

Am I helping them or enabling them?

This week I wanted to address a few thoughts on the difference about helping and enabling. Maybe at your next staff meeting you might want to discuss this and get everyone's feed back. Also let me know what your thoughts are on this topic and I will pass it on. If you are interested in learning more about my client training let me know I will send you a proposal.

Have a great week.

Paul

Am I helping them or enabling them?

Let me review a little background on this, the majority of us do not change until we are uncomfortable. If you look at changes in your life it was because most of the time there was discomfort or pain. In the Twelve Step Programs they call it the bottom. Reaching the bottom is the start of change. The founder of AA put it this way. "Hopeless desperation is the cornerstone of sobriety (change)." Enabling then is an act that keeps people from their bottom (suffering and pain) and eventually dealing with their issue. The problem is it is difficult for many of us to tell if we are helping or enabling, it is a very thin line. Most people do not like to standby when a person is in pain and not help. The other problem is that what you are doing in most cases; under normal circumstances is a nice act. The difference is what the outcome is for the person receiving the help. Is it a one time help or is it something that teaches them to rely on me. An easy example of enabling would be if the client forgets their paperwork and you keep getting it for them. If we keep doing it and lecturing then they will probably put up with the lecture but not change. Telling your child to clean up her / his room and then you do it; they learn to put up with your lecture and don't change. One of my suggestions is that if you are questioning if it is helping or enabling then is probably is enabling. Or ask yourself "am I helping them or making them depended on me". Also remember this takes place at home too. What kinds of thoughts do you have about this? Do you see much enabling going on in your office? I will send your thoughts out next week. Here are a few thoughts from others.

Some of our co-worker's thoughts.

I just completed taking a class in Family Development where we discussed the difference between enabling and helping our clients. I have to say that I am guilty of enabling my clients because sometimes I try to do everything for them even when they are capable of doing it themselves. Since I completed the Family Development class, I have been looking at things differently. Now, I am trying to focus more on giving my clients the tools and information on resources available in our community but making sure that they follow up (make the appt, schedule appts, etc.) Now I always keep in mind this saying

"give someone a fish, they'll eat for one day, teach them how to fish, they'll eat for the rest of their life" Author: unknown. Teresa, CA

As for the difference between helping and enabling a client: We first have to understand the difference between empathizing and sympathizing. Sympathizing lends itself to feeling sorry for the person which may allow us to let the client go on and on about their problems, which enables them to continue in their "victim" mode. Empathizing, on the other hand, allows us to take note of their problems and acknowledge them with the client, but it does not allow us to dwell on the problems. Instead it can set the stage for helping the client see that she can have some control over her problems and become more pro-active in solving them. I do not allow my clients to wallow in self pity, even though some of them have had really sad lives. I try to notice the positive, strong things about them and mention those things as we are talking. They have allowed themselves to be the "victim" for so long they cannot see themselves as strong individuals with problem solving skills. I ask them what measures they have taken thus far in solving their problems and ask what the results were. I ask them what outcome they would like to see and then outline steps, working backward, to help them see that most problems have to be solved in stages and requires thinking things through rather than just reacting in the same old way. The way I see it, our clients have enablers in their families and friendships. They do not need for us to do the same. It is up to us to build them up and help them regain their confidence so they can get themselves out of their predicaments. Susan, Rome GA

Your topic for this week - the difference between helping and enabling - is a thorny one. In AA terms "enable" has a negative connotation since it usually means the parties involved are not really helping the individual get better but enabling them to continue in a destructive pattern.

However, the dictionary defines "enable" as: "To supply with the means, the knowledge or the opportunity; to make able."

This is a very positive thing. I think that the greatest help I can give my clients is to enable them to be more effective job seekers - that is, provide them with the knowledge and the tools that will give them the competitive edge as job seekers (aside from skill-base).

However, if you're referring to the AA perspective, what we try not to do is enable clients to continue in destructive job and life-style patterns. We don't just hand them a job. We don't just give them money (or whatever). We take them through a process designed to empower them to take control of their life and of their job search process. We do our best to help them identify what the barriers have been for them and figure out how to overcome them.

