



# Compelled to Control: Recovering Intimacy in Broken Relationships

By J. Keith Miller

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"When a controller has the sense of life being out of control," he says, "he or she reacts with an even stronger need to 'get things under control'...usually with the negative result of alienating the people who matter the most." Miller tackles this deeply denied, seemingly universal phenomenon with compassion and offers a way out of the dilemma. He tells who to approach broken relationships in new ways, leaving behind destructive patterns of perfectionism and self-justification.

Keith Miller is one of those rare writers who can combine intellectual acuity with deeply felt insight born of his own struggle for authenticity. *Compelled to Control* is an impressive contribution to the literature of recovery and personal change.

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### **Editorial Review**

#### About the Author

J. Keith Miller is one of the nation's most widely respected inspirational speakers. He is an entrepreneur-turned-author with degrees in business, administration, theology and psychological counseling. Miller has more than 15 books to his credit, among them Facing Codependence, which he co-authored with Pia Mellody and Andrea Miller, A Hunger for Healing, Hope in the Fast Lane and The Taste of New Wine.

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### **Introduction**

Something is wrong in America.

A great, unseen vibration is shaking the country, causing ripples—and then waves—of anxiety, stress, anger and shame. These waves sweep across boundaries of race, gender, class and education into the lives of almost everyone. Even those apparently protected by wealth, power and religion are not immune.

The vibration that threatens to shake us apart is fear.

We are a nation of people who fear we are not "enough." Deep in the recess of our hearts, in places we rarely reveal even to ourselves, we feel shameful and inadequate—and we're terrified someone will find out. We live in constant fear that our shortcomings will be exposed to family, to friends, to the world. We wake up at night reliving a mistake and feel overwhelmed with shame.

We worry. Our personal relationships don't satisfy, nor do other aspects of our lives. We are lonely and frustrated, our marriages often end in separation or divorce, our children are estranged. In an effort to "fix it" we may turn to compulsive or addictive behaviors, only to find that our unconscious attempts to cover the pain are unsuccessful, too, and bring only more loneliness and fear.

We look everywhere for someone or something outside of ourselves to blame or complain about, for something to kill the pain and bring us peace. But when we increase our efforts to find happiness, we come face to face with the uncomfortable feeling that we are "not doing it right." Our desperate strivings leave our fundamental issues untouched. Blaise Pascal, the French philosopher, viewed this phenomenon another way: "We are complaining about the ants at the picnic when the bears are eating our children."

Life in the last decade of the century has changed our experience of time. Our grandparents seemed to live a life of relative serenity, moving at a steady pace down the quiet river called Time, on a strong but invisible current. As they paddled downstream, they heard the sounds and felt the pulse of life in the river and on the surrounding banks. The slower pace of life allowed them to live more in harmony with the flow of the water, the chirping of birds on shore, the scudding of clouds overhead.

But in today's world, we race downstream as if on a giant speedboat, ignoring the natural current of the river that flows, we think, too slowly for us to do all we must do. We grapple with time, try to expand it in our

accelerating race to get more and more accomplished in a day, a week, a year, than anyone in the past ever dreamed of doing. In our race against the clock, we have created a fast-paced reality in which a person who elects to work "only" an eight-hour day has little chance to get ahead or climb the corporate ladder. As we zip through our days and nights, all we see and hear of the river bank is an unrecognizable blur.

By some miracle our minds can move faster and faster—but our feelings cannot. They still conform to the steady flow of the river. When our minds and feelings don't match up, we learn to disconnect from our feelings. We believe our feelings hamper us in keeping up our overcommitted, accelerated pace. Our emotions become sealed off or grossly exaggerated, and "emotion" becomes a dirty word. Even people related by the close bonds of family pass each other in the halls of their lives numbly, without really connecting.

Couples may eat together or even "make love," but our lives seem to be happening to other people. Gradually we move into our heads and live there, exhausted and alone, walled off from ourselves and from those closest to us. We vaguely hear the voices of our loved ones but tend to lose touch with their tender feelings—and with our own.

Our answer is to try frantically to gain control of our work, our schedule and our relationships. Our control attempts leave in their wake some very unhappy mates, lovers, children and parents who make up our nuclear families. Even our friends and co-workers are affected. There are few truly happy campers in the world of a controller.

There are millions of controllers—and we are burning out at an incredible rate. Our relationships are hollow, ragged, distant. We're exhausted and feel totally alone inside, even though we may be surrounded by people. Instead of achieving that serene and happy life that our frantic, controlling activity was supposed to produce, we have tense stomachs and bruised or broken relationships.

Fortunately, there is a way out and many controllers are taking it. It begins by emotionally disembarking from that speedboat. Some of us can step back and make a rational decision to jump off. Others are hurled off when our overcontrolling gets out of control, leaving us with unmanageable lives. To our horror, we discover that no matter how hard we try to tighten our grip, we are truly powerless.

