live life." Living is a process of growth. The 12 Promises give us a measure that we can use to see that we are growing – that we are living.

Literature

The Promises as Tools for Recovery

For some of us, CoDA's 12 Promises have served, first and foremost, as milestones in our recovery. We find comfort and encouragement when we read the Promises at the end of a meeting and we realize that one or more of them have begun to come true in our lives.

When we realize that we have taken a different, positive action instead of engaging in our codependent patterns, it can be an electrifying experience. The first time that we choose to communicate with a family member in a way that is safe for us while still respectful of them (Promise 8), or the first time we see ourselves consciously let go of another's approval (Promise 10), it is a powerful moment. We suddenly see the concrete results of our recovery work.

Beyond being a simple measure of our progress, though, the Promises can also serve as hands-on tools to be applied in our recovery. Above everything else, the Promises are aspirational in nature. They describe the kind of person we would like to become, and the relationships in which we would like to participate. Just like the 12 Traditions or our slogans, they can serve as effective reminders of the behaviours we want to embrace, instead of the default patterns we pursued in the past. We can actually use the 12 Promises, moment-to-moment, to aid in our growth.

What does that look like? It may mean reciting one of the Promises in a tense moment, as a reminder of the behavior we want to practice in our new recovery-based lives. We may use the recovery technique of "acting as-if." It might mean incorporating one or more of the Promises into a prayer, seeking our Higher Power's support. Or we could use the principle described in one of the Promises as a tool for decision-making when we are faced with a difficult choice. Consider the following examples:

What would a person of integrity and dignity do in this situation?

I am unique and precious. I have value even if this person is angry with me.

Higher Power, please help me to communicate in a way that is safe for me and respectful of them.

Am I behaving like an equal partner in this situation?

I don't need this person's approval. I feel genuinely lovable, loving and loved without them.

Progress, Not Perfection

Turning to the promises as guides for our behaviors helps to remind us to hold onto the gains that we have made in our Recovery. Some of us like to say that “you can’t put the genie back in the lamp,” or “you can’t put the toothpaste back in the tube,” or simply “you can’t un-know something.” What that means is that if we’ve experienced one of these Promises, even once, we are changed. Ours is a program of progress, not perfection. We may never grow to the point of experiencing all of these promises all of the time. But if we’ve experienced them, even once, we now know that it’s possible for us to behave in this new way. We can never go back to not knowing.

Consider Promise 8. We may find ourselves, in a tense situation, communicating with a family member in a new way - one that is safe for us and yet still respectful of them. Exhilarated, we phone our sponsor to report the new change in us. Does that mean that we will never engage in codependent communication with that family member again? Probably not. But in the future, when an opportunity arises to choose between our previous patterns and a new behaviour, we will know that we have options. We gradually begin to exercise the other options. Slowly, perhaps, we become more consistent about practicing better behaviors. Some of us describe this as the 7th Step (*Humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings*) at work in our lives.

Going Deeper

When we actively incorporate CoDA’s Promises into our daily thinking, we begin to experience them at a deeper level. They gradually become a part of everything we do. We begin to use them daily and in an interrelated way.

What do the promises look like when we combine them?

P2 + P5: Because I’m no longer controlled by my fears, I’m free to love and accept myself and others.

P3 + P10: I know a new freedom since I don’t have to rely on anyone else for my sense of worth.

P4 + P2: I’m free of my worry, guilt and regret about the past so I can act with courage, integrity and dignity today.