UPPER ISLAND ASSESSMENT AND RESOURCE SERVICE

THE FAMILY ENABLERS

- The Johnson Institute

ALCOHOLISM IS A FAMILY ILLNESS

Alcoholism and alcohol misuse have far-reaching effects for American society. However, few persons feel the pain of alcoholism as it affects "society". Most men and women feel the pain, and they feel it grievously and sharply, only when it hits their own families and friends.

This document speaks mostly of alcoholism. But what we say here applies basically to all forms of mood-changing chemicals: alcohol, cocaine, marijuana, heroin, "uppers", "downers"--whatever. 2) To avoid endless repetition of "he or she", we've usually settled for the commoner "he". But keep in mind the real situation: many women are chemically dependent. For instance, in the United States about 40% of alcoholics are women.

For families in which one member--father, mother, or child--is an alcoholic, there are three major problems at the outset. The first is correctly identifying the problem as alcoholism. Identification is a problem because alcoholism is a great master of disguise. So effective in disguising itself is it that many people don't recognize it though they live with it every day in the family. Still, once alcoholism is recognized, there's a second problem: what can family members do that will really help? The third problem concern how family members have been affected and what help they themselves may need.

The purpose of this booklet is to help those close to an alcoholic address these problems by letting them in on some very important insights into the alcoholism process in families.

This is the first insight: there's a subtle and specific way in which alcoholism can involve the nonalcoholic. For an alcoholic to continue drinking, nonalcoholic must be unwittingly involved in enabling (that is, encouraging) the alcoholic's drinking. Applied to families, this is sadly ironic. The second insight is this: those close to an alcoholic are inclined to develop behaviour and/or emotional problems of their own as they attempt to make adjustments to the alcoholic's progressive disease of alcoholism. They can become so caught up in the alcoholism system that they find it almost impossible to let go of the merry-go-round without some outside help.

Those who are closest to an alcoholic, most concerned about that person, and most hopeful that the alcoholic will stop drinking often unwittingly play into the alcoholic's progressive drinking pattern.

By their actions, the alcoholic can be enabled to drink more comfortably, and family members and friends become drawn into and affected by the very problem they'd like to prevent.

Thus a circular process is set up that can gather a momentum of its own that's difficult to halt.

ALCOHOLIC BEHAVIOUR

No one knowingly encourages the continuance of alcoholism or of other drug dependence in another family member. Enabling usually happens because people think they're doing the appropriate thing to help the alcoholic or remedy the situation. Enabling may sometimes occur against one's better judgment; it always occurs without the enabler's full realization of what's going on. In understanding enabling and what to do about it, family members must realize that alcoholism is a disease; it isn't something that anyone who drinks chooses fully and freely.

An alcoholic -- and those around the alcoholic -- cannot predict with certainty if or when the alcoholic will stop drinking once he or she starts. Because the time and amount of drinking are uncontrollable and unpredictable, the alcoholic, unexpectedly and repeatedly, is likely to engage in such disruptive and destructive behaviors as:

- breaking family commitment, both major and minor;
- spending more money than planned;
- driving while intoxicated, and getting arrested;

- making inappropriate statements to friends, family, and co-workers; and
- arguing, fighting, and doing other anti-social actions.

The alcoholic would probably neither do such things nor approve of them in others unless he was drinking. In fact, such behaviors violate the alcoholic's conscience and cause feelings of guilt, remorse, and self-hatred. The alcoholic takes care of these intense negative feelings by spontaneous rationalizations and projections. Rationalizations and projections are really tricks the mind plays on itself. Rationalization is the intellectual process of making irrational behaviour seem rational by creating false reasons. Projections consist of unloading self-hatred onto others. Rationalizations convince the alcoholic that "last night wasn't that bad" or that "others drank that much, too". Projections cause the alcoholic to believe that "people don't like me; they judge me unfairly. I need booze to comfort myself and help me feel good about myself again". The effect of such psychological defense is to remove the person from reality. The alcoholic's view of life can, in fact, become so distorted that he'll be the last person to recognize that drinking represents any type of personal problem.

WHO IS AN ENABLER?

