

# From Enabler to Ally: A Personal Transformation Story

## SARAH'S STORY

I never thought of myself as an enabler. In fact, I would have said I was doing everything I could to help my brother, Michael. I was the one who answered his desperate calls at 2 AM. I was the one who loaned him money when he couldn't make rent. I was the one who made excuses to our parents when he missed another family dinner. I was the one trying to hold everything together while his addiction to opioids tore our family apart.

I was also exhausted, resentful, and watching my own life shrink as his addiction expanded to fill every space.

My journey from enabler to ally didn't happen overnight. It took time, painful realizations, and support to understand that what I thought was helping was actually making recovery more distant for both of us. This is the story of how I learned to truly support my brother while reclaiming my own life—a transformation that ultimately strengthened our relationship in ways I never imagined possible.

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## PHASE 1: THE ENABLING CYCLE

Looking back, I can see the patterns clearly now, though they were invisible to me then.

### The Crisis-Rescue Cycle

It always started with a crisis—Michael losing a job, facing eviction, having withdrawal symptoms, or getting into legal trouble. Each time, I would drop everything to rescue him. I paid his rent three times in six months. I called his boss to make excuses. I let him crash on my couch "just until he got back on his feet" more times than I can count.

After each rescue, there would be promises and brief improvements. "This time is different," he would say, and I desperately wanted to believe him. Sometimes there were a few weeks of stability that fed my hope. But inevitably, another crisis would emerge, and the cycle would begin again.

## **What I Didn't Understand Then**

At the time, I didn't recognize that:

- My "help" was removing the natural consequences that might have motivated change
- The emotional roller coaster was damaging my own mental health
- I was participating in a pattern that kept us both stuck
- My resentment was growing even as my support continued
- I was trying to manage his recovery rather than supporting him in managing it himself

As my therapist later helped me see, I was trapped in the enabler's paradox: the more I tried to solve Michael's problems, the more I communicated that I didn't believe he could solve them himself. My rescuing sent a message that contradicted my words of encouragement.

## **The Breaking Point**

My wake-up call came after I found Michael unconscious in my bathroom, having overdosed while staying with me. After the paramedics revived him and the immediate crisis passed, I realized something had to change—not just for him, but for me. I couldn't keep living in constant fear and chaos. I couldn't keep putting my life on hold while watching him continue to struggle.

That week, with hands shaking, I called a family addiction counselor. "I don't know how to help my brother anymore," I admitted. "I think I might be making things worse."

It was the hardest and most important call I've ever made.

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## **PHASE 2: THE TURNING POINT - UNDERSTANDING ENABLING**

My first few sessions with the counselor were eye-opening and painful. She introduced me to the concept of enabling and helped me see how my well-intentioned actions were actually supporting the addiction rather than my brother's recovery.

### **What I Learned About Enabling**

- **Definition:** Enabling means removing or cushioning the natural consequences of addiction in ways that make it easier for the addiction to continue.

- **Common Enabling Behaviors:** I checked almost every box:
  - Making excuses for absences or behaviors
  - Providing money that funded the addiction
  - Taking over responsibilities the person could manage
  - Lying to protect them from consequences
  - Prioritizing their emergencies over my own wellbeing
  - Repeatedly believing promises despite past patterns
- **The Roots of My Enabling:** Through counseling, I realized my enabling was fueled by:
  - Fear that Michael might die without my intervention
  - Guilt that I had a stable life while he struggled
  - A need to feel needed and important
  - Childhood patterns of trying to "fix" family problems
  - Discomfort with setting and maintaining boundaries

### **Hitting My Own Bottom**

The counselor asked me a question that changed everything: "What would happen if you stopped trying to manage Michael's addiction and started focusing on your own wellbeing?"

My immediate reaction was fear. "He might die," I said.

"And what's happening now, with all your help?" she asked gently.

The truth hit me like a physical blow: despite all my rescuing, Michael was still actively using, still in danger, and now I was emotionally, financially, and physically depleted as well. My enabling wasn't preventing the worst-case scenario—it was just ensuring that I would be too exhausted to handle it if it came.

That realization was my rock bottom as an enabler. I had been so focused on saving Michael that I hadn't noticed I was drowning too.

## **PHASE 3: THE ASPIRE JOURNEY - BECOMING AN ALLY**

With the support of my counselor, a family support group, and eventually a recovery coach from Aspire Impact Network, I began the difficult journey from enabling to becoming a true ally in recovery. The ASPIRE framework guided my transformation.

