



Enabling: The Dark Side Of Being Helpful (Part One)

As massage therapists, we are, by nature, caring people. But can our caring go too far?

By Dianne Polseno

Why did you become a massage therapist? Throughout the 12 years of my teaching in the field of professional massage and bodywork, I have heard thousands of responses to this question. Universally, the answer includes the statement, "Because I want to help people."

The desire to help people is a highly regarded and valuable human trait, indispensable in human service voca-

tions. Even if we consider ourselves to be in the service industry and not in human services, massage and bodywork can still be classified among the "helping" professions. Typically, we are kind, nurturing, supportive, compassionate and caring people, and we aim to offer comfort and care to those who seek our services. While these benevolent qualities are desirous and necessary, they have another side that can undermine both personal and professional relationships.

This two-part series is presented to shed light into a hidden corner of the caring, helpful personality, exposing an aspect called "enabling." If we apply this perspective to our own circumstances as bodywork professionals, we may be able to identify ways in which we, in our efforts to be helpful, may be supporting unproductive behaviors of our clients.

Enabling

To "enable," as defined by Webster's *Comprehensive Dictionary*, means "To make able; to give means or power to; to make possible or more easy."¹ This hardly seems negative or potentially harmful. In the 1970s, however, when treatment approaches responded to the drug explosion of the 1960s by viewing the chemically dependent person

as part of a family system, the term "enabling" was not used positively. Enablers became known as codependent family rescuers whose helpfulness allowed the chemically dependent person to stay sick.

Now, as the psychology of family systems is studied beyond chemical dependency, codependency and enabling are believed to exist in families where there is no active addiction. Of this, Jennifer P. Schneider, M.D., comments, "The concept of enabling is now well-known to addiction counselors and to members of Al-Anon and other self-help groups for families of addicts. Yet thousands of people who do not have an obvious problem with chemical dependency enable their spouses, children and friends without ever realizing that their 'helpfulness' actually harms the people they are trying to help."²

Angelyn Miller, in her book *The Enabler: When Helping Harms the Ones You Love*,³ alludes to the following about enabling and enablers:

All relationships, whether they are between spouses, parents and children, employers and employees, teachers and students, or therapists and clients, are capable of becoming situations in which enabling can occur.

Enabling is a learned way of being. Society extols do-gooders, and we live in a culture that has socialized children to expect reward for giving into the needs and demands of others. If self-sacrifice and giving in to others consistently brings validation and praise, it can lead to a person becoming an overly cooperative, people-pleasing adult. Those who are more concerned about the feelings of others than of their own best interest tend not to speak up to take care of themselves, are tolerant of unacceptable behavior, and enable others to continue that behavior.

People who enable exhibit many apparently wonderful qualities; they are adaptable, tolerant, strong, flexible, sacrificing, hard-working, tolerant, capable, courageous, forgiving and wise. Each of these qualities has a dark side, and their application requires scrutiny. For example, one's exaggerat-



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ed capability can make another person feel incompetent. Kindness can imply obligation, flexibility can take away limits, and strength can foster attachment and dependency.

Those who are in a position of responsibility toward others who require some form of help are in danger of enabling behaviors.

While enabling is an ageless and genderless pattern of behavior, the maternal, care-taking instincts of women make them more susceptible to enabling roles.

People enable others when they protect them from the consequences of their actions by taking responsibility for them. They prevent growth and learning in others by assuming their responsibilities, and promote weakness in others by protecting them from the consequences of their unproductive behavior.

Enabling creates an atmosphere in which a person can comfortably continue his or her detrimental behavior.

Enabling Clients

There are factors that place massage and bodywork professionals in jeopardy of enabling clients. For one thing, our livelihood depends upon our having clients. If they like us and we please them, they are much more likely to reschedule appointments and refer their friends and family to us. This, in and of itself, can make it difficult to confront a client about behavior we find unacceptable, such as lateness, no-shows, sexual arousal, poor hygiene or being overly chatty during a session.

Another factor is that clients may come to us to be "fixed," having expectations that massage will provide a remedy. They may be unwilling to actively participate in their own healing process and cannot be recruited to do self-care activities between sessions. In such cases, we can end up working harder at a client's wellness than they do. In other words, we enable them.

Consider the following case in which a client, who I will call Jean, made me aware of my own enabling role. Jean was a local marathon runner who developed an iliotibial band injury that caused moderate to severe pain. She had been diagnosed and treated by an orthopedic specialist and a physical therapist, yet her pain persisted. A mutual acquaintance referred Jean to me for massage.

As I typically do with clients who seek massage for a specific injury, I spent time at her first appointment discussing a treatment plan and goals. Our shared goal was pain relief and injury recovery, and we agreed to work on a weekly basis. I performed the



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massage and hydrotherapy techniques that I believed would help her condition, and I recommended homework of resting the injury and cold pack application between visits.

Each visit, Jean walked into my office limping, but walked out feeling significantly better. While she sometimes cooperated with the cold pack application, she was unwilling to stop running to provide the rest her injury needed to heal. So, week after week for about six weeks, Jean experienced pain relief after the massage, but it returned when she ran. The massage was apparently effective, but she didn't provide the rest her injury needed to improve. My kind persistence in advising rest was met with comments of, "I'm a runner; I have to run," and "I know my body; I can handle it." After awhile, without even realizing it, I stopped suggesting it.

I found myself feeling increasingly invested in her preparation for an upcoming marathon. In retrospect, I see that I was feeling somewhat responsible for making her better because of all the money she had spent

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on massage, and I worked harder and longer during her sessions. Still, she limped in and walked out, only to limp in again a few days later because she had been running.

Eventually, Jean grimaced in pain during every session because her condition had become so much more aggravated from running. I felt frustrated because I was doing everything I could possibly think of, and still her condition wasn't improving. It took awhile for me to be able to clarify the inner uneasiness I felt when I saw Jean's appointment written in my schedule. Careful and honest self-inventory helped me understand that I felt uncomfortable because I realized that I was fostering Jean's lack of self-care. Her running was causing her condition to worsen, and the work I did enabled her to continue running.

Jean was willing and able to pay for frequent massage, and it was tempting to focus on my finances and justify my participation in this situation. I decided, though, to talk with Jean. I expressed my concern that her running was counterproductive, and I reported my realization that her injury seemed to be worsening. I requested that we reassess the goals for our massage, considering her choice to continue running with the injury. Our discussion made Jean have to choose between her passion for running and her desire to allow her body to heal, since they seemed to be mutually exclusive.

Jean chose to continue running, and our treatment goals changed from pain relief and injury recovery to pain reduction and palliative care. She received massage much less frequently now that it was acknowledged that its effectiveness, under these conditions, was temporary and limited. One day she told me that despite her realization that no treatment would significantly help her if she didn't provide it rest, she was unwilling to stop running.

Afterthoughts

Despite our best motives and intentions, there are times when our helpfulness enables others to continue adverse behaviors, and robs them of

the right to learn from the consequences of their behaviors. The potential to enable is inherent in any given situation where help is needed and given because a fine line separates "helping" from "fostering dependency." Awareness of enabling tendencies and changing our behaviors can help us become more effective in our relationships. A poem, "The Enabler"⁴ by Angelyn Miller, summarizes this well:

When not in check,
I will:
Pick up your shoes
Carry your pack
Pay your traffic ticket
Lie to your boss
Do your homework
Remove rocks from your path
And strip you of the joy
Of saying, "I did it myself!"

Next issue, Part Two of this topic addresses the warning signs of enabling to help you assess your own enabling potential, including suggestions for keeping enabling behaviors in check so you can offer help without harm. ❧

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