

How to Abandon Ship: A Manual for the Recovering Family

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Lifeboat (n.) A strong, buoyant boat especially designed for saving the lives of shipwrecked people.

You'd have to have ice running through your veins if you didn't cry when Leonardo DiCaprio died in Kate Winslet's arms at the end of *Titanic*. I curse James Cameron for what he did to them. I can't help it, every time I watch it I find myself clinging to the false hope that *this* time Jack and Rose somehow survive and we all get the happy ending that was coming to us.

To illustrate our quandary as families of addicts or alcoholics, I want you to imagine a different scenario after the impact. The Titanic hasn't sunk but is teetering on the crest of the iceberg, ready to go down at any moment. Rose has taken a nasty blow to the head, compromising her thinking. Jack, Rose and her family make it safely to the lifeboat and the evil fiancé dies (which, admittedly, has little to do with my metaphor but we all hate that guy). Rose, despite her impassioned love for Jack, is inexplicably drawn to the ill-fated ship and amidst heart-wrenching pleas from her family, leaps back onto the Promenade deck and insists she's just fine. Jack and the family launch a painstaking operation to get her back, using all their best logic, compassion, love, bargaining, guilt and intimidation tactics. Despite their mounting frustration and despair, they sympathize with her grievances about the dire conditions aboard the ship so they execute a water-bailing strategy and send up blankets, medical supplies and their own personal food rations, all the while tirelessly pleading with her to come to her senses. Jack redoubles his efforts, presenting her with reams of search-and-rescue data supporting their decision to abandon the ship. He attempts to take her by force, a few times succeeding in getting her into the lifeboat only to have his hopes dashed after she finds her way back to the ship. Rose notices that exhaustion and resentment are coming to a head on the lifeboat so she begins to actively split the family in order to separate the weak from the herd. She doesn't feel good about it but desperate times call for targeting the most self-sacrificing

member to continue some form of support. This move escalates the fighting and finger-pointing among the family members as they become increasingly depleted from neglecting their own needs. The wear and tear is too much for some and they shut Rose out completely. The others pick up the slack and soldier on.

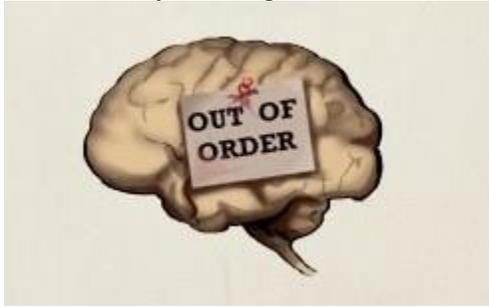
If you have an addict in your life, you no doubt recognize that the well-meaning family is “enabling” Rose. Enabling is, in a nutshell, helping. Jack and the family are helping Rose to stay aboard the Titanic. It’s a difficult paradox to grasp that making it comfortable for her is the very thing blocking her view – she can’t see how uncomfortable and dangerous the ship is from the vantage point of being relatively comfortable. In her current state, the only thing that will wake her up to the reality is the natural and uninterrupted effects of being on a sinking ship. Then of course, it’s the family’s job to throw her the ladder and cheer her on. I hope to shed some light on why the ones who love Rose the most are, in effect, perpetuating the problem, and what they could do instead.

“The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” E.Burke

Within the addiction field, to enable means to *help sustain the dysfunction in another, thereby encouraging and reinforcing the dysfunction*. If you’ve done your share of bailing water, this will feel a bit pejorative but the fact is, we all do it and most of us do it unwittingly. So if you’re going to read on, you must be willing to cut yourself some serious slack. Recovery isn’t about blame; it is about throwing our energy and intelligence at the solution rather than the problem. It is our personal responsibility to examine whether we are adding fuel to the fire and take the necessary steps to stop it. It is also ours to do this without creating a victim or being a victim. In other words, without blame in play.