Now, how does enabling fit into all of this? Usually enabling means helping or supporting something or someone. However, in the alcoholic family, what's being enabled (supported) is the alcoholism--the drinking itself--instead of the drinker as a person. Who is an enabler? An enabler is a person who reacts to an alcoholic in such a way as to shield the alcoholic from experiencing the full impact of the harmful consequences of alcoholism. An enabler helps the alcoholic delude himself that drinking isn't the problem. A small example of enabling: a wife or husband calls the alcoholic's office to explain that the alcoholic "has the flu" when actually the problem is a hangover. When enablers cover up for an alcoholic, the alcoholic doesn't realize the effects of drinking and thus has little reason to change. Further, the alcoholic misses an opportunity to gain what he needs most: significant insight that alcoholism is the problem. Without insight, the alcoholic will remain a victim of his drinking. It's in the very nature of the disease that alcoholics really can't recognize that they need to stop drinking and to seek appropriate help.

So family members who go along with the alcoholic's drinking "to calm his nerves", "to help her endure her loneliness", "because he works so hard", or for any other reason, are all engaging in enabling behaviour.

Family members who take on the responsibilities of the drinking person are enabling. Teenage (or younger) children who take on responsibilities in the home beyond their years or maturity while a parent is drunk or hung over are enablers. A husband who hides his wife's alcoholism "because I love her too much to embarrass her" is an enabler. A wife who cuts back on her own social life or family activities because a husband is drunk is an enabler in the sense that she's letting the drinking behaviour run her life. In short, any family member who does for an alcoholic what the alcoholic normally would be doing for self is enabling.

Refusing to be an enabler can certainly lead to some difficult situations for the alcoholic: loss of job, loss of driver's license, a jail sentence, moving out of the family home, loss of contact with the family. But matters needn't go that far. And if enablers stop their enabling behaviour, it's virtually certain that although some difficult situations will arise with the alcoholic in the short run, in the long run he'll be forced to face problems more honestly.

Tragically, as a person in an enabling role continues trying to "help", the disease progresses, and everyone--both the alcoholic and the family--suffers. If the enabler's role is so harmful, why would anyone assume it? Usually enablers see all that's being done as a sincere effort to help both the family and the drinker, or as the best that can be done in the situation. They're often afraid of how the problems the alcoholic gets into will affect the family, and so they try to shield the family from the consequences. Like the alcoholic, enablers can become demoralized and see no alternative.

Lacking the knowledge of how alcoholism works, enablers act out of misguided kindness and sympathy. Sometimes the problem just escalates as the enablers become more emotionally constricted because their blinders narrow their vision.

RATIONALIZING

Alcoholism is a progressive disease that initially may present only a few episodes of loss of control. Unfortunately, most people close to an alcoholic perceive such episodes as isolated instances of intoxication and not as a pattern of harmful dependence. Early on, few persons would see themselves as entwined in a harmful pattern. Rather, they see themselves as concerned people who want to help someone they care very much about. They may receive credit and kudos for their "self-sacrifice", and even as the situation worsens they may begin to feel pleased with their effort, hoping it will bolster their own self-esteem. Consequently, they try to understand why the dependent person became intoxicated and acted so inappropriately. The enabler seldom views the drinker as one who can't control drinking, but rather as one who simply chooses to drink in order to cope with some pressure and "lets things get a little out of hand". But the drinking continues, and life for the family most likely gets worse.

The enabler, not recognizing the presence of alcoholism, usually responds to episodes of intoxication in either of two ways:

1. Excusing the behaviour as unusual, perhaps, but still normal. The enabler might reason:
   - "Who doesn't need to blow off steam once in a while?"
   - "It's vacation time. Why shouldn't a person be allowed to let loose?"
   - "Lots of people get loaded at that kind of party" (for instance, New Year's, Kegger, promotion, wedding).
   - "It was no big deal last night. Why dwell on the broken lamp, cigarette burn, accident, or argument? It'd just be upsetting."
2. Excusing the behaviour because it's seen as the result of another problem. The enabler might think such things as:
   - "With those job pressures, anyone would drink."
   - "She's just going through that phase in life."
   - "The peer group's to blame."
   - "The problem is loneliness and not knowing how to mix very well."
   - "Maybe it's my fault. I shouldn't have been so critical."

Often the enabler either believes that a problem with alcohol doesn't exist or that, if it does, it'll disappear when the "real" problem is resolved.

In this way, the enabler too becomes highly vulnerable to the same developing defense and denial that victimize the alcoholic. The rationalizations of both persons now are supporting their misunderstanding of the nature of the problem. "He drinks because of job pressure," says the enabler. "I'm not having problems at work because of drinking; I'm nervous because they demand so much of me. And my home life just makes things worse," says the alcoholic.

