



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

There are no cookbook recipes for situations such as this. It is often in retrospect where we gain clarity on when we crossed the line.

By Dianne Polseno



The desire to help people is a valuable human trait that is likely to be found in the personality profile of a massage therapist. Part One of this series [Spring 2003] described a less obvious aspect of helpfulness, called enabling. This is a form of over-helping, where helpfulness becomes detrimental, hindering self-care on both sides of the client/massage therapist relationship.

Part Two continues the discussion on this topic, and offers ways to increase conscious awareness of your own enabling tendencies.

Helping Versus Enabling

There are no absolute differences between helping and enabling, and they can seem very similar. More perplexing, one can be inherent in the other. In other words, an element of helpfulness can exist in any situation where enabling occurs, and an element of enabling can exist whenever we are helpful. They are entangled, and it can be difficult to extract one from the other. Their differences are clearer when they are observed from the following viewpoints.

Enabling Awareness Quiz

The following questions can help increase your conscious awareness of your own tendencies toward enabling behaviors. If you check “yes” to any of these questions, you are at risk for enabling.

- Do you have difficulty saying “no” to clients?
- Do you feel like a client or coworker is driving you crazy?**
- Do you tend to ignore or put up with a situation with a client or coworker because you are uncomfortable about confronting him or her and honestly speaking your mind?
- Do you feel as though you are working harder at a client’s wellness than he or she is?**
- Do you feel resentful because a client or coworker does not appreciate you?
- Do you adjust your already overbooked schedule to fit a client in who calls at the last minute?**
- Do you have difficulty enforcing your policies on lateness and no-shows?
- Do you feel responsible if a client’s condition does not improve?**
- Do you feel you are giving more of yourself than you should with a client?
- Do you tolerate inappropriate behavior from a client or coworker for the sake of financial security?**
- Do you tend to think of others first and put yourself last?
- Do you give clients self-care instructions for aftercare that they do not follow?**
- Do you feel compelled and obliged to help people?
- Do you often feel victimized and all used up?**
- Do you feel responsible for preventing the consequences of someone else’s actions?
- Do you let a client talk you out of your request for a doctor’s clearance for massage, even though you believe that it is best for the client’s safety?**
- Do you let a client talk you into working an area more deeply or aggressively than you feel is either comfortable for you or appropriate for them?
- Do you see clients as people who need to be fixed, with problems that need to be solved?**
- Have you been told reliable information about another massage therapist’s unethical conduct, and you don’t know what to do with the information?
- When you hear such songs as “Wind Beneath My Wings” and “Because You Loved Me,” do you immediately think of someone who should be singing those words to you?**

First, let us view them contextually. Depending on the circumstances, a gesture might be helpful one day and enabling on another day. Or, what may be helpful to one client might be enabling to another client. Consider this scenario:

My client—we’ll call her Susan—who never cancels or forgets an appointment and is always on time, doesn’t show up for her massage today. Another client—we’ll call her Maggie—a busy real estate broker who has canceled at the last minute several times and often arrives late for her appointments, also doesn’t show up today. I am annoyed and inconvenienced by both situations, but after thinking about it, I decide not to charge Susan, based on her history of reliability. I also decide not to charge Maggie, but it is mostly because I am uncomfortable speaking up, and I don’t want to lose the business. While my response to both clients may be the same, and even though I may retain Maggie financially, I am enabling her to continue the behavior that causes me persistent resentment and inconvenience.

Second, let us view helping and enabling on a continuum. Helping and enabling are extreme aspects of the same continuum, where helping comes from a place of pure benevolence and enabling comes from a place of defense. The characteristics and outcomes at each pole are described on the opposite page.

From this viewpoint, it seems obvious that enabling would be detrimental to all concerned, and would therefore be easy to consciously choose against. However, most real-life situations exist in the gray areas, the middle-ground places of human relationship where emotions influence our choices and intimacy is risky.

In this place, the motivating force behind our behaviors can be a blend of benevolence and defensiveness,

HELPING

- I am motivated by kindness, love and caring
- I make clear, conscious choices
- I feel good about the outcome
- I feel appreciated
- I help others and still take care of myself
- I benefit
- The client benefits
- The client/therapist relationship is enhanced

ENABLING

- I am motivated by guilt, denial, fear or responsibility
- I react from habitual patterns
- I feel resentful about the outcome
- I feel taken advantage of
- I neglect myself in order to help others
- I expend
- The client can continue unacceptable behavior
- The client/therapist relationship is stressed

and being helpful can make us feel like we are, in some aspect, taking care of ourselves. Putting our needs first can cause so much guilt and fear that we'd rather deal with the feelings of resentment when we give too much of ourselves to others. Or, we may get a sense of personal satisfaction from our helpfulness because we have a disproportional sense of responsibility in our relationships, acting from our need to rescue and fix others.

There are no cookbook recipes for how to help without enabling. It is often in retrospect, as we review relationships, situations and our participation in them, where we gain clarity on when we crossed the line.

Keep Enabling In Check

Socrates said, "An unexamined life is not worth living." Looking at ourselves to gain greater awareness of how we feel, think and act is a good first step to take if we are attempting to stop or prevent enabling behaviors.

It impresses me to find that most massage therapists admit that they regularly incorporate self-assessment and self-reflection activities into their lifestyles to maintain ethical fitness. The following suggestions, extractions and elaborations of the practices they use can provide the self-awareness needed to illuminate the path toward helping and away from enabling:

1 Before falling asleep, review the day, situation-by-situation, to see if there are unresolved issues, feelings or a sense of unfinished business. If you feel you could have handled a situation differently, decide what action you believe would have been more effective, and try to take that action the next time a similar situation arises.

2 Take time to learn more about yourself in relationship to other people. Don't judge what you learn as right/wrong or good/bad. Instead, ask, "Am I acting in my own best interest and producing the results I really want?"

3 Get to know the "nature of your nature," so to speak. Assess your character assets to see where they have the potential to work against you.

4 Listen to your internal barometers. Pay attention to your inner knowing as it expresses itself through your body, dreams, thoughts and feelings. Learn your unique signals that let you know when you aren't taking care of yourself with people, when helpfulness to others is at your own expense.

5 Confide in someone you trust; a counselor, adviser, mentor, peer supervisor, spouse, friend or relative can offer an objective view that is unavailable to you in the midst of your situation.

Conclusion

By definition, both helping and enabling mean to allow, to facilitate and to make possible. Based on

modern thought in family dysfunction recovery, however, these synonymous terms can also be antonyms. Enabling has become the term used to describe over-helping, harmful helping and detrimental helping. Because, as massage therapists, we are typically helpful, caring people, we easily can fall into enabling behaviors with our clients and coworkers, as well as in our personal relationships.

Identifying enabling tendencies requires intentional assessment of our nature, our motives, our behaviors and our relationships with others. Through such assessment, we help expand our conscious awareness. Conscious awareness is the light that, when shed on the helpful personality, can dispel its shadow aspect called enabling. If we get to know ourselves better, if we make our choices more consciously, if we are reflective about the outcomes of our past choices, then we are better equipped to navigate our way to being beneficially helpful to all concerned. 📖

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