

# HOW TO UNDERSTAND ENABLING

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*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 they 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. The paper is 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.*

## Helping

- Addressing specific disruptive and distressing behaviors of the alcoholic.
- Allowing precontemplators 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 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 frustrated or resentful when a gift or kind gesture becomes an entitlement.
- Becoming enmeshed with the addict while becoming socially isolated from others.
- Changing or shifting boundaries to accommodate the addict or alcoholic.
- Picking up the pieces after each crisis so that things appear normal on the outside.

## 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, 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.

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

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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### American Psychological Association

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<http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>

### Chicago Manual of Style / Kate Turabian

Doverspike, William, "How to Understand Enabling," Nov. 01, 2023. <http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>

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### Modern Language Association

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Addictions Course Presentation Deck:

Doverspike, W. F. (2010). *Addictions counseling: Couple and family involvement* [PowerPoint slides]. Atlanta, GA: Richmond Graduate University.

Workshop Presentation Deck:

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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