



# When Friendships Become Toxic: Understanding Emotional Dependency

by Jerry Armelli, M.Ed., PC  
Founder and Director, Prodigal Ministries  
Speaking on behalf of Brothers Road



Webinar April 22, 2020

[www.brothersroad.org](http://www.brothersroad.org)

# About Jerry Armelli, M.Ed, PC

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Jerry A. Armelli, M.Ed., PC, is a professional counselor and founder and director of Prodigal Ministries in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Established in 1986, Prodigal Ministries is a multi-faceted discipleship ministry providing counseling, information, support groups, mentoring and prayer to persons seeking sexual purity and wholeness from a Biblical perspective.

Jerry began his journey out of emotional turmoil and time within gay circles in 1983. He married in 1994, and together, Jerry and his wife, Mia, own and operate a dance studio for children. They are the parents of a young-adult daughter.

*Brothers Road has special gratitude to Jerry: He shared [his story](#) as one of the first 10 featured on the original Brothers Road website (then [peoplecanchange.com](#)) back in September 2000. Those original 10 stories became the seed from which Brothers Road grew.*



# About Brothers Road

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Brothers on a Road Less Traveled (“Brothers Road”) is a non-profit, interfaith, peer-support fellowship made up primarily of men from homosexual or bisexual backgrounds who — for our own, deeply personal reasons — typically do not embrace a gay identity or choose to live a gay life.

Instead, we prefer to explore and address underlying issues that may be at the root of some of our inner-conflicts around our sexuality, faith, masculinity, and self-esteem.



The “road less traveled” that we choose for ourselves is a journey of self-discovery, authenticity, personal empowerment, and affirmation.

Brothers Road respects the inherent and equal worth, dignity, equal rights, and free will of every human being, regardless of their sexuality or how they may choose to express or address it in their own lives.

# Webinar Introduction

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Maybe he started out as your new best friend — a man who really "got" you, and the two of you just "clicked." Maybe this seemed like the friendship of a lifetime.

But soon, maybe you realized you thought about him almost every minute of the day. You craved constant connection and attention from him. Your relationship with him overshadowed all your other relationships — maybe even with your wife.

Is it emotional dependency? Co-dependency? Enmeshment? Obsession?

What do you do when your "ideal" friendship becomes unhealthy? How do you break out of unhealthy cycles? Can the friendship be saved? Should it be?



# 3 Categories of Same-Sex Attraction

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## 1. Driven primarily by emotional (romantic) desires

- This man is driven primarily by a desire for deep emotional connection
- He may fall in love easily
- He may be susceptible to crushes, obsessions, idolization, **emotional dependency**
- He may tolerate sex to get emotional connection

