

Codependency - Caretaking Behavior

A man who tended toward caretaking behavior in his relationships told me that as a child, he resisted spending time with peers because he worried about his single mother at home alone. As he became an adult, he gave up some major personal goals because of his emotional responsibility for his mother (who was often physically ill and quite nervous). I asked him how his mother communicated her emotional distress. He noted that although she never complained to him about being lonely or depressed, she did not have any friends, dates, personal passions/interests, or goals for the future. When peers tried to reach out to her, the mother did not receive their friendship or share her parenting crises or other personal problems with them. This left the client feeling the burden to meet her emotional needs. In adulthood, my client had become much like his mother- he had not a single friend whom he felt he could call on during a crisis. He had no difficulty helping others; in fact he was easily taken advantage of and said "Yes" to others when he wanted to say "No". But, he did not allow others to reciprocate nurturing and support (including his wife), as he did not reveal any current pain/distress to them. We talked about how he could now be sending his own children the message that he was in need of emotional caretaking due to his lack of intimate relationships with same-age peers and his spouse. Out of fear of repeating the cycle again, the client immediately began taking more risks in relationships with his wife and peers by sharing his past and present problems. Now, perhaps his children won't have to grow up into trained caretakers who are looking for a relationship with someone who needs help (like an addict or otherwise sickly, irresponsible, or distant individual). Rather, they will look for another stable, responsible person with whom to spend their lives. What a gift!