First and foremost: the lifeboat remains anchored next to the Titanic while there are people still on it. It is critical that the family not just get committed, but *stay* committed. The reason for this is simple, although largely misunderstood: addiction is a brain disease that strips the addict of the ability to help himself. Recent advances in neuroscience have generated new understandings about addiction like nothing we’ve seen before. Neuroimaging is revealing the inside of the addict’s brain under all sorts of conditions and what we see is tantamount to a neurophysiological pinball game that has left him with only a smattering of clear-thinking moments. This makes it an absolute necessity for someone else to be in the driver’s seat if he is to survive. While this news is usually very well received by the “Chief Enabler” who immediately homes in on the driver’s seat like a heat-seeking missile, it is the trained addiction professional who should be relegated as both driver and navigator. The family’s place is in the passenger

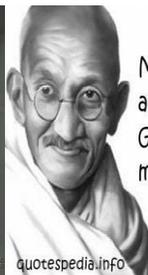
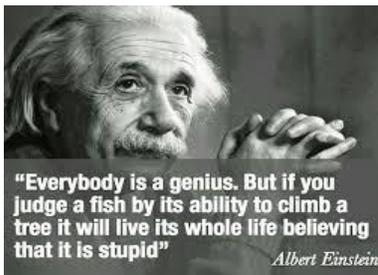
seats and if you can get the addict in the trunk for the time being, so much the better.



The road trip will be on the order of “Little Miss Sunshine,” but think monsoon instead of sun. The good thing about the weather is that it changes. In order to buy into this seating arrangement you, the passengers, must know what you’re up against. You *need* to know what science knows about the changes that have occurred in the brain of the addict if you are to respond constructively. As a recovering alcoholic, I am deeply appreciative of the scientific explanations for what can only be described as unfathomable behavior during my drinking years. For those who hated high school biology, take heart; everything you need to know about the addict’s brain can be summed up in one little section. For those who loved and are good at biology, you’ll need to forgive me for simplifying very, very complex neuroanatomy and physiology. I have listed references at the end of this article for your reading pleasure.

The Circle of Life Section

We know that different parts of the brain handle different functions. And we know the two parts that account for most of the addict’s insanity are the neocortex and the limbic system, or midbrain. Our neocortex, especially the prefrontal cortex, is the reasoning, moral, law-abiding, free will, good judgment, impulse-control part of the brain. This is the home of our personality and all that we love and dream about; there’s even a little section in charge of weighing future consequences against short-term gain. This higher-order brain takes every little thing into account and then makes a choice. Think of this as the Einstein-Gandhi brain. This is the *volition* part of the brain, the only part with *choice*.



My religion is based on truth and non-violence. Truth is my God. Non-violence is the means of realising Him.

quotespedia.info Mahatma Gandhi

There’s a much older, deeper, non-choice part of the brain; the mid-brain – we call it the “reptilian” brain because it’s so primal that everyone from reptiles up the ladder rely on it for minute-to-minute survival. It is the automatic, unconscious, instinctual part of the brain, the part that evokes the fight-flight-or-freeze response and the part that doles out the dopamine (the chemical that makes us feel alive and wonderful). We call this part the



Lizard brain.

In a healthy brain, the cortex listens to what the midbrain has to say, makes a split-second decision and then tells the body what to do. In a *healthy* brain then, the reasoning cortex overrides the instinctual midbrain in all matters *not* having to do with survival. If the midbrain perceives it's about survival, however, *it reacts without consulting the cortex.*

If you take a healthy brain and add a genetic predisposition for addiction, high stress (particularly in childhood), trauma (anything that interrupts healthy growth and development) and then add any mind-altering drug that releases dopamine as a reward for taking it, well, you have trouble. Einstein would say it's just about the math. These ingredients will very likely produce a drug addict, irrespective of whether the drug is alcohol, prescription pills, marijuana or crystal meth. When the stress management system has been compromised, and that can happen when important childhood needs go unmet, it leaves a person with a highly sensitive fight-flight-or-freeze response – it takes very little to have them in a *perceived state of survival*; many of them are in a perpetual state of what we call “neuro-hyperarousal.” This is an exhausting and stressful state and the brain will naturally crave rest and relief. When people pick up alcohol or drugs to do this, we recognize it as “self-medicating;” this is actually an adaptive response for a being that requires a resting/restorative state.

And because all drugs work solely within the reward center of the limbic system, they ultimately “trick” the brain into misperceiving that the addict *needs the drug to survive*. When this happens, as you recall, the brain doesn't consult the reasoning cortex – the rational, moral brain is a file that is there but not downloaded. Bill Nye the Science Guy would judge me for my decidedly wanton abbreviation of the workings of the addicted brain; the breadth of our knowledge is staggering and growing by the day. What I lack in precision, however, I gain in getting you to the relevant bottom line: addiction *breaks* the prefrontal cortex and the midbrain in such a way that the reasoning, moral, choice-making brain is at the mercy of the primal, survival brain. It's David and Goliath with David's hands tied behind his back. The survival brain of the addict has become an

omnipotent dictator whose singular mission is to keep taking drugs *at any cost*.



