

# LAWYERS Assistance

By J.E. (Buddy) Stockwell

“ENABLING” THE ALCOHOLIC OR ADDICT

**A**lcoholics and drug addicts often have “enablers” behind the scenes who, without even realizing it, play a role in supporting, rather than arresting, the diseases of alcoholism and addiction.

Enabling emanates from a sense of duty to protect loved ones and to help friends. We assist in getting the person out of immediate troubles with a DWI arrest, financial difficulty or failed responsibilities. We assume that the person will have learned his/her lesson, be thankful for the help and will “fly right” thereafter.

But when it comes to the alcoholic or addict, the bitter truth is that when family and friends protect a person from the full consequences of his/her substance-use-related behavior, they also participate indirectly in minimizing the true severity of the problem. With the severe consequences abated, the problem is no longer seen as serious so clinical intervention is not sought.

Authors Jeff and Debra Jay, experts in the field of clinical intervention, write about “enabling” in their book *LOVE FIRST, a Family’s Guide to Intervention* (2008, 2nd Edition, Hazelden Press) and delineate two categories: 1) Innocent Enabling; and 2) Desperate Enabling.

**Innocent Enabling** occurs during the incubatory stages of substance-use disorders. It is rooted in love for the person and in denial as to the true potential for an alcohol or drug problem. The substance-related problems of a loved one or friend are written off as bad luck, youthful indiscretions, stress-related or perhaps all deemed the result of a “wild phase” that will surely pass in the fullness of time.

As the person’s team of enablers continues to bail the person out of recurring scrapes, the enablers likely find themselves going to greater and greater lengths to protect the person from

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consequences. Enablers will do things such as concoct alibis for the person’s behavior, loan the person money, or use influence to sway police, prosecutors or the court to “go easy” on repeat substance-related arrests, etc.

Despite all of the enablers’ help, eventually the person gets into more scrapes and more troubles due to alcohol (or drugs). In their book *LOVE FIRST*, the Jays describe this first, innocent stage of enabling as “fertilizer” that actually *supports* the growth of the disease of alcoholism or addiction in the person.

To the enablers’ credit and recognizing that their intentions are good, it’s often very difficult to see these situations for what they really are. When a son or daughter is arrested for driving drunk or for possession of illegal substances, for example, the parents usually seek the aid of a lawyer to help their loved one navigate the criminal justice system. Most of the time, no one even thinks about sending the son or daughter to a high-quality treatment center or for an in-depth, substance-use-disorder assessment. The focus is on avoiding prosecution, not on finding real answers as to why the loved one behaved in a way that resulted in arrest.

So, in many cases, the opportunity to address alcoholism and addiction in the early stages is missed. While the enablers wait and hope that the person will outgrow the alcohol or drug problem, the disease does not wait; it uses the time to strengthen its grip upon the person.

**Desperate Enabling** is the next phase. It is rooted in reality and fear. The alcohol

(or drug) use is out of control and family and friends know it. There is no longer any way to pretend with a straight face that the person is not an alcoholic or addict. But, even then, enabling and covering up problems are still the default settings. Families fear that the family’s reputation will be harmed if the truth gets out. There is also fear of what might happen to the alcoholic or addict, including the possibility of being incarcerated in some cases. Friends begin to stay clear and don’t know how to help anymore.

Extreme examples involve adult alcoholics or addicts moving back in with parents. The parents will house, clothe, feed and supply the son or daughter with money (for drugs, if need be, even illegal drugs). Parents will pay off gambling debts, continue to pay off drug dealers or give an allowance for drugs, and do whatever it takes to try and reduce the alcoholic’s or addict’s pain.

The Jays report that, on average, it takes 11 years for a family to shift the efforts from enabling to promoting clinical intervention and treatment. Unless the enablers change, there is little or no incentive for the alcoholic or addict to change.

The mission at the Lawyers Assistance Program (LAP) is to confidentially help families help their loved ones NOW and avoid years of pain and consequences. Make a confidential call to LAP at 1(866)354-9334, (985)778-0571 or email [LAP@louisianalap.com](mailto:LAP@louisianalap.com). Or visit the website at [www.louisianalap.com](http://www.louisianalap.com).

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