

## 2. Two Phases of Enabling

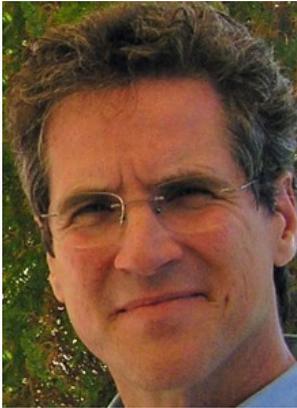
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By Jeff Jay

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When family members become concerned about a loved one's alcohol use, they will almost always do all the wrong things. Operating out of a sense of loyalty and love, they will unwittingly enable the disease to progress. Inevitably, the alcohol or other drug use becomes worse.



Jeff Jay, clinical interventionist and co-author of Love First

There are countless examples of how this may occur. Here are three stories that showcase enabling behavior.

1) A young woman in college is known to be drinking somewhat heavily. Her grades aren't what they should be. Finally, she drives her car into a parked vehicle while intoxicated. Legal problems arise.

Her parents run to the rescue, thinking: "She's just going through a phase. She can't be an alcoholic. She is our beloved daughter." Instead of getting professional help, her parents call a lawyer to deal with the legal trouble. Unwittingly, they diminish the negative consequences of their daughter's drinking. That is, they make the problem less of a problem for their daughter. In this way, they have enabled the problem to continue.

2) A young man with a wife and [children](#) is staying out too late. He is drinking with his buddies at a sports bar and occasionally using cocaine. The problem escalates over time and his behavior becomes erratic. He stays out all night. He begins to miss work. He spends the mortgage money.

His wife becomes frantic, and somehow blames herself for the problem. When he misses work, she calls in sick for him. When she is asked by his parents how things are going, she lies and says all is well. She is too ashamed and confused to reach out for help, yet she is unwittingly making things worse. Without knowing it, she has become his accomplice by averting negative consequences at work and smoothing over problems with his parents. She may even borrow money to cover the mortgage payment. Even though she begs and threatens, cries and pleads, his wife is now enabling the problem to continue.

3) A 74 year old woman has prescriptions from three different doctors, none of whom know what the other is prescribing. She is taking Xanax, Percodan, and Tylenol 3, along with a host of other medications. She also drinks at night, now that her husband has passed away. Despite the love of her children and grand children, she is an alcoholic and drug addict.

When she falls and breaks her hip, the accident is attributed to old age. But at 74, she is quite fit and completely independent. She has lost her balance and fallen in her own home because of her narcotic and benzodiazepine habit, along with her drinking.

The family will not acknowledge the problem. Although Grandma has been hard to deal with on certain family occasions, it is simply too much to deal with. And besides, they think, she deserves to have a drink or two after Grandpa's death. By turning away from the problem this family is enabling the problem.

There are two phases of enabling: innocent and desperate. The stories above are all examples of innocent enabling. The family members really don't know any better, and their rationalizations are holding up fairly well. In truth, they are in as much denial of the problem as the alcoholic.

At some point this changes. Perhaps the young woman from the first story continues drinking, and drinks even more. Finally, she has a second and more serious car accident, injuring herself and someone else. Now her family is terrified. "My God," they think, "she just can't stop drinking. She must be an alcoholic!"

Strangely enough, most family members still will not reach out for help. Instead, they will descend into the desperate stage of enabling. Recognizing that their daughter has a serious problem, her parents take drastic measures to cover it up. They cannot imagine their beloved daughter labeled as an

alcoholic. She will never be accepted, much less get ahead. Now the family goes into high gear. They hire another lawyer, they transfer her to a new college, and they keep the incident quiet. They are afraid that they may be making things worse, but they are determined not to damage her reputation.

Of course, this only makes things worse. Their daughter has not received any treatment yet, and so the disease progresses. Although her parents know there is a serious alcohol problem, they see it as a moral issue and not a medical one. They are still enabling the disease to continue. Desperately enabling.

Most people suffering from chemical dependency have an enabling system. This system is comprised of well-meaning friends and family members who unwittingly help the disease to progress. The enablers may be the source of money or the things that money can buy, like food and shelter. They may be the source of alibis or services such as legal help. Or, they may simply ignore the problem.

