

## Are you an Enabler?

Alvean, I'm sure that this is a subject that comes up in your practice. It certainly comes up for many people just in the normal course of their relationships, whether it's in a relationship they have with a significant other, or friend, or family member. It's about when you may be enabling somebody else's issues rather than really helping them. And I think there's a temptation for those of us who care about other people to try and weigh in and be helpful. But there's a very fine line as we both know, between helping somebody and helping them to undo themselves; helping them in the wrong direction. Am I right, that this is something you run across?

Yes, and to your initial statement, not just in my practice, but in real relationships every day. I happen to be a parent of young adult children, or children becoming young adults. At this point, my son just graduated from high school. There's this dance that we do also as parents figuring out how much help we should give as we try to ensure that our kids can stand on their own two feet. And whether or not too much, is too much. I struggle with that sometimes as a parent, because my husband and I fortunately, can afford to do a lot of things for our kids that we did not have done for us, and not because our parents didn't necessarily have the means, although they might not have. They might not have had the will to do it sometimes more than just the expendable income. We have positioned ourselves to be able to do a lot where our kids are concerned. And so figuring out, how much is too much leads to a number of questions. Am I preventing them from being independent? Am I handicapping them in some way? Am I helicopter parenting in some way? The same applies to friendships. I have a friend that struggles with the truth. Sometimes that's the nicest way I could probably say it. And I know why they struggle with it. Sometimes I wrestle with whether or not I'm enabling this individual by not calling out some of the falsehoods. And then there's the part of me that just doesn't want to deal with what's going to come with that. Sometimes you don't feel like you are up for the fight, the argument and the tension. So you just kind of let it go. But in letting it go, are you enabling the individual to continue this kind of behavior with other people? So finding and figuring out where the lines are in various relationships? is a very real question. I so appreciate this question from the audience, because I think we all struggle with it in some form or another even professionally.

Are there some signposts, some clues that we could look for to identify when we're behaving in this enabling way?

I don't know. And this is my personal perspective. I don't know that there are specific totems so to speak, What I will say is there might be a few little checkpoints here and there. Bread crumbs, that tell us that we might want to be more sensitive when we observe an individual become a lesser version of themselves as a byproduct of our unwillingness to address an on-going issue. I think that while growth is everybody's personal responsibility, there is an environment that helps to nurture friendships and healthy relationships; we nurture each other's growth. And when we have to say something or need to say something coming from a place of genuine love and interest in the best version of that other person, then the source from which those statements, commentaries, critiques even, come from are genuinely good. A,

lot of times in those relationships, our friends, our partners and our family can hear that we want the best for them, even if the critique might sting just a little bit, too. But It's so encapsulated by love. There's a knowingness in that. I think that when we recognize that we are helping someone be a lesser version of themselves that is one of those signposts, breadcrumbs or totems, that we may really want to take a good look at.

I think many times we will avoid the issue because we don't want to be overly critical. We don't want to put a relationship at risk. And this is difficult ground to call somebody out on their stuff. I had a colleague years ago who was a brilliant writer. Whenever we had a really difficult thing that we needed to communicate, we gave him the task. I don't want to call this a trick because it really wasn't a trick, but what he did was to take the negative, push it to the side and find something positive to talk about that came from the opposite direction to shed light on the issue that we had to convey. I've found in my own experience, that it's a particularly good way to enter into a conversation about something that's emotionally fraught. I had a conversation recently, I won't go into the details of it, but I was asked a question by a friend about some behavior they engaged in as to what my opinion was. You know when you hear that question you've just put one of your feet on the land mine. The question is, how do you elegantly step off without setting off the explosion? I paused, which is not just a useful thing to do, but to gather my wits. And after a while my answer was to say to him, you know, I think you already know the answer to that. You know, you're better than that. I've seen you when you've done this, and this, and this, talking about positive things that this individual had done. Because the truth was, in asking that question, what he was looking for was some validation for something that he had to know, wasn't right, or he wouldn't have asked the question. He was already troubled by it. And so, he was looking for somebody to tip the balance and hopefully in his direction, or in a positive direction. I didn't want to upset the apple cart, but at the same time, I didn't want to let him off. Because the truth was, he was better than that; he wasn't acting as his noble self, he wasn't being the person he could be in that moment. He was letting himself down. And somebody needed to say that to him, I got the job, because he asked me the question. I didn't volunteer for this, but at the same time, I wanted to give him something to aspire to, rather than just simply condemning his behavior. And that worked. In that instance. I can't tell you, I've always been so wise.

