

sexpressions

1

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A MAGAZINE FOR INTERVENERS
AND EDUCATORS WHO ARE OFFERING
SEX-EDUCATION ACTIVITIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE
OF SECONDARY-SCHOOL AGE

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AFFECTIVE AND SEXUAL DEPENDENCE

A phenomenon
to discuss with youth

BY
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Affective and sexual dependence affects both young and old. What is affective dependence? Questions about it may have occurred to you. What are its sources, symptoms, and effects?

Québec 



A simple way to begin thinking about affective and sexual dependence: complete this questionnaire

ARE YOU AN AFFECTIVE DEPENDANT?	YES	NO
1. You feel rejected or neglected if you are not continually told that you are loved.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. You believe that others love you because you are able to suffer for them.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. You are able to continue loving someone who no longer loves you.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. You are constantly afraid of being judged or disliked.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. You believe that others deliberately provoke your feelings and emotions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. You feel ill at ease at the prospect of being alone.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. You'd be ready to do anything, including things you dislike, to avoid breaking up with your partner.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. You believe that love can fix everything, even when your relationship is going nowhere.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Your partner is your idol, and you live only for him or for her.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. You cannot make decisions without talking about them to others.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

(Bourget, 2002)

If you replied **yes** to most of these statements, you might have some of the characteristics that may be associated with affective dependence. Perhaps you recognize someone close to you, a work colleague, a relative, or even a student in your class.

Adolescence coincides with the beginning of loving relations, and it is important that young people experience their first loves in an open and healthy environment. Unfortunately, affective dependence does not foster harmonious relations. An understanding of affective dependence and its consequences may be of great help to young people in their love life. Moreover, this theme of affective and love-life issues (MEQ, MSSS 2003) fits well within the general domain of health and welfare of the Québec Education Program (MEQ, 2004), the goal of which is that students develop harmoniously in their environment and feel comfortable, happy, valued, and safe. Professionals in the educational system can approach this theme in two principle ways:

- 1 awareness of oneself and of one's basic needs
- 2 awareness of the consequences on one's health and happiness of one's personal choices.

Professionals are thus invited to help young people who are for the first time entering into loving and sexual relationships become aware of the affective and relational issues involved.

LOVE OR DEPENDENCE?

It is quite important to establish the distinction between love and dependence. Is someone who waits an hour or so for his girlfriend so they can go home together in love or dependent? Is someone who dyes her hair blonde to please and seduce her partner in love or dependent?

Of course, adolescents who are emotionally dependent love their partners. They love them passionately, they idealize and even idolize them, and they will do anything not to lose their partners; their whole lives revolve around their relationships (Dallaire, 2000).

Only one thing, in fact, distinguishes love from dependence: suffering (Luria, 1997). Suffering creeps in as soon as the adolescent begins to accept everything, relinquishing any self interest for the sake of the other. Dependence becomes unhealthy when the relationship takes up all the space (Grog, 1995) and when, despite the pain and suffering we have experienced, we return after each injury to the person who makes us suffer (Senk, 1997). The person to whom we cling has the power to calm our anxiety and inner pain, and to provide an illusion of a sense of well-being that we lack (Lemay, 1997). A vicious circle is established; the illusion of well-being continually forces us to return to the source of our suffering.

AFFECTIVE DEPENDENCE IS MORE WIDESPREAD THAN WE THINK

Screening for affective dependence is difficult because dependent adolescents lie to themselves; when confronted with their behaviour they deny it, vainly justify it, or accuse their partners of being responsible for it. As well, they can believe that no one sees what they do (Senk, 1997), or that they are adapting to the situation (Borrel, 1997). Yet dependence is well established and, unfortunately, may sometimes push them to acts of violence against themselves or their partners.

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DEPENDENT ADOLESCENTS AND THEIR BEHAVIOUR

As we have mentioned, it can be difficult at first glance to distinguish clearly between love and affective dependence. It all depends on the frequency and intensity of the feelings of impotence and worthlessness, on the real suffering that the absence of or need for the other provokes. Certain attitudes and behaviours turn out to be reliable indicators of affective dependence.

“Yes, Yes, OK!”

Because they do not want to be disliked, dependent adolescents do not express their disagreement. Therefore they do things they do not want to do solely to be accepted by others (Charpentier, 1994).

“It’s because of you that ...”

Dependent adolescents do not value themselves highly; they do not consider themselves to be worth much trouble. Moreover, if they do succeed in something they give the credit to others, to their partner or friends, or to any cause external to themselves (Campeau, 1990). If they fail, they also blame others. In short, they never consider themselves responsible either for their successes or their failures.