Just as families can do a lot to make things worse, they can also help things get better. When the enabling system turns into an intervening system, the disease becomes much harder to maintain. Friends and family cannot cure chemical dependency, but they can have a very positive impact on the problem. Families can break the cycle of enabling in three ways:

1. Talk openly and honestly with the alcoholic about the problem. Stick to the facts and don't be judgmental. Talk about your own feelings, but don't try to inflict guilt. Only talk when the person is sober. Do not nag or scold. Talk about what you will do to help, and also talk about what you will no longer do to enable the problem. Also, talk openly and honestly with other family members about the problem, so everyone is on the same page.
2. Do not give or lend money for the addiction, or to cover debts caused by the addiction. For example, if the rent money has been spent at the bar, don't block the natural consequences of that action. Otherwise, one is only buying the next drink. However, if young children are involved, this strategy may not be appropriate. Be vigilant in protecting these silent victims of addiction.
3. Become involved in a program of recovery. Al-anon, Nar-anon, and Families Anonymous are invaluable resources. It is often too difficult to stop the enabling process without help and support from those who have been down this road. Join a group, and draw on their experience, strength, and hope.

Enabling can also take a toll on the family members themselves. Ironically, their attempts to control the situation may impact them physically and emotionally. Some of these negative consequences are discussed in our book, [Love First: A New Approach to Intervention for Alcoholism and Drug Addiction](#):

"Loved ones who enable the alcoholic are at high risk for both physical and mental illnesses. Their stress may cause diseases in the family similar to those the alcoholic experiences.

"According to Dr. Max Schneider, an internist specializing in families of alcoholics, the people around the alcoholic suffer from higher incidences of gastritis, stroke, heart disease, insomnia, respiratory problems, anxiety, and depression. Dr. Schneider warns that the risk of accidents, homicide, and suicide are much higher among families living with active addiction.

"Desperate enabling causes every member of the family to suffer. Anger and disputes arise; blame is bounced from person to person, and the family unit itself is eventually damaged. Children are especially vulnerable to this phase of enabling. The adults in the family are so focused on keeping the alcoholic in line, they don't always notice [what the children are going through](#). Make children your number-one responsibility. Be sure they are safe. Talk to them about alcoholism. Explain that it is a disease. It is nobody's fault, and the sick person can't help him- or herself. Give children a safe harbor, a person to talk to, and be honest with them. If you are aware of children who are living in danger because of a parent's addiction, it is your duty to act. For guidelines on helping children cope with a parent's alcoholism, contact the [National Association for Children of Alcoholics](#)."

With all the problems that result from the enabling process, one might wonder what causes people to become enablers in the first place. In the innocent stage of enabling, the answer is ignorance. Enablers at this stage have plenty of love and concern, but they have no effective knowledge to guide them. In the desperate stage of enabling, fear is the primary motivator. Here we find enablers who are so concerned about the continuing consequences of addiction that they will do almost anything to protect the status quo. Ironically, there is a good deal of pleasure to be found in successfully outrunning the consequences and escaping the pain. As we note in our book:

"When addiction causes a problem, we are in pain, too; when the problem is solved, we're relieved and our pain is reduced. Our feelings of relief are a form of pleasure. Once we go through the enabling cycle a few times, we're conditioned to expect a reduction of pain and increased pleasure as a result of our enabling behaviors. Since we feel better, we mistakenly believe enabling works. Of course, since the addiction has not been treated, more problems will continue to surface. The only way we can keep up with the problems is to find more and more ways to enable. Our enabling progresses as the disease progresses, and our lives become increasingly unmanageable."

When the enabling system turns into an intervening system, things begin to change. In the articles to come, some of the techniques for planning and carrying out a structured intervention will be discussed. But there is an important interim step that can be taken short of a structured intervention. When a family detaches with love, in what can be called a soft intervention, they can protect themselves from the negative consequences of the addiction at the same time that they help the alcoholic to feel those consequences. A passage from *Love First* illustrates this point:

"The well-known 'Serenity Prayer' by Reinhold Niebuhr is the perfect recipe for detachment: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

"We are encouraged to see what we cannot change in other people, places, and things, but what we can change in ourselves. What does it take to do this? Wisdom and courage. And what is the result? Serenity. When we detach with love, we take our focus off the alcoholic and place it onto ourselves. When we focus on ourselves, we regain our power to make meaningful choices about what we do and what we don't do. By making this shift in our thinking and actions, the world around us changes. Our world becomes manageable, and we find peace."

This final passage from our book illustrates the problem and solution for many families:

"If you are focused on the alcoholic, you are focused on the problem. Take your eyes off the problem, and you'll no longer be trapped in the problem. Put your focus on yourself. Resign from your job as manager of the alcoholic's problems. Sign up for the team that creates solutions."

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