

Providing Support to Those in Recovery: A Christian Perspective

What does it mean to offer support to a person who is suffering from addiction?

Support people are key factors in a person's recovery from addiction. Scripture says: "Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth" (3 John 8). As support people we need to be mindful of the truth about addiction and the behaviors that result from it. There are several hallmark characteristics of addiction. Lying and denial probably top the list. Both of these characteristics are sins against the truth and a means of dishonoring Jesus as "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). Addiction is a deep darkness that holds its victims bound by lies and denial. Denial prevents people from being honest with themselves. Lying is an act intended to distract others from finding out the truth in the addict's obsession with his/her drug of choice – an obsession that controls his/her life, causing him/her to make poor choices and continue lying to cover up the guilt and shame of what they have done, and minimize the nagging fear that others will find out.

When someone you love is addicted, it creates a penetrating emotional pain and mental anguish that compel you to offer help. But how can you help them effectively? The first thing you need to understand is that addiction is not logical and it will not respond to logic. It is a disease that is cunning, baffling and powerful. You and your addicted loved one cannot do this alone. You need help. Help can come in several forms:

- ❖ From those who have successfully struggled with addiction and learned what it takes to be solidly in recovery. Often you can find these people in 12 Step groups like AA or NA. These are groups in

which the addicted person finds support and guidance in their recovery.

- ❖ From Al-Anon Family Groups – people who form a fellowship of relatives and friends of alcoholics/addicts. They come together to share their experience, strength, and hope in order to solve their common problems. They believe alcoholism/addiction is a family illness and that changed attitudes can aid recovery. Many people who have problems with someone else's drinking, substance abuse, or any other addiction are able to find help by attending Al-Anon. One of the popular misconceptions about Al-Anon is that they can somehow help you "manage" the alcoholic or addict in your life. Nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, they start by helping you admit that you are "powerless over alcohol--that your life has become unmanageable." If you are powerless over alcohol, then certainly you are powerless to change the alcoholic/addict. You cannot change them; you can only change yourself through the 12 Steps with the help of Al-Anon groups and, especially through God's grace. Al-Anon gives you the opportunity to focus on yourself and discover your own needs and path for recovery, whether or not the alcoholic/addict you love is actively in recovery. Al-Anon invites "support people" to attend meetings in order to acquire your own source of support.
- ❖ From professionals who can educate you about the Disease of Addiction. Professionally trained people can help open your mind to the dysfunctional relationship patterns that characterize addiction, and they can teach you skills to help you live in healthy ways. Often you can find these people offering counseling to individuals, families or groups through private practice, intensive

outpatient programs, or residential rehabilitation programs focused on addiction treatment.

- ❖ From faith-based people who offer support through prayer and a sense of hospitality, welcoming alcoholics/addicts and their families into their faith community. These people are often found in churches, some of which offer a God-based 12 Step model called Celebrate Recovery.
- ❖ From God who is the Source of Light and Truth. You can find constant support and companionship through reading his word each day.

Ongoing help is available through a variety of sources; however, the following fundamental guidelines can serve to form your mind and direct your behaviors so that you learn to live in new and healthier ways.

It is often useful to view behaviors on a continuum to identify a range of choices that help you select the “optimum way of being” as the position in the center – the behavior you want to move toward. The opposite ends of the continuum are used to represent the maladaptive or unhealthy behaviors that you want to move away from or avoid. “Support” is one of those concepts that can be seen on a continuum as indicated by the following:

Abandon → **Support** ← **Enable**
(Move Away) (Move Toward) (Move Away)

When you are offering support, you help the addict see the truth about the situation and make healthy choices. Sometimes that means you must challenge their behavior or enforce appropriate consequences. You act as an advocate for them in their recovery, helping them take the next best step toward remaining clean and sober. This is contrary to the positions in which you might enable or abandon the alcoholic/addict. Enabling and abandonment are the patterns of behavior that you want to correct and learn to avoid in the future.

What is abandonment?

