When Family Members Protect Alcoholics

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In families with alcoholism, emotions and priorities can get very mixed up — and not just by the alcoholic. Spouses, kids, parents, and extended family members can also get emotionally entangled with the alcoholic’s situation. Everyone has expectations and needs to be met, and in many cases the alcoholic falls short. When everyone gets accustomed to living with an intense emotional situation, feelings start taking on way too much importance.

The Problems

Family members:

- **Don’t want to lose their relationship with the alcoholic.** Some family members don’t put pressure on an alcoholic because they don’t want to be abandoned. They would rather keep that person in their life instead of possibly losing them altogether. Rather than talk about alcohol rehab or tell the alcoholic their true feelings about the problem, they play it safe and avoid the truth.

  It is understandable that others may want to stay connected to the alcoholic. But the family member makes their choice because of what they want to keep, not because of what might be better for the alcoholic.

- **Don’t want to rock the boat.** Going against the grain in an alcoholic family could make someone a hot target. If one person tries to speak the truth about an alcoholic and put up boundaries, that person quickly can become the black sheep. Family members often will air out the truth-teller’s dirty laundry; whatever positive standing they might have within the family could be knocked down. Rumors and negativity may even spread beyond the family group. If that’s the price for helping an alcoholic family member, why would anyone do it? It takes courage to stand up to an entire family, and many people aren’t sure they have it.

- **Don’t want to be isolated.** It’s bad enough that a person giving tough love to an alcoholic family member may get harassed — the breach of family rules may be enough to cause relatives’ rejection. When your alcoholic cousin Jimmy asks for money and you refuse him, you make a wise decision. But you also risk your overprotective grandma putting a black mark against your name. In her eyes, you did something wrong, not Jimmy.

  Grandma also may influence other family members to isolate you. If you feel this potential isolation and loneliness is too much for you to bear, you may decide to give in to Jimmy’s money requests to stay connected to the family.

- **Don’t see the harm in protecting and rescuing the alcoholic.** Some people may truly believe they are helping their loved one by rescuing them. Family members hate to see the alcoholic so upset about his or her circumstances. They give money, shelter, food, or whatever the alcoholic might need at the moment. It may make the family feel better that the alcoholic
isn’t suffering as much because of their help. However, it’s the suffering that can make an alcoholic realize how much he or she needs to turn his or her life around.

The Solutions

Family members should:

- **Give compassion and keep firm boundaries.** Setting boundaries has nothing to do with being mean. Having compassion does not mean lacking backbone. You can say “no” with a gentle look in your eyes and with a caring tone of voice. You can say “I love you, and because of that I won’t be giving you money right now.” You can tell an alcoholic that when he or she is clean and sober, you would love to have a visit.

- **Present clear choices and hold to them.** It’s one thing to give ultimatums and choices to an alcoholic relative. Holding your ground is much harder. When you tell someone you won’t be giving them any more money or a place to stay, you need to hold to that line 100 percent. If you give in just one time, you will undermine your entire strategy. Alcoholics need to feel the full amount of stress for their troubles just like everyone else. If they are bailed out all the time, they don’t face the full responsibility of their lifestyle. When they have to fall and stumble on their own, they have a better chance of seeing why they really need to change.

- **Provide information about good rehab options and addiction resources.** By now, it may seem like there isn’t really much you can do to help an alcoholic relative. Thankfully, that isn’t true. An alcoholic really needs good information about alcohol treatment and support groups in the area. You can find lots of information online, in the phone book, and in newspapers. Gather your information and write down a few good choices. Hand it to the alcoholic you intend to help and tell them how much you care when you do it. Do not be surprised if the person scoffs at the idea of alcohol rehab, gets mad at you, or gives you an excuse. He or she may reject what you have to say publicly, but look at the list in private.

- **Be prepared to lose the relationship.** Your alcoholic relative may be very upset with your firm boundaries and alcohol rehab information. He or she may say “I hate you,” “you don’t really love me,” or “I want nothing to do with you.” It’s also possible that the alcoholic may act on these words and stick to them for some time. That can be a painful thought for many people trying to help alcoholic relatives. The thing families fear most after anxious months or years of no contact is hearing that their loved one died.

It takes a lot of guts to keep a firm, loving boundary, give information, or even set up an intervention. Talk to a rehab counselor or AA support group leader to get support and guidance. You never know how the alcoholic in your family will respond to your rational but caring approach.

Offering Help to an Alcoholic

The Mayo Clinic has a comprehensive webpage describing alcohol dependence and what generally can be expected from alcohol treatment. The Alanon/Alateen website also has good information about their support groups for family members and friends of alcoholics. Also, contact a local alcohol treatment center in your area to understand how you can truly help an alcoholic family member.