PROJECTING

The disease continues to have an increasingly adverse effect on both the alcoholic and the enabler. The alcoholic's growing negative feelings about self, resulting partially from inappropriate behaviour while intoxicated and partially from the general devastating (and depressant) effects of alcoholism on the human system, are unconsciously and more frequently projected as the problems of the enablers. The enablers become the target of such statements as:

- "With the work load you're dumping on me, it's no wonder I need long lunch hours."
- I come home from work and all I hear is you kids fighting over which program to watch on

T.V. You're enough to drive anyone to drink."

- "If you cared about me half as much as you care about your friends, maybe I wouldn't want to drink so much."
- "If you'd shape up, I'd be all right."
- "School's a bore, the teachers are stupid, and you just don't understand my friends. So I got caught smoking grass--big deal!"

Just what is projection and how does it work?

Projection consists of accusing others of failings we dimly see and dislike in ourselves but don't want to admit. Projecting them onto others allows us to attack them safely. When an alcoholic can blame other people or circumstances for his bad feelings, he experiences an unconscious venting of his emotions. He temporarily relieves some of the internal stress that's part of alcoholism. Obviously, this is a false solution to the problem, which will only become worse as time goes on. Projection as a solution or survival mechanism, of course, helps the alcoholic avoid the truth of his situation. Avoiding the truth is counterproductive, though, because the alcoholic will experience more pain, which will produce further unconscious projections.

When the alcoholic verbalizes a projection such as "If you'd shape up, I'd be all right", there's little realization on either the dependent's or the enabler's part that the alcoholic speaks out of fear and self-hatred. For example, both persons are apt to believe that the dependent does hate the enabler--and has good reason to do so. One common effect of projection is that both persons focus on the enabler's behaviour, not on the alcoholic's, and this distraction allows the disease of alcoholism to continue undetected.

Understanding projection makes it possible to see how this defense can and does have a devastating emotional impact on the enabler.

AVOIDING

As alcoholism progresses in any member of a family, virtually every family member and any other persons involved experience certain emotions. Even though family, co-workers, and friends may not talk openly about anger, guilt, shame, hurt, fear, and a sense of being cut off, these feelings are almost always present. Those close to the alcoholic need to learn that they're not bad or abnormal if they have these feelings. They also need to learn how to express these feelings appropriately and how to fulfil their own emotional needs. Unfortunately, those involved with alcoholics tend not to talk openly about alcoholism. Often, it's as if there were a tacit agreement in the family not to talk about drinking. This "secret" tends to impede the very kind of open communication that would help the family members or friends support one another. Instead, it reinforces their sense of shame and isolation.

As the pain caused by the blaming and accusations of the alcoholic becomes more uncomfortable, the enabler is likely to feel hurt and vaguely guilty. If the interpersonal relationship between the alcoholic and the enabler is somewhat superficial--for example, if the enabler is a friendly acquaintance or a fellow employee, or if the alcoholic is a more distant relative or an employer--then the enabler, in an effort to find relief from the pain, can simply avoid contact with the alcoholic. The enabler may take positions such as:

- "After what he said and did last night, let's just not invite him to our parties anymore."
- "She just doesn't seem to fit into this department. I'll try to transfer her to shopping."
- "She isn't as reliable as she used to be. I don't think we should ask her to be on our committee."
- "After the way he nearly capsized the boat, I'm not going on another fishing trip with him.

Such avoidance reactions only allow alcoholism to progress. The alcoholic, still out of touch with

reality, doesn't receive from the enabler a good description of the behaviour that strained the relationship. Usually the enabler simply withdraws from all contact. The alcoholic, convinced that anything but alcohol is the problem, remains victimized by his faulty alcoholic thinking as he blames others for the split. He's likely to think such things as:

- "If they weren't so boring, I wouldn't drink so much at their parties."
- "This company just keeps piling on the paper work so much that no one can get a job done. An hour and a half for lunch isn't what's slowing me down."
- "They never gave me credit in the past, so just let them organize their own committee. Then they'll know how hard it is."
- "Who wants to go fishing with them? Those guys don't know how to have a good time. They make fishing more work than fun."

Not every enabler, however, can simply avoid the alcoholic. If the interpersonal relationship between the two is deep--for instance, if the alcoholic is an immediately family member, a close friend, or an immediately supervisor--the increasing projections are likely to create in the enabler feelings of guilt and self-recrimination. Not knowing much about alcoholism, the enabler may begin to feel and accept responsibility for the alcoholic's intoxications. This in turn leads the enabler to reason such things as:

- "Maybe I'm doing something to bring this about."
- "Maybe I wasn't clear enough in my instructions to her, or maybe I'm putting too much work on her shoulders."
- "If I were home more, maybe...."
- "Maybe we didn't give him enough love when he was younger."
- "Maybe if I change, this'll go away."

