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Working with clients who have conflicts with enabling loved ones who are addicted

Group Discussion introduced by Frank Kelley

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Summary by Frank Kelley

I was a psychodynamic counsellor and retired from the NHS ten years ago. A lot of my memories of my working life have faded into the past.

At the end of our network meeting in May I had a brief conversation with Alan Priest. This quickly evoked vivid memories of counselling sessions with clients who were family or close friends of people who were addicted.

One common experience is that they were advised by professionals and support organisations not to enable addiction. This advice evoked powerful conflicts which were central to the counselling work.

I saw a woman in her sixties. Her and her husband were looking forward to a quieter life. However their daughter was addicted and not capable of looking after her child. So they effectively became full time parents late in life.

A middle aged woman who drove her teenage daughter around to find a dealer and paid for her drugs.

A woman in her fifties who steadfastly kept to professionals advice not to enable her alcoholic husband. Their relationship ended in separation and divorce. Recognising and stopping enabling offered the hope that he would face up to the reality of his addiction and change. She changed but her husband didn't. He carried on drinking more and more and literally died of drink.

The mother of an addict who struggled with knowing she was being enabling. In one of our later sessions she asked me what I would do in a similar situation. I had a strong sense I needed to give a genuine answer. I said that professionals would always advise not to enable. But in that situation I genuinely would not know what I would do.

Al Anon, who support family and friends of addicts, offer the following signs of enabling.

- Providing them with money to support their habit
- Providing them with shelter
- Downplaying the severity of the problem
- Providing emotional support
- Lying on their behalf to shield them from consequences
- Rationalising their behaviour or making excuses for them

Enabling involves denial, compliance, stepping in to resolve problems and repeated crises. It is the accumulation of crises that leads to enablers having a growing sense of the damage done.

While writing this I wondered how helpful counselling had been. Certainly none of my counselling clients radically changed their enabling way of relating over the course of our sessions.

I also saw recovering alcoholics. One was a firm believer in the AA's 12 step programme. He was clear about the importance of clearly facing the damage you do to your loved ones. This includes taking a moral inventory of ourselves, admitting the exact nature of our wrongs and literally listing all the persons we had harmed. He described the way he thought, when addicted, as *tricky thinking*.

What my enabling clients talked about was their own counterpart to the addicts tricky thinking. The denial of responsibility, of the damage done, of the burden of rescuing addicts.

During counselling one thing my enabling clients did was to give me, and themselves, a clear sense of how they enabled, a clear sense of what it was like living with an addict and a clear sense of the damage done. What they did, and what my AA client did, was to undo much of the tricky thinking that had sustained them through these years of enabling addiction.

I am also thinking of the psychoanalytic idea of projective identification. A concept developed by Melanie Klein, it is a defence mechanism where an individual unconsciously projects unwanted parts of themselves into another person, and then unconsciously manipulates that person to behave in a way that confirms the projected belief. This allows the addict to avoid feeling the unwanted part of themselves, as if they have "dumped" it onto the other person.

I think what is dumped from addict to enabler is a very powerful sense of persistent helplessness, frustration and guilt. Through counselling these identifications can be recognised rather than denied. For my clients they became more bearable, the source in the addict became visible and these powerful feelings no longer had to be compulsively acted on.

Thank you to everyone who came for this group discussion. Feedback after the event suggested that this format may mean being less focussed than with our more usual format of a longer presentation followed by a Q&A. Conversely we found it interesting to see what more of our members thought.