## 2. Driven primarily by physical (sexual) behaviors

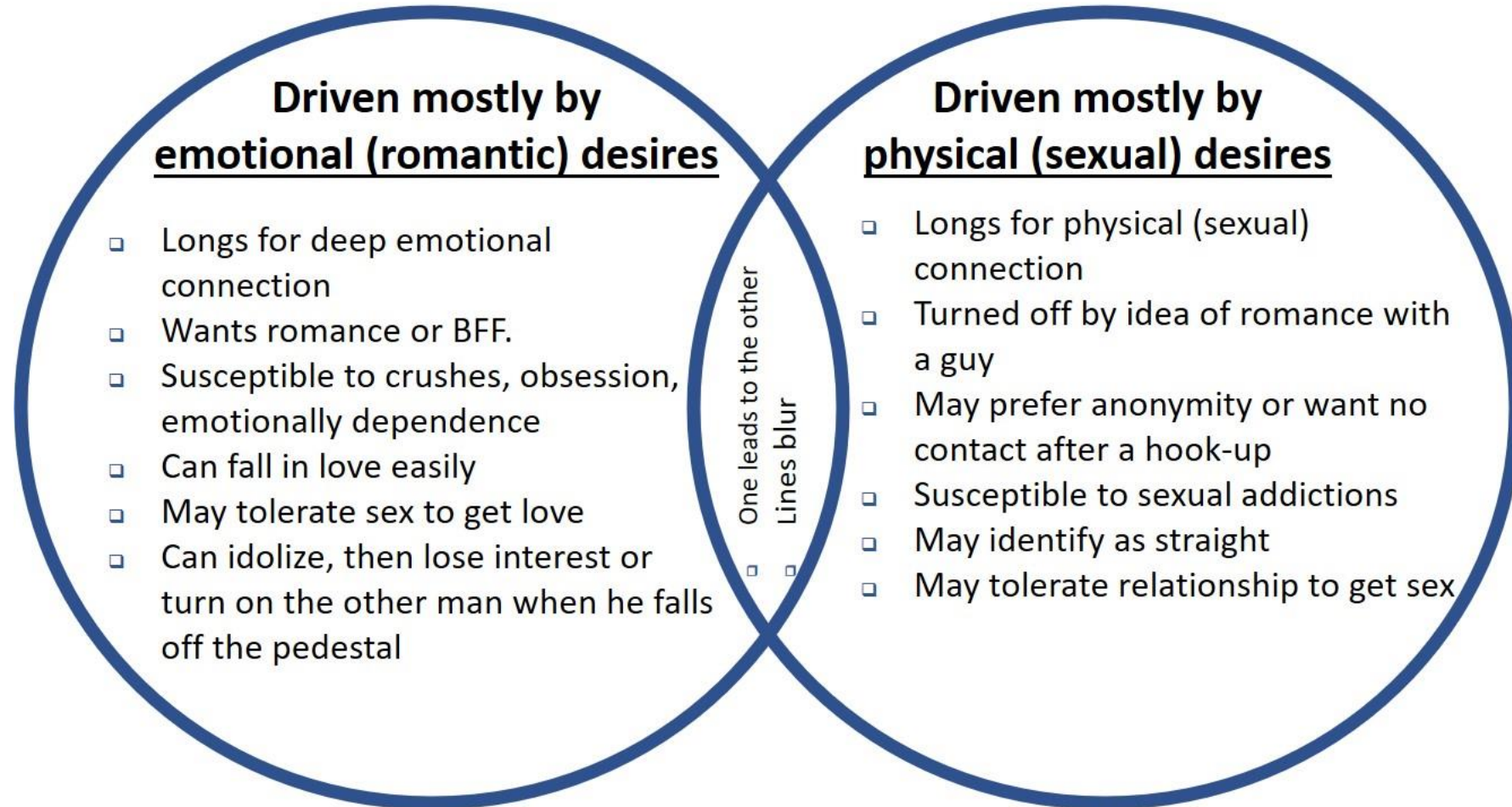
- This man is driven primarily by sexual desire or a craving for male physical connection
- He may be turned off by romance with a guy
- He may prefer anonymity or want no contact after the hook-up
- He may identify as straight
- He may be at risk for **sexual addiction**
- He may tolerate emotional connection to get sex

## 3. If driven by both: More likely to embrace a gay identity

- This man wants both, embraces both, so he easily identifies as gay
- This is especially true if he has no feelings for the opposite sex or feels primarily hostility toward the opposite sex