### **A - Acknowledging Reality**

The first step was facing the truth about addiction, enabling, and my own limitations:

- I accepted that addiction is a chronic brain disorder requiring professional treatment, not just family support
- I acknowledged that I couldn't control or cure Michael's addiction
- I recognized that my enabling was harming both of us
- I faced my fears about what might happen if I stopped rescuing
- I admitted how deeply my brother's addiction had affected my own life and relationships

**The Turning Point:** During a family session, I finally said out loud: "I love my brother, but I can't keep trying to save him at the expense of my own life. Something has to change." Speaking that truth was terrifying but also liberating.

## **S - Setting Boundaries**

Learning to set and maintain healthy boundaries was the most challenging and essential part of my journey:

- I clarified what behaviors I could and couldn't accept in my home
- I stopped providing financial support that could fund addiction
- I committed to no longer lying or making excuses for Michael
- I developed clear communication about my boundaries
- I learned to distinguish between helping and enabling

**The Turning Point:** I had to ask Michael to leave my apartment when he brought drugs into my home. It was one of my clearly stated boundaries, but enforcing it was still the hardest thing I'd ever done. I arranged for him to go to a shelter that had connections to treatment options. That night, I cried for hours but didn't call him or go get him. It was the first time I had allowed him to experience the full consequence of his choices.

## **P - Practicing Self-Care**

As I stepped back from managing Michael's life, I needed to rebuild my own:

- I returned to activities and interests I had abandoned
- I reconnected with friends I had neglected
- I established routines that supported my physical and emotional health
- I set limits on when and how I would engage with addiction-related crises
- I learned to recognize and manage my anxiety triggers

**The Turning Point:** Three months into my recovery journey as a family member, I took a weekend trip with friends—something I hadn't done in

years because I was afraid to be unavailable if Michael needed me. During that trip, I realized I was laughing again, sleeping through the night, and feeling hopeful about my future.

## **I - Improving Understanding**

Education became a powerful tool in my transformation:

- I learned about addiction as a complex health condition
- I researched evidence-based treatment approaches
- I gained insight into the recovery process and its challenges
- I connected with other families with similar experiences
- I developed a better understanding of what actually helps versus what enables

**The Turning Point:** Attending family education sessions at a local treatment center transformed how I viewed Michael's struggles. Learning about the neurobiological aspects of addiction helped me separate the person I loved from the behaviors driven by addiction. This reduced my anger and judgment while increasing my genuine compassion.

## **R - Rebuilding Relationships**

As I changed, my relationship with Michael began to transform:

- I practiced honest, direct communication about feelings and needs
- I expressed care for him while maintaining my boundaries
- I supported recovery efforts without taking responsibility for them
- I acknowledged the grief and loss we both experienced
- I began to relate to Michael as a whole person, not just "my addicted brother"

**The Turning Point:** Six months into my journey, Michael entered treatment again. Unlike previous times when I had arranged everything and pushed him into programs, this time he made the calls himself. During a family session, he told me, "It's different this time because it was my choice. I'm doing this for me, not to make you happy or get everyone off my back." I realized then that my stepping back had created space for him to step forward.

## **E - Engaging in Recovery**

I discovered my own path of growth and healing:

- I committed to my own recovery journey as a family member
- I found purpose in supporting others through family support groups
- I celebrated small victories rather than expecting perfection
- I developed resilience for the inevitable challenges

- I learned to balance supporting Michael with living my own life

**The Turning Point:** At a year into our parallel recovery journeys, I realized that regardless of what choices Michael made, I now had the tools to maintain my own wellbeing. My happiness was no longer dependent on his sobriety. This wasn't abandonment—it was the foundation that allowed me to be truly supportive without being consumed.

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## **PHASE 4: WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AN ALLY**

Today, three years into this journey, I understand what it means to be a genuine ally rather than an enabler. The difference is profound.

### **Characteristics of an Ally**

As an ally to someone in recovery, I:

- **Offer support without control:** I can provide encouragement and resources without trying to manage the recovery process.
- **Maintain healthy boundaries:** I've learned that boundaries protect both of us and actually strengthen our relationship rather than damaging it.
- **Respect recovery ownership:** I recognize that recovery belongs to the person experiencing addiction—my role is supportive, not directive.
- **Balance compassion with reality:** I can hold space for the difficulties of addiction while not excusing harmful behaviors.
- **Practice detachment with love:** I can care deeply while accepting that I cannot control outcomes.
- **Focus on my own growth:** I continue my own recovery journey regardless of where others are in theirs.
- **Provide informed support:** I offer help based on evidence and understanding rather than fear and rescuing.

