

# Guest Blog: 5 Warning Signs that Enabling is Ruining Your Relationships - and You!

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Family and friends mean everything to Marissa. And like many women, Marissa was encouraged and rewarded, since childhood, for being *selfless*. She was taught that thinking about herself and her needs was wrong and that she should be more concerned with the needs of others. While it seems wonderful to aspire to selflessness, unfortunately, that can be the prelude to enabling.

**What is enabling?** Also called “codependence”, the term comes from the field of addictions. Used here, it is doing for others what they should be doing for themselves, usurping their responsibilities and diminishing them in the process. Let’s look at behaviors that are warning signs of enabling, the damage they cause and some alternatives.

## **1. *Knowing what’s best for everyone and insisting on making that happen.***

Marissa genuinely thought it was her responsibility to be in charge of everything and everybody—even strangers. She *guided* what people did so everyone adhered to her *correct* ways. Many of her sentences started with, “You should....” Her husband, Peter’s, 45<sup>th</sup> birthday was coming soon. Even though it wasn’t a surprise, she decided where and when it would be held and which people should and shouldn’t attend. She gave everyone approved gift lists and assigned each guest specific food items to bring—including the type of serving dish. Peter looked just “right” on his special day because Marissa purchased his clothing and set it out for him. After all, she didn’t want him to embarrass himself by not being properly attired. Basically, she anticipated people making incorrect choices; so whenever and wherever she could, she orchestrated their lives to make things easy for them.

**The damage:** Marissa offended people with her directives, robbed them of their fun, creativity and self-esteem, and emasculated Peter.

**The option:** Realize that ultimately, all the adults are in charge of themselves—exactly as you are.

**2. *Reading everyone’s minds.*** Enablers certainly *know* what’s in other’s minds—including their needs, desires and motivations. When her friend, Jean, started dating Christof, Marissa *knew* Jean wouldn’t like his habits. To protect Jean, she persuaded her to drop him. Jean regretted that decision and never forgave Marissa. Since Marissa knew people often won’t do what’s expected, she was prepared to speak with Christof personally if Jean didn’t end it. She simply thought it was her job to point out flaws or potential problems and suggest remedies to others, *just in case* someone might miss something. She let her sisters know they really wouldn’t enjoy a cruise and dissuaded them from going. After all, isn’t it the right thing to protect everyone from making mistakes or getting hurt in some way? And if you do

other's thinking for them, doesn't it save them time while assuring your *approved* outcomes?

**The damage:** Marissa took other people's rights away, insulted them, hurt their feelings, and caused friendships to end. Others found Marissa annoying, at best, and wanted to avoid her.

**The option:** Learn to work collaboratively with others. Find out what they really want and then work *with* them—only if they desire your help.

### **3. Pleasing everyone, but not yourself.**

When in-laws visited, Marissa followed their wishes, not hers. Silence or confrontation seemed her only options, so she said nothing. She was rewarded with praise and positive responses which felt good in one sense, but also filled her with anger and resentment. She silently steamed because she hated doing it their way, particularly since her way was better. Certainly Marissa couldn't confront them because they might think she wasn't nice.

**The damage:** Anger and resentment built up over time and created a contentious atmosphere within her extended family. Suppressed anger became a major stressor for Marissa.

**The option:** [Communication tools](#) can be learned that eliminate the need to make others wrong for you to be right. You can learn how to comfortably share your viewpoints without imposing them. (My [book](#) has many communication hints and tools.)

**4. Being pleased that people rely on you.** By taking over other people's responsibilities, Marissa made herself indispensable. Now people would remain reliant on her. This ensured her a place in their lives, offered a sense of stability, and gave her a feeling of importance. She was proud of her efficiency and of having an influence on so many lives.

**The damage:** Enabling is the cause of irritability, anger, fights or verbal shutdowns, excess work, stress, and the critical and guilt-ridden feelings Marissa experienced. In short, enabling is toxic.

**The option:** Ask yourself who is benefiting more from this selflessness: you or your loved ones and friends? If you are enjoying your martyr role, learn new behaviors and consider receiving counseling.

**5. Not having time to deal with your own issues.** As an enabler, Marissa's job is always about others and never about her. She spends so much time taking on other people's responsibilities that she doesn't have time to focus on herself. What a relief that is, not having to deal with her own issues! Phew!

**The damage:** Marissa is in trouble. She's responsible for everything and everybody—no wonder she's exhausted. People won't change their behavior—no wonder she's irritable and angry. People don't respect her ideas—no wonder she feels alone in her thinking or isolated in the world. Their resistance makes her feel powerless—no wonder she feels depressed. Enabling was so engrained in her, she didn't

realize it was destroying her, her marriage and friendships. Fortunately, she learned she had options and choices to save her marriage and her life.

**The option:** When you choose to stop assuming all of this unnecessary responsibility and control, your workload decreases, your anger and stress subside, you'll have fewer arguments yet better communication, and end up with more time for yourself. Your home will become more peaceful and your loved ones will feel better about themselves—and better about you! And most importantly, rather than resenting people, you will build healthy and loving relationships with family and friends.

**Guest Blog written by Diana B. Denholm, Ph.D., LMHC, author of *The Caregiving Wife's Handbook*.**

[Diana B. Denholm](#), PhD, LMHC, has been a board-certified psychotherapist for more than 30 years and a medical psychotherapist for over 20. In her recent book, readers learn the communication and collaboration skills to avoid enabling which she developed during her 11 years as primary caregiver to her late husband. Her new book, ***The Caregiving Wife's Handbook: Caring for Your Seriously Ill Husband, Caring for Yourself*** (Hunter House, [www.caregivingwife.com](http://www.caregivingwife.com)), offers hope, advice, and resources for any caregiver dealing with long-term illnesses.