Ego & Addiction:
Why Families Enable Addicts and Derail Interventions
Introduction

When a friend or loved one begins to struggle with addiction, it’s important for that person to have a reliable and compassionate support system around them. Friends and family members typically form the foundation of the recovery process and it’s vital to keep egos and volatile tempers in check to help the person walk toward sobriety.

Addiction carries a significant social stigma, which deters many individuals from seeking the help they need to recover from substance abuse. Often, family members will experience shock, shame, and anger regarding the news that a loved one is suffering from addiction.

If you are personally seeking help for addiction, it’s important to trust your support system enough to tell them about your struggles. On the other hand, if someone you love has recently revealed his or her addiction, it’s vital that you not let your personal feelings get in the way of your ability to support your loved one through recovery.
1 Family Roles in Addiction
Everyone in an addict’s support system is going to play a role in the person’s recovery. Typically this role will depend on how long the family member or friend has had an emotional connection to the substance abuser. It will also hinge on how close of a relationship the two individuals have.

Your reaction to a loved one’s addiction will influence your specific role in his or her life. Emotionally driven responses are normal, but it’s important to be able to put personal beliefs and feelings aside if they do not help the individual in his or her recovery.

Chapter 1: Family Roles in Addiction

- The Guilty
- The Redeemer
- Allies
- Deniers
- Enforcers
- Saboteurs
- Helpers
- The Martyr
- The Clueless
Some family members will express remorse at the news of the addiction, believing they are to blame for the loved one’s behavior in some way. In some situations these feelings can help uncover deep-seated tension or resentment between family members for past behaviors and interactions. Discussing these feelings and thoughts can aid the recovery process, but only if these discussions are constructive and not hostile or accusatory.

A parent usually assumes this role and will become the primary support figure for the struggling loved one. It’s important for anyone assuming this role to be realistic about the loved one’s situation and not attempt to make excuses or downplay the severity of the situation. Redeemers can quickly turn into enablers if they do not take a thoughtful approach to recovery.

Allies are typically siblings or other close relatives who offer continuous support but may not play a very active role in the support system. In some situations allies are other addicts who may either support their loved one’s recovery efforts or try to undermine them.
Deniers

Unfortunately some family members will assume negative roles. Those in denial about the loved one’s situation or the severity of the addiction will not help with recovery and may actually hinder it – by making the substance abuser think too lightly about his or her situation. Deniers may sometimes feel a degree of guilt for the loved one’s situation and may end up separating themselves from the recovery process.

Enforcers

Enforcers often are parents who will take a more straightforward role in the individual’s recovery. Enforcers will usually try direct intervention measures and attempt to take direct control over the recovery process. Since enforcers tend to use problem-solving thinking, they may fail to recognize the loved one’s emotional turmoil. This can unintentionally prolong the loved one’s addictive and self-destructive behaviors.

Saboteurs

When members of the support structure undermine the recovery process, they often do so because of the mistaken belief they are helping the struggling individual. Recovery from substance abuse is physically and emotionally taxing, and saboteurs/enablers may assume that supplying the individual with small doses of a substance will help ease his or her symptoms. Often, saboteurs fall into this role because they feel left out of the recovery process and want to help. They see the loved one in pain and do not realize that even though enabling the addiction may provide temporary relief for the immediate pain, their actions harm the long-term recovery effort.
Helpers are typically friends who do what they can to make substance abuse recovery less stressful for the addict and his or her family. This may take the form of helping with daily activities, running errands, or providing transportation to and from recovery centers and therapy sessions.

Helpers

The Martyr

This is usually the person with the closest bond to the substance abuser, such as a significant other or spouse. Martyrs often shoulder the brunt of the individual’s destructive behaviors. And if addiction goes unnoticed by the family for an extended time, the martyr will often wrongly assume most of the blame for letting the substance abuse get out of control.

The Clueless

Some family members are too young or too distant to know much about the intimate details of the substance abuser’s situation. They provide some level of support, but this is usually in an unaffectionate, detached way.