Abandonment is giving up on the addict/alcoholic, casting them aside because of your frustration and exhaustion. Trying to break through the denial caused by addiction can be tiresome. It can create a sense of hopelessness and helplessness inside of you. It can also

generate feelings of anger and hostility. When you act from these feelings, it can reinforce the guilt, shame and worthlessness that already fill your addicted loved one with self-loathing. Seeking help from those who are trained in addiction treatment can provide the strength and guidance that you need to become an effective support person.

An effective support person learns to distinguish between abandonment and “tough love.” Tough Love is an expression that was originally coined by Bill Milliken when he wrote a book with that title in 1968. Tough Love involves treating another person harshly or sternly with the intent of helping them in the long run. Support people who genuinely love an addict or alcoholic may refuse financial support until the addict/alcoholic enters treatment and begins to take responsibility for his/her life. Although Tough Love may look and feel like abandonment, it is quite different in some important ways. When imposing Tough Love, there is an attitude of authentic loving.

What is enabling?

Enabling is giving the illusion that you are helping, when, in fact, the actions you take are not really helping at all. “Enablers” provide “help” that actually makes it easier for the addict/alcoholic to continue the downward spiral of their addiction. The bottom line is that these enabling behaviors allow the addict/alcoholic to avoid the consequences of their actions. The addict/alcoholic continues using or drinking, resting securely in the belief: “No matter how much I mess up, somebody will always be there to rescue me.” Enablers often do things for addicts/alcoholics that they could, and should, be doing for themselves.

Enabling comes from our natural human instinct to help others. The concept and the motivation are good; however, the outcome is not good. You know you have engaged in enabling behavior when the outcome you get is the opposite of the one you wanted. Think about the following behaviors. Notice if they describe you.

- ❖ Are you **guilty of *bailing them out*** in an effort to help them “get out of a tight spot?”
- ❖ Do you frequently say: “**I’ll give you one more chance.**” Then find yourself giving them another and another?

- ❖ Do you **buy into their excuses** for drinking or using because you feel sorry for them, and after all “they’ve had a hard life”?
- ❖ Do you **validate their tendency to blame others** for their difficulties and the misery of their life?
- ❖ Do you **avoid challenging their behavior** because of your own pattern of avoiding conflict or trying to please others?
- ❖ Do you like playing the role of “**rescuer**?”
- ❖ Are you a “**fixer**,” making this person’s life a personal project for you by striving to provide everything the alcoholic/addict demands or says they must have?
- ❖ Do you detest the idea of allowing people to suffer, so instead of letting them experience their consequences as a way to learn a life lesson, you **ease the pain of their suffering by taking away their consequences**?
- ❖ Are you a “**caretaker**,” one who just loves to tend the needs of others in order to help you feel needed, and as a consequence, prevent them from being the mature adult they need to become by learning to take responsibility for their own lives?
- ❖ Do you like to have control over people and/or situations, causing you to “**take charge**,” while preventing them from accepting responsibility?
- ❖ Do you **encourage their poor choices** by joining them in their addictive behaviors, thinking that this will strengthen your relationship?
- ❖ Do you **make excuses for their poor behavior**?
- ❖ Do you **threaten to impose consequences and fail to carry them out**?
- ❖ Do you **accept responsibility for their actions**?

If you engage in enabling behaviors, you are creating an obstacle to their recovery. The kind of help that is described above is no help at all. In order for your family to heal you must identify and learn to avoid enabling behaviors.

Do you find yourself swinging between enabling and abandonment?

Some people have a harsh sense of justice and they readily give ultimatums that push the addict/alcoholic out of their lives. Emotional cutoff is easy for these people and abandonment is the experience that is created for the addict/alcoholic by this behavior. The people who demonstrate a harsh sense of justice live largely on the left side of the continuum depicted above. Other people are blessed with an overabundance of compassion and forgiveness, causing them to provide “helping behavior” that often fails to provide authentic help. These people become enablers and live largely on the right side of the above continuum.

