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Exploring “Enabling Behaviours” of Wives of Persons with Substance Use Disorder in Chapter 8 of the *Big Book of Alcoholic Anonymous*

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ABSTRACT

Substance use disorder has a damaging effect on the family members of alcoholics and drug users. On the other hand, the reactions and behaviours of family members may negatively influence a person with substance use disorder. The behaviours of significant others of a person with substance use disorder that contribute to the maintenance of substance use disorder are called enabling. This study aimed to explore enabling behaviours of wives of persons with substance use disorder in Chapter 8 of *Alcoholic Anonymous’ Big Book* by utilising qualitative content analysis. Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) is one of the most commonly used programs for recovery from alcoholism. The current study sought to help mental health professionals get a better understanding of the views and premises of the AA program in reference to enabling behaviours of wives by conducting a qualitative content analysis of the *AA Big Book*. The study also discusses the healthy behaviours suggested by the authors of the *Big Book* and the comprehensiveness of the text for the readers.

Keywords: Enabling behaviour; Wives of alcoholics; Alcoholism; *Alcoholic Anonymous (AA)*; *Big Book*; 12 step self-help program; Qualitative content analysis

1. Introduction

Substance use disorder not only damages the person with substance use disorder, but also the families of users^[1,2]. On the other hand, the behaviours and

reactions of family members may affect the individual with substance use disorder^[3]. Enabling behaviour usually refers to the dysfunctional reactions of family members of a person with substance use

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disorder, that further eternalize drinking or drugging by the user. In spite of the wealth of literature on the importance of enabling behaviors by significant others of a person with substance use disorder, far fewer studies have been conducted on the nature of enabling behaviors^[3,4]. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the concept of enabling behavior in Chapter 8 of *Alcoholic Anonymous' Big Book*. Previous studies demonstrated that the 12-step programs have been helpful for different kinds of problems such as alcoholism, substance use disorder and co-dependency^[5-7]. As the 12-step program of AA is one of the most successful and pervasive approaches for recovery from alcoholism^[7,8-10], the approach of this program regarding the enabling behaviors of wives of alcoholics can shed light on the concept of enabling behavior and also help mental health professionals acquire a better understanding about AA's viewpoint on the concept and treatment.

1.1 Enabling behaviour

Significant others of a person with substance use disorder may employ diverse and often changing ways of coping with that person^[11]. These ways of coping may influence the behaviours of the individual with substance use disorder^[12,4,3]. Myers and Salt^[13] postulated that in families with substance use disorder, those behaviors of the family members that contribute to the maintenance and expansion of the substance use disorder of the addicted individual are called enabling. Enabling may consist of cleaning up after an alcoholic, bailing an addict out of jail, paying his or her debts, getting out of dinner invitations, calling the addict's boss and telling him or her that the addict is sick, and so on. Playing the role of peacemaker during family conflicts is considered a milder expression of enabling behavior. Of course, the family members often cannot see how this kind of "helping" is harmful^[13]. According to Rotunda and Doman^[4], enabling is

"a learned set of behavioral responses enacted by significant others that have the potential to reinforce drinking or drugging responses, thus increasing the probability

of such a response in the future. This consequence may result from direct behaviors of the significant other (e.g., buying drugs for the person with substance use disorder), as well as through negative reinforcement mechanisms (e.g., directly or indirectly helping or permitting the person with substance use disorder to avoid naturally occurring negative consequences associated with drinking and other drug use)" (page 268).

For measuring the enabling behaviours of partners and spouses of alcohol-dependent individuals some assessment tools have been developed such as "Spouse Enabling Inventory (SEI)"^[14], "Significant Other Checklist"^[15]; and the "Behavioural Enabling Scale (BES)"^[3].

Thomas, Yoshioka, and Ager^[14] managed a program named "disabling program" which was successful in diminishing the enabling behaviours of the spouses of alcohol-dependent participants of their study. The results of another study^[16], demonstrated that the frequency of enabling behaviours of wives of alcoholics decreased with the duration of the wives' membership in Al-Anon (the 12-step self-help program for families and friends of alcoholics). The longer the wives had been members of the Al-Anon group, the less frequent the behaviours displayed. Acceptance of the principles of Al-Anon appeared to be related to a decrease in such counterproductive behaviors. This study also showed that Al-Anon was effective in helping wives of alcoholics toward constructive behaviors^[16].

