

The List of Enabling Behaviors: How to Recognize and Stop Your Enabling

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Introduction

The resourcefulness and creativity of family members dealing with addiction are genuinely remarkable. In their efforts to address a loved one's substance abuse, they often engage in various strategies—ranging from "search and destroy" missions and detective work to playing prosecuting attorney and "game show host"—in an attempt to manage the addiction. People often begin problem-solving before they correctly identify the actual problem.

Family members are deeply troubled by the awareness that something is wrong with their loved one. As with any problem-solving process, they first try to identify the nature of the issue. No one wants to believe that their loved one has a problem with alcohol or other drugs. Instead, family members may seek other explanations for the dysfunctional behavior, such as ADD, depression, poor self-esteem, an unsuitable job, an unsuitable partner, learning disabilities, or simply "acting out."

In their search for solutions, concerned family members may think that changing external circumstances—like finding the right job, partner, or medication—will solve the problem. They look for gaps or issues in their loved one's life, identify these as "the problem," and attempt to address them. While their loved one may appear directionless, unmotivated, isolated, self-loathing, and despairing, these issues are often symptoms rather than the root cause of the substance use disorder.

Understanding Enabling Behavior

Enabling occurs when significant others of individuals with substance use disorders attempt to alleviate the perceived causes of their loved one's addiction by making their lives easier. Enabling often involves removing the natural negative consequences of their behavior, which can perpetuate rather than resolve the addiction. Family members inadvertently reduce the loved one's motivation to change by making life easier.

The individual with substance use issues may resent being treated like a "home improvement project" and might struggle with family members over control, creating a hostile home environment. In such cases, enabling behavior shifts from "trying to help" to "trying to survive," with family members engaging in behaviors they believe will make the situation more manageable, even if they know that enabling is not genuinely helping.

The Enabling Worksheet

The Enabling Worksheet is for helping concerned family members identify their history of enabling behaviors, their perceived motivations, the emotions associated with these behaviors, and their impact on their own lives. The goal is to connect one's behavior with its outcomes. People are less likely to change if they believe their behavior is beneficial. Identifying frequent enabling behaviors and their impacts can help family members understand whether their actions have positively or negatively affected their loved one's substance use. Access The Enabling Worksheet [here](#).

Typical Enabling Behaviors

Here is a list of common enabling behaviors:

- Conducting "search and destroy" missions to find and dispose of substance stashes.
- Limiting the amount of cash the loved one has access to.
- Pleading, persuading, or demanding that the loved one stop drinking or using substances.
- Making promises or threats that you cannot keep.

- Covering up for the loved one by calling in sick or making excuses on their behalf.
- Believing implausible explanations.
- Making bargains or attempting to bribe the loved one.
- Acting as a detective to uncover the loved one's activities.
- Presenting endless reason and logic in discussions.
- Offering employment to the loved one after they have lost previous jobs.
- Calling to wake the loved one up in the morning.
- Bailing the loved one out of jail.
- Providing financial rescue.
- Assuming responsibility for the loved one's problems.
- Putting the loved one to bed when they pass out.
- Cleaning up after the loved one's substance use.
- Searching for loved ones when they don't come home or going to bars to bring them back.
- Canceling planned trips to "babysit" the loved one to prevent trouble.
- Withdrawing from family and friends to avoid discussing the problem.
- Purchasing liquor for the loved one or picking them up from bars to avoid a DUI.

Remember that some behaviors you engage in may be essential for your survival, and stopping them might not be feasible. For example, if you handle all the bills, including the mortgage, your own well-being must maintain those responsibilities. Some enabling behaviors may be necessary for your own survival. However, family members may defend their continuing pursuit of control over a loved one because they erroneously believe they "have to" for their own survival.

Conclusion

Understanding and addressing enabling behaviors is a critical step for family members seeking to support their loved ones healthier. By recognizing and changing enabling behaviors, family members can better support their own well-being and that of their loved ones.

See [Recovery Solutions for Families With Addiction](#)

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