

You Can Stop The Enabling Despite the Emotional Blackmail

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

You have found your way to the counselor's office to get help for the alcoholic/addict in your life. The alcoholic/addict can't see that the source of the problems in their lives is the drinking/drugging. When they do acknowledge that addiction is the problem, they are still not cooperating with your attempts to get them to stop, or to get help for stopping the drinking/drug use.

What you have learned so far, is that one of the best things you can do for the addict and for yourself is stop enabling. With giving up enabling, you can regain control over your own life. You have learned about detaching with love and the importance of allowing the addict to suffer the natural negative consequences of the continuing drinking/drugging. It may have even been suggested that when you stop enabling that the addict has to sober up.

This is not necessarily the case. Typically, you are not the only person in the addict's life that loves him/her and wants to "help". You are not only person affected by his/her addiction. You are not the only enabler. Addicts typically have layers of enablers, not just the spouse or parent. The addict may also have grandparents, siblings, coworkers, bosses, friends, etc. who also want to "help".

When you stop enabling, the addict will be angry with you. They will reach out to other enablers who will carry on with the enabling. These other enablers will continue until like you, they feel all used up. It is often a fairly short amount of time before the alcoholic/addict has gone through the rest of the enablers in their lives.

Can you speed up that process? Does it help to consult with the other enablers? It can, especially the other enablers within the family. Family counseling or consultation with an addiction professional can provide a family with the tools and knowledge that they need to be together on the same page to stop the enabling, to consistently provide feedback about the addict's behavior, and to break out of old, dysfunctional behavioral patterns that reinforce the addiction or denial about it. Families need to learn how to break the cycle of "tag team enabling" where, when one person gets fed up and stops enabling, another comes back into the enabling role. Discussing the history of tag team enabling in the family, the feelings, and the motives of each person involved, can assist each family member with being able to identify when they feel compelled to "enable" and how and when to resist that urge.

Family members persist in enabling behavior despite knowing that they are enabling, under some pretty predictable circumstances: they fear that if they do not enable, the addict will die or that others will suffer. They buy groceries, furnish a car and gas money so that they go to work, provide a place to live so that they won't be homeless, etc. They also enable because of fear of consequences to others should they not enable.

Alcoholics/addicts often use emotional blackmail to keep family members enabling. Family members fear that their grandchildren will go without food, shelter, clothing, and other support. Family members fear that their addict will kill himself/herself.

Family members can intervene at the grandchild level to have an appropriate impact, rather than continue to be emotionally blackmailed to provide support for the addiction. Family members can get custody if there is neglect or abuse of grandchildren. If an adult child is threatening suicide, you should take such threats seriously, even if you believe it to be manipulation. If someone is suicidal, the appropriate response is to have them admitted to inpatient treatment. If they won't go, call the police and ask them to intervene. Laws and procedures differ from state to state. Check with your local mental health center or medical hospital to find out what the next step is for having someone court ordered to the hospital. If your significant other is not really suicidal, they will not like their 72 hour stay. If they are suicidal, the hospital is the appropriate level of care.

Despite your best efforts to stop your own enabling, to educate others on the need to stop enabling, and to intervene at appropriate times and circumstances with appropriate treatment options, the addict can still refuse help and persist in their addiction.

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