“If you want ...”

Dependent adolescents do not begin their own projects but count on others to make decisions and be responsible for them (Campeau, 1990; Charpentier, 1994; Lemay, 1997; Luria, 1997). Moreover, their life experiences have not taught them confidence; each time they showed confidence they were betrayed.

“You’re my idol!”

Dependent adolescents have low self-esteem and negative self-images (Campeau, 1990). They feel empty inside and try to hide this through the admiration they feel for others. Dependent adolescents only exist through others, and thus risk throwing themselves into the arms of the first person to come along, because finally someone takes an interest in them (Luria, 1997).

“Look what I did for you ...”

Dependent adolescents find it difficult to know, affirm and meet their needs. To win the love of others, they have learned to neglect and even ignore their own needs (Campeau, 1990).

“Stay with me.”

Dependent adolescents fear being abandoned and feel uneasy at the prospect of finding themselves alone (Lemay, 1997). They constantly seek someone whom they can admire, or carry on multiple love affairs.

AUTONOMY AND DEPENDENCE IN ADOLESCENCE

Affective dependence is rooted in two distinct contexts, both of which can hinder the development of the child or adolescent. The family environment often triggers the progressive acquisition of dependent behaviour. In families in which physical and psychological violence are found, children soon learn to feel ashamed because they believe they are responsible for the situation (Campeau, 1989). They gradually convince themselves that they do not deserve to be loved, and to dispel this feeling, they adopt dependent behaviours. Unfortunately, this erroneous perception continues into adolescence and provokes either ideas of running away or other fantasies, or such behaviours as that of the saviour or of the class clown.

Furthermore, dependence may appear in adolescence. We know that in this period, young people feel the need to assert their independence, and to do so in all aspects of life, including work, study, and sexuality (Dolto, 1988; Matteau, 1999). This process does not mean that young people cut their links to their families, but that they acquire a certain emotional autonomy. Depending on whether he or she has gone through this stage positively or negatively, an adolescent will develop either autonomy or affective dependence.

Both boys and girls have this desire for autonomy. However, they experience it at different periods and with different intensities (Geuzaine et al., 2000). Being emotionally close to her parents turns out to be beneficial for the development of autonomy in a girl. This is not necessarily the case for boys-among whom autonomy is socially valued—who acquire autonomy much earlier in life than do girls. This difference may be attributed to the fact that girls are more encouraged to express emotions and to have significant relationships (Bornstein et al., 1993).

This process of developing autonomy will be stronger if parents and teachers encourage the adolescent’s successes, decisions, and initiatives. Moreover, since adolescence is a time when self-esteem is fragile, it is especially important to encourage autonomous behaviours, since an adolescent with low self-esteem will be more likely to develop loving relationships based on affective or sexual dependence (Duclos et al., 1995).





WHEN DEPENDENCE EQUALS VIOLENCE

In certain cases, affective dependence is expressed by gestures that are physically or verbally violent, and features of the dependence sustain this violence. First of all, affectively dependent adolescents seem to find it difficult to communicate (Campeau, 1990). Young people often lack the ability to assert themselves, to know how to say “no,” to voice their opinions. Thus instead of asking they beg; instead of expressing their opinions, they lie; and instead of asserting themselves, they blame or threaten others.

“It’s your fault, I warned you not to do that!”

Some dependent adolescents feel an exaggerated need for power. They are incapable of just letting things happen or letting the people around them do what they want to do, because the fear of some drama ensuing constantly gnaws at them (Campeau, 1990). Moreover, dependent adolescents never consider themselves responsible for a breakup; it’s never their fault! And if, unfortunately, a breakup does occur, they will have a lot of trouble getting over it. Thus, to assure their power and control over a relationship, dependent adolescents will make their partners feel guilty, threaten, dominate and manipulate them, and will sometimes resort to force.

Affective dependence may turn into jealousy, possessiveness (Dallaire, 2000), and even obsession (Charpentier, 1994). What dependent adolescents want to avoid at all costs is a breakup, which they are convinced would be fatal for them. They think that a drama could erupt in their love affair at any moment. They have exaggerated fears of this happening, and agonize over elaborate fantasies about it. They try out various strategies to win back their partners that usually smother rather than seduce them. The adolescents then use indifference, blackmail, and sometimes even threats of suicide. As a last resort, they express this frustration by physical violence so as to dominate their partners (Dallaire, 2000).

Little by little, dependent adolescents lose control of their behaviour (Campeau, 1990). They may throw scenes and make fools of themselves in front of their friends. They may go as far as impulsively committing extreme acts against themselves, their partners, or others whom they surprise in the company of their partners (Charpentier, 1994). These impulsive behaviours may even endanger not only their own lives but also those of their partners.