1.2 Alcoholic Anonymous

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is one of the most effective, famous, and largely available treatment approaches for recovery from alcoholism in the world^[17-19]. AA is a self-help group that assists individuals to get over their alcoholism and to maintain sobriety through its emphasis on spirituality, social support, and its liberal 12-step. Alcoholic Anonymous was originated by Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith in 1935, and quickly grew in the 1940s. AA self-help groups are now all over the world and are

Table 1. The description of enabling behaviours and some of the examples in the related literature.

Name of researchers	Description of enabling behaviours	Some of examples of enabling behaviours
Myers and Salt (2000) ^[13]	Those behaviours of the family members that contribute to maintenance and expansion of substance use disorder of the addicted individual is called enabling	cleaning up the mess made by an alcoholic; bailing an addict out of jail; paying his or her debts; getting out of dinner invitations; calling the addict’s boss and telling him or her that the addict is sick
Rotunda and Doman (2001) ^[4]	a learned set of behavioural responses enacted by significant others that have the potential to reinforce drinking or drugging responses, thus increasing the probability of such a response in the future. This consequence may result from direct behaviors of the significant other, as well as through negative reinforcement mechanisms .	Direct behaviors of the significant other like: buying drugs for the person with substance use disorder negative reinforcement mechanisms like: directly or indirectly helping or permitting the person with substance use disorder to avoid naturally occurring negative consequences associated with drinking and other drug use

known as one of the best treatment approaches to alcoholism. Bill Wilson encouraged the medical community to study AA. As a result, a number of studies reported the efficacy of AA participation in the recovery from alcoholism ^[8-10,19], and numerous rehabilitation centres for alcohol abuse continue to use the principles of AA as part of a total treatment program ^[20].

Bill Wilson, with cooperation from some of the original members of AA in 1939, published a book entitled *Alcoholics Anonymous*. This text is known to AA members as the *Big Book*. Subsequent to the publication of the *Big Book*, AA’s membership grew rapidly and by 1955 the membership was estimated at 150,000 men and women (AA World Services, 1976). *Alcoholics Anonymous’ Big Book* includes the philosophy and program of AA and comprises 9 chapters. Chapter 8 of the book, under the name “to wives” was written by the wives of Alcoholic Anonymous members and allocated to the wives of alcoholics and address the problems, challenges, and difficulties that these women encounter during the period of their husbands’ alcoholism and in their husband’s process of recovery (if they have to go through it). Moreover, this chapter points out mistakes that the wives made in relationships with their husbands and also offers alternative ways of behaving with their husbands.

2. The current study

Previous studies have demonstrated that at least

some partners of people with substance use disorder have responded to behave in a manner consistent with popular concepts of enabling. Nevertheless, the extent, effect, and particular nature of enabling behaviors among significant others remain understudied ^[8-10,18]. Therefore, the present study aimed to explore enabling behaviors of wives of alcoholics as put forward in Chapter 8 of *Alcoholic Anonymous’ Big Book*. This study answered the following research questions: How does the text mention enabling behaviour? What kind of enabling behaviours are cited in the text? What are healthy behaviours as suggested by the authors as alternatives for enabling behaviour? How comprehensive is the book regarding enabling behaviours?

While Alcoholics Anonymous self-help program has been recognized as a successful and efficient approach to alcoholism’s recovery ^[8-10,21], investigating the viewpoint of AA about enabling behaviour may further illuminate this concept. Furthermore, it may help mental health specialists in the field of substance use disorder acquire a more comprehensive understanding of this program.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

To answer the research questions of the study, qualitative content analysis was used. Qualitative content analysis is an inductive approach utilized for written or visual materials with the goal of identify-

ing particular characteristics of the material. One of the advantages of content analysis is its unobtrusiveness. The existence of the observer does not impact what is being observed ^[22,23].

There are different approaches that fall under the classification of qualitative content analysis. Three approaches identified by Hesieh and Shannon ^[23] are conventional, directed, and summative. For analysing Chapter 8 of *AA's Big Book*, a summative content analysis was used. In summative content analysis, the focus is on exploring the fundamental meanings of the words that make up the content under study. Beginning with determining certain words or content in text, the purpose of this approach is to understand the contextual use of words or content. A summative approach involves latent content analysis which is the process of interpretation of content ^[23].