Animal Planet can always be counted on to provide the perfect metaphor. What happens to the brain of an addict is nicely illustrated by a species of parasite that live in the stomach lining of the Estuarine snail. For survival's sake, these snails burrow into the ground so as not to stand out and make themselves easy prey to birds. This is good with the parasites until they are called to reproduce. Unfortunately for the snail, in order to reproduce, the parasite requires an environment only found within the belly of a particular species of bird. When the parasite is ready to pass on its genetic material, then, it makes a bee-line for the snail's brain where its presence makes the snail feel like getting some sun. This is where nature really deals the snail a blow - once out in the open, the hapless snail sprouts orange antennae. In bird world, this is tantamount to wearing a strobe light on top of your head. The bird eats the snail and the parasite is now in the belly of the bird ready to mix it up. *Just as the parasite hijacks the brain of the snail, the biological effect of addiction hijacks the brain of the addict.* We could blame the snail for causing his own demise but to be fair, how much *choice* did he have once the parasite took over his brain?

Keep Your Friends Close, Your Enemies Closer

Addiction is your enemy, not the addict. Addiction *is* a parasite living off the person you love and making them unrecognizable. The biology makes it vital for the family to heed whatever wake-up call comes your way and to stay mindful about your responses. Because you didn't *cause* the addiction, there is nothing you can do to cure or control it. What you do have, however, is a lot more influence than you realize. The family system and the circumstances you find yourself in are always co-created; this is good news. Consciously or unconsciously, there is typically much the family is doing to perpetuate the dysfunction, usually some form of over-caretaking and/or over-controlling. We lose way too many people due to a very understandable error: in an effort to do *something*, the family focuses on the short-term goal of putting out a fire or making the addict more comfortable instead of keeping their eyes on the long term goal of healthy, sustainable recovery. It is very rare that the family's response achieves both; you cannot please the addict and move toward a healthy resolution at the same time. More often than not, these are mutually exclusive and the family must choose one or the other. This is in keeping with the paradigm of operant conditioning that holds true for all animals whereby we reward (reinforce) only those behaviors that we want to see repeated. If you're financing,

rescuing, cleaning up after, accepting excuses or allowing yourselves to be bullied off your mark, you are reinforcing whatever they just did to get them into trouble. What feels like helping actually strengthens the addiction and the problem behavior. Notwithstanding your *feelings* of love, it is a mistake to think that letting addicts dictate the rules or preventing them from experiencing pain, hurt, frustration and even danger is an *act* of love. We can, as they say, kill them with kindness.

Why We Do the Things We Do

See if any of these common reasons for enabling feel familiar:

- We don't see ourselves doing it. It's not uncommon to see one parent over-controlling the addict's affairs while admonishing the other for over-caretaking. Enabling behaviors can feel right because they do solve the problem-du-jour and, in fact, they might well be appropriate if they weren't being done for an addict whose over-arching symptom is a failure to take personal responsibility.
- We are avoiding our own feelings. Fear, sadness, anger, grief, resentment and anxiety come with the territory – they are legitimate - so they *should* be felt, but we often attempt to outrun them with analyzing, problem-solving, busy work and the illusion of control. Homo Erectus has no end of innovative ways to avoid pain and reality.
- You are unwilling to deal with the addict's reactions. And who can blame you, intentionally antagonizing an addict is poking a hornet's nest, a particularly difficult challenge for conflict-avoiders. The addict is skilled at turning the tables, lashing out and inking you (like the squid squirting ink at its predator while it makes its escape). It can feel like you're in a court of law with the burden of proof on you; they would make excellent prosecutors if only they would use their power for good. Let's be clear about this because I hear it a lot: you are under no obligation to provide evidence when it comes to drinking or drug use. The fact is, close family members have adapted to the chaos over time by developing highly keen instincts. Drug testing is fallible, there are myriad loopholes and the recovery field is always behind the eight-ball. On the other hand, I have never, not once, seen an addict fool the instincts of a parent or spouse.
- You are uninformed. Addiction is steeped in myth, misconceptions and fallacies such as "you can't help an addict until they want help"; "there's nothing we can do until he hits bottom"; "if I just solve this one last problem things will be OK"; "it's just a phase"; "it's a matter of will power" and, probably most harmful, "treatment doesn't work." This is old-school thinking, it is uncorroborated and incorrect and it costs us untold suffering and death.
- You want a guarantee that "non-enabling" will work before you relinquish your old ways. My office is full of people (including me from time to time) who argue for what isn't working. But the risk feels too high; the "what ifs" can literally paralyze families, particularly if they have a history of unresolved trauma themselves. Parents, in particular, fall into this hole because turning your back on the disease feels like turning your back on your sons and daughters. You are advised to take actions that are fundamentally counter to your genetic and

