

Family Dynamics of Addiction and Recovery: 14 Enabling Behaviors for Family Members to Quit Now

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

As you probably already know, enabling happens in the process of family members trying to help their loved one regain control over their drinking or drug use and the problems that occur with the addiction. Concerned relatives usually begin with rational and reasonable approaches. However, when these approaches do not work, they often step up their efforts and try to take control in the face of their loved one's apparent abdication of control. They take on the mini and significant crises that occur with addiction and problem-solve at the crisis level (e.g., "You lost your job; you can come to work for me at my store.")

In effect, these problem-solving behaviors can go awry and make it more comfortable and easier for the person with addiction to continue drinking or using. As their loved one becomes more disabled by their addiction, enabling behavior can become increasingly pathological.

A good definition for enabling is simply "removing the natural negative consequences of someone's behavior." Why would someone change their behavior if it is working for them? Family members can also inadvertently enable by engaging in the struggle over the substance. By continuing to try to get between the person with addiction and their substance, the family member encourages them to view that struggle as "The Struggle," rather than having to face their own struggle with addiction.

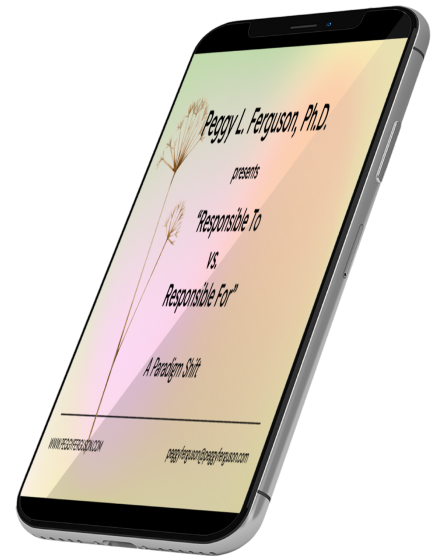
To allow them to suffer the consequences of their behavior and possibly become motivated for recovery, refer to the "Behaviors to Eliminate" list below. These actions are not effective and sometimes make matters worse.

- Search-and-destroy missions to find and destroy the stash.
- Pleading, cajoling, or demanding.
- Demanding promises from your loved one that they cannot keep, and then expecting them to keep them.
- Making threats or ultimatums that you cannot enforce.
- Covering up for them, calling in sick, or making excuses.
- Believing the unbelievable.
- Making bargains or trying to bribe them.
- Playing detective to find out what they have been up to.
- Endlessly presenting reason and logic.
- Giving them a job after they have lost their last job.
- Calling them to wake them up in the morning.
- Bailing them out of jail.
- Rescuing them financially.
- Believing that it is your fault.

By avoiding these inappropriate caretaking behaviors, family members are more able to focus on regaining control over their own lives. Ending your enabling is an example of setting boundaries. But instead of telling them what to do and not do, you are setting boundaries with yourself. You are taking responsibility for you. When you stop these dysfunctional behaviors, you no longer accommodate addiction's further encroachment on your life. When family members stop removing the negative consequences of addiction, their loved one is more likely to begin to see the struggle as their own struggle with addiction and to seek recovery. When a crisis presents an opportunity to offer tangible help, seize it by helping your loved one get help instead of getting out of their mess. **Note:** This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2009 on this site. The content has been updated for contemporary language and concepts, clarity and accuracy.

**“Responsibility To vs. Responsibility For:”
A Paradigm Shift
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

Understanding and eliminating enabling behaviors and distinguishing between "Responsibility to and Responsibility For" empowers family members' recovery. Recognizing where your responsibilities lie can help clarify boundaries and reduce the compulsion to control outcomes that are ultimately beyond your control. This shift is crucial for maintaining your well-being and fostering a healthier environment for both you and your loved one. Learn how to shift your thoughts and behavior from "responsibility for" to "responsibility to" with this Brief Lesson.



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