3.2 Textbook selection

The *Alcoholic Anonymous' Big Book* was chosen because this book is considered as the most representative textbook of AA. The *Big Book* displays the values, beliefs, and fundamental content of the program ^[24]. Chapter 8 was selected because this chapter was written by the wives of Alcoholic Anonymous members to address the wives of men who drink too much. These chapter mansions to the problems and challenges of wives of alcoholics and their feelings, reactions and mistakes. It also suggests a healthy way of behaving the alcoholic husbands.

3.3 Procedures

The first author read Chapter 8 word by word and took notes. Based on the notes, she began to look for patterns of similarity and difference. While keeping in her mind the research questions, she started to identify codes from meaning units in the text in question. Meaning units of analysis could be a word, sentence or statement which was related to the concept of enabling behaviour, its examples and the suggested healthy behaviours of wives of alcoholics. After recognizing codes, she categorized them with regard to the research questions of the study. Afterwards, the number of codes was counted to determine the frequency of each code. The framework for analysis was developed based on the definitions and examples of enabling behaviours in the relevant literature. **Table 2** mentions a sample of meaning units and related codes.

4. Findings and discussion

This study used qualitative content analysis to explore enabling behaviour in Chapter 8 of *Alcoholic Anonymous' Big Book*. In this part of the article, findings of the research questions will be addressed, and subsequently discussed.

4.1 How does the text refer to enabling behaviour?

Chapter 8 of *Alcoholic Anonymous' Big Book* addressed wives of alcoholics and their problems,

Table 2. A sample of meaning units and codes of the data analysis process.

	Meaning unit from the text	Codes
Enabling behaviours mentioned in the <i>Big Book</i>	We have told innumerable lies to protect our pride and our husband's reputation	Telling lies to people about the husband
	We could make few social engagements.	Limiting social engagement
	Our homes have been battle-grounds many an evening	Getting Angry and fighting with the alcoholic husband
Healthy Behaviours suggested by the authors of the <i>Big Book</i>	Try not to condemn your alcoholic husband no matter what he says or does	Stop condemning the husband
	Your desire to protect him should not cause you to lie to people when they have a right to know where he is and what he is doing	Stop telling lies
	The first principle of success is that you should never be angry	Not to get angry

behaviours and attitudes. In this chapter, there are some statements that indirectly mention enabling behaviours; nevertheless, there is no direct mention of the term “enabling behaviour”. One of the statements written by the wives of alcoholics that mentions enabling behaviours indirectly is on page 104 which point out the mistakes they have made, “As wives of Alcoholic Anonymous, we would like you to feel that we understand as perhaps few do. We want to analyse mistakes we have made”. In another part of the chapter, after describing the situation of the wives in the alcoholic family, it is stated that “under these conditions we naturally make mistakes”. These statements offer clues for how wives make reference to enabling behaviours. These kinds of statements that deal with the mistakes of wives in relation to their alcoholic husbands have been repeated 3 times in the text.

Alcoholics Anonymous was founded in 1935, and *AA's Big Book* was originally published in 1939^[24]. It was only later in the 1950s that the word enabling was used by early Al-Anon literature to describe the disease of significant others of alcoholics caused by the pathogenic effects of alcoholism on the family members^[25]. As a result, it is acceptable that by the time of publishing the *Big Book*, the term “enabling behaviour” had not been used in the addiction literature. However, respecting the explanations of the text, and based on the definitions of enabling behaviour, it can be implied that the mistakes of the wives refer to their enabling behaviours.

4.2 What kinds of enabling behaviours have been mentioned in the text?

Different kinds of enabling behaviours have been remarked on in Chapter 8 of *Big Book*. Totally, this chapter highlighted 26 different types of enabling behaviours. Some of the enabling behaviours which are mentioned in the text include: Telling lies to the husband’s employer and his friends that he was sick, being hysterical, ignoring and denying the addiction problem, getting angry with the husband, criticizing, having retaliatory love affairs with other men, and limiting social engagement.