spiritual programming. Families *require* support and guidance in order to pull this off while holding the uncertainty – this is Step One, seeing that life itself is inherently risky and there's not a thing we can do about that reality other than accept it and take action from that very premise. There are, however, exhaustive clinical data documenting predictable outcomes for what does and doesn't work on addiction.

- You are acting on what you were conditioned to do as kids; we all adapt to our own family of origin and our parents' rules, that's all we know. It's a little like the native Eskimo who doesn't see corners and edges due to being raised in a white-on-white, curvy environment. Very early on, we unconsciously adopt a way of living (an operating system) that keeps us safe within the particular environment we find ourselves in. The adaptations are survival skills and, while helpful as a child, they often become coping skills which are not at all helpful in a functional system. Keep the "peace" at any cost; put up a brave front; don't air your dirty laundry in public; don't let them see you cry; buck up; put others first; pull yourself up by your..... you get the picture. *Any sustainable solution requires our willingness to examine and loosen our grip on our own coping mechanisms and conditioned responses to stress.*
- You haven't grasped a simple, indelible truth: our ability to affect a solution is based entirely on those things *we can control*. Or perhaps you understand it but don't trust it. Rather than staying true to your own values and boundaries which will *influence* the addict, you wear yourselves out by focusing on their behaviors, a focus which gives you *the illusion* of control. We can influence and inspire others, we cannot control. Writer and producer Devon Franklin said it this way: we can only prepare for what might happen and respond well to what has just happened; we have no say in what actually happens.
- You are receiving some form of secondary gain. Conserving energy by taking the path of least resistance (what is familiar), feeling needed, gaining the acclaim of others who may see you as heroic, *feeling* like you're in control - all reinforce your enabling. Perhaps the mother of all benefits in the cost-benefit analysis of tough love is that you can postpone facing your fear. That one is my personal Goliath.
- You don't know *how* to stop and/or you don't yet have the critical first step in place: developing a support system *outside the family* system.

Sow, Seed, Water, Wait.

A gardener doesn't plant a tree and then watch it around the clock, micro-manage its growth, try to talk some sense into it, plead with it, nag it or threaten it if it's not growing fast enough. Most of us don't use force on our flowers. We care for the soil with water and fertilizer, make sure it's getting enough sun and we prop it up, fence it off or otherwise protect it from the stresses of the environment while it develops a root system.

This is about power, not force. We have the power to influence and mediate growth but we don't have control.

The following questions will help you gauge whether your next action is in support of the lifeboat or the Titanic. I encourage you to laminate the list, go through it with a wingman, then give yourself 24 hours *before doing anything for the addict* (or anyone else for that matter).

1. Was I asked? Many of us are adept at solving the addict's problems before they even appear on his or her personal radar screen. Unless you are asked, *particularly when it comes to advice-giving*, you are interfering and your motives can likely be traced back to your own fears and needs.
2. Am I suffering as a result? Is this taking time, money, energy or anything else of mine that I don't *want* to give? Is this negatively affecting my other relationships?
3. What are my feelings? Resentment, anger, feeling taken advantage of, victimized, unappreciated, used, over-extended or exhausted all indicate enabling. When you swallow these feelings, you can count on seeing them again in the form of depression, anxiety and physical illness. When those show up, are you taking responsibility for them or are you blaming the addict? In The Four Agreements, don Miguel Ruiz beautifully illustrates how easily we go to one of two internalized ego-states, the Judge or the Victim. Only consciousness and practice will give you alternatives to these two responses which keep us going nowhere.
4. Is this something a (insert age of addict here)-year-old person should be able to do for themselves? This is a "whose responsibility is it?" question. Even though we're often asked to help, when we solve a problem the addict has created, he/she receives this message: "You can't do this for yourself because you are lazy, irresponsible and/or incompetent and you can't be trusted to run your own life." From the outside, you'll see relief and perhaps temporary gratitude, from the inside, the addict's eroding self-worth goes from bad to worse, causing a physiological domino effect that mobilizes craving and compels him to drink/use. If you're a parent, ask yourself whether you would do his homework for him. Because that is an *exact* analogy. The class is LIFE 101.
5. Am I allowing the addict to **fully** experience **all** the consequences of his or her own choices? If we allow the natural cause-and-effect relationship to take place, we aren't *causing* a problem for the addict; we're simply not interrupting a natural outcome of a choice he made. Interrupting any natural or logical consequence includes any form of fixing, financing, advising, soothing or otherwise attempting to protect him from reality. Reality is Truth. The Truth is that life involves suffering and those of us who are going to be happy despite that need to be strong and well-practiced. Unless you're really evolved, most of us don't do the work of changing until not changing gets worse. For the addict, worse needs to be much, much worse because the addicted brain is sabotaging his best efforts. Despite the 35 years between me and my last drink, I recall with absolute clarity the heart-sinking laments of my family, the loss of one job after the other, my failed marriage, numerous ERs, the inside of a jail cell and life at

