



Lifestyle

David Julen: Moving from enabling to helping

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Financial stress, family interactions, and facing often unrealistic expectations can be a volatile mix.

Many families will face the challenges of responding healthfully when our loved ones – particularly those we haven't seen in months, if not years – drink to excess, eat excess, and may have symptoms of drug dependence.

A faith-based panel discussion of these topics was held on Nov. 18, hosted by Faith Fighting Addiction, a network of churches organized by the Gaston Controlled Substances Coalition, and the Spiritual Care Department of CaroMont Regional Medical Center.

The event, "Are you a Helper or an Enabler?" featured Dr. Jeffery Ellison, the Rev. Eddie Ingram, and the Rev. David Kneen, all experienced counselors.

Though we often think of enabling when we think of drug and alcohol addiction, it comes in many other forms such as gambling, sex addiction, and compulsive spending.

At its core, enabling means fixing, solving, or make the consequences go away for people in the throes of an addiction or other dysfunctional behavior patterns.

One reason enabling is so widespread is that it comes from the normal and healthy instinct to protect those we love. As loving parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and neighbors we commit to be caregivers: to protect our infants and children, to provide guidance and protection, to help them to health so they will leave the nest and successfully go into the world.

But, when that protective instinct hinders loved ones from breaking unhealthy habits, it often enables them to continue a dangerous habit ... leading to great risk and potential harm.

Dr Ellison noted an enabler protects a person, who is dependent, from suffering the natural consequences of their behaviors.

Think of enabling as shock absorbers on a car, protecting it from potholes and speed bumps ... and allowing a person to avoid the full effects of their bad driving. With good shocks, why change your driving?

This is where we often hear about “Tough Love,” a phrase that easily rolls off the tongues of those not facing difficult issues. Each of the three counselors noted that families must go through “Tough Love” more than the addicted or dependent person in their lives.

At the same time, enabling is elusive and difficult to recognize because it masquerades under the guise of protecting the addicted or dependent person. As Rev. Kneen noted, “Even perhaps subconsciously, enabling is often done to protect the family or group rather than loving the person addicted.”

The pattern of enabling can sound like “If we just rescue them this time they have promised to quit, and we can get back to our normal life” or keeping it hidden may sound like “What goes on in this house stays in this house.

In addition, there is tremendous pressure to keep the family system normal, even if enabling and keeping secrets results in a toxic and unhealthy environment. As Rev. Ingram noted, there is often tremendous pressure on the family member who speaking against enabling, to get back in line and maintain a normality and balance.

“It is inevitable that moving from enabling to helping, using “tough love” will resort in pain and suffering,” Ingram said. As it is likely the family has long accommodated their loved one in need, it is also likely it will resist change, even when it is healthy.

This type of “Tough Love,” for the person of faith, is described in the Bible as practicing a deeper love that requires sacrifice.

It means looking at the person through the lens of God’s love, as the desire to help rather than enable, to become the person who God has called them to be in light of Gods love. It recognizes that an addictive behavior is a symptom of falling short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). It means taking seriously the

understanding each person is created in God's image and that God desires for persons to be free of their addictions so they can accomplish God's purposes in their lives.

It is the love that loves your neighbor as yourself (Lev.19:18, Mark 12:30-31) wanting the truly best for someone as you want for yourself. It is the love described by Paul in 1 Corin. 13:6 that is willing to speak truth in love...that does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It is a "Tough Love" like the woman willing to give up her child in 1 Kings 3, to suffer alienation rather than see the child killed, because the wise King Solomon knew deeper love would reveal itself in the true Mother.

With this in mind, here are several principles adapted from Dr Ellison's presentation to help us move a person from enabling to helping:

1. Convey to the person that enabling is a normal and natural response, and they are not alone. This is where a church family that helps strengthen and be the body of Christ can help. We should think of the church as pictured in Romans 12. "Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer" (v12), "Rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn." Unfortunately, many will not share issues with their church families for fear of being judged.
2. Help the person struggling with enabling get a picture of the outcome they desire with the dependent person. What would it look like if they and the dependent person moved to a healthier relationship?
3. Set tangible goals to help the person achieve what they want. This will require conversations to discuss feelings and boundaries. You may suggest working with a counselor, attending AA or NA meetings, or setting a plan to pay back borrowed money. To the best of your ability try not to be punitive, but to focus on healing and points toward redemption. Talk beforehand and agree on your expectations for the dependent individual. If as a couple you can only agree on two things, present them, as people suffering from addiction have had long practice in seeing cracks to take advantage of the situation.
4. Hold them accountable for their goals. Ask "How did it go with the counselor? What is your next step?" This is where it is vital to have family, peer or church support because the energy to have these tough conversations can be hard to

find.

5. If your loved one has a substance abuse emergency, or your family needs crisis care over the holidays, call the HELP Line at Partners Behavioral Health Management at 1-888-235 -4673. The services of this government-supported agency are free and confidential.

6. Contact the Gaston County YMCA Resource Connection Gateway gastonymca.org/programs/gateway for referrals to high-quality helping services in Gaston County. A member of their staff will respond to your email within 90 minutes; there is no charge for this confidential service.

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