



This information sheet is intended to offer you an introduction to enabling behaviour relating to drugs and alcohol. It is not intended as a comprehensive guide on the subject therefore if you need more information please contact York Carers Centre.

What is enabling?

Enabling is doing for others what they are capable of doing for themselves.

Individuals with problematic drug or alcohol use can often be protected from the negative consequences of their substance use by concerned others (family, friends, parents, husband, wife, siblings etc). Addiction or dependency on drugs or alcohol can bring with it a number of difficult and frightening experiences for the concerned other. It is human nature to want to support a person you care for, to ensure they are not in pain or distress, and to want to help them stop using drugs or alcohol. Often concerned others focus their energy and time on supporting the person with the drug or alcohol problem. Supporting them with money, paying their bills, making excuses for their behaviours and in some cases accessing the drugs or alcohol for them. What started out as well meaning support to protect and support a person, and a way of dealing with the stress that comes with addiction can end up as enabling.

Enabling can be an unhelpful behaviour as it does not resolve the stresses that come from drug or alcohol use for the concerned other. When we enable a person who is using drugs or alcohol we often prevent them from experiencing the negative consequences of their addiction or dependency. When we do this, we discourage them from learning and coping with their mistakes, and deny them the opportunities to realise their drug or alcohol use has become problematic. Leaving a person you care for to face up to and experience the problems of their drug or alcohol use can feel frightening and can be a difficult thought for many concerned others. Yet to continue to enable them in their drug or alcohol use means continuing to support the addiction.

Support is available for concerned others to talk about these worries and to make decisions about the best ways to support the drug or alcohol user. By accessing support and information the concerned other can begin to plan out how to reduce and stop the enabling behaviours whilst offering other forms of support which can promote changes for the drug or alcohol user.

Enabling behaviours start as acts of kindness to support a person using drugs or alcohol. For some people and families enabling becomes a way of coping with the stress of supporting a person with an addiction, yet enabling can become unhelpful to all concerned.

Examples of enabling behaviour include:

- Making excuses (calling their drugs worker to say they will not be attending when they are not interested in going to the appointment / have been using drugs)
- Trying to take control of their drug or alcohol use
- Giving them money to buy drugs or alcohol
- Buying the drugs or alcohol for them
- Paying their debts

From the drug or alcohol user's point of view, the message of enabling can be:

The drug or alcohol user:

1. May come to expect they will be rescued / looked after
2. Is prevented from living a normal life, for example a life where they make decisions, experience personal success and failure and learn to pick themselves up and carry on
3. Does not get to find out how resourceful and resilient they can be
4. Is prevented from developing a sense of self-awareness and self worth
5. Will probably find that people in their lives are frequently angry and accuse them of ignoring and disrespecting their boundaries and their needs
6. May become dependent on the enabler and may feel they cannot (even when they may want to) do things on their own and for themselves

The end result when we enable can be:

1. We feel angry, resentful and powerless to do anything about the addiction
2. We might find that our lives have become unmanageable as we have become so focused on trying to manage or change the person using drugs or alcohol

3. We may think we must look after and care for the person using drugs or alcohol, even when the personal cost is high
4. We usually end up depressed, anxious and tense and may experience mental or physical health problems as a result of our preoccupation with the person using drugs or alcohol
5. We might find it very difficult to set and enforce boundaries