Some of the enabling behaviours have been brought up directly in the text, for example, “frequently, you have felt obligated to tell your husband’s employer and his friends that he was sick, when as a matter of fact he was tight” (p. 115). On the other hand, some of the enabling behaviours have been mentioned indirectly through the advice and insights given by the authors. In the sentence: “Let him see that you want to be helpful rather than critical” (p. 111), the word “critical” in the text implies the enabling behaviour of the wives. Another example of an indirect hint of enabling behaviour is about lying, “Your desire to protect him should not cause you to lie to people when they have a right to know where he is and what he is doing” (p.115).

Of all sorts of enabling behaviours mentioned in this chapter, some of them just brought up ones, but some others have been remarked on several times. For example, criticizing, limiting social engagement because of the husband’s alcoholism and telling lies to the employers and friends of the husband have been repeated respectively 5, 4 and 3 times. The repetition of the mentioned enabling behaviours could be because of the importance of these behaviours and the frequency of them in addictive family systems.

Most of the enabling behaviours mentioned in Chapter 8 are aligned with the examples of enabling behaviours in the related studies. For example, some of the items of Behavioral Enabling Scale^[3] involve: “Partner made excuses to others for client’s impaired behaviour when s/he was drinking or high”, “partner changed or cancelled family plans or social activities because client was drinking, using drugs, or hangover”, and “Partner helped conceal client’s drinking or drug use from employers or co-workers” (p.272).

4.3 What are healthy behaviours suggested by authors as alternatives for enabling behaviours?

Besides explaining the mistakes of wives of alcoholics in Chapter 8, the authors give some pieces of advice to the wives of alcoholics about how to deal with the situation they are living in. Some of the suggestions are about how to behave healthily

in the period of their husbands’ active alcoholism or in their process of recovery from alcoholism. Some examples of the ways of reacting to an active alcoholic are: “Do not set your heart on reforming your husband. You may be unable to do so, no matter how hard you try” (p. 111); “Let him see that you want to be helpful rather than critical” (p. 111); and, “Talk about his condition or this book only when he raises the issue” (p. 112).

The following paragraph is about understanding the situation of a recovering alcoholic and the way of behaving with him,

The fact is that he should work with other people to maintain his own sobriety. Sometimes he will be so interested that he becomes really neglectful... It will do a little good if you point that out and urge more attention to yourself. We find it a real mistake to dampen his enthusiasm for alcoholic work. You should join in his efforts as possibly as you can (p. 119).

While mentioning the healthy ways of behaving with alcoholic husbands, the authors attempted to explain the disease of addiction and its effects on the alcoholic person. They also clarified the needs and conditions of a recovering alcoholic. In this way, the authors help the wives to realize the nature of their husbands’ disease. It seems that the raised awareness of the wives aligned with behavioural alternatives

would make them more successful in decreasing their enabling behaviours.

Some of the suggestions of Chapter 8 are concentrated on the personal life of wives. The advice usually encourages them not to preoccupy themselves with their husbands’ alcoholism: “Be determined that your husband’s drinking is not going to spoil your relations with your children or your friends” (p. 111), or “It is possible to have a full and useful life, through your husband continues to drink” (p. 111). Sometimes the authors brought up evidence to prove their claim, “We know women who are unafraid, even happy under these conditions” (p. 111). **Table 3** points out some of the examples of the enabling behaviours (or mistakes which the wives had made) and the healthy behaviours derived from the data analysis of this study.

This finding is consistent with the existing literature on the recovery from co-dependence. Previous studies demonstrated that wives of individuals with substance use disorder are co-dependent ^[26,28] and enabling behaviour is one of the characteristics of co-dependents ^[28,29]. So, for decreasing the enabling behaviours and behaving in a healthy way, wives need to work on their recovery from co-dependence. According to Whitfield ^[30], for recovery from co-dependence, co-dependents firstly need to understand that they are powerless over others, but they are powerful over themselves. They began to reclaim

Table 3. Examples of the enabling behaviours and the healthy behaviours derived from data analysis of this study.

Examples of enabling behaviours mentioned in the <i>Big Book of Alcoholic Anonymous</i>	Healthy behaviours suggested by the authors of the <i>Big Book of Alcoholic Anonymous</i>
Getting Angry and fighting with the alcoholic husband	Not to get angry Avoiding conflicts or keeping them under control Solving the problems in a friendly way Being patient
Criticising the husband	Stop criticising him
Telling lies to others (like his employer or friends) about the husband	Stop telling lies Being honest with the people who need to know the reality of the husband’s situation
Ignoring and denying the alcoholism problem	Acceptance of the reality Trying to increase awareness about the disease of alcoholism and undersetting the husband’s situation
Controlling the husband both in his active alcoholism or in the process of recovery	Not to control the husband

their personal power by working on a process of boosting their awareness, and by taking responsibility for their well-being and functioning.

