

Enabling

What is enabling?

Enabling is helping someone avoid the natural consequences of bad behavior. Anyone who covers for an addict or removes him or her from the consequences of his or her use is enabling the addict's behavior. Family members, friends, bosses, neighbors—lots of people fall into the enabling trap by thinking they are being helpful or empathetic. In fact, most enabling results from good intentions.

Family members often enable because they need and want to keep the household and family life operating as if everything were fine. To do this, they must block the consequences of the addict's behavior as much as possible. Family members may cover for the addict, lie, and deny, all to avoid the shame they would feel if the outside world knew what was really happening inside their four walls.

If others enable you, will it slow your recovery?

Yes. The Big Book says to admit “to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.” As a recovering person, you are called by this Fifth Step to realize and recall the negative consequences of your alcohol and other drug use. When others enable you, they protect you from feeling or seeing those consequences clearly. When consequences are blocked or minimized, the cause-and-effect method of learning appropriate, healthy behavior is absent. You are then able to continue with erratic, unpredictable, irresponsible, insane behavior because, to some extent, the path has been cleared for you to do so.

Enabling also allows deep anger and resentment to build within the family, in the workplace, or with friends. On one hand, the enabler eagerly rescues or helps the addict. On the other hand, the enabler may develop and harbor deep resentment at having to cover for someone else frequently. Feelings of self-pity and righteous anger build. The addict, however, is oblivious to the enabler's growing resentment. Instead, he or she is completely focused on using and protecting the supply of chemicals.

Enabling happens in many ways. A critical first step to stop enabling behavior is to understand it. Once you know how you enable—and how you are enabled—you can take steps to change your thoughts and actions.

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What are some ways you can avoid enabling others who have an active addiction?

As you move forward in your recovery, you are learning how important it is that you not enable others. You are learning to set new boundaries with those you love, asking them to hold you accountable for your actions.

At the same time, you may have people in your life who still have an active addiction. It is very important that you not “take on” these people and try to help them while you are still in early recovery. Doing so may set you up for a relapse.

Here are specific ways that you can avoid enabling others in active addiction:

Don't . . .

- call in sick for the addict
- provide the addict with money or a place to stay
- provide excuses for the addict to avoid social events
- promise yourself that you “won't put up with it” and then back down
- make excuses for the addict's inappropriate behavior
- make excuses to yourself or others for the addict's broken promises
- deny, rationalize, or minimize the problem either to yourself or others

Do . . .

- continue to stay in touch with extended family members, friends, neighbors, or anyone else who might have already figured out the problem
- talk to others about what's happening
- continue to attend social events, outings, and other activities that are important to you
- find an Al-Anon group or other support group
- get family and/or couples counseling
- keep active with your own hobbies, interests, and friends

The best thing you can do for yourself and this person is to put some distance between you and him or her. Later, when you have more experience and time in recovery, you may be able to reach out and offer help. Until then, keep your distance and avoid enabling as much as you can.

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Of course, it is even more difficult to do this when the person with the active addiction is a spouse or significant other. In this case, you must always put your sobriety first. It must be your highest priority. Seek counsel from your sponsor and others in your Twelve Step group. You may even want to consider removing yourself from the living situation, at least on a temporary basis, until your sobriety is stronger.

How can you help your family and friends quit enabling you?

While you were actively using, you may have had family and friends who enabled your use. It is important now to create new patterns of relating to one another that don't involve enabling. Just as addicts or alcoholics need to focus on their recovery, friends and family need to focus on themselves and their growth.