For the enabler, feelings of self-doubt, inadequacy, and guilt mount as the drinking progresses and as the projections from the alcoholic increase in frequency and severity. Without help to see the problem for what it is, the enabler continues to accept the blame ("I know I'm not perfect by a long shot") for current stressful situations created by the alcoholism.

TRYING TO CONTROL

Enablers need to learn what's happening to them at an emotional level. Because of feelings of decreasing self-worth, the enabler becomes more and more compulsive in reactions to the alcoholic. The alcoholic's drinking becomes a virtual display of the enabler's internal guilt and sense of inadequacy. In other words, the enabler's self-worth becomes tied directly to the alcoholic's drinking. The more the alcoholic drinks, the more the enabler feels responsible, guilty, and inadequate. The only way for the enabler to feel any positive self-worth, so the enabler believes, is to make sure the alcoholic's drinking doesn't get out of control. It's as if the enabler thought, "If there were some things I did to cause this, there must be things I can do to make it go away."

At this point in the disease process, the enabler may have lost the ability to initiate action or to behave autonomously without reference to drinking. It may be almost impossible to retain the emotional stability and insight needed to deal with the disease effectively. Without help, the enabler is likely to become increasingly depressed, discouraged, and dysfunctional.

Having "agreed" that he or she is to blame and must by his or her own effort control the drinking, the enabler ends up trying to control the family life by adopting reactive behaviour in such typical ways as:

- cancelling social events where there's drinking;
- disposing of extra quantities of liquor or other drugs;
- calling home in midday to determine whether the alcoholic is sober;

- relieving the alcoholic of a portion of office work and personally doing the job;
- explaining to the school counsellor or teacher why there are problems in school (but never mentioning alcohol) and agreeing to see that the problems get resolved; and
- assuming household responsibilities that the alcoholic used to hold.

These typical reactions of enablers are self-protective efforts to keep control and retain some shred of self-respect. But they can look like attempts to manipulate the drinker and hide the drinking. They're doomed to fail because the enabler is engaged in trying to control the uncontrollable. Neither the alcoholic nor the enabler can control the alcoholic's drinking. Every time the alcoholic drinks, the enabler's self-worth diminishes. Most enablers respond by making even more desperate attempts to control. On and on the vicious cycle goes as both the alcoholic and the enabler become increasingly alienated and dysfunctional.

HELP FOR ENABLERS

At this point the enabler needs help as much as the alcoholic does. Breaking the cycle requires the enabler to gain knowledge and awareness in the following areas:

- how the disease of alcoholism works;
- how enabling fosters continued drinking;
- how concerned, loving people with the best of intentions can be enablers; and
- that enabling behaviour can be stopped; there's hope.

With knowledge and insight into self, the enabler can begin to see what's happened in the gradual building of the dysfunctional patterns and can respond to the alcoholic in more effective ways. The cycle of drinking and enabling can be broken. New and different interaction with the alcoholic will help the enabler to "let go" of responsibility for the alcoholic's drinking and subsequent behaviour and to realize that, as close as anyone is to another, no one is responsible for another person's drinking. With a new sense of freedom, the enabler can stop shielding the alcoholic from the harmful consequences of the drinking and can realize that to do so is neither cruel or uncaring. The enabler may be of help to the alcoholic by presenting the specific ways in which the disease causes and worsens problems for both of them. Talking directly about drinking and behaviour, the enabler stops hiding the problem. At last the enabler changes roles and becomes a helper, providing the alcoholic with the data necessary to see the serious nature of the situation. With insight into alcoholism and into their own role in it, the former enablers can seek the appropriate help they need to lead happier and healthier lives.

One of the first and best steps that family members can take is to start on their own self-help program. Al-Anon and Alateen are excellent groups that have provided assistance and advice to thousands of men and women who live with the problems of alcoholism in the family. Both groups can be located by looking in the telephone directory.

Family members who live with alcoholism don't have to live as unhappy, troubled, angry people with low self-esteem. When the enablers change, their new ways of dealing with alcoholism will provide hope and even motivation for the drinking persons to seek help for themselves.

For more information contact: Upper Island Assessment & Resource Service:
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