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UNDERSTANDING ENABLING

Enabling is a process whereby well-meaning people allow and even encourage irresponsible and self-destructive behavior in another, through action or inaction, by shielding them from the consequences of their actions.

Enablers can be parents, spouses, friends, teachers, employers, or co-workers – anyone who stands between an individual and the consequences of his/her actions. Enabling is particularly common around issues involving use of alcohol/drugs. Enabling is a complex process involving feelings, beliefs, and actions.

FEELINGS: Fear or Anxiety –

- that the one we care about may be hurt/harmed if allowed to experience the consequences of his/her actions (may have legal consequences, loss of reputation, job, school)
- that we may be rejected by them if we fail to cover for him/her or deny privilege
- that we may be wrong in our assessment of the situation
- that the actions of another may reflect poorly on one's self, family, school, etc.
- that one's actions will be misinterpreted (lack of trust, or lack of caring)
- that the person will carry out threats, such as running away, quitting, or suicide

MISTAKEN BELIEFS:

- there is nothing I can do
- it's my fault that this person chooses to _____ (use alcohol/drugs, skip school, etc.)
- I must always trust someone I care about
- everyone else is doing these things so I should ignore or excuse it
- alcohol/drugs abuse is caused by poor morals or lack of self-control – one can stop anytime they choose

ACTIONS:

- covering up for the user through actions or keeping secrets
- giving in to avoid conflict, embarrassment, or argument
- taking action based on mistaken beliefs or with limited knowledge of the actual circumstances
- doing another person's work for him/her

YOU NEED TO PAY ATTENTION WHEN:

- something feels wrong inside
- you knowingly go along with false statements
- you withhold information
- you make excuses for someone
- your tolerance for inappropriate behavior increases
- you start accepting or believing lies, because you don't want to do anything about it, or are afraid to

(over)

Enabling behavior shields the alcohol/drug abuser from experiencing the consequences of his/her use. One individual can enable another. Families, schools, and other institutions can also become enabling systems.

When an individual is heavily involved in using alcohol or other drugs, denial is the strongest defense against the need to change. Blaming others, rationalizing failures, lying, and manipulating people are the means through which that person survives and justifies continued use of drugs. They can be quite good in these efforts – they can pull others into their survival system, especially people who care. It is easy to become an unwitting collaborator in empowering drug abuse, believing that we are helping, but this is actually “enabling.”

Enabling includes both action and inaction. Some acts are blatant, as when an individual lies to cover up for a user. Others are more subtle, like consciously or unconsciously ignoring signs of use. People enable for a variety of reasons – lack of knowledge, belief in stereotypes and myths, desire to maintain one’s own comfort level, to protect another person’s reputation, and so on. Whatever the reasons for enabling, the result is the same – the user is deprived of the opportunity to learn personal responsibility by experiencing the natural and logical consequences of the choices he/she makes.

Attitudes and beliefs leading to enabling:

- **Denial** – Denial can be conceptualized as an acronym for **don’t even know I am lying** (to myself), which speaks to the unconscious level on which denial often occurs. Denial serves a protective function in blocking threatening, painful, or unacceptable realities from our consciousness. It can be a powerful enough force to prevent us from seeing what is right in front of us.
- **Stereotypic Thinking** – Having preconceived notions about the kinds of people who use drugs can prevent us from recognizing problems (e.g. high achieving students don’t use drugs; elementary age students don’t use drugs; kids can’t become alcoholics).
- **Blaming** – Holding some other person or circumstance responsible for the alcohol/drug problems of the individual: (peer pressure; poor parenting or lack of strict rules; pushers; society). Blaming excuses the individual from taking responsibility for his/her own choices. It may also cause us to feel sorry for an individual and make extra allowances.
- **Fear** – Fearing that an individual will be hurt or harmed if allowed to experience the consequences of his/her actions (legal consequences, job loss, school failure, loss of reputation). This can lead us to lower standards, ignore behaviors, or fail to seek help from others. One might also fear loss of relationship with or anger from the individual.
- **Frustration** – If strategies used to get an individual on track are not successful, it can be frustrating and cause one to give up or feel angry for his/her lack of response.

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