

ENABLING - THE CAST OF CHARACTERS

The paradox.... as a result of the enabler, the alcoholic gradually loses power over his/her life and behavior, yet the alcoholic wields more and more power over those close to him. Where there is enabling there is a dysfunctional family and the most powerful person in terms of rule making is also the most dysfunctional.

It is my opinion, that there are two stages of enabling. Stage one of enabling can start in everyday life with everyday occurrences long before a person is dependent on alcohol or other drugs. The enabler is the coach who elevates their athlete to greater heights by looking the other way when rules are broken. It is the principal or teacher who bends the rules for the gifted student, exceptional athlete or super cheerleader. It is the police officer who lets a student go after stopping him/her for drinking and driving because the officer knows his/her parents. It is the mom or dad who classically supports his/her son or daughter when unhealthy choices or decisions have been made by their son or daughter. The enabler, a parent, desperately tries to cover up the problem (the son or daughter's unhealthy choices), insisting everything is o.k.

I consider stage two, to be when the physical grip of dependency continues to tighten. For a time, the enabler averts for a time many of the social and financial difficulties that the dependent person has created, thereby delaying the day of reckoning. By preventing the crisis that could bring the dependent person to treatment, the enabler actually prolongs the disease. The enabler delays accountability and responsibility that the dependent person needs to take for their actions.

It should not surprise us when the family takes on a group identity which mirrors that of the alcoholic, and soon everyone is displaying the psychological symptoms of the dependent's disease. The dependent person ensures that family members are addicted to their enabling roles. The chief enabler is usually the person emotionally closest to the dependent person. An enabling wife often acts out of a sincere, misguided sense of love and loyalty. Sometimes, she may act out of shame to protect her own and her family's self-respect. The chemically dependent person's family is a drama like a Shakespearean tragedy. Blind and unknowing, the whole supporting cast of characters will go down in disaster with the dependent person. Enabling permeates family values and systems. As with violence and alcoholism, enabling is passed on from family member to family member, it is role-modeled. When the dependent person finally gets help, many times the co-dependent/spouse (chief enabler) will remain sick. The chief enabler is accustomed to "fixing" the alcoholic and has taken over the alcoholic's responsibilities. All family enablers (mother, father, son, daughter, husband, wife, best friend) need to enter recovery with the dependent person. If not, the family enabler will continue to want to be in control, to bail the family out, to fix and to "mother" the dependent person.

Almost everyone who has a relationship with the dependent (spouse, child, parent, employer, co-worker, or friend) enables at least occasionally. As the dependent person's disease progresses, the enabler steps in more often with more elaborate protection. The effect is to deflate the hand of fate and soften the blow.

I call this process "**enabling**". It is my dream that one day soon, everyone who meets people with problems in the course of the day's work including physicians, psychotherapists, lawyers, law-enforcement officers, and teachers will learn to recognize the symptoms particular to each role in the alcoholic family, especially those of the enabler.

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ENABLING

Enabling is defined as reacting to a person in such a way to shield him or her from experiencing the full impact of the harmful consequences of behavior.

Enabling behavior differs from helping in that it permits or allows the person to be irresponsible.

PROTECTION from natural consequences of behavior

KEEPING SECRETS about behavior from others in order to keep peace

MAKING EXCUSES for the behavior (school, friends, legal authorities, work, family)

BAILING OUT of trouble (debts, fixing tickets, paying lawyers, providing jobs)

BLAMING OTHERS for dependent person's behavior (friends, teachers, employers, family, self)

SEEING THE PROBLEM AS THE RESULT OF SOMETHING ELSE
(shyness, adolescence, loneliness, child, broken home)

AVOIDING the chemically dependent person in order to keep peace
(out-of-sight, out-of-mind)

GIVING MONEY THAT IS UNDESERVED / NOT EARNED

ATTEMPTING TO CONTROL (planning activities, choosing friends, getting jobs)

MAKING THREATS that have no follow through or consistency

TAKING CARE OF the chemically dependent person (doing what he/she should be expected to for themselves)

ENABLING BEHAVIORS

Justifying:

The use or agreeing with the rationalization of the addicted one.

Avoiding Problems:

Keeping the peace, believing a lack of conflict makes a good relationship.

Keeping Feelings Inside:

No one gets to know you or be close to you.

Minimizing:

Altering how you really see a situation so the other person is less likely to be uncomfortable with their part in it (i.e. be responsible for their behavior).

Protecting:

Protects the image of the addicted one so they can not realize the impact of their behavior.

Avoiding By Using Food And Other Distractions.**Blaming Others:**

Polarizes others in a defensive stance and never helps solve the problem.

Taking Over:

The tasks, responsibilities and situation for the addicted one.

Feeling Superior:

In relationship to the addicted one who has partially learned to expect you to do their jobs and take over their responsibilities.

Controlling:

All kinds of details and situations to deal with your anxiety but rationalized it as being a favor.

Enduring:

Never knowing when enough is enough and putting up with extreme situations against everything inside that prompts you to be fed up and stand up for what you really feel.

Waiting:

As though time itself will somehow cure problems that you are too afraid to perform actions to change.

EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS IN CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLICS

GUILT - The child believes that he/she is the cause of the parent's drinking

ANXIETY - Constant worry over the family's troubles and fears of fights or violence

EMBARRASSMENT - The child is ashamed of the situation at home & frequently withdraws from friends or other family members

CONFUSION - The drinking parent's sudden mood swings & unpredictable behavior & the absence of a regular daily schedule can cause fear & uncertainty

INABILITY TO TRUST - Repeated disappointment, broken promises & outright lies by the alcoholic parent may lead to problems in trusting others or developing close relationships

ANGER - The child resents the drinking parent & may also be angry with the non-drinking parent for lack of support & protection

DEPRESSION - Loneliness & a sense of helplessness over the family's troubles

Warning Signs:

- * Failure in school or truancy
- * Withdrawal from classmates and friends
- * Frequent physical complaints
- * Drug or alcohol abuse
- * Overly aggressive play
- * Delinquency behavior
- * Overachievement and emotional distance from peers
- * Lying, suppressing their feelings
- * Consistent denial of family problems