For some controllers a light comes on. Gradually we become aware that we don't need another degree, a promotion to president of the corporation or a net worth in the millions to find serenity. We make an astonishing discovery: The only possible way to get control is by giving up controlling. It's a paradox that is not easy to comprehend. But it is so.

I know firsthand. In recent years I have traveled the United States on speaking engagements and have met thousands of people. Everywhere I go, I find concerned professionals and disturbed lay people who want to know how to solve problems in intimate family and romantic relationships.

My journeys have given me many opportunities to investigate the causes and cures of dysfunction in intimate relationships. Addiction is blamed, and co-dependence. But what is the underlying cause of addiction and co-dependence? I find that the culprit is usually the compulsion to control. It is a disease and it is reaching epidemic proportions.

This book is the culmination of my search to isolate the causes and cures of painful breakdowns in intimate relationships. Since 1987, I have written and coauthored four books exploring these issues. *Compelled to Control* focuses specifically on the tragic loss of intimacy, and points to principles of healthy intimacy and new ways to live creatively.

In this book I will explore the process of recovery from the control disease and describe a way to make your way back to reality-oriented, loving relationships with spouses, lovers, children, parents and friends.

The recovery process brings the hope of living sanely with courage and serenity.

## Chapter 1

### **Falling Out of the Speedboat** Discovering the Compulsion to Control

"You're controlling my life!" Sue shouted at Roger. Her face was contorted, beams of hot, red anger shooting from her eyes. "You interrogate me about every dime I spend and then *you* go out and buy a brand new set of golf clubs.

"Every weekend that football is on TV, we have to stay here so you can watch. You don't like my friends who don't like football, so we never see them any more. We only see *your* friends."

"You control what we eat by only eating beef and potatoes and making fun of vegetables in front of the children. I suppose you think it's *funny* when you say that if you wanted to eat a bush, you'd get a plateful from the side yard hedge!" Sue glared at her husband.

Roger stared back in disbelief. What was she talking about? "*I'm* controlling *your* life?" His voice began to rise. He could not believe she was serious. It seemed to him that they always did what Sue wanted. The voice that repeated over and over in Roger's head always seemed to say, "Make your wife happy. Be unselfish. Do what she wants and she'll love you."

"For God's sake, Sue, I've gone where you wanted to go on vacation, gone to movies, plays and symphonies because you wanted to, made love the way you wanted and deferred to you about how to raise the kids including what and how much they can do at each age." As he spoke, Roger felt a rumbling rage churning up his stomach. This was the second most controlling woman he'd ever known next to his mother. And Sue was saying *he* was controlling *her* life! Roger's face was flushed as he tried to get his voice under control. He said evenly, "You try to control me every chance you get. You've done it through our whole marriage and you're doing it now. I'm sick of fighting with you all the time. I don't know, maybe we should just call this whole sorry marriage off."

Now it was Sue's turn to look at Roger in disbelief. She turned and stalked out of the bedroom, slamming the door.

"And that," Roger told me, "was how the great war was declared that finally brought us to you for counseling."

Given my experience with my own compulsion to control and that of many other couples equally as sophisticated and intelligent as Roger and Sue I suspected that they were both controlling, but that each could only see the *other's* control behaviors. At any rate, neither of them knew how to stop. They told me that intimacy had gone completely out of their relationship, except for the occasional sex-truce when they were both frantic to make love. Roger said sadly, "I love Sue and want to be close to her again. But things are so screwed up now that we can't even talk without fighting, let alone begin to like each other again."

Although they didn't have the words for it yet, what Roger and Sue wanted to know was this: What is this compulsion to control that blocks our communication and pushes us farther and farther apart? How can we become intimate again? Do we even know what authentic intimacy is? Apparently most of us do not. A divorce rate in America of more than 50 percent attests to our lack of understanding about what makes relationships work and what causes them to fail.

## How I Fell Off the Boat

Several years ago, having finally achieved the kind of success I'd always hoped for, my life began to fall apart. I had been an executive in the oil exploration business, a marketing consultant, a personal counselor, a writer and lecturer. I had a degree in psychological counseling, and I had been told that I was intelligent and sensitive. I enjoyed my work and was recognized in my field, and I had an attractive and loving family.

Then, seemingly out of the blue, the people closest to me began to tell me that I "controlled" them. I didn't know what they were talking about. After all, I was generous with them, I loved them and I dreamed of their being beautiful, successful people like I wanted to be. I was a serious Christian trying to live a good life. What I didn't see was that my controlling presence was like a giant amoeba that slowly spread over my intimate relationships, oozing silently and inexorably across other people's boundaries, until my vocation, my ideas and my expectations crowded out the space for their identities and growth. My controlling behaviors were somehow occupying their emotional territory. Instead of focusing time, attention and love on them, my life had become the central life in our relationships. My vocation and dreams absorbed my thinking and took up the space where their lives would have been free to develop.

