

Functional Alcoholism

Enablers do not hold the alcoholic accountable for unacceptable behavior and may help the person avoid the consequences of their actions. There may be a social or economic cost for not playing this role of enabler, especially if the alcoholic is an employer or close family member. Frequently, stopping enabling feels like a “Catch-22.”



World’s Most Enabling Statement

Labeling someone a functional alcoholic is a strong and reinforcing enabling behavior. It is used to describe someone the enabler believes to be alcoholic, but also seems to “function” acceptably in their occupational or social activities. Usually these are areas where the enabler knows the alcoholic best.

4. Does the thought of not socializing with the functional alcoholic seem unacceptable and disconcerting?
5. Have you dismissed or minimized alcohol-related problems that have occurred in the functional alcoholic’s life, even while thinking to yourself that this person needs help?
6. Would your decision to stop drinking with the functional alcoholic cause him or her to question your loyalty or ability to have a good time?
7. If others agreed to participate in an intervention to motivate the functional alcoholic to enter treatment, would you feel inclined to argue against it, motivated by how your life might change?
8. Do you believe the functional alcoholic would become boring if he or she decided to stop drinking for good?

If you answered “Yes” to any of these questions, you may be an enabler.

Feeling Torn

The enabler of the functional alcoholic is anyone facing the prospect of having to change their behavior in order to positively influence the alcoholic to get help and into recovery. The enabler may feel guilty or unsure of what to do—stuck in the role. If she won’t stop, what should I do?

Where to Start

To play a constructive role in helping the alcoholic, start by dropping the functional alcoholic label. Make a decision to stop “overt enabling.” This means saying or doing things that interfere with the ability of the alcoholic to be responsible for the direct or indirect consequences of their behavior. This will initiate a process of change with opportunities later to play a proactive role in encouraging this person to enter treatment.

Contact PAS to speak with a professional who can help you set limits and learn new relational patterns that remove you from covering, enabling and excusing the alcoholic’s behaviors.

Functional Cancer?

There is no such thing as functional alcoholism, just as there is no such thing as functional cancer. Both are chronic, potentially fatal diseases that progress over time.

The term functional alcoholism allows the enabler to continue the advantages of the relationship they have with the alcoholic, even while their role as an enabler grows worse. This defense is called “minimizing.”

It Doesn’t Bother Me

Functional alcoholism means “his or her drinking problem doesn’t bother me.” Those labeled as functional alcoholics by others often demonstrate middle or late stage alcoholism characteristics including blackouts (memory loss while drinking), DUI arrests, and relational dysfunction, especially relationship problems in the home with spouse or children. The functioning alcoholic lies and/or minimizes family neglect, abuse, and other irresponsible behavior attributable to drinking.

Are You Killing an Alcoholic with Kindness?

Ask yourself:

1. Have you ever called someone a functional alcoholic?
2. Do you have a social relationship with this person where drinking plays an important role?
3. Have you heard “stories” about the functional alcoholic’s home life that are problematic or disturbing to you?

This information is not intended to replace the medical advice of your doctor or healthcare provider. Please consult your health care provider or EAP for advice about a personal concern or medical condition.