Letting Go: Detaching From A Spouse's Alcoholism
How the Family Can Be Alright When the Alcoholic Is Still Drinking

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Many family members (especially parents) believe that they cannot be ok when someone they love is sick or miserable. It may feel like 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.

"Letting go", or "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 addiction or recovery from it. As part of the family dynamics of addiction, the spouse becomes hopelessly entangled in the addict’s addiction, becoming obsessed with the addict. Healthy detachment from the addict’s addiction must occur in order to begin one's own recovery. When a spouse or other 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.

With all the focus on the addict, the spouse may begin to behave as if s/he has the answers, that they can (or should) fix it, or that they know exactly what the addict needs to do to change his/her life. In the process of obsessing about the other's problems, the non-alcoholic spouse focuses all his/her energy and other resources on what the alcoholic is/is not doing. These obsessions don't solve anyone’s problems.

When 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 "let go with love". Healthy detachment involves mentally, emotionally, and sometimes physically, letting go of others’ responsibilities. When you "Let Go With Love", you acknowledge that you cannot solve another’s problems and you allow them the dignity to do it for themselves. When you let go with love, you are more able to let go of 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:

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