

**Stop the Tag Team Enabling:
Helping Your Family Member Find Recovery
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

Family dynamics of addiction are a complicated phenomenon. The word "addict" conjures up a variety of emotional responses and stereotypical beliefs. This is further complicated by the experiential "filters" that people have regarding their prior experiences with other alcoholics and addicts at some other time and some other place in their lives.

When you have a family member or a close friend for that matter, who has addiction, you want to help. You want to save them from having to experience the consequences that you can foresee in the future. You want to make them be able to also see those consequences and thus avoid them. When you see someone that you love hurting, you want to kiss it, put a band-aid on it, or take away the pain in some way. These are normal reactions.

Family members apply normal solving problem behavior to the "abnormal" problems of addiction and end up enabling the perpetuation of the very "thing" they hope to stop-the drinking/using. A simple applied definition of "enabling" is the removal, or reduction, of the natural negative consequences of someone else's behavior. When you remove the consequences of someone's behavior, they have no motivation to change that behavior. As far as they are concerned, what they are doing is working for them. You as a family member, and enabler, can be in the bankruptcy courts as a consequence of continuing to financially enable them. If they still have other enablers willing to step up to the plate to carry on after you are broke, they don't have a problem.

And having additional enablers waiting in the wings is commonplace for addicts. Most addicts have layers of enablers. Within a family, the enabling hierarchy would include spouse (if any), parents (individually or collectively), grandparents, siblings. The first line of enablers is usually the spouse. If there is no spouse, the first line is usually the parents or a parent, individually. Tag team enabling starts when one enabler stops the enabling and another enabler steps up to take over that role.

If the primary enabler gets to a point where they are fed up and begins to detach (usually with anger), making a conscious decision to stop enabling, another person(s) in that family system will usually step up and carry on the rescue services. Often there is one family member, especially in the parental generation who is saying, "I'm not going to keep doing this. I am not willing to bail him/her out any more. That's it!" and another who is saying, "Now Honey, wait a minute. What if" . They trade places as the one in the foreground gets fed up and moves into the background and the one who has been in the background moves into the foreground to continue the enabling. When the one in the foreground feels used up again, they will typically trade places again. If both parents get together on this, a grandparent may step in from the background to take their places as primary enabler. Any other family member could do the same.

Secrecy plays a major role in keeping these dynamics going. Alcoholics/addicts are good at manipulating others to help, and to keep secrets. Alcoholics blame others for their behavior and can be quite convincing on how they have been victimized. Temporary alliances spring up in alcoholic families, where the enabling of one family member is kept secret from other family members. This is very destructive and one of the common casualties of addiction in the family with an addicted "child" is the divorce of the parents.

How do you stop the tag team enabling? Stop the secrets. Be open and honest with the whole family about what is going on with the addict. Stop your enabling behavior. Don't fight amongst yourselves over who is the worst enabler. Have a family meeting. Identify your historical enabling behaviors and the ones you are most likely to do in the future. Have a plan for not engaging in those behaviors. Provide support for each other. Support the other family members when they are on the verge of "caving in" and returning to enabling. Remind each other that stopping the enabling is the best thing you can do so that your loved one becomes motivated to change.

An addict is largely prevented from experiencing pain when he is cushioned from the negative consequences of his/her own behavior. S/he is most likely to experience a crisis when the enablers fold out from under him/her. Family members can actually "help" when a crisis occurs. Without bailing them out or rescuing them from the natural negative consequences, family members can provide access to treatment and recovery resources. Often, the treatment center has a lot more appeal to the addict, than a jail cell.

Don't worry that they have not "hit bottom" or are going to treatment to stay married, stay out of jail, keep their job, etc. It is a myth that you have to have had some kind of epiphany to benefit from treatment. An addict who is "coerced" into treatment by the courts, judge, family, boss, etc. has the same probability of getting sober as the addict who enters treatment believing that they have hit bottom and are surrendering to recovery. Family members can help this to happen by getting out of the way and letting the addict suffer the consequences of his/her disease.

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