

Functional Alcoholism

Isn't

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 occupation or social activities. Usually these areas are where the enabler knows the alcoholic best.

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 illnesses that grow worse 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. The 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 may demonstrate middle or late stage alcoholism characteristics including blackouts (memory loss while drinking), DUI arrests, and dysfunction within their homes, especially relationship problems with spouses and children.

The functioning alcoholic lies about (or minimizes) family neglect, abuse, and other irresponsible behavior attributed to drinking. Functionality often does not extend outside work or the informal social context.

Are You Killing an Alcoholic with Kindness

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?
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 are 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 well. The enabler may feel guilty or unsure of what to do—stuck in the role.

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, especially if the alcoholic is an employer. Frequently, stopping enabling feels like a "Catch-22."

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.