HOW DO YOU GET TO BE THIS WAY?

It seems, then, that our perception of love may lead us into affective dependence. This process is complicated by adolescence, a period of difficulties and troubles. Because adolescents are just beginning their love lives, their affection for others comes in intense and noble surges, the presence of the other seems indispensable to them, and the gestures of love are necessarily generous. What is needed, then, is to get them to start thinking about the differences between love and affective dependence. Here are some of the beliefs that are worth discussing with young people; some nuances, of course, should be added.

THE MYTHS OF LOVE

- * **To feel loved, I need to feel that someone needs me.**
- * **When you lose a partner, you’ve got to try to win him or her back by continuing to offer love.**
- * **If I suffer and sacrifice myself for another, I will be worthy of his or her love.**
- * **In love, I let my partner have all the space.**
- * **In order not to feel depressed again, I compensate by looking for casual love affairs.**
- * **If there’s no passion, it’s not love.**
- * **Those around me will not love me if I make a mistake.**
- * **I avoid contradicting other people in conversation as much as possible so as to avoid conflict.**
- * **Love will come to me because I’m working on it.**
- * **A good way to be loved is to be useful.**
- * **I would do anything to avoid a breakup.**
- * **Love can overcome all.**



SOME HEALTH CONSEQUENCES

Because they have difficulty acknowledging their emotional and physical needs, affective dependent adolescents are vulnerable to physical and psychological diseases (Campeau, 1991). They have many physical problems caused by stress and anxiety. Moreover, affective dependence is also often coupled with dependence on alcohol or drugs, with bulimia, etc. It also goes along with depression, suicidal ideation, and phobia. Sexual dependence, finally, may take the form of an obsession.

SEXUAL DEPENDENCE AS AN OBSESSION

Affective dependent adolescents need a loving relationship to define themselves. They also feel the need to merge with another, which they do through sexuality. Their sexual desire is enhanced every time they make love because when they do so, for a few hours at least, they have less fear of losing their partner (Dallaire, 2000).

But if dependent adolescents have no one in their lives they may, to calm their fears and fill the emptiness inside, begin to engage repetitively in other forms of sexual activity such as masturbation, cyber-sex, voyeurism, prostitution, or even sexual aggression or abuse (Lemay, 1997; Potvin, 1998).

In certain cases, sexual dependence presents as a form of obsession (Lemay, 1997). First the adolescent feels bored, distressed and lonely, and feels the need to get away from such feelings (Potvin, 1998). Next the idea of a sexual activity occurs and becomes a fixation: the fantasy takes shape and the pleasure it provides has a calming effect on the distress and pushes the adolescent to act. The gratification thus obtained contributes to repetition of the act. For the dependent adolescent, these sexual obsessions are completely uncontrollable.

Sexual dependence affects boys as well as girls, though it seems less frequent in girls (Potvin, 1998). Perhaps this is because a very active sexual life wins a boy the respect of his peers, whereas in a girl the same behaviour is frowned upon. For an adolescent girl, sexual dependence takes the form rather of a search for tenderness and attention in the sexual relationship. As for boys, sexual dependence functions to reduce frustration, vent stress, and dissipate conflicts.

SEXUALITY, DEPENDENCE, SEXUALLY TRANSMISSIBLE INFECTIONS, AND PREGNANCY

Obsessive sexual activity requires taking increasingly bigger risks to maintain the same level of gratification (Potvin, 1998). For example, dependent adolescents tend to multiply their partners so as to feel the same sensations, or to do things that pose a certain risk for themselves or their partners. Moreover, affective dependent adolescents who have a taste for risk and a devil-may-care attitude tend to take refuge in escapist thoughts such as "I'll never get AIDS!" (Campeau, 1990).

The sexual behaviour of dependent adolescents can, in fact, pose a risk for contracting sexually transmissible infections (STIs) and pregnancy. Moreover, it should be remembered that affective dependence is often accompanied by another dependence, such as on alcohol or drugs. Whether it is the dependent adolescents themselves or their partners who use such substances, dependence on them pushes dependent adolescents towards having multiple partners and unprotected sex (Campeau, 1990). Given the shortcomings of affective dependents when it comes to communication and self-assertion, one can easily imagine the difficulties they will have when the time comes to negotiate condom use.



TAKING CONTROL OF YOUR LIFE

Dependent adolescents have work to do on themselves. First, they have to acknowledge their dependence, and then they must put into practice certain measures that will allow them to win more autonomy in their affective relationships. In particular, they must aim at self-affirmation, improvement of self-esteem, and “letting go” with respect to their partners.

