

HELP

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**Helping vs. Enabling:  
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there” and helping until it hurts.**

# Helping vs. Enabling:

## The difference between “being there” and helping until it hurts.

By: Dr Laura Dabney

Recently, I had a patient say to me, **“Of course I’m going to help him. I’m his mother!”** I understood her sentiment, but I also knew that this woman was practically unraveling her own life for the sake of a grown son who hardly seemed to notice her sacrifices. She’d lost sight of the difference between helping and enabling.

In fact, over the past few months, I’ve noticed an increasing number of talks with my patients about the subject of enabling. But the conversations rarely start there. Instead, they start with a parent or spouse or significant other telling me they believe they need to “be there” for the person they love. Then they go on to detail the emotional and physical toll “being there for them” requires.

Husbands feel it’s their “duty” to support their wives. Wives can’t “turn my back on him when he’s down.”

Parents can’t stand to see their kids struggle and go to great lengths to help, telling me “it’s what a caring parent does” even when their kids are adults. Kids, too, struggle to help their aging parents, even to the great disruption of their own lives, and justify the hardship by asking me, “If I’m not there for them, who will be?!”

**No wonder we struggle. Relationships can be immensely difficult to navigate.**

It’s not that people don’t understand the general difference between helping someone and enabling them. As more

psychological concepts make their way into our culture, I find that people are both aware of and can articulate the risks and consequences helping too much. The challenge isn't about awareness. It's about applying that knowledge in a healthy manner to our most personal relationships.

So, back to my recent discussions with patients. After they've described their struggles to help a loved one, I ask how they can tell the difference between helping and enabling that person. "How do you know you're not enabling him?" I say. Most often, they answer, "*I don't.*"

The good news is that the line between helping and enabling is not as gray as we believe it to be. The line, in fact, is very clear.

If a behavior or action is hurting you (not your partner or kid or parent), then it's a problem. If "helping" has negative consequences for your emotional or physical or financial health, you've crossed the line into enabling.

My patients tell me,

*"But I have the money ..."*

*"But it won't happen if I don't do it ..."*

*"But if I can help, I should ..."*

We can make every excuse for our behavior. As human beings, we're wonderfully adept at presenting the choices we make as all but inevitable. And yet, that doesn't mean there won't be consequences, even if we "have the money" or "it won't happen if I don't do it" or "I believe I should help if I can."

**At this point, I ask my patients how their "helping" has affected their lives;**

The question often shocks them because they haven't considered themselves or their needs. And yet, for the first time,

they admit that they are tired, angry, resentful, bitter, guilt-ridden, anxious and fearful, trapped, burdened. The more they talk, the longer the list grows.

Very often, too, patients feel suddenly guilty turning the spotlight on themselves. Admitting to difficult feelings isn't easy to do. Many of us have been raised to be givers, to help until it hurts, that thinking about ourselves is selfish. But once I give them the safe space to open up about their hurt and resentment, they can see by my face that I'm not horrified or sitting in judgment of everything they've tried so desperately to do to help. Often, venting some of these feelings comes with a significant sense of relief.

Each of us has a responsibility to ourselves, to prioritize our own emotional, physical, and financial health, to first "put on our own oxygen masks before helping others." We know this in theory, but it's not until we step back and look at the effects our "helping" is having on our overall health that we realize how much harm we may be doing. And it's only when we're able to recognize that harm that we can take the necessary steps to stop it.



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