The discovery that I had a compulsion to control everything and everybody in my life came as a real surprise to me. I had always seen myself as a sensitive person who wanted everyone to be free to do what they needed and wanted to do. Since I couldn't see that I was always taking up more than my share of relationships, I was angry when others didn't appreciate the good things I thought I was bringing them. The results were bewildering arguments, separations and the frightening sense that my life was out of control. I felt emotionally depressed and lonely, with an even stronger need to "get things under control" although the idea of "control" never consciously crossed my mind.

I accelerated my social drinking to kill the pain of this bewildering turn of events and what I regarded as false accusations. I tried desperately to get some sanity and closeness back in my life and relationships. But the harder I worked to create a life in which we could all be happy, the more people around me seemed to rebel. As I tried to cover the pain of my bruised ego and sense of inadequacy, I worked even longer hours to get away from the pain.

Of course, I didn't see myself as compulsive; I just thought I was able to get more done than other people. I couldn't see that what I thought was a desire to get the most out of life was really a deeply rooted compulsion to control, which I manifested by working most of the time. I worked more and more and became increasingly irritated and defensive. The fear that my life and relationships would become unmanageable increased. I feared that my inadequacies would be revealed and cause my loved ones to leave. As my feelings became more intense, I felt that a giant spring was tightening, forcing to the surface deeply submerged fears of failing, of being alone and ashamed—fears I'd held in check since childhood.

As my loneliness progressed, I began to seek ways out of my dilemma. I kept reminding myself that I was a loving father and husband, a writer and counselor who had helped many people. But evidently those with whom I thought I had the most intimate connections saw me as a self-centered and controlling egomaniac. It

was very disturbing.

The degree of resistance to seeing my own control issues is almost unbelievable to me now. I simply could not believe that I was a controlling person in my home, when all I wanted to be was a good husband and father. Yet the clear evidence of my family told me otherwise. Finally, after several personal tragedies—including a divorce, some serious financial reverses, and much loneliness and pain—I sought professional treatment. As my denial cracked open, I discovered that my controlling attempts to cover my pain had turned into compulsive behavior that qualified as an addiction in itself. I was using this behavior to "fix" my life and was only making things worse. Only when I became aware of my contribution to the problem could I begin making steps toward a new way of living.

That was more than 10 years ago. The help I received in treatment, and later in 12-Step programs, has transformed my life. The quality of my inner experience and personal relationships has changed so much that I often find myself awake in the middle of the night, weeping with gratitude.

All this time I have continued to work the 12 Steps and attend meetings several times a week. I live an increasingly comfortable life that suits what I feel is the real me. For the first time I feel a serene settledness about who I am and how I can relate intimately to those close to me. Although I fail often, I now have the tools to move from separation back to intimacy with people and with God.

#### Understanding the Compulsion to Control

When I decided to write about the insidious compulsion to control other people and how it destroys personal relationships, my friends either grimaced or smiled as they recognized themselves. "Oh my gosh, it's true. Hurry up and write that book. I need it."

As I listened to people, it soon became apparent that control problems have an impact on more than personal relationships. Many people offered examples of their self-defeating attempts to control business associates, medical practices and church groups. The resulting destruction of relationships and morale was devastating.

As I began the project, I intended to survey psychological abstracts on the compulsion to control to see if my research would turn up anything that would verify my idea that control is the major factor in destroying intimate relationships. But I ran into a stone wall: there was almost nothing. Though many psychologists and counselors were convinced that the attempt to control was the major issue in many dysfunctional relations, none could recommend anything in the literature to explain it satisfactorily.

In the past few years, several writers, such as John Bradshaw and Pia Mellody, have noted that childhood abuse and the resulting shame, guilt, anger, pain and fear in adult children lead to controlling behaviors that, in turn, have a profound effect on people's ability to have functional intimate relationships. I could find no one who had put forth the notion that there may be a dynamic "disease-like" factor in the compulsion to control that could have an enormous influence in the destruction of relationships.

The compulsion to control infiltrates like a cancer, destroying not only intimate relationships, but the health and happiness of people in educational, religious, political and business institutions. I had the sense that we were a nation of controllers. But how was I to write about a truth that everyone suspects yet no one wants to admit?

The words of psychologist Carl Rogers helped me tremendously:

I came to a conclusion which others have reached before, that in a new field, perhaps what is needed first is to steep oneself in the events, to approach the phenomena with as few preconceptions as possible, to take a naturalist's observational, descriptive approach to these events, and to draw forth the low-level inferences that seem most relative to the material itself.

This is what I had done, albeit unconsciously. I had steeped myself in the experiences of recovery and dealing with the pain in the disease processes involved in addictions, compulsions and broken relationships for 10 years. And now, in a secular context, I was going to write about what I had discovered.

My first question was basic: What is the underlying inner struggle for control all about? And from where does the compulsion come?

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