Who ever is, but I love that you said that, because in the same relationship that I'm referring to, with this particular friend, when I've seen him be truly transparent and honest, it's often messy, but it's so sincere, that it's beautiful. It is who he really is, and what he's really going through. And for a minute, he's less of the public figure, and he's just himself, he's less of whoever he thinks he needs to be for everybody else. And he is just himself. I have said that, not necessarily in the moment, sometimes I just let it sit, and then I'll send a text message. And I'll say, you know, I loved that, you just let it rip in such and such conversation, or you were just so raw it was just nice to be able to feel the real you in the midst of that. You're right, you get more by assuming you're dealing with a good person. You get more of that positive behavior as a byproduct of the spotlight you put on the desired behavior, or the better version of the individual. And it's not that I in any way I expect anybody to be running around disclosing all of their imperfections, It's just that sincerity has such value, and being honest about where you

are has such incredible value, not only for yourself, but the other people around you that I would just love to see him be more of that person on a regular basis. I didn't always say what I could have said or should have said in the moment to invite him to a higher level of himself, because it was just easier to just let it slide.

You know, thinking about totems, I think another one of those ways that we can observe ourselves more objectively is to recognize whether there's a theme. When you find yourself in a situation with someone with whom you are in a relationship of whatever kind, whether it's a collegial relationship, or a love relationship, and the same subject keeps coming up, it's the same theme and that person will continue to go down the same path. If you've had these conversations before, whether you were blunt or a little more tactful; if you find yourself giving the same counsel again, time to step back. A personal anecdote. I was at lunch with a good friend who's going through some marital difficulties. And this isn't the first time things have flared up, but then they go away. I probably should have asked this question a long time ago. But at least in my defense, I did ask it that on this occasion, why are you still in this marriage? What's keeping you here? I don't mean that in a negative sense. I'm saying why haven't you walked away? What are the things that you find about your partner that are keeping you here? What are you getting out of this relationship that's positive? And it immediately changed the conversation from a litany of what she did, right and wrong? I want to say, this is a fellow who's pretty good at calling himself out. But he was on a tear here. And the tear was, this is what's wrong, this is what I don't get, and this is what I'm not happy about. So, the question really pulled him out of that refrain, and forced him to reflect. Then my follow up question was, if your mate were here right now, what would she say? Do you know? Have you ever talked about it? Now, as it turned out his answer was a speculation. And I said, it would be interesting if you asked that question what the actual answer would have been? Here's the irony, he did. and it was nothing like what he thought.

I think that there are ways to at least grow the suspicion that we may be leading people in the wrong direction. It has to do with our genuine desire as human beings to be empathetic, to try to help. But sometimes our help is not the right kind of help. And we have to be willing sometimes to do the ugly, messy stuff. for the greater good. I sometimes use the example that the most beautiful things come out of some of the most ugly circumstances. And if you've ever seen a woman have a baby, that is really ugly, messy stuff. Then, on the other side of all of that pain, all of that noise, all of that mess, is one of the most perfect creations known to mankind. And so, in much of our relationships, we have to do very similar things. We have to be willing to get a little bit messy, look a bit uncomfortable. And there might be a little bit of pain to go with that. But on the other side of that are some of the most beautiful things that we will ever experience both in love and in life.

You know, I'm always astounded at the poetry of your insights.

It's mutual Douglas.

That's another episode of love life.

We'll be back with you next week. Thank you, Kamaria and Todd. And if you'd like to write to us about this or any other episode, or have some suggestions, please write to us at [alvean@lovelife.digital](mailto:alvean@lovelife.digital) or [doug@lovelife.digital](mailto:doug@lovelife.digital)

And we will be back next in another week for more love life.  
Bye, folks.