

# HOW TO UNDERSTAND ENABLING

William Doverspike, Ph.D.

Drdoverspike.com

770-913-0506

*The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief review of concepts that have been part of the field of addiction for so long that most of them have become conventional wisdom. Some of the ideas in this paper can be found in other sources including Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters (1969, 2004), Rev. Joseph Kellermann (1970), Dr. James Prochaska (1994), and others. This paper is designed to be educational in nature and is not intended for distribution, publication, or commercial use. The paper is not to provide professional advice, diagnosis, or treatment. The reader is encouraged to contact a licensed mental health professional if professional advice, diagnostic consultation, or treatment is being sought. Material cited or quoted in this paper is limited to the purposes of commentary, criticism, reporting, teaching, scholarship, or research in addiction.*

*There are several roles that are played in the Merry-Go-Round Named Denial (Kellermann, 1970):*

**Addict/Alcoholic:** *The main actor controls others through anger and guilt.*

**Victim:** *The victim is often a boss or co-worker who is responsible for covering and getting the work done when the alcoholic is absent or unavailable, allowing the alcoholic to continue drinking or drugging without losing his job.*

**Provoker:** *The provoker is often a parent or spouse who holds the relationship together while feeding back bitterness, fear, guilt, hurt, and resentment into the relationship.*

**Enabler:** *The “helpful” (or controlling) hero is often a sibling or parent who rescues and saves the alcoholic in crisis and relieves the alcoholic of tension and consequences created by the crisis.<sup>1</sup>*

## Helping

- Addressing specific disruptive and distressing behaviors of the alcoholic.
- Allowing addicts and alcoholics to accept responsibility for their actions.
- Stating something once or making a suggestion if asked for one.
- Ensuring that each negative behavior is followed by a consistent consequence.
- Directly implementing and maintaining behavioral change for oneself.
- Engaging in consistent self-care rather than taking care of others.
- Maintaining healthy social connections and maintaining boundaries with the addict.
- Being pleasantly surprised when a gift or kind gesture is appreciated or reciprocated.
- Maintaining firm boundaries and natural consequences to protect oneself.
- Letting the pieces fall where they fall so that things appear as they really are.

## Enabling

- Avoiding discussions and confrontations related to distressing behaviors.
- Making excuses, covering, and even defending problem behaviors.
- Arguing, blaming, lecturing, nagging, threatening, or pouring out liquor.
- Softening impact by minimizing the consequences of crisis events.
- Frequently or repeatedly recommending behavior change for the other person.
- Engaging in care-taking of the other rather than taking care of oneself.
- Becoming socially isolated from others and becoming enmeshed with the addict.
- Becoming frustrated or resentful when a gift or kind gesture becomes an entitlement.
- Changing, eroding, or shifting boundaries to accommodate the addict or alcoholic.
- Picking up the pieces after each crisis so that things appear normal on the outside.

### Notes

**1. Detective:** The role of detective or investigator can overlap with any of the other roles. The role of detective can begin as innocently as checking to see how much the alcoholic drank the night before. The detective soon learns not to actually ask the alcoholic but to use more scientific investigative techniques such as counting the empty beer cans or measuring the amount of wine that is still in the gallon jug of wine. At worst, the detective might engage in a search and destroy mission, angrily pouring out the whiskey, at which point the detective becomes a *provoker*. Other detectives use more subtle monitoring techniques, such as placing a very small tick mark on the bottle, in order to later see how much the level has changed. The unsuspecting detective has no clue that the alcoholic is already one step ahead—drinking from a hidden bottle so that the level in the marked bottle never changes. Now that the alcoholic has reached a new level of secrecy in drinking, the detective has unwittingly become an *enabler*. As the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) says, “Remember that we deal with alcohol—cunning, baffling, powerful!” (AA World Services, 2001, pp. 58–59). With the advent of technology, some detectives have gone so far as to install tracking applications on their computers and smart phones, so that they can synchronously track when and where the alcoholic is driving or staying. This strategy can backfire, however, turning the detective into a victim when they make a discovery that they regret. There are some things that, once done, cannot be undone.