“Me, dependent?”

Acknowledging one’s dependence is the very first step to freeing oneself from dependence (Borrel, 1997). Since dependent adolescents do not consider themselves to be affective dependent, they must first draw up an honest inventory of their behaviours and feelings. They can then analyze the positive and negative aspects of these behaviours and feelings.

“Who am I?”

Changing your image of yourself, and learning to know, like, and accept yourself are difficult but necessary stages (Campeau, 1990). Since dependent adolescents have low self-esteem they must absolutely acknowledge their true worth. Participating in various social activities, for instance, will help them to know themselves better, and to discover their skills. In love, they must clarify, affirm and respect their values so as to understand what they are looking for in a relationship.

“I would need...”

Acknowledging one’s emotions and needs and learning to express them are among the things that must be done to conquer dependence. Dependent adolescents-whether the dependence is affective or sexual-must overcome their inner void through changing their usual ways of reacting, which makes them turn to their partner or to compulsive sexuality.

“I don’t think I can!”

One of the goals at which dependent adolescents must aim is acquiring some self-confidence (Campeau 1999). Participating in different projects or workshops will help them in making decisions or taking initiatives. When in a couple, dependent adolescents must learn not to bet everything on their relationships, and to recognize that they have a life outside the relationship as do their partners (Dallaire, 2000).

“I love you because...”

A dependent adolescent’s concept of love is often biased by myths and false beliefs (Borrel, 1997). This misunderstanding leads to behaviours that are, most of the time, unsatisfactory and painful. The adolescent has to transform these beliefs into healthy representations of reality that will help him or her to behave maturely.

“I’m going out tonight without you.”

It is in the interest of dependent adolescents to find social activities that they can take part in alone or with people other than their partners (Dallaire, 2000). Doing so will help them develop their identity and individuality.

“It can’t be that!”

Dependent adolescents must stop imagining breakup scenarios that so often cause anxiety (Dallaire, 2000). To do this, they must replace negative mental images by positive sequences. Thus instead of imagining that since their partner has not telephoned he or she must want to break up, they should make the effort to replace this thought with a more realistic scenario; if the partner has not phoned, it is probably because various reasons have prevented him or her doing so.

“I’ve got something to tell you...”

There are deficiencies in the way that dependent adolescents communicate. They must learn to communicate without threatening and to assert themselves without manipulating. The biggest difficulty affective dependents have in learning to communicate is in expressing their feelings. In this context, writing can be an excellent way for some dependent youths to express themselves; but they can also ask for professional help.

SOME RESOURCES

Dépendants Affectifs Anonymes includes mutual-help groups especially for young people. You can find out more by phoning:

Montréal: (514) 990-4744
Outside Montréal: 1 877 621-4744

Moreover, there are several websites that can support affective dependents in their rehabilitation process.

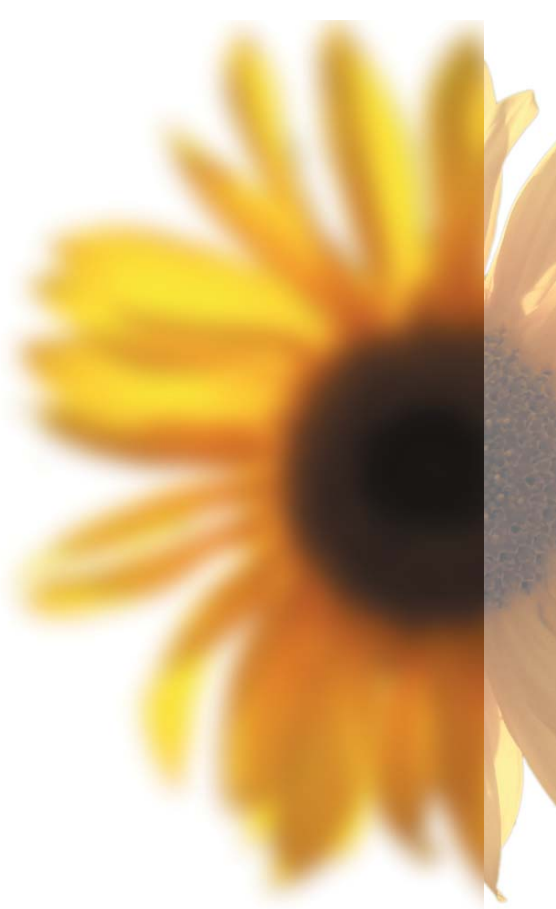
Website of Dépendants Affectifs Anonymes (includes schedules of meetings of mutual help groups) <http://www.daa-quebec.org/>

