

# **You Can Stop The Enabling Despite the Emotional Blackmail**

**By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

When you have a person in the family with an addiction, it makes for a complicated family life. Oftentimes when family members are trying to help, they are actually enabling the person with addiction to persist in self-destructive behavior. Helpful tips are included here that will help you learn how to stop enabling to help them break the cycle of addiction.

When someone we love, be it a family member or close friend, experiences substance use problems, we want to help prevent them from experiencing the devastating effects of their illness. We observe their life-destroying behavior patterns and feel compelled to make them aware of the collision course we see them hurtling toward, hoping to avoid the catastrophe. It's natural to want to ease the pain of those we love who are hurting. Family members try scolding, shaming, reason, logic, pleading, threats, and everything else that others have tried to get their loved one to quit drinking or using drugs.

Family members are trying to solve the problem of substance use disorder by applying emotional and logical problem-solving behavior to a problem immune to those techniques. Unfortunately, the individual in question cannot see that their reliance on substances is the root of their life's problems. Even if they acknowledge their problem, they may not cooperate in your attempts to get them to seek help and quit using. Defense mechanisms convince them that the behavior you are trying to get them to eliminate is the solution rather than the problem.

As a result, family members persevere long enough to feel used and abused from their efforts. They try a different tack when they learn that the helping behavior they are using is probably enabling instead. They

discover that they may be perpetuating what they hope to stop—drinking or drug use, by taking on their loved one's responsibilities. They are encouraged to replace enabling with focusing on regaining agency over their own lives. Although the idea of "detaching with love" is a foreign concept, especially when it means allowing your loved one to experience pain.

The kind of detachment most families experience involves anger and feeling all used up. Family members detaching (with love, not anger) can change family dynamics enough that a loved one with substance use disorder reaches out for "help" from the other enablers. Eventually, these enablers (spouses, parents, grandparents, friends) will feel worn out and used up too. Those in the background who have stopped enabling may return to the frontline as other family members withdraw from enabling. Even though there are usually layers of enablers, people with substance use disorder will often cycle through the rest of their enablers before asking for help.

The simple applied definition of "enabling" is reducing or removing the natural adverse outcomes of someone else's choices. If you remove the consequences of someone's behavior, they are not motivated to change their ways because what they're doing appears to be working. Sometimes family members think they are solving a problem so that the problem won't stress out their loved one and cause them to use more drugs. Sometimes family members know they are enabling and will continue to engage in such behaviors out of fear that the loved one with addiction will die or others will suffer. They might buy groceries or pay for a car and gas to ensure their loved one can work, provide housing so that they have a place to live, and so on. They might even enable to prevent someone else from suffering. A typical example is a grandparent continuing to enable out of fear that their grandchildren will go without necessities like food, clothing, and shelter. Family members often persist in enabling with full awareness of the enabling. Much of the time they do so, to reduce their own distress, for fear of what will happen if they don't continue. The fear of what will happen is the emotional blackmail.

Emotional blackmail is a familiar manipulation tactic people with substance use issues use. They use the family member's love for them to get them to continue enabling. A typical example is the family member's fear that the stress of natural negative consequences will be too much for someone with a substance use problem, and they will suicide. Deception, blaming, and other defenses are core correlates of substance disorders. These loved ones become adept at manipulating others into "helping" them. They commonly blame others for their behavior problems and can convince people that they're victims. They are often able to manipulate loved ones to keep secrets from other family members. A common example is the adult child with substance use problems who gets one parent to withhold information from the other.

The impact of a family member's addiction on the family is not always evident. System changes of incorporating the substance use problem into the structure and functioning of the family impacts everyone in the family. The family secrets, deception, and enabling are detrimental. Parents with an adult child with substance use problems endanger their marriage if they are not working together as a team. Many marriages have failed because of the poorly handled conflict between parents over how to "manage" their child's addiction. Similarly, when family members continue to support their loved ones financially, they suffer economic hardships while enabling their loved ones to escape responsibility and the financial consequences of their continuing addiction.

Ending the enabling is often a productive tool for helping your loved one transition into recovery. To stop the secret keeping and the family enabling, an open, honest discussion among family members to get on the same page and to stop tag team enabling is called for. Be open and honest about what you notice about the substance use behavior. Support people for the family (including counselors, coaches, AlAnon sponsors, and recovery-related materials) can assist the family in developing new communication and problem-solving skills. Many of the family's familiar tools and techniques for problem-solving need to be replaced for dealing with substance use disorder.

Each family member can contribute by identifying the impact of substance use on them and the family. Adults should also look at their own contributions to counterproductive family dynamics. Other enablers can be tutored on eliminating enabling by suggesting a book or other informational materials, and AIAnon. When they know that stopping enabling has the best chance of being helpful to the person with substance use disorder, they are more likely to get on board. When you have a plan for eliminating your own enabling behavior and encouraging others to do the same, you assist your loved one in realizing the negative consequences of their behavior. This recognition, though sometimes painful, can help them to change.

When there are no natural negative consequences of someone's behavior, there is no motivation to change. Why change what is working? When natural adverse effects are experienced, it can create a crisis and an incentive to seek help and begin recovery. A crisis is an opportunity for intervention. People are more likely to be open to change during a crisis. Family members can use a crisis to provide access to treatment and recovery resources.

To be effective, families must intervene at the right time and in the right way with the appropriate treatment options. In cases where the safety and well-being of children or grandchildren are at risk, family members should intervene to protect them from harm when the threat is discovered. If necessary, a family member may need to seek custody of the children. If an adult child threatens suicide, taking such claims seriously and admitting them to inpatient treatment is appropriate. In cases where an individual is unwilling to go to treatment, calling the local police department for assistance may be necessary.

There will be plenty of opportunities (also known as crises) to intervene - legal, medical, separation and divorce, being fired, homeless, etc. Each crisis presents an opportunity to offer tangible help instead of rescue. Don't be afraid to seek guidance from your local mental health center or other professionals for advice on an action plan for your specific situation. Despite your efforts to stop enabling, educate others, and intervene

appropriately, your loved one may still refuse help and persist in their addiction. You can't make them change or directly motivate them to seek help, but you can offer treatment and other support when they are ready to accept it. **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, clarity and accuracy.**

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