

# Dependency and Passivity-You Can Have One without the Other

May 03, 2011

Think of a dependent person and you think of someone who's needy, high-maintenance, and passive. That's how many psychologists and therapists think of them, too; passivity is key. But dependency is actually more complex and can even have active, positive aspects, writes Robert Bornstein of Adelphi University, the author of a new article published in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

Bornstein was sent towards a different concept of dependency by a series of experiments he did in graduate school. He paired a dependent person with a less dependent person and set them to debate an issue they disagreed on. He expected that the dependent person would give in to their peer. But the opposite happened; 70 percent of the time, it was the nondependent person who gave in. So the assumption of psychologists was wrong; dependent people aren't always passive. The reason, he realized, was that they wanted to impress the professor running the experiment.

"My understanding, based on what studies we've done so far, is that the core of a dependent personality is a perception of one's self as helpless, vulnerable, and weak," Bornstein says. He believes this often comes from growing up with overprotective or authoritarian parents. So dependent people decide "the way to get by in life is to find someone strong and never let go." That means they want to impress authority figures who might help or protect them later; they also want to maintain relationships at all cost.

The surprising part is that this need to impress can lead to some very active, non-passive behavior. The reliance on authority figures explains why dependent people are more likely to see a doctor when they have an alarming symptom, and more likely to stick to a treatment regimen or a weight-loss program when a doctor assigns it to them. This can also make them conscientious therapy patients.

Other studies have found that dependent college students have higher GPAs than non-dependent college students. "If you're a non-dependent person, the general feeling is, 'well, I'll have to figure it out on my own,'" Bornstein says. "Dependent students, who are predisposed to seek help from an authority figure, will go to a professor and ask for help."

Of course, that's not all good. Seeking medical attention after every little twinge isn't necessarily useful, and a dependent college student can drive his professors up the wall. Another surprising finding is that dependent men are more likely to perpetrate domestic violence; they're so worried about maintaining the relationship that, "When they get desperate, they resort to coercive tactics," he says.

Bornstein thinks the new way of thinking about dependency is helpful to psychological scientists and also to therapists. "I'm trying to move toward a fundamental shift in the way that psychologists or therapists deal with dependent patients," he says. Traditionally, the goal was to make the dependency go away. "My take on it is, the most effective way to deal with dependent patients is to turn unhealthy

dependency into healthy dependency.”