

**Detachment:
How the Family Can Be Alright When the Addict Is Still Using
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

It is normal for family members, especially parents, to believe that they cannot be okay when someone they love is sick or miserable. It is normal for them to think it would be betrayal to be alright in the midst of a beloved's illness or discomfort. However, that is exactly what is called for in the case of familial addiction. Remember what the airline flight attendants say in their speech before take off. They remind you that in case of emergency and the deployment of the oxygen masks, to first place the mask on your own face before you attempt to help others. This is the same kind of situation.

Detachment is a tool for family members' recovery and a goal of most recovery programs for codependents. Detachment makes it possible to give up responsibility for another person's disease or recovery from it. As part of the family dynamics of addiction, the family member becomes hopelessly entangled in the addict's addiction. The family member gets obsessed with the addict. Healthy detachment from the addict's addiction must occur in order to begin one's own recovery. When family members are detached in a healthy manner, they are more likely to be able to seize an opportunity to assist the addict to get into recovery.

In their obsession with the addict's addiction, family members typically think that they have the answers, that they can (or should) fix it, or that they know exactly what the addict needs to do to change their lives. In the process, you get locked into a struggle for control that just helps perpetuate the addiction. When you are obsessing about others' problems, you are focusing all your energy and other resources on what they are doing or not doing, thinking or not thinking, feeling or not feeling. These obsessions about others don't solve anyone's problems. To get locked into a struggle over control with the addict helps the addict stay in denial by blaming you.

When you are obsessing about someone else, you become detached from yourself. You don't know what you are feeling. You question your own sense of reality and sanity. You may get into a circular pattern of worrying, reacting, and obsessively trying to control. Family members tend to get so bound up in the coercive pattern that they forget that they have other choices than to react in this manner. They are engaged in compulsive behavior, like the addict. They become invested in their own solutions and compulsively keep trying to sell that solution to the addict. Family members' solutions may be right on. They may be perfectly rational or reasonable. Unfortunately, addiction is not rational, nor reasonable.

Family members often get to a place of detachment through frustration and anger. Detachment does not have to involve anger or a hostile withdrawal. It does not involve an acceptance of anything that comes your way. It is not about withholding love and concern.

Family members can detach with love. Healthy detachment involves mentally, emotionally, and sometimes physically, letting go of others' responsibilities. With healthy detachment, you acknowledge that you cannot solve another's problems and you allow them the dignity to do it for themselves. Healthy detachment is also about eliminating the worry that goes with taking on responsibility for another without the authority or the ability to effect change. Healthy detachment also assumes that you take on the job of your own responsibilities.

How do family members detach with love? It is easier to let go of control of something when you realize that you never really had control in the first place. A good place to start with learning healthy detachment is to identify how your attempts to take control have not worked and have in fact, created unmanageability in your own life. These attempts might involve trying to manage their mood, limit their intake of chemicals, manipulate, nag, reason, plead or shame them into changing their behavior. It is helpful to understand that your efforts to take control have involved "chasing an illusion of control". The illusion of control comes from thinking that your efforts worked, when in fact, over time, the effort was not effective. A family member, in focusing on "them", becomes a person that s/he doesn't want to be as his/her own life becomes unmanageable. When family members can identify how attempts are not working and how those attempts create havoc in their own lives, it is easier to give up the illusion of control and the need to control.

Family members can recover, regardless of whether the addict does. Allowing the addict to suffer the natural negative consequences of their behavior can allow crises to happen. Having peace of mind and stability in your own life allows you to be able to take advantage of the crises that occur and to assist the addict to find the appropriate help they need when they are most willing to accept it.

The anonymous "Let Go" text sums up quite eloquently what detachment with love is all about:

Let Go

- • To let go does not mean to stop caring, it means I can't do it for someone else.
- • To let go is not to cut myself off, it's the realization that I can't control another.
- • To let go is not to enable, but to allow learning from natural consequences.
- • To let go is to admit powerlessness, which means the outcome is not in my hands.
- • To let go is not to try to change or blame another, it's to make the most of myself.
- • To let go is not to care for, but to care about.
- • To let go is not to fix, but to be supportive.
- • To let go is not to judge, but to allow another to be a human being.
- • To let go is not be in the middle arranging all the outcomes but to allow others to affect their destinies.
- • To let go is not to be protective, it's to permit another to face reality.
- • To let go is not to deny, but to accept.

- · To let go is not to nag, scold, or argue, but instead to search out my own shortcomings and correct them.
- · To let go is not to adjust everything to my desires but to take each day as it comes, and cherish myself in it.
- · To let go is not to criticize and regulate anybody but to try to become what I dream I can be.
- · To let go is not to regret the past, but to grow and live for the future.
- · To let go is to fear less, and love more.

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