# 3 Categories of Same-Sex Attraction

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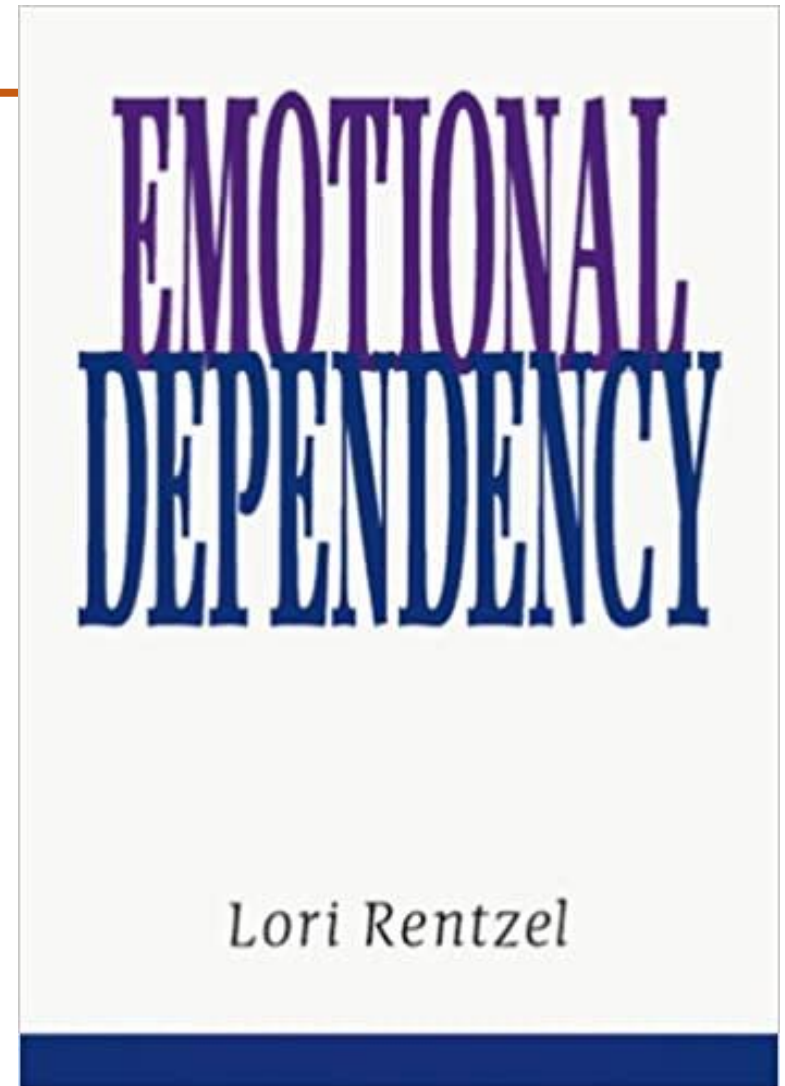
3<sup>rd</sup> Category: The man who is driven about equally by both will more easily embrace a gay identity

# Emotional Dependency

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Many of the ideas expressed in this webinar come from this pamphlet by Lori Thorkelson Rentzel.

- One area of disagreement: She recommends severing emotionally dependent relationships rather than working through them



# Forms of Healthy Nurturing

- Giving attention
- Attentive listening
- Admiration
- Counsel
- Affirmations (physical and verbal)
- Similar interests
- Time spent together

These are **legitimate needs** that should be embraced and reciprocated in healthy relationships.



## In Brothers Road language:

Healthy, brotherly nurturing is the vital, “golden” side of masculine emotional connection.



Emotional dependency, on the other hand, represents an attempt to meet authentic, “golden” needs in “shadowy” ways.



# Emotional Dependency vs Codependency

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Similar but different. They are “cousins”

## Emotional dependency:

- Syndrome when the ongoing presence or nurturing of another specific individual seems essential (for personal security, love, value, worth, etc.)
  - *“I can’t survive without you. I will even manipulate you, if necessary, to get you to meet all my needs.”*

## Codependency:

- Syndrome of “I don’t know who I am or what to do unless you do something first.” (I can’t act but only react.)
  - *“My wounds feed your wounds, your wounds feed mine.”*



# Emotional Dependency

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Exclusiveness  
Possessiveness  
Intensity



# Signs of Emotional Dependency

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Emotional dependency may appear healthy or harmless at first, but can lead to inordinate (disproportionately large) and often sudden attachments

- Jealousy, possessiveness
- Demanding total attention and exclusivity
- Obsession with what he is doing, thinking, and who he is with
- Often begins suddenly and intensely
  - In contrast, healthy friendships build over time



# Signs of Emotional Dependency

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- Always preferring to spend time with him alone, one-to-one
- Feeling sad, frustrated, anxious or threatened when apart
- Irrational thoughts or feelings when you're apart or don't hear from him
  - *"What did I do wrong?"*
  - *"Does he still care about me?"*
  - *"Is he with someone else?"*
- Losing interest in other relationships (friends, family, wife)
- See everyone else as a threat to your "special relationship"



# Signs of Emotional Dependency

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- Thinking romantic, intimate, or sexual thoughts about him. Romanticizing the relationship with poems, music
- Romantic touch (caressing) or gazing romantically into each other's eyes, at length
- Wanting to see him naked
- Taking on his problems, interests or hobbies
- Preoccupation with his appearance. Starting to dress like him or wear your hair like his