### **Our Relationship Today**

Michael is now two years into his recovery journey. Our relationship has been rebuilt on a foundation of honesty, mutual respect, and

appropriate boundaries. We still have difficult moments, but they no longer derail our lives or our connection.

I no longer:

- Loan money directly (though I might contribute to treatment costs when appropriate)
- Make excuses for his behavior to others
- Put my life on hold during his challenges
- Try to rescue him from natural consequences
- Take responsibility for his recovery work

I now:

- Listen without immediately trying to fix
- Share recovery resources when welcomed
- Celebrate recovery milestones without attaching my worth to them
- Communicate honestly about my feelings and needs
- Enjoy our relationship beyond the context of addiction

Recently, Michael told me, "When you stopped trying to save me, it forced me to decide if I wanted to save myself. It was the hardest gift anyone has ever given me, but it's the reason I'm alive today."

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## **LESSONS FROM MY JOURNEY**

For others walking this path, here are the most important insights from my transformation:

### **The Paradox of Helping**

True help often means not doing what feels most natural in the moment. Sometimes the most supportive action is allowing someone to experience the natural consequences of addiction while remaining emotionally present and ready to support recovery efforts.

### **The Importance of Support**

I couldn't make this journey alone. My transformation was possible because of:

- Professional guidance from counselors and recovery coaches
- The shared wisdom of support groups like Al-Anon
- Education about addiction and recovery
- Connections with others who understood the experience
- Resources from organizations like Aspire Impact Network

### **Recovery as a Family Journey**

Addiction affects the entire family system, and healing requires change throughout that system. My recovery journey as a family member was just as important as Michael's recovery from substance use. We were both transforming unhealthy patterns into healthier ways of living and relating.

## **The Reality of the Process**

Becoming an ally rather than an enabler wasn't a single decision but a daily practice. It involved:

- Ongoing learning and self-reflection
- Mistakes and course corrections
- Emotional ups and downs
- Gradual rather than immediate change
- Continuous growth and adjustment

## **Hope in Transformation**

The journey from enabling to alliance created possibility where there had been only despair. By changing myself—the only person I truly could change—I contributed to a healthier environment where recovery became possible for both of us.

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## **REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR YOUR JOURNEY**

If my story resonates with your experience, consider reflecting on these questions:

1. What behaviors might be enabling rather than helping your loved one?
2. What fears arise when you consider changing these patterns?
3. What boundaries might support both your wellbeing and your loved one's recovery?
4. How has focusing on their addiction affected your own life and relationships?
5. What support do you need to make changes in how you respond to addiction?
6. What would being an ally rather than an enabler look like in your specific situation?
7. What small step could you take today toward healthier patterns?

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## RESOURCES FOR YOUR TRANSFORMATION

If you're ready to begin your own journey from enabling to alliance, these resources can help:

### Local Support in Nebraska

- **Aspire Impact Network:** Offers family recovery coaching, support groups, and education. Contact (402) 759-2210 or visit [www.aspireimpactnetwork.com](http://www.aspireimpactnetwork.com)
- **Alcohol and Drug Solutions:** Provides family programming alongside addiction treatment services in Lincoln.
- **Region 5 Systems:** Coordinates behavioral health services including family support programs.
- **Al-Anon/Nar-Anon Meetings:** Peer support groups specifically for family members affected by addiction. Find local meetings online.

### Educational Resources

- **"Codependent No More" by Melody Beattie:** A foundational book for understanding enabling patterns.
- **"Get Your Loved One Sober: Alternatives to Nagging, Pleading, and Threatening" by Robert Meyers and Brenda Wolfe:** Introduction to the evidence-based CRAFT approach.
- **"Beyond Addiction: How Science and Kindness Help People Change" by Jeffrey Foote, Carrie Wilkens, and Nicole Kosanke:** A compassionate, science-based guide for families.

### Online Support

- **Partnership to End Addiction:** Offers resources, parent coaching, and support at [drugfree.org](http://drugfree.org)
- **SMART Recovery Family & Friends:** Provides evidence-based support for loved ones at [smartrecovery.org](http://smartrecovery.org)
- **Faces & Voices of Recovery:** Connects families with recovery community at [facesandvoicesofrecovery.org](http://facesandvoicesofrecovery.org)

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*This personal narrative is based on real experiences shared by family members in our programs, though details have been changed to protect privacy. If you see yourself in this story, know that transformation and healing are possible for you too.*

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