

Using “The Enabling Worksheet” to Identify Your Enabling Behavior, The Motivation Behind It, and How It Harms You

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Long before the problem has been correctly identified as addiction, family members work to solve the problems associated with the drinking or using. Family members can see that something is wrong with the alcoholic/addict and seek to try to help. They continue to try to step in and “help” as the addict’s life gets more and more out of control. Family members’ attempts to problem solve on behalf of the alcoholic often results in “enabling”. Enabling is the act of removing or buffering the natural negative effects of the drinking or using. Enabling actually assists the alcoholic/addict in continuing to drink or use drugs, often the exact opposite of the intended outcome. When a significant other removes or buffers the natural negative consequences of the drinking/using, the addict is not motivated to change.

In the beginning, family members seem to be trying to solve the problems so that the addict is under less stress, thereby reducing their motive to use. Family members believe that if they can “stage manage” the environment for the addict, that the addict will be able to regain control over their using or their lives. Long before the actual problem is identified, family members typically identify the problem as something other than the drinking/drugging. Some of the common ways that family members identify the problems include: ADD, depression, poor self-concept, the wrong job, the wrong wife/husband, learning disabilities, and “just plain crazy”. They step in and try to correct these problems or direct the alcoholic in making changes in these areas. As the addiction progresses over time and the family members get all used up or worn out in the process, motivation for enabling often changes to doing whatever is perceived to be the “easiest thing to do”.

Family members often aware that their enabling is causing problems in their own life, feel compelled to enable, just as the alcoholic or addict feels compelled to use the chemical, despite the problems caused by it. Enabling can take many forms, including taking responsibility for the alcoholic, taking care of the alcoholic’s responsibilities, buffering or reducing the negative consequences of the drinking or drugging, maintaining a power struggle with the addict over the chemical, and placating the addict so as to not make waves.

List the enabling behaviors that you have engaged in with your alcoholic or addict. Think about ways that you tried to problem solve, only to end up enabling the drinking or using to continue. Identify what you believe your motives to have been at that time. Identify what you felt and how your enabling behavior actually hurt you in the process. Some suggestions are listed below:

- a. Making sure that the alcoholic/addict has a job, even if you have to employ him/her.

- b. Calling to wake him/her up for work.
- c. Making excuses for him/her. Calling in sick to work for him/her. Apologizing for his/her behavior.
- d. Going on “search and destroy” missions where you hunt down the stash and destroy it. Pouring out the liquor. Limiting the amount of cash they have.
- e. Appointing yourself the “drink counter/monitor” and trying to limit how much the alcoholic drank.
- f. Bailing them out of jail. Putting them to bed when they have passed out in the kitchen floor or on the lawn. Cleaning up the vomit.
- g. Looking for them when they don’t come home. Going to the bar to bring them home.
- h. Using pleading, arguing, reason and logic, guilt trips, anger, threats, etc. to get them to quit.
- i. Staying home from planned trips to “babysit” them so that they don’t get into trouble.
- j. Pulling back from family and friends to keep from discussing the problem.
- k. “Playing detective” to gather enough information to confront them with so that they will admit that they have a problem and will quit.
- l. Buying liquor for them or picking them up at the bar so that they don’t get a DUI.
- m. Giving them food, paying the rent, car insurance, etc.

Keep in mind that there are probably behaviors that you are engaging in that are necessary for your own survival, that are enabling your loved one in the process. You probably would not choose to stop these behaviors because they would interfere with your own survival. An example would be that you pay all the bills, including the mortgage. It is not in your best interest to have your utilities shut off or to be evicted from your home.

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