So, the fish analogy works best...give a man a fish and you feed him once, teach him how to fish and he can feed himself (and his family) for life. Cindra, CA

## Responses

I am a helper by nature so It is hard not to enable someone. Recently we have begun to do intensive case reviews with folks on welfare who have used half or more of their 60

months. Those who have many children and multiple romantic relationships and no serious problems we can clearly write detailed requirements and hold them accountable if they don't comply. But the ones who have had years of substance abuse and mental health or may be low functioning it is harder to hold them accountable because it seems they don't make wise decisions and they tend to live day by day. I get more stressed than they do about what is going to happen when they can't get welfare. I also know that substance abusers can be manipulators and so I feel kind of like I could judge their ability wrong and they could lose their welfare and it might harm the children if there is no other support system. One thing I have learned about is that if I give them a break it is usually easier to hold them accountable the next time. WHEW no wonder this job is hard. I am messing with families and not a product. Penny IL

Your request to distinguish between helping and enabling was interesting. I agree there is a fine line between the two. How I have seen this is through some of our customers who come to ask for letters to caseworkers stating they have been in class. They sometimes need the letter for documentation purposes to show attendance or other reasons.

Sometimes the participant may not have shown up for days or may have shown for a day and want this assistance. I want to help, but I don't want to enable. I tell them I cannot do that because they have not been in class long enough. They sometimes get upset, but it is how I assist them to assist themselves.

Another area where enabling can be seen is through domestic situations. This is where one spouse or the other covers up for the other. Children see this as being normal behavior, thus the cycle begins (continues). Joyce OK

I enjoyed your comments, and the comments of your readers on enabling. I feel that most clients with families are the easiest to enable. I think that most of these folks have been through a lot of pain, but lack the proper training to change. They were brought up in chaos and have never developed healthy coping skills. I am of the opinion that most of these people either take the "flight or fright" approach to any problem solving. Before you get a person a job, they need training in any number of areas, and a healthy dose of esteem boosting. I believe it is futile to assist them in getting a job that they do not like, as they will just lose it, and come out of the experience feeling worse than when they went in. I propose that re-training or training for the first time is of the utmost importance. Damian IN

Thank you I needed this one today regarding my teenager. I am enabling. NY

It seems I battle with this dilemma daily. I found it interesting that you stated that we do not change until we are uncomfortable. I know that's true and sometimes that's the tactic I use with my clients. I first encourage, guide, teach the skills needed so they can do for themselves. When that doesn't work, I try to figure out a way to make the client uncomfortable in their present situation. Often our clients are more than willing to settle for minimum wage on a subsidized program as long as they don't have to go out and look for a job. They are more interested in their comfort zone than improving their life--after all, at least they know what to expect!--So when all else seems to fail to motivate an

individual, I make them uncomfortable by moving them to another assignment, agency, different work schedule, a place that they might have to take the bus to instead of walking to, working in a situation that's not quite as nice as the present. --I don't put them in danger, or in impossible situations, just realistic work world situations that they are either going to have to adapt to or make a change. For instance, I had a lady working in a large office as a clerical assistant. The agency was in a nice location, had all the up-to-date office equipment, and she worked in the background not dealing with the public. She loved it and would not cooperate with job search. I decided to transfer her to an very small agency (2 people plus her), running on a shoestring, no fancy office equipment, and she was going to have to answer phones and deal to a moderate level with the public. She argued, cried and said she wasn't going. I told her that was her decision, but she was not staying in her present assignment. It was time for a new experience. She did transfer, but called weekly with complaints asking me to move her. I told her she needed to go out and find a real job or she could quit, but I wasn't going to move her. She eventually believed me and found a job. I really Susan MI

I believe that in this field it is important to let clients know that 'we are in this together'. I do this by talking to them about their life's ambitions and how we can get them there. I take notes on those important things. Then I say "OK, you pick 3 of the things we talked about. Next week you will go do this, this, and this". Then I say "I will help you with these OTHER three things on your list, and BY THE END OF NEXT WEEK we will get together, see what's happenin' and what to do next". It's a good assessment tool to see if they will follow through. It enables them to be more in control, and by golly,....it gives them something tangible to be working on. It's a challenge to get people to realize their own worth, but when they do, it sure feels good. For all of us involved. Chow. Misty in B-town IN.