The best place to be on the continuum is in the middle. However, right, left and center are not the only options. Some people actually swing from enabling to abandoning. Imagine being an enabler and using all your energy trying to “fix” or “rescue” or “take care of” the addict/alcoholic. Finally, you simply can’t take it anymore, and you say “I’ve had it. I’m not going to do this. I quit!” This puts you in the position of abandoning the alcoholic/addict. Over time, the possibility exists for you to feel guilty for abandoning your loved one and return to enabling behavior. This pattern of swinging may have occurred over a long period of time.

Relationship dynamics can be quite complicated. It is useful to reflect on your pattern. Do you tend to enable or abandon? Perhaps you actually recognize how you swing from one to the other. It’s also possible that you exhibit “enabling behavior” toward the addict/alcoholic, while another loved one exhibits “abandoning behavior.” Perhaps you are the parents of the addict/alcoholic, and this difference in your behavior has caused tremendous conflict in your relationship because one of you fulfills the “enabler role,” while the other fulfills the “abandoning role.” Learning to recognize these patterns is a critical step in healing your relationships and providing a healthy environment for you and your addicted loved one. Through family counseling you can learn to provide the proper support for the person you love who is suffering from addiction. The following guidelines will offer you some ideas on how to be a good support person.

How do I stay focused on support?

The following characteristics will guide you toward using supportive behaviors that encourage you and your loved one to get solidly on the road to recovery

and make steps toward living a healthy lifestyle and promoting an Enriched Environment that will foster ongoing healing and growth for your family. Try to cultivate these qualities:

- ❖ Practice healthy detachment. Step back and allow them to suffer the consequences of their poor choices. The “ouch factor” gives them an opportunity to learn from their mistakes. Avoid jumping into the situation to make things better.
- ❖ Practice healthy validation. Notice what they are doing that is helping them in their life and in their recovery. Reinforce these positive actions.
- ❖ Practice healthy invalidation. Notice old destructive patterns and lovingly make them aware of them. Have an agreement whereby you have permission to give honest feedback that is intended to keep them solidly in recovery. Caution: avoid nagging and controlling.
- ❖ Vow to speak the truth with love. Offer feedback gently, honestly and firmly.
- ❖ Be firm and steadfast in the truth. Say what you mean and mean what you say.
- ❖ Let your “yes” mean “yes” and your “no” mean “no.” Avoid being indecisive and avoid going back on your word. Make a thoughtful and healthy decision and move forward based on a sense of conviction.
- ❖ Exercise healthy boundaries. Allow the recovering addict/alcoholic to “think their own thoughts” and “feel their own feelings.” Avoid imposing your will on them. Give them the freedom to be who they are, as long as they are exercising good judgment and avoiding destructive behaviors.
- ❖ Avoid nagging, criticizing, judging and condemning. These behaviors are destructive to their recovery and to your relationship.
- ❖ Be an advocate in their recovery. Help them stay focused on being in recovery by:
 - Reinforcing their progress. Tell them when they are doing a good job.
 - Accepting the same limitations they have. Avoid drinking in front of them and expecting them to attend functions where there is alcohol. If you have to take prescription

medications that are addictive, keep them securely away from the addict/alcoholic.

- Keeping them mindful of being proactive in their recovery. Notice when they stop doing things that help them stay in recovery, and remind them how much those things helped them.
- Removing temptations. Be sure your home and their living space are free of addictive substances. Accompany them when they go to the doctor to prevent them from getting prescriptions for addictive medications.
- ❖ Help them accept responsibility for their actions.
- ❖ Avoid the temptation to rescue them or fix things.
- ❖ Help them engage in problem solving and conflict resolution, instead of blaming and self-pity.

Recovery has the power to transform people’s lives and their relationships. Take advantage of this opportunity to heal and grow. Actively engage in the process of recovery with your loved one by learning to be a person who can provide authentic Christian support. Make a commitment to live the words of sacred scripture: “Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth” (3 John 8). Let us follow Jesus as “the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6).

St. Joseph Institute offers a residential treatment program for adults suffering from addiction. Our one-on-one counseling, Christian spirituality, holistic approach, passionate desire to see people heal, and belief in the goodness of each individual are among the defining qualities of our program. The Institute’s beautiful campus is located on a mountainside near State College in central Pennsylvania.

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