Ultimately, the solution is to look in the mirror, turn the focus inward and take a fearless and searching inventory of oneself while letting go of taking the inventories of others.



## References

Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters. (1969, 1987). *Alcoholism: A merry-go-round named denial* [P-3]. New York, NY: Author.

This pamphlet is based on the October 5, 1968 presentation by Reverend Joseph Kellerman, former Director of the Charlotte, North Carolina, Council on Alcoholism. It describes the family disease of alcoholism using a metaphor of a three-act play that includes four main characters: the alcoholic, the enabler, the victim, and the provoker.

Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters. (2004). *A guide for the family of the alcoholic* [P-7]. Virginia Beach, VA: Author.

Pages 9 and 10 contain some useful reminders of things to do and don'ts. The back cover of this 11-page pamphlet states that it is "Based on an article by Reverend Joseph L. Kellermann, Former Director, Charlotte Council on Alcoholism." See also Kellermann (1969, 1970). Some of the list of "don'ts" on page 10 of this pamphlet are included in "An open letter from an alcoholic" (pp. 3-4) of *Three Views of Al-Anon* [P-15], which was published in 1970 and revised in 2000.

Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. (2001). *Alcoholics Anonymous* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Author.

On April 10, 1939, 4,730 copies of the first edition of Alcoholics Anonymous were published by Works Publishing Company at \$3.50 per copy. The printer, Edward Blackwell of the Cornwall Press, was told to use the thickest paper in his shop. The large, bulky volume became known as the "Big Book" and the name has stuck ever since. On page 170 of AA Comes of Age Bill W. wrote that the idea behind the thick, large paper was to convince the alcoholic he was getting his money's worth. The second edition was published in 1955, third edition in 1976, and the fourth edition in 2001.

Kellermann, J. L. (1970, 1987). *Alcoholism: A merry-go-round named denial*. Center City, MN: Hazelden.

Prochaska, J. O., Norcross, J. C., & DiClemente, C. C. (1994). *Changing for good: A revolutionary six-stage program for overcoming bad habits and moving your life positively forward*. New York, NY: Avon Books.

Page 97 contains Table 6 (Differences Between Enablers and Helpers).

## Resources

Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters. (1970, 1972, 2000). *Three views of Al-Anon* [P-15]. Virginia Beach, VA: Author.

This 7-page pamphlet contains “An open letter from an alcoholic” (pp. 2-7) that is also summarized as a list of “don’ts” on page 10 of Al-Anon’s (2004) revised *A Guide for the Family of the Alcoholic* [P-7]. The information contained in the P-15 pamphlet is based on material from Reverend Joseph L. Kellermann, Former Director, Charlotte Council on Alcoholism.

Doverspike, W. F. (2011). *Addictions: Diagnosis and treatment* [PowerPoint slides]. Atlanta, GA: Richmond Graduate University.

The “Helping vs. Enabling” comparisons on page 1 are taken from a chart on Section 7 (Couple and Family Involvement) of the PowerPoint deck.

Doverspike, W. F. (2018). *Marital and family therapy: Key concepts and glossary terms*.

[http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/psi\\_marital\\_and\\_family\\_therapy\\_-\\_key\\_concepts\\_and\\_glossary\\_terms.pdf](http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/psi_marital_and_family_therapy_-_key_concepts_and_glossary_terms.pdf)

This document is cross-referenced to this Word file: PSI Addictions Key Concepts and Glossary Terms: Marital and Family Therapy.doc. Both files are used in Dr. Doverspike’s Addiction Counseling classes, but neither file is exhaustive of key concepts and glossary terms related to addiction. Instead, the terms are related only to marital, family, and relational system factors in addiction.

Doverspike, W. F. (2022). *How to understand sobriety*.

[http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/how\\_to\\_understand\\_sobriety.pdf](http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/how_to_understand_sobriety.pdf)

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Doverspike, W. F. (2011). *Addictions: Diagnosis and treatment* [PowerPoint slides]. Atlanta, GA: Richmond Graduate University.

Webinar Presentation Deck:

Doverspike, W. F. (2011). *Addictions: Diagnosis and treatment* [PowerPoint slides]. Atlanta, GA: Richmond Graduate University.

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