

Enabling & Rescuing vs Tough Love

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"We cannot begin to make progress in learning to Love ourselves until we start being kind to ourselves in healthy ways. A very important part of being kind to ourselves is learning how to say no, and how to set, and be able to defend, boundaries.

Unconditional Love does not mean being a doormat for other people - unconditional Love begins with Loving ourselves enough to protect ourselves from the people we Love if that is necessary."

"We live in a society where the emotional experience of "love" is conditional on behavior. Where fear, guilt, and shame are used to try to control children's behavior because parents believe that their children's behavior reflects their self-worth.

In other words, if little Johnny is a well-behaved, "good boy," then his parents are good people. If Johnny acts out, and misbehaves, then there is something wrong with his parents. ("He doesn't come from a good family.")

What the family dynamics research shows is that it is actually the good child - the family hero role -who is the most emotionally dishonest and out of touch with him/herself, while the acting-out child - the scapegoat - is the most emotionally honest child in the dysfunctional family."

Codependence: The Dance of Wounded Souls

Enabling is a term used in 12 step recovery to describe the behavior of family members, or other loved ones, who rescue an alcoholic or drug addict from the consequences of their own self destructive behavior. It also relates to rescuing anyone who is caught up in any of the compulsive and/or addictive self destructive behaviors that are symptoms of codependency: gambling; spending; eating disorders; sexual or relationship addictions; inability to hold a job; etc.

Codependency recovery is in one sense growing up. As long as we are caught in unconscious reaction to our childhood wounding we cannot become mature responsible adults capable of healthy, Truly Loving relationships. The person who is caught up in self destructive compulsive/addictive behavior patterns behaves in an immature and irresponsible manner.

[As I note often in my writing, codependency involves extremes of behavior. The immature, irresponsible, self destructive codependent is one extreme of the spectrum - usually the person who is genetically an addictive personality. At the other extreme, is the codependent who is over responsible and/or other focused - and can appear to be very mature and successful, with no need of being rescued. This is often the adult who as a child was being the parent in the family - rescuing and taking care of their own immature parents from a very young age. The family hero or caretaker who defines themselves by external accomplishments, popularity, possessions, superiority to others, etc. This person can be a workaholic, or exercise/health fanatic, or religion addict, or a professional caretaker (therapist, nurse, etc.), or "kind hearted" martyr (who is passively controlling by avoiding conflict and thus set up to be the "wronged" victim) - some type of controlling personality who feels superior to others based upon their seeming ability to be in control of their lives according to certain external criteria. The external criteria can range from being financially successful to being successful in never getting angry - and are dysfunctional codependent measures of worth based upon comparison to, upon feeling superior to, other people. These varieties of codependency are not capable of healthy, Truly Loving relationships either.]

A person who is acting out self destructively has no reason to change if they do not ever suffer major consequences for their behavior. If they are rescued from consequences, they are enabled to continue practicing their addiction.

I celebrated my sobriety anniversary on January 3rd. I have now been clean and sober for over 18 years. The reason I got clean and sober was because my parents did an intervention on me and set a boundary that they would not rescue me financially one more time.

An intervention is a confrontation of self destructive behavior by the addicts loved ones. It is often professionally facilitated - although that is not a necessary requirement. It involves the family and friends of an alcoholic/addict confronting the self destructive behavior and setting boundaries with the person. It is sometimes described as an example of "tough love."

Tough love is a misnomer. Love that does not include boundaries is not Truly Love - it is enmeshment, it is emotional vampirism. If I do not Love myself enough to have boundaries to protect myself from the behavior of others than I am not capable of relating to other people in a healthy Loving manner. Rescuing another from their own self destructive behavior is not Loving - and it is codependently dishonest.

When we are reacting out of our codependency, unconsciously reacting out of our childhood emotional wounds and

programming, then we are not capable of being honest with ourselves or others. A codependent doesn't rescue or try to save someone they "love" for the other persons benefit - they do it for themselves. A parent who keeps rescuing a child from self destructive behavior is on some level trying to be loving - but at the deepest level they are trying to rescue themselves from the pain of seeing their child destroy themselves. They are being selfish - which is human and normal - but they are doing it dishonestly by telling themselves they are doing it for the other person. This is a set up to feel victimized - and to abuse and shame the child/loved one for their behavior. "How can you do this to me after all I have done for you?"

One of the important distinctions to learn in recovery, is how to draw a boundary between being and behavior. We can love a person's being and still protect ourselves from their behavior if that is necessary. To think that loving someone means we have to accept being abused by them is dysfunctional - and it demonstrates a lack of Love for our self. If we do not know how to be Loving to our self, then we cannot Truly Love another person in a healthy way. If we do not honor our self, show respect for our self, by having boundaries - then the other person is not going to respect us.

Rescuing someone who is actively practicing addiction of some kind, is enabling. It is dysfunctional because it supports the person in continuing to practice their addiction. A person in recovery working on getting healthier may need some help from time to time - and that is great, that is being supportive in a positive manner. Helping someone to continue to self destruct is not support, it is codependency - it is also not Loving.

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