A website with information on sexual dependence <http://www.orroz.freesurf.fr/>

A website with information on all forms of dependence <http://www.psynternaute.com/>

Tel-jeunes
Montréal: (514) 288-2266
Outside Montréal: 1 800 263-2266
<http://www.teljeunes.com/>

Kids Help Phone
1 (800) 668-6868
<http://www.kidshelpphone.ca/en/>



Interventions

Affective dependence can hinder both affective and sexual development and the general welfare of those who suffer from it. It can also have an effect on their partners. For this reason an intervention for affective dependence should reinforce the construction of the sexual identity of young people and provide them an opportunity to make critical judgments about their love relationships.

DURATION: 1 hour	GENERAL OBJECTIVE Recognize affective dependent behaviour.
MATERIAL: The questionnaire at the beginning of this article.	

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

List the various affective dependent behaviours that can upset a love relationship.

Name the ways of freeing oneself from affective dependence.

Instructions

1 Distribute the questionnaire and ask participants to fill it out mentally, without writing anything down. This precaution assures confidentiality, even among friends, who are always curious to see the responses of their associates. Moreover, make it clear to the students that they will not have to verbally reveal their responses to others.

Duration: 5 minutes

2 Once the questionnaire has been read, the teacher or intervener forms sub-groups of three or four persons each and asks participants to discuss the following aspects:

- What do you think of what the questionnaire says?
- Do you believe that someone who responded “yes” to several of these statements could be affective dependent?
- What distinction do you make between a loving attitude and an affective dependent attitude?
- What do you know about affective dependence?
- How can affective dependence disturb a love relationship?

Duration: 10 minutes

PLENARY

The teacher or intervener first asks each of the sub-groups to name a spokesperson, and then asks each spokesperson to share with the whole group the ideas discussed in the sub-group.

Stress the following elements.

THE SIGNS OF AFFECTIVE DEPENDENCE ARE:

- suffering
- lack of self-confidence
- the desire to always please others

HOW DOES AFFECTIVE DEPENDENCE DISRUPT A LOVE RELATIONSHIP?

- by making communication between partners difficult
- by the need for power shown by one of the partners
- by jealousy and possessiveness
- by manipulation, lies, threats, blackmail, or violence in the love relationship
- by difficulty in negotiating the use of condoms for protection

Duration: 15 minutes

DISCUSSION

The teacher or intervener leads the discussion on the presence of violence in affective dependence, and on ways of living a healthy relationship without dependence.

Questions to enliven the discussion:

- What do you notice about the ideas that emerged from your discussions? Do some of them surprise or shock you?
- In your opinion, how far can an affective dependent go to avoid a breakup of the relationship?
- Do you think it is plausible that young affective dependents would act destructively against themselves or their partners? Justify your answer.
- In your opinion, does a relationship have any chances of blossoming if one of the partners is affective dependent? Justify your response.
- What elements have to be changed in relationships marked by affective dependence?
- What tips could you give to young affective dependents who wish to change their behaviour?

Highlight the following tips:

- Participate in social activities, student projects, and get-togethers with other young people so as to get to know yourself and develop self confidence.
- Go to communication workshops.
- Set realistic goals for yourself.
- Keep in touch with your friends and organize activities with them.
- Express yourself through writing, art or any other creative activity.

Duration: 15 minutes

CONCLUSION

The teacher or intervener returns to the questionnaire distributed at the beginning of the meeting and asks participants if they believe they would answer differently now that they know more about affective dependence. The teacher or intervener sums up the important points made in the meeting and asks participants what they learned from the workshop.

Duration: 5 minutes

Interventions

**FOR
VALENTINE'S DAY**

GENERAL OBJECTIVE

Sensitize youth so they can have loving relationships without dependence.

Instructions

1

Several weeks before Valentine's Day, organize a competition to create publicity posters on the theme *Love without dependence*. With the aid of texts, drawing or graffiti, participants should express their visions of love without dependence. Formulating and discussing the criteria beforehand with the students can orient their creations so that they reflect the activity's theme as faithfully as possible. Pertinence, of course, should be the most important of the criteria for choosing the best poster.

While working on this competition, it may be constructive to summarize the process so as to elicit reactions and comments from the young people.

The intervener within the school system may also refer to the VIRAJ program (Programme de prévention de violence dans les relations amoureuses des jeunes) produced in 1994 by the ministère de l'Éducation du Québec to guide other pedagogic interventions on this theme.

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