If a friend or family member makes a revelation about addiction or if the family knows of the addiction and stages an intervention, it’s important to have everyone in the support system understand the loved one’s situation. Those in the support system should not try to do only what they personally believe to be best for the struggling loved one. Even good intentions can cause serious harm and hinder recovery, so it’s important for friends and family members to know the difference between helping and enabling.
2 Helping vs. Enabling
Chapter 2:
Helping vs. Enabling

Addiction completely changes how a person views the world, which includes his or her relationships with close friends, loved ones, and dearest family members. It hurts to witness substance abuse as loved ones will invariably face very strong emotions during the addiction and recovery phases. Unfortunately, many family members and friends do not realize that their own behaviors may be hurting the person they love.

Family members need to realize that there is rarely a sudden wake-up call for the substance abuser. Getting arrested one more time, losing a job, getting a new job, or meeting a new romantic partner will not suddenly wipe out the addiction. Enabling can often take the form of inaction or simply assuming the whole situation will work itself out without any direct involvement.

Enabling Behaviors

Addiction takes a physical toll as well as a significant psychological one. When you and your family see a loved one in pain, you naturally may try to do what you can to help. However, some of your best intentions may actually be destructive. Instead of helping your loved one recover some family members may unintentionally enable the addictive behaviors.
Enabling Applies to any Assistance that:

1) Prevents or delays a loved one from returning to normal life and/or
2) Fuels the addiction in one or more of the following ways:

- Making excuses for the loved one's behavior or trying to rationalize the addiction.
- Handling everyday activities such as cooking, cleaning, taking care of children, and running errands. Substance abusers need to be able to transition back into normal life and keeping them detached from routine responsibilities does not aid the recovery.
- Covering for the loved one's behaviors to spare him or her from negative consequences. For example, calling the substance abuser's place of work and telling the employer that the person is sick qualifies as enabling.
- Giving the loved one money. It's always best to assume that any cash the addict gets his or her hands on will go toward buying more drugs. If a substance abuser insists he or she needs cash for something else, offer to purchase the desired item.
- Bailing the loved one out of jail. Although this may seem harsh, if somebody is arrested and incarcerated due to his or her behavior, this can be a valuable lesson and aid in the recovery process. If someone posts bail for the substance abuser, the enabler is essentially preventing the loved one from fully realizing the consequences of his or her actions.
- Failing to keep appropriate pressure on the individual to undergo or continue treatment or not taking a relapse episode seriously enough.
If friends and family members truly want to help in recovery, it is essential for them to realize how the relationship with the loved alters their perceptions. They should not consider temporary assistance as helping in the long-term recovery effort. Generally, people base all enabling behaviors in good intentions. The enabler sees the addict suffering and wants to help relieve this pain.

However, recovery is not easy or painless. Those who are struggling must come to realize the full scope of their addiction and its effects on the people in their lives. When enablers prevent this, they are effectively holding up the recovery journey. It’s also important to recognize that any level of enabling has a detrimental effect on the person’s recovery. If a family member engages in enabling behavior, the addiction is far more likely to worsen.

Even if enabling has already happened, it’s better to immediately stop it and let the situation grow to be uncomfortable for the substance abuser.

This drives home the message that their behavior needs to change.
3 Staging an Intervention
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Staging an Intervention

An intervention is a gathering of an addict’s family, friends, and occasionally coworkers and colleagues. Essentially the intervention is a way to show the individual how his or her addiction and actions hurt the entire family. The intervention also conveys to the substance abuser that all attendees want to help with the recovery process.

If you’re thinking about staging an intervention, it’s important to reflect on which of the previously mentioned roles you might fill and which roles other family members will or currently embody. If there are any conflicts or enabling patterns, you should address them in the intervention. One common issue among addicts and their families is codependency.

Identifying Codependent Behaviors

Codependency describes any relationship between two people that feeds into each other’s destructive actions. Addiction inherently trains its sufferers how to manipulate others.

Many addicts will attempt to bargain or negotiate with loved ones before seeking treatment. Some may even threaten self-harm or suicide. For example, someone may agree to stop using drugs but demand something else in return. Agreeing to such terms is codependence and this does not help the person recover from addiction.

It’s important to separate charity from support. Many enablers become such because they think they are helping someone through a troubling time. While this is true in a way, it is vital that the recipient fully understands the scope of the addiction and its various effects on his or her life. Eliminating sources of stress so the addict doesn't have to deal with them may seem like a helpful thing to do, but eventually the individual will not be able to handle this stress on his or her own. Some family members become codependent because they are afraid of what the loved one might do if they do not agree to his or her terms. They might fear the substance abuser will remove them from his or her life, so they will go out of their way to enable the loved one’s behaviors. This reinforces codependency.