# Signs of Emotional Dependency

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- Putting him on a pedestal. Unable to see his faults realistically
- An idealistic, unrealistic awe of him that can be consuming
- Unwilling to make plans unless he is involved
  - *“I’ll go if you’re going”*
  - *“Let’s be roommates at the conference!”*
- Speaking for the other man
- Finishing each other’s sentences
- Telling others what he thinks or feels



# Signs of Emotional Dependency

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- Excessive or inappropriate displays of physical affection
  - Rationalized because it is not sexual and is “meeting unmet needs”
  - Ask: *“Am I this way with other male friends? With heterosexual men?”*
- A degree of intimacy and familiarity (persistent inside jokes, persistent references to special gifts or outings) that can make others uncomfortable



# Manipulation

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Passive-aggressive efforts  
to maintain  
Emotional Dependency





# Manipulation

## Passive-aggressive efforts to maintain Emotional Dependency

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When his legitimate needs are not being met, the emotionally dependent man can *manipulate* others to meet his needs.

Examples:

- Excessive praise or affirmation (over the top)
- Creating drama, exaggerating problems to foster sympathy, dependency
  - *“I could never make it without you”*
  - *“You’re the only one who can help me.”*
- Living vicariously through him: Trying to become what you want him to be to you.



# Manipulation

## Passive-aggressive efforts to maintain Emotional Dependency

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- Deliberately fostering guilt
  - *“You should just know what I want without me having to ask for it.”*
  - *“You ‘made’ me feel bad”* (Making him responsible for your feelings)
- Using threats (spoken or unspoken)
  - Silent treatment, pouting, even suicide threats when the other man tries to set boundaries or suggests backing off the relationship
- Undermining the other man’s friendships or family relationships so he has no one else to turn to



# Why Seek “Recovery”?

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- Without deliberate, healthy and focused intervention, emotionally dependent relationships are almost inevitably destined to crash and burn, sooner or later.
- The question is how many other relationships with family and friends (even with wives and children) will the emotionally dependent relationship take down with it before the individuals seek help?
- Also, the sooner the individuals seek out healthy interventions, the more likely it is that the emotionally dependent relationship can be transformed and preserved as one of many healthy friendships that an individual has.



# Recovering from Emotional Dependency

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A note from Brothers Road:

- Jerry Armelli summarizes the healing work necessary to recover from emotional dependency, in part, as “Things to Forsake” and “Things to Learn.”
- His framework complements nicely the Brothers Road framework we call “M.A.N.S. Work.”
- The acronym stands for **Masculinity, Authenticity, Needs Fulfillment** and **Surrender** — four areas of inner healing and personal growth that can potentially bring any man closer to wholeness and peace.
- Learn more at [www.brothersroad.org/mans/](http://www.brothersroad.org/mans/)



Masculinity • Authenticity  
Needs Fulfillment • Surrender

# Recovering from Emotional Dependency

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## **Surrender:** Things to Forsake

**Become willing** to challenge or release beliefs, ideas, or patterns (ways of being) that may be keeping you stuck

- **“Only One” Syndrome:** *“He is the only one who truly gets me,” “He is the only one who can meet my needs,” “I need one man to be everything to me, not a community of men who collectively meet my needs”*
- **“Only Way” Syndrome:** *“This is the only way to feel alive, to find healing, to feel like a man”*
  - Instead, open yourself up to alternatives: *“Many different people can help meet different needs in different ways”*

# Recovering from Emotional Dependency

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## **Surrender:** Things to Forsake

- **Drama:** *“I need the drama. I need the ‘high’ from all the attention”*
  - Instead, open yourself up to alternatives: *“I need peace more.”*
- **Escape:** *“I need someone else to take care of me, to take responsibility for my emotional well-being.”*
  - Instead, open yourself up to alternatives: *“I can take responsibility for my own beliefs and feelings.”*

# Recovering from Emotional Dependency

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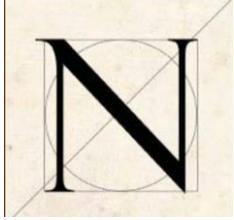


