

Enabling

Morteza & Karen Khaleghi, Ph.D.

The concept of enabling sounds straight forward—doing for others what they can and need to do for themselves—and yet it's often incredibly hard to distinguish between helping, supporting, and enabling.

The desire to help others, especially those who mean the most to us, is one of the noblest of human instincts. Parents want to help their children succeed in school. Spouses want to help each other solve the problems that life throws at them. Friends want to help each other at work or in their personal relationships. Unfortunately, though, this well-meaning impulse can backfire tragically when addiction is part of the equation.

In one sense, “enabling” has the same meaning as “empowering.” It means lending a hand to help people accomplish things they could not do by themselves. More recently, however, it has developed the specialized meaning of offering help that perpetuates rather than solves a problem. A parent who allows a child to stay home from school because he hasn't studied for a test is enabling irresponsibility. The spouse who makes excuses for his hungover partner is enabling alcohol abuse. The friend who lends money to a drug addict “so he won't be forced to steal” is enabling that addiction.

Those who habitually enable dysfunctional behavior are often referred to as codependent. It's a telling word, because an enabler's self-esteem is often dependent on his or her ability and willingness to “help” in inappropriate ways. This “help” allows the enabler to feel in control of an unmanageable situation. The reality, though, is that enabling not only

doesn't help, but it actively causes harm and makes the situation worse.

By stepping in to “solve” the addict’s problems, the enabler takes away any motivation for the addict to take responsibility for his or her own actions. Without that motivation, there is little reason for the addict to change. Enablers help addicts dig themselves deeper into trouble.

It can be a fine line between helping and enabling. Letting a teenager ignore chores while studying for finals may be helpful. Dismissing that teenager’s drug use, drinking, bullying, defiance or violence as “just part of being that age” is not helping.

Enabling behavior:

1. Protects the addict from the natural consequences of his behavior.
2. Keeps secrets about the addict's behavior from others in order to keep peace.
3. Makes excuses for the addict's behavior (with teachers, friends, legal authorities, employers, and other family members).
4. Bails the addict out of trouble (pays debts, fixes tickets, hires lawyers, and provides jobs).
5. Blames others for the addicted person's behaviors (friends, teachers, employers, family, and self),
6. Sees “the problem” as the result of something else (shyness, adolescence, loneliness, broken home, or mental illness).
7. Avoids the addict in order to keep peace (out of sight, out of mind).

8. Gives money that is undeserved or unearned.
9. Attempts to control that which is not within the enabler's ability to control (plans activities, chooses friends, and gets jobs).
10. Makes threats that have no follow-through or consistency.
11. “Care takes” the addicted person by doing what she is expected to do for herself.

Here are some questions to ask yourself when considering whether you are an enabler:

1. Do you often ignore unacceptable behavior?
2. Do you find yourself resenting the responsibilities you take on?
3. Do you consistently put your own needs and desires aside in order to help someone else?
4. Do you have trouble expressing your own emotions?
5. Do you ever feel fearful that not doing something will cause a blowup, make the person leave you, or even result in violence?
6. Do you ever lie to cover for someone else's mistakes?
7. Do you consistently assign blame for problems to other people rather than the one who is really responsible?
8. Do you continue to offer help when it is never appreciated or acknowledged?

If these questions make you think you might be an enabler, it is important that you take action. If the addict you are enabling is in treatment, then you, too, should take part in the process. If the addict is not in treatment, you should explore your own issues, either with a personal counselor or through an organization like LAA or CoDA. Most of all, don't help your loved one into the grave.