

## Learning to Let Go Of The Illusion Of Control By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

What are you afraid of? Fear and anxiety are overarching ways of life with familial addiction. Fear is a paintbrush that colors almost all aspects of family life. Some fears are easily identifiable 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 all kinds of fears living in an addicted system.

All kinds of survival roles and behaviors develop to try to reduce 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 chaos going on, it is no wonder that family members feel compelled to establish some kind of control. The need for control becomes compulsive. The more the compulsive attempts to regain or retain 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 really hard pursuing an illusion of control. Every time they think that they have figured out something that will work to reduce the drinking or the negative consequences of the drinking, it won't work the next time they try it. They keep trying the same things over and over, not being able to imagine that "letting go" would actually reduce their emotional turmoil rather than increasing it.

Letting go of the compulsion to control others is a notion that may initially be incomprehensible. When you think about your prior attempts to stage-manage the lives of your family members, especially the addicted ones, closer examination should reveal that those efforts do not work – with predictability and consistency over time.

Addiction is an illness that defies all reasons and logic—at least in the application of dealing with addiction. When there is an obvious lack of control, it is reasonable that "someone" should step up and take control. This restoration of control would eliminate all the problems caused by addiction, including the emotional turmoil experienced by family members observing anxiously on the sidelines or in the thick of the battle.

Family members' attempts to take control are usually problem solving attempts. To solve a problem, however, it must be yours to solve. It is very difficult to solve the problems that belong to someone else. You usually will not get much cooperation from the person with the problem. They typically have other ideas about how to solve the problem, if they even perceive that a problem exists.

The first step for family members who are working diligently to solve the problem of a loved one's addiction, is to identify their own attempts to control or problem solve and to identify how those attempts have not worked. It is also helpful to identify which of those "helping" behaviors have served as "enabling".

The next step is to stop taking responsibility for the addict's recovery or active addiction and to step out of the way to allow him/her to suffer the natural negative consequences of addiction. This "helps" the addict to become motivated to change. The family member is simply "letting go" of the "illusion of control" of the addict, and "letting go" of responsibility for the addict's decisions and behavior.

While there seems to be a paradoxical relationship between "letting go" and empowerment, if you are compulsively trying to solve the problems that do not belong to you, you will not have the time and energy to solve the problems that are your responsibility.

In the twelve step recovery program for family members of alcoholics, a sense of spirituality, faith, and the support of others, helps to abolish the fear, while 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 fact that you really don't have control over others' feelings, decisions, and behavior, etc. It involves giving up responsibility for others' business. Letting go allows others the dignity to take responsibility for their own lives.

Giving up the illusion of control of others empowers us to decide how we can genuinely live our own lives in the fullest way possible. To let go, ask yourself, "Whose business/job 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 responsibility lies. If you are hiding your purse in your own home to prevent theft by an active addict, your responsibility to self may be to not allow the active addict to live in your house. Can you prevent the addict from stealing from you? No, but you can decide who gets to live in your home. Taking care of your own responsibilities often involve difficult choices.

Many family members shrink from denying their addicted loved one a place to live, for fear that the addict will die before s/he sobers up. It is not an unrealistic fear. Many do die from addiction. Many also die from addiction while living in the family home. Family members must make their own choices based on what they can live with. For many family members, letting go is a somewhat lengthy process, built on successive steps and continually improving awareness and insight.

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 figure out how you can take care of your own needs after you have used all your resources taking care of someone who "should" be taking care of themselves. You find that you often have serenity or peace even amidst the presence of life's ups and downs and problems.