

Laurel's Story

I grew up the youngest of four in the 80s. My mother was the breadwinner and worked long hours. My father was the stay-at-home parent. In retrospect I'm pretty sure my dad has borderline & narcissistic personality disorders, as well as being an addict. Apparently when he and my mom met he was abusing narcotics. After they had their first child (my brother) he quit all illegal substances, but now--again, in retrospect--I would call him a "dry drunk".

However, when I was a child and did not know names to put on it, his unpredictable, nonsensical, sexualized, cruel and sadistic behavior was just confusing and terrifying. I remember hiding from him in a shrub in our front yard and thinking--with my childish logic, casting about for any theories!--that the only reasonable explanation for my dad's behavior was that he was actually Satan. It was hard for us to have friends because neighborhood mothers--I later found out--did not want their daughters spending time in our home. They thought my dad might be inappropriate with their daughters. They weren't exactly wrong about my father.

So instead of abusing substances he became a hoarder--books, old cars, stereo equipment, it piled up in our house and yard. He became obsessed with health & nutrition, to the point where he required me and my siblings chew every mouthful of food 100 times, denied us liquids with meals, and padlocked the refrigerator to prevent snacking. I remember eating handfuls of vitamin E capsules because the gelatin capsule itself was slightly sweet and chewy. My sister and I also tried snacking on cat food, and dried spaghetti. But occasionally he would buy pints of ice cream or Halloween or Easter candy on sale the day after and go on a major binge.

My eldest sister struggled with depression. I remember once finding Prozac in her dresser when she must have been about 17 (I would have been 10). She battled with my dad, whereas the rest of us tended to just try to tiptoe around and appease him. She tried to run away from home. She called the police several times on him and there were confrontations outside the house. I was called into the principal's office when I was in 2nd grade. The police were there and they said my sister had called them and told them our father was abusive. Did I think he was abusive? they asked me. I knew he was, but I was scared to get him into trouble. I felt horrible to betray my sister as I had just an inkling of the courage it must have taken to speak out against what was happening, but I lied. I said no. I knew that it was a lie.

A few years later my sister committed suicide. Four years after that my parents got divorced. Life improved after the divorce for me, for a few years, like a grace period. Although my surviving sister started suffering from depression and substance abuse and dangerous behaviors at this time. I think my codependence started with my dad, trying to make him happy, prevent his outbursts, avoid his criticism and anger, etc. I now recognize the ways he tried to make his children responsible for him. Then, my codependence really got going with my surviving sister because I assumed that my "job" was to prevent her from committing suicide, too.

So from about 19 years of age to 31, when I attended my first CoDA meeting, I was a poster child for codependence! Forestalling my own depression and anxiety by focusing on others, out-of-control controlling and managing, perfectionism, resentment, guilt, self-denial and neglect, allowing my boundaries to be violated and violating others' boundaries, engineering my life so it was always intense and stressful with little down-time, etc. Indulging in love & relationship addiction. My weight yo-yo'd a lot as I also medicated with food. All the while thinking I had magically dodged a bullet, since my

surviving brother and sister seemed to be such "messes" and I was somehow doing "fine".

I eventually went to graduate school and fell in love with someone. It was perfect because she came from an alcoholic/codependent family, lived overseas and having this long-distance relationship with her ensured that life would continue to be intense, chaotic, stressful, and overcommitted. We both tried to fix the other. The combined stress of graduate studies and maintaining this relationship started to crack my facade. I started seeing a therapist through University health services and went on antidepressant and anti-anxiety meds. The guilt of leaving my sisters behind in their darkest hours was gnawing at me. I lived in fear of receiving a terrible phone call. Yet something told me, also, that I had to put some distance between me and my surviving sister. These were early attempts to detach, I think. But without the knowledge in my heart--which recovery principles might have taught me--that it was the right, and the only thing, to do. So without that knowledge there was guilt.

Actually, it was good for my sister to be away from ME, too. And that was humbling as this concept dawned on me--that all my (codependent) behaviors were not really helping, but possibly, in fact, HARMING the person I claimed to love so much and who I was trying to help. (I do love my sister, but my codependent behaviors were not what I would now call "loving") But still, it would be a few years until I really was humbled enough to receive the wisdom in recovery principles...

My romantic relationship fell apart in 2011 and so did I. A few months later I had the magical good fortune to end up moving to a city and to an apartment that was only a few blocks away from an Alano Club with meetings all day, 7 days a week of various fellowships. Including CoDA. I experienced my CoDA birthday on a Sunday in February of 2012. I'm three and 1/2 years old now! I cried in every meeting for the first year. They were tears of grief, remorse, relief, and occasionally pain-filled joy or joy-filled pain to borrow a term I heard a speaker use. Reading the Twelve Promises out loud I would sometimes get choked up over the words, "I learned that it was possible to mend" or "I release myself from worry, guilt and regret" and many others.

I've been working slowly through the Steps and recently got a Sponsor. One funny thing is that my weight has been stable ever since getting into recovery, through no special effort. I think I am just finally being "fed" in the way that I actually needed. Some days I still struggle, but most days I am just so grateful that, by the grace of a Power Greater than myself I ended up in CoDA--and stayed. It's true, I DO know a new freedom. I have a burgeoning spiritual life that feeds and consoles me in a healthy way. In a way that gives me more independence from seeking consolation in inappropriate ways, places, or with inappropriate people. I thank the Universe every day and often think, "There but for the grace of God go I" -- not with a superior attitude but with humility. This serves to remind me that 1) recovery is by no means a freebie and 2) it is a lifelong process. Yet, based on the progress I have made, I feel a new optimism for the future. A future with abiding peace, love, acceptance, and healthy relationships with family, friends and partners.

Laurel 9/11/15