

## ENABLING vs. HELPING

The word “enable” has always had a positive connotation throughout my life. I remember learning as a child that donating to the March of Dimes could *enable* a crippled child to walk; paying taxes would *enable* the government to provide infrastructure and fund the defense of our country; a donation to the food bank would *enable* a hungry person to eat; working hard and being a good citizen would *enable* a fuller, more meaningful life. Yes, almost every enabling activity imaginable had been positive.....until addiction entered the picture.

As defined by the experts and by those of us who have lived through it, enabling is far from a positive behavior when applied to the life of an addict. In the examples above, the cause and effect relationship between action and outcome is positive and easy to understand. But in the addiction upside-down world of opposites, the line between “helping” the addict and “enabling” the addiction is difficult to ascertain and define. So to try to help understand the difference, let’s think about “helping” and “enabling” as they apply to substance abuse.

To me, “helping” the addict is consistently, 100% of the time, providing assistance to defeat the addiction and promote the process of recovery. By that, I mean every action is designed to end the conduct, habits, and patterns typically associated with addictive behaviors. Examples of helping, in some circumstances, would be providing resources for rehabilitation, either in-patient or out-patient; assisting in exploring employment, education or job training opportunities; providing advice for successfully fulfilling responsibilities; and providing limited resources (such as transportation, food, clothing and shelter) while the transition to recovery is underway. “Enabling,” on the other hand, is consistently, 100% of the time, perpetuating the addiction as opposed to defeating it. This is where the line gets blurred, as “enabling” often disguises itself as “helping.” Examples of enabling, in most circumstances, would be mitigating the consequences of the addict’s actions; allowing (encouraging) slothful behavior such as sleeping all day, calling off from work, and ignoring assigned responsibilities; paying overdue bills for the addict; supplying substances while the addict is awaiting treatment; denying the obvious fact that the affliction is progressing, not regressing; and not exacting severe consequences for violation of agreed-upon rules.

In every action, the test that must be passed is: “Will this action help defeat the addiction and lead to recovery?” If the answer is yes, it is important to be able to answer the additional question, “How?” If you cannot define the “how,” it is very likely that you are about to *enable* rather than *help* even if you answered the question with a “yes” in good faith! If the answer is no, then it is very likely that “enabling” is what is being offered.

And now for the really hard part. Often, it is **not** the action itself that determines whether or not it is enabling....it is the circumstances surrounding the act. In the “helping” examples above, there are circumstances under which many of them could be perceived as “enabling;” likewise, in the enabling examples above, there are circumstances under which many could be considered “help.” But in every case, regardless of the action or circumstances, correctly answering the questions, “Will this action help defeat the addiction and lead to recovery?” and “How?” will improve your chances of knowing the difference and acting accordingly.

The chart below demonstrates the impact that circumstances can have on actions that we are typically called upon to perform when dealing with an active addiction and the mental exercise we need to undertake in order to determine whether or not we are *enabling the dependency* or *helping to defeat it*.

<u>ACTION</u>	<u>CIRCUMSTANCE</u>	<u>ENABLING/HELPING</u>
<u>PROVIDE FOOD &amp; SHELTER</u>	Minor, using or recovering	Helping
	21+ using	Enabling
	21+ recovering	Helping
<u>LOCATE AND FUND REHAB</u>	Minor	Helping
	21+ with multiple “relapses”	Enabling
	21+ with decision to recover	Helping
<u>PROVIDE TRANSPORTATION</u>	Minor or 21+Meet Friends	Enabling
	Minor or 21+Go to AA/NA Meeting	Helping
	Minor or 21+ Go to Work/School	Helping
<u>Mitigate/Allow Consequences of Addict’s Behavior</u>		
	Warrant for Arrest	
-Pay Fine		Enabling
-Allow/Assist Arrest		Helping
	Unpaid Debt to Drug Dealer	
-Pay Debt		Enabling
-Don’t Pay Debt		Helping (although risky)
	Missing Valuables from Home	
-Prosecute		Helping
-Don’t Prosecute		Enabling
	Fraudulent Use of Credit Cards	
-Prosecute		Helping
-Don’t Prosecute		Enabling
	Jailed For Any Violation	
-Pay Bail		Enabling
-Hire Defense Attorney		Enabling
-Visit during Visiting Hours		Helping
<u>PAY DELINQUENT BILLS</u>	During Rehabilitation	Helping
	Due to Poor Budgeting	Enabling
	Due to not working	Enabling
	Due to apathy/depression/etc.	Enabling
	To preserve insurance benefits	Helping

To summarize, I have concluded that actions, in and of themselves, are neither helping nor enabling but become one or the other in the face of various circumstances. If we mentally ask ourselves the key questions as previously discussed, we will always know which course we are taking. **Sometimes, even with the knowledge that we are enabling, we will do it anyway because the consequence to us of doing the opposite is too grievous for us to bear.** Hopefully, though, armed with the knowledge of the difference, we will choose “helping” vs. “enabling” at every opportunity, as a life that is very important to us depends on it.