the Salvation Army homeless shelter. Yet, even today, all these awful memories are dwarfed next to the memory of the agonizing cravings that crept in as soon as the immediate problem was behind me. Only by experiencing the full impact of the problems caused by the addiction can the addict reach his personal “bottom,” which is essentially a pain threshold. Allowing an addict to take responsibility for himself is NOT the same as blaming or punishing him which would be salt in the wound. There is an important distinction between fault and responsibility.

The addict is apt to be disagreeable about No. 5 so I like to blame Isaac Newton and his Third Law of Motion: for every action there is a re-action equal in magnitude but opposite in direction. If you rob them of what Life gives them back, you are robbing them of the opportunity to grow and you keep them below their pain threshold. They don't need lecturing, nagging, scolding or threatening. They do need to know:

- a) There is a problem.
- b) It is MY problem.
- c) I can handle my problem. For the recovering addict, this is critical to the development of coping skills, strength, emotional maturity, self-confidence and self-worth (the operative word here is *self* which implies that we don't acquire these things unless we do it ourselves).

6. Has what I'm about to do proven successful in the past? Look at the evidence: is the addict any closer to recovery or has it been one step forward, two back? The fixing of problems caused by the addiction is not fixing the addiction. If nothing changes, nothing changes.

7. Am I working harder at the addict's life than he/she is? Have another look at Numbers 2 and 3.

What we're aiming for I think of as *filtered* help, a *hand out* not a *handout*. The Dalai Lama said the most important thing people can do in any situation is “critical thinking followed by right action.” *Critical thinking* requires more than just the one point of view; I choose people who are smart, do not have their own agenda and are willing to tell me the truth. *Followed by* means that the critical thinking comes before the action. *Right action* means doing the right thing even when it is hard; the right thing is usually easy to spot because it's always the hardest to do. Professional guidance and trusty wingmen are a necessary ingredient as you're sorting through the list – doing this exercise with my clients invariably sheds light on *their* resistances and fears. I regularly see family members let go of resentment and blame and become more understanding and supportive of each other as we go deeper into why each person is responding to the addict the way they do. This is a very illuminative, connective and healing process that puts the focus on supporting one another's weak spots and sensitivities and calling forth each person's strengths. It is a game-changer.

Letting Go and Letting God

The beauty of this age-old saying is that it's neither here nor there if your God is the Laws of Physics or Love or a Benevolent Father or the Buddha or the Force (use the Force, Luke). I am in awe of the human brain, scientists say it is the most complex thing in the known universe. But whatever power and process created the design of a leaf is smarter and has more power than my little brain. To let go does not mean to turn away from or to stop caring or to cut myself off from the person I love who is in trouble. It means I must make my peace with the reality that I can't do it for someone else no matter how much I want to, and the outcome is not in my hands. Right action is mine, the outcome is mine to let go of. Then it is a matter of trusting my God.

During an interview with a Phoenix radio station, Mother Teresa was asked by a caller, "What can I do to help others?" Her response has stayed with me over the years. "It is not a question of *what* – there are opportunities everywhere you look. *How*," she said, "that is the trick." I believe she meant that any hand extended, must be extended in Grace. As you make your way up to the summit of this, or any other, personal Everest, my hope is that you gain a deep knowing that *anything* is possible in the presence of Grace. And a Sherpa.

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.
Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.*