## Surrender: Things to Forsake

- **Dependence / Risk-Aversion / Craving:** *“Only SSA men can make me feel safe. Only SSA men can satisfy my craving for an intense male-male relationship.”*
  - Instead, open yourself up to alternatives: *“I may be able to experience equal or even greater healing in other kinds of relationships, especially friendships with opposite-sex attracted (OSA or heterosexual) men.”*
- All of these changes (things to forsake) require us first to **become willing** to try something else.
  - *A change of heart must accompany changes in beliefs and behaviors or else the old beliefs and behaviors will inevitably return*

# Recovering from Emotional Dependency

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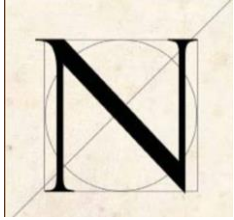
## **Needs Fulfillment:** Things to Learn and Experience

- Learn to **set internal emotional boundaries**
  - Learn to experience your own emotions apart from the other man — and to still feel accepted
  - Learn to give appropriate time and space to your emotions while balancing them with logic and reason
  - Decide to not let your emotions run your life



# Recovering from Emotional Dependency

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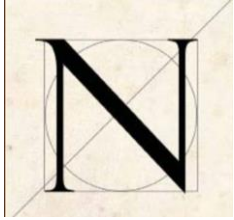


## **Needs Fulfillment:** Things to Learn and Experience

- Learn to be **your own best friend**
  - Challenge your fear of being alone. Discover how your own company can be enjoyable
  - Experience meaningful alone time with God
  - Practice accepting and affirming yourself, so you're not 100% dependent on the affirmation of others
  - Watch your self-talk. Practice treating yourself with kindness

# Recovering from Emotional Dependency

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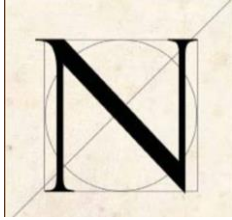


## **Needs Fulfillment:** Things to Learn and Experience

- **Branch out** and foster friendships with at least 5 men
  - Learn to enjoy the richness of different kinds of friendships with different people
- Again, all of these changes (things to learn and experience require us first to **become willing** to try something else
  - *A change of heart must accompany changes in beliefs and behaviors or else the old beliefs and behaviors will inevitably return*

# Recovering from Emotional Dependency

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## **Needs Fulfillment:** Things to Learn and Experience

- **SSA men need 3 types of friendships**
  - “Same-same”: Same gender (men), same issue (same-sex attracted)
  - “Same-different”: Same gender (men), different issues (opposite-sex attracted)
    1. Some know about your SSA (or related issues) and can support you, when needed
    2. Others don’t know about your SSA (or related issues) and don’t need to. They treat you as just one of the guys.
  - “Different-different”: Different gender (women), different issues (opposite-sex attracted)
    - You need to practice being in relationships with the opposite sex (not necessarily romantic relationships) to live a balanced life
- All 3 types of relationships contribute to recovery, growth and balance

# Recovering from Emotional Dependency

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## **Authenticity:** Ask for and Accept Support

- Be willing to **face the truth** about the relationship.
  - Be as honest and open about it as you can be—with yourself, each other, and others.
    - *This will be challenging, because you'll likely have a lot of defenses, coping mechanisms, justifications and rationalizations for keeping the relationship going as it is.*
  - Recognize the unhealed “wounds” or unmet needs that you’re trying to address through the relationship
  - Other men — especially OSA (opposite-sex-attracted) friends — can help you see what you can’t
    - They can show you what a healthier or more typical friendship between men looks like.

