



When family, friends, and associates of a chemically dependent individual allow that individual to continue the addiction to alcohol or drugs, their behavior is called enabling. When repeated, enabling behaviors become ingrained in the chemically dependent person's family, job, or social structures.

Addiction often takes families by surprise. Alcoholics and addicts become quite good at hiding their addiction from friends and family so that by the time that someone realizes that something is wrong, the alcoholism or addiction might be far advanced. Shocked family members often don't know how to respond. When they see a loved one suffering or in need, their natural response is to try to help them and fill that need. They're afraid of losing their loved one – maybe they will die, maybe they will get angry and leave. For that reason, they may try to help the addict, believing that as long as the addict is still at home, in their care, or dependent on them, at least the addict will not get himself or herself into worse trouble.

The problem is that helping an addict is not the same as helping a family member who was laid off from their job or injured in a car accident. In some cases, addiction goes on for longer than it should because family or friends with good intentions enable the addict, cushioning the negative consequences of their poor decisions. Sometimes those in relationships with addicts are psychologically attached to the feeling of being needed by the addict, and losing that relationship would be devastating for their own sense of identity and self-worth. If you know an addict, you should evaluate your interactions with them to make sure that you are helping the addict (which might mean NOT helping them!) and not the addiction.

Meaning Well: The Origins of Enabling

We often begin enabling in an attempt to be kind and helpful. For example, we may wake someone so they are not late to work. By doing so, we help them avoid the consequences of oversleeping because they were using or drinking late into the night before. We loan addicts money, often over and over again, and we are surprised when they use it to buy more drugs or alcohol.

Enablers may have their own system of denial that is fed by the lies and deceptions addicts use to cover up their using.

The Effects of Enabling

As enabling behaviors become routine, we end up feeling frustrated, ineffectual, and angry. Often, we continue to enable because we don't want to appear mean or unreasonable. Enabling behaviors directly and indirectly support the vicious cycle of never-ending problems and pain of addiction. When we stop enabling, when we stop helping and covering up for the addict, we allow the addict to experience the consequences of their out-of-control behavior. We no longer wake them up, loan them money, or bail them out of jail. We stop shielding them from the consequences of their behaviors.

- Enabling Feelings -

Feelings Associated with Enabling

By providing support to chemically dependent persons, we help them continue to drink alcohol or use drugs, and we assist them in increasing the severity of their addiction. Repeated enabling becomes come the 'normal' way we deal with the addict. As the disease of chemical dependency progresses, the problems and conflict that result from addiction in a family member or friend increase, and so does the discomfort we feel.

Enabling Is Self-Defeating

When we begin enabling, we often believe we are being helpful. When we find that our efforts are ineffective and the problems continue and become more pronounced, we feel frustrated, resentful, and angry. As the disease and our enabling progresses , our initial discomfort becomes intensified with feelings that can include anger, rage, hostility, sadness, and distrust. Sometimes we become totally numb rather than experience the pain, or we become overly active to avoid feeling. Our focus becomes more and more centered on supporting and protecting the chemically dependent individual and less centered less on our own needs. We often feel hopeless, defeated, and depressed. This cycle of problems feeding problems continues until we seek help.

Addressing Enabling

To regain a sense of themselves and to break the cycle in which they become trapped, enablers must learn to focus on their personal rights and needs. They must allow the addicted individual to feel the consequences of their own behavior. As enablers stop protecting the addict, they begins to feel the consequences of their addiction, and may become very angry. At first, this can be frightening, but as we learn that we are not responsible for the addict's problems, we feel strength and pride in ourselves. We may also feel sad to see the addict having to live with the consequences of their addiction.

Enabling Behavior -

Overview

Enabling behaviors by family, friends, and associates of a chemically dependent individual allow the individual to continue in the disease of chemical dependency. The system of behaviors that develops becomes 'normal' for enablers.

When we begin enabling, we often believe that we are being helpful. Many times, both the chemically dependent person and the enabler are in denial about the severity of the hidden addiction.

Examples of Enabling

Examples of enabling behaviors include:

- Making excuses for the addict/alcoholic (calling the alcoholic's boss to say they are sick with the flu, when they are really hung over, or referring to your teenager's drug use as 'just a phase')
- Paying their bills
- Bailing them out of jail
- Making rationalizations for their irresponsible behaviors
- Ignoring the problems caused by the addict's use (financial, employment, legal)
- Cleaning up their messes
- Accepting their excuses or believing their lies
- Not discussing the problem of their chemical use
- Not getting help for yourself

As addicts/alcoholics are rescued from the consequences of their using and drinking, they learn to rely on their enablers to continue their addiction.

Enabling behaviors can be changed, and recovery is possible even if the chemically dependent person does not seek help.

- Changing Enabling Behavior -

Overview

The intensity of enabling behaviors is determined by a variety of factors. For example, if you were raised in a dysfunctional family, your tendencies to adopt enabling behaviors or renew other codependent behaviors may be more easily triggered by a current crisis or continued stress. If you are a parent of a chemically dependent child, enabling may come easily because of your ongoing role as a caregiver. If the chemically dependent individual is in the earlier stages of the disease and you have identified beginning enabling behaviors, the behaviors may not be firmly established and therefore may not be difficult to change.

How to Change Enabling Behavior

When we begin to identify and change our behaviors, they don't just disappear all at once. Recovery and changing takes time and practice, practice, practice. With this in mind, we can look at some examples of changing enabling behaviors.

- Stop making excuses to others for situations or problems that are caused by the drinking and using of the alcoholic or addict. Do not phone the employer to excuse him/her from work. Do not make up stories to others about why the addict/alcoholic was unable to keep obligations such as showing up for the family reunion or missing your 10-year-old daughter's dance recital.
- Refuse to lie.
- If the chemically dependent person makes a mess, such as being physically ill or tearing up the living room, do not clean it up. Allow them to see the damage and result of their actions.
- Do not bail them out of jail.
- Do not pay bills you are not responsible for in areas that do not affect your safety or basic well being. Do not pay for the new TV he/she purchased. Do pay your phone and electric bill.
- Do not continue useless arguments. Go to a movie, take a walk, read a good book, or go to a support group meeting.
- Do not make threats you are not 100% willing to back up with appropriate actions. Example: I'm leaving and you'll never see me or the kids again!
- If safe and appropriate, discuss your concern with the person in a non-emotional way.
- Find a support system, a sponsor, codependency treatment, private therapy or counseling, a spiritual advisor or minister, or trustworthy friends.

When you begin to change your enabling behaviors it is helpful to have a sponsor in an organization who is familiar with your individual circumstances. They can be key to achieving positive changes in you.