Assuming Another’s Responsibility

By Tish Vincent

The managed care company offices were in an old Victorian house in downtown Lansing. Therapists had to walk down a steep flight of stairs to meet with individuals who were there for assessments or therapy. On this particular day, my 3 p.m. assessment sat sullenly beside his mother in the elegant living room, his appearance somewhat slovenly.

The man was seeking a mental health and substance abuse assessment because he had been caught driving drunk and had marijuana in the car. His mother was 68. She sat in my office in clean, worn clothing, a scarf tied about her head, anxious and frightened for her son.

Assessment sat sullenly beside his mother about her head, anxious and frightened for her son that day was chilling. I do not know the consequences from the criminal justice system, his life would be ruined.

Assessment was 45 years old. His mother was 68. She sat in my office in clean, worn clothing, a scarf tied about her head, anxious and frightened for her son.

The man I was assessing was 45 years old. His mother was 68. She sat in my office in clean, worn clothing, a scarf tied about her head, anxious and frightened for her son.

Detachment

Just as addicts must risk abstaining from their substance of choice, codependents must risk allowing their loved ones to suffer the consequences of their choices. In my many years practicing as a therapist, I have observed that is often more difficult for codependents to stop assuming responsibility for their loved ones’ choices than for addicts to start assuming responsibility for their choices.

I have learned to expect anger when I intervene with addicts and call attention to the effects of their addiction. Addicts seek help when consequences are barreling down on them like a freight train. Though angered by hearing they need to stop using, they are usually motivated enough to try because their backs are against a wall.

Intervening with an addict’s family, friends, and coworkers is much more challenging. Codependent individuals want to save their addicted family member or friend. They want to be the savior riding in on the white horse to find the solution—a new job, a new spouse, a better wardrobe, a better counselor, a better lawyer, a fresh start in another community, something, anything! They are often frantic, desperate, and angry at the person pointing out that their efforts to help are enabling the addict to continue using.

In my many attempts at intervention, my sad observation is that the path to addiction remains clear if the codependent person fails to seek help to stop enabling the addict. Enabling is not a conscious choice; it’s just what codependents do.

Codependent professionals

Therapists, psychiatrists, and attorneys can be codependent, too. They enter the picture to offer professional guidance and sometimes lose their way in the perfect storm of addiction. If you find yourself worrying that a consequence of an addict’s behavior may ruin his or her life, it’s time to seek solutions for yourself.

Two resources are Al-Anon Family Groups1 and Codependent No More by Melody Beattie.2 Helping addicts is counterintuitive. As long as you feel you can save them, you are powerless to help them. Hope appears once you admit powerlessness, respect the force and reality of the addiction, and allow addicts to experience consequences and take responsibility for their choices.

Seeing that mother trying so hard to save her son that day was chilling. I do not know which paths they have traveled since. I hope she found a way to hold him accountable instead of pitying him.

ENDNOTES