# Recovering from Emotional Dependency

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## **Authenticity:** Ask for and Accept Support

- Seek (or accept) the **support** of others — counselors, pastors, family members, a support group
  - Invite (or allow) them to speak candidly about what they see.
  - Invite (or allow) them to help you set and maintain healthy boundaries

# Recovering from Emotional Dependency

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## **Authenticity:** Ask for and Accept Support

- Become willing to **grieve** the loss you feel, both of the emotionally dependent relationship and the losses from the past (absent father? peer wounds?) that may have led to it
- **Build new friendships with OSA** men to help in your recovery and growth

# For Married Men: Rebuilding Your Marriage...

## ...As Part of Recovery From an Emotionally Dependent Relationship

- **Recommit to placing your wife *first***, above everyone else. *You may need to win her back!*
  - Give her the respect, time, attention and affection that you were seeking for yourself
  - Respect her feelings, needs, and intuition
    - Sometimes men have “gaslighted” their wives for raising concerns about the friendship that they didn’t want to admit to
  - Be willing to ask: *“How can I rebuild trust? What do you need from me to feel safe and at peace?”*
  - As you foster new friendships (especially with OSA men), invite her *into* your friendships, rather than treating her like an outsider to a significant part of your life.



# Friendships with OSA and SSA Men

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## At Prodigal Ministries:

- SSA men relate only in a group setting — No contact outside of group sessions
  - Because of the intensity and connection that can happen in relationships between SSA men, Prodigal believes it's best if it happens in a group for all to witness and support
    - Friendships between SSA men have a greater risk of feeding off of each other's similar brokenness
  - This also pushes clients to reach out to form friendships with OSA men out in the "real world"





# Friendships with OSA and SSA Men

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- Friendships with OSA men have greater potential to promote healing and growth
  - They are safer, sexually, and come with inherent boundaries built in: The friendship isn't going to turn sexual
  - Friendships with OSA men help the SSA man work through his ambivalence toward the OSA male world.
  - OSA men can model how men relate to each other
  - If the SSA men becomes emotionally dependent, it's usually safe to continue the friendship anyway
    - He can learn from the emotional dependency, work through the underlying issues



# Friendships with OSA and SSA Men

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- SSA men also have things to teach the OSA man
  - How to be more in touch with emotions, more vulnerable, more transparent
  - The need that all men have for “brothers” and father figures
  - How to be more accepting of expressions of (platonic) love and affirmation between men

## Perspective of Brothers Road:



As a peer-support fellowship, Brothers Road takes a different approach from Prodigal Ministries. We encourage and facilitate mutual support and friendship among SSA men. We find that these friendships can be a safe “training ground” to practice building trust and friendship skills.

From that foundation, then, an SSA man can be better prepared to risk building friendships with OSA men—which have the potential to ultimately be more healing, in many ways.

Same philosophy, in general, but different approaches for our different “ministries,” which have different missions

# Summary

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- Emotional dependency stems from legitimate needs—but they are met in “shadowy” ways (to use a Brothers Road term)
- Certain needs can never be met as they *ideally* should have been—such as by a dad who is no longer around. That loss must be grieved and surrendered.
- Other needs can still be met, especially in relationships with OSA men
- Recovery from emotional dependency is possible, by
  - Surrendering beliefs, ideas, patterns (ways of being) and behaviors that have kept you stuck
  - Meeting authentic needs for internal emotional boundaries, becoming your own best friend, and branching out to build multiple friendships
  - Facing the truth about the unhealthy aspects of the relationship, and inviting (and accepting) support and accountability from others

# Questions & Answers

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Should an emotionally dependent relationship with another SSA man be severed?

- The answer is case-by-case.
- The relationship does not have to be severed but needs to have clear external boundaries, with outside accountability.
- *“I’m not for automatically severing the relationship altogether. There is too much that can be learned in transforming it to a healthier relationship.”*



What do I do if a friend threatens suicide over his loss ?

- Help him develop a plan for calling for professional intervention. If he threatens suicide again, empathize and then remind them of the agreed-upon plan. Kindly hand him over to professionals rather than taking that responsibility onto yourself.

# Q&A

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What about when a wife sees her husband developing an emotionally dependent relationship with another man but he refuses to see it?

- She can't make him see it what he refuses to see. She can speak the truth, enlist the support of others, do her own work (i.e, work through her own issues), ask for what she wants, and give consequences (set boundaries).



What do you mean by “healthy emotional dependency”?

- In a relationship with an OSA man, the SSA man may become emotionally dependent. But the OSA man can continue to nurture the relationship in healthy ways, teaching the SSA man how to have a healthy relationship.
- The OSA man can often set healthy boundaries for the relationship.