To Beattie ^[29], the basis of recovery from co-dependence which the majority of co-dependents usually forget is that everyone is responsible for themselves. In the process of recovery, the co-dependents learn to take care of themselves by detaching from the object of their obsession and stopping controlling others.

4.4 How far is the book comprehensive enough regarding enabling behaviours?

It sounds that Chapter 8 of *AA's Big Book* was written comprehensively in terms of enabling behaviour. The authors tried to include most of the common mistakes of wives of alcoholics, and provide the wives with helpful and practical advice. They also attempted to increase the awareness of wives about the disease of alcoholism which could enable them to understand the situation of their husbands. When the pioneers of AA identified alcoholism as a disease for the first time in the 1940s, the knowledge and experience of people and even mental health professionals about the disease of alcoholics and their family members was anecdotal and insufficient. It was around 20 years later that the American Medical Association (AMA) established a definition of alcoholism as a disease ^[31]. Also, it was in the late 1970s that the word co-dependent was developed to describe people who had become dysfunctional as a result of living with a partner with substance use disorder ^[32]. So, considering the atmosphere of the 1940s, this chapter is a creative, pioneering and comprehensive writing about wives of alcoholics, their challenges, enabling behaviours and alternative ways of dealing with an alcoholic husband.

It is worth mentioning that the writers applied an empathetic approach to writing this chapter. They used the plural pronoun “we” and tried to share the deep feelings and real and genuine experiences of wives frankly. The last paragraph of the chapter in question can be considered as one of the most empathic expressions of the chapter:

We realize that we have been giving you much direct advice. We may have seemed to lecture. If that is so we are sorry, for we ourselves, don't always care for people who lecture us. But what we have related is based upon experience, some of it painful. We had to learn these things the hard way. That is why we are anxious that you understand, and that you avoid these unnecessary difficulties (p. 121).

It seems that using the plural pronoun of “we” aligned with the empathetic style of writing made this chapter more effective. Concerning the anger, pain and frustration of wives of people with substance use disorder, it seems reasonable to firstly try to empathize with their difficult situation. This way of writing may decrease the denial of wives which is one of the common characteristics among them ^[28,19,33].

5. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to explore the enabling behaviours in Chapter 8 of *Alcoholic Anonymous' Big Book* that was written for wives of alcoholics. The findings of this study shed light on the concept of enabling behaviours and especially on the ways of decreasing these behaviours through the outlook of pioneers of 12 step self-help programs.

The authors of *Big Book* used a compassionate and sympathetic style to advise the wives about their enabling behaviours. They tried firstly to show their empathy to the tough and confusing situation of the wives. Then, by providing information about the disease of alcoholism and the consequences of this disease on the alcoholic person, the authors attempted to help the wives to gain a better understanding about their husbands' disease and not to personalize their husbands' reactions. The writers also suggested some alternative ways of behaving with an alcoholic or recovering husband. Moreover, the wives are advised to concentrate on their own lives rather than hopelessly try to rescue their husbands. The finding clarified that efforts to diminish the enabling behaviours of the wives need to accompany with raising

their awareness and reducing their co-dependent characteristics.

The way that authors of *Big Book* address the wives' feelings and problems and especially their enabling behaviours can be used by counselors, psychologists or other mental health professionals as a valuable source for planning the recovery and treatment plans for decreasing enabling behaviours of wives of persons with substance use disorder.

Although *AA's Big Book* is usually used by recovering alcoholics in 12-step program of AA, Chapter 8 of this book is an insightful reference for family members of alcoholics, especially their wives. The flow and simple style of writing besides providing practical suggestions made this text a suitable source for different readers with various knowledge and levels of education.

Author Contributions

As the first author, I, Parastoo Askian, had the central part in the all parts of conducting research like choosing the methodology, collecting data and data analysis and driving conclusions. The second author, Hesameddin Masoumian Sharghi contributed in choosing and clarifying the topic of the article and also in the process of data analysis.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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