

**Family Dynamics of Addiction and Recovery:
How to Let Go to Regain Your Peace of Mind
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

What are you afraid of? Fear and anxiety are part and parcel of daily life with familial addiction. Fear is a paintbrush that colors almost all aspects of family life. Some fears are easily recognizable in an addicted family: "What if he gets arrested?" "When am I going to get the call in the middle of the night saying that she has died in a drunk driving wreck?" "I never know when I write a check if there will be any money in the bank to cover it." "He may decide that he wants to change careers again for the third time this year."

Family members experience a variety of fears living in an addicted system. All kinds of survival roles and behaviors develop to attempt to minimize the fear, anxiety, and general pain of not knowing what will happen next, and to deal with the dysfunction happening in the present. With so much turmoil going on, it is no surprise that family members feel compelled to establish some kind of control.

The need for control becomes compulsive. The more the persistent attempts to recover or maintain control, the more the emotional discomfort increases, rather than decreases. When family members are instructed to "let go of control", it usually initially makes no sense to them. If they don't have control, (or at least try to), who will?

They work extremely hard pursuing an illusion of control. Every time they think that they have figured out something that will work to minimize the drinking or the detrimental consequences of the drinking, it won't work the next time they attempt it. They keep trying the same things over and over, not being able to believe that letting go, would actually reduce their emotional turmoil rather than increasing it.

Letting go of the drive to manage others is a notion that may initially be incomprehensible. When you think about your previous attempts to stage-manage not only the lives of your family members and the real affect of your efforts, you can identify that your efforts do not work - with predictability and consistency.

Attempts to remain in control of the details and events of one's life and environment are about trying to manage anxiety and trying to solve problems. It is very difficult to solve the problems that belong to someone other than yourself. You typically will not get much cooperation.

While there seems to be a contradictory relationship between "letting go" and empowerment, if you are compulsively trying to resolve the problems that do not belong to you, you will not have the time and energy to solve the problems that are your responsibility. One of the things learned in the twelve step recovery program for family members of alcoholics is that faith in a "power greater than yourself" helps to abolish the fear, while you are practicing "letting go" of others.

The actual mechanics of how to let go is somewhat more illusive. "Letting go" is not the same thing as detachment with anger or "emotional cutoff." "Letting go with love" involves accepting the reality that you actually don't have authority over others' feelings, decisions, and behavior. It involves giving up responsibility for others' business. Letting go allows others the dignity to assume responsibility for their own lives. Giving up the illusion of control of others empowers family members to decide how they can genuinely live their lives in the fullest way possible.

For a beginning effort to let go, first identify the ways in the past, that you have tried to assert control over your significant other. Identify exactly how those attempts have not worked over time, consistently. Identify the negative consequences of those efforts on your own life. To continue your efforts in letting go, when you feel compelled to step in, ask yourself, "Whose business is this?" If it's not your business, stay out of it. If you answer yourself, "It is my business because his/her behavior affects me", then identify where your power and your responsibilities lie. Then, take custody of your own responsibilities in the situation.

How do you know that you are letting go? You don't spend your day worrying about what someone else is doing or not doing. You don't step in to solve someone else's problems, then feel compelled to sell the solution to them. You don't spend your energy trying to determine out how you can take charge of your own needs after you have used all your resources taking control of someone who should be taking care of themselves. You find that you often have serenity even amidst the presence of life's ups and downs and problems.

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