If a family member is always there to save the day, the substance abuser will assume that’s the way it always will be.
Intervention Day

When you plan an intervention, try to make sure that as many people as possible will be able to attend. In the intervention, don’t rush the conversation, but try to be as constructive as possible without making excuses for the loved one’s behavior. Substance abusers will financially ruin themselves and their families, alienate loved ones from one another, and manipulate others however and whenever possible in order to maintain their habits.

While an intervention is an opportunity to show the loved one that you care about him or her, this is also the time to make it abundantly clear that the family will not feed into the destructive behaviors any longer.

Recovery is different for every individual, and some will take it upon themselves to seek help. Others will continue using heavily after their entire lives have crumbled around them and they’ve lost everything once mattered to them.

It’s important to realize that there is no right time to start the recovery process. If your loved one is suffering from addiction, you don’t need to wait for him or her to lose everything before starting to seek help.

Keeping Emotions in Check

The intervention is bound to uncover serious emotional turmoil among the loved one’s support system. Some family members may be so angry and disappointed that they shut down or refuse to participate. Others may falsely assume responsibility for the loved one’s behaviors in some way or another.

It’s vital to rein in these feelings before the intervention. Every family will have issues and obstacles on the road to recovery, and identifying and addressing these predicaments early will help the struggling loved one get the most out of his or her support system.
Overcoming Fears

Some members of the substance abuser’s family may simply be too scared about the possibilities of accepting the situation fully. Denial is powerful, and it can prevent an addiction sufferer from receiving the support and encouragement he or she needs.

It’s important for friends and family who are experiencing fear or denial about a loved one’s addiction to think carefully about what is truly best for the individual. Avoiding the issue or downplaying it does not help.

Some families may already struggle with communication. Tensions about the addiction can easily boil over into heated arguments or fights, and these behaviors are not constructive or conducive to healing.
Managing Egos and Overcoming Obstacles to Recovery
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In many intervention scenarios, one family member will actively or unknowingly hold back the recovery process. This person is usually a parent or very close relative with a strong connection to the addict. In most cases, it’s the father. There are several reasons why this family member may stand in the way of the seeking treatment for his or her loved one, and all of them are rooted in the ego.

This obstructer may feel ashamed of the loved one’s behavior and believe that accepting the addiction is the same as approval. This person may also think that addiction treatment undermines his or her ability to govern the household. This person may also simply be embarrassed due to the social stigmas surrounding addiction.

In situations such as these, the obstructer may have deep-seated feelings of guilt that he or she is unwilling to acknowledge. Obstructing recovery enables this person to push away the feelings of responsibility. In most cases, having such a person standing in the way is one of the biggest hurdles in the process.

When one or more family members let their ego get in the way of helping a loved one find treatment, it can be a powerful obstacle.
Some ways to get through to these family members include:

**Keep Chipping Away**

Resistance is simply a family’s inability to collaborate and seek help. Patterns of interaction are what cause resistance, but the same patterns can be used to break resistance. Get the family together to talk face to face to air all concerns. This may need to be repeated several times before making a breakthrough.

**Involve Others in the Effort**

In order to overcome egos it helps to have a team mentality. One ego against many positive forces can’t overtake a counseling session or resistance to such a session.

**Engage Them in Tasks**

When there is something the family can work toward together, the tasks become a way to bond and overcome individual egos.
Seek Professional Assistance

One of the best steps you can take to manage an intervention is to bring in a professional interventionist. Family First Intervention offers professional guidance for coordinating and mediating interventions and family discussions about addiction. Sometimes the presence of a neutral third party helps facilitate constructive discussion and positive steps.

It's important for everyone involved in the struggling love one's life to show him or her the consequences and ongoing effects of the addiction. In order for this to happen effectively, the substance abuser must be able to recognize that everyone is there out of concern for him or her. Tempers can flare and egos may bruise, but these are very small prices to pay for helping a friend or family member overcome substance abuse.

We work in all 50 states and come to your house or a designated meeting location within 24 to 48 hours of your call to us. We wish you all the best in helping your loved one find treatment and in getting your whole family on board.

If you’re considering holding an intervention for a loved one and would like to know more about hiring a professional interventionist to manage the process, call Family First Intervention at (877) 445-1140
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