

Learning to Let Go of the Illusion of Control

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

What are you afraid of? Fear and anxiety are pervasive in families dealing with addiction. Fear colors nearly every aspect of family life. Some fears are readily identifiable in families affected by addiction: "What if they get arrested?" "When will I receive the call in the dead of night informing me of their death in a drunk driving accident?" "I never know if there will be enough money in the bank to cover a check." "They might decide to change careers for the third time this year." Family members experience a multitude of fears while living with someone with a substance use disorder. In the chaos of not knowing what will happen next, it's unsurprising that family members feel compelled to establish some semblance of control in an attempt to reduce their anxiety. The need for control translates into compulsively attempting to regain stability. The more the effort to take control of the environment and those in it, the more emotional discomfort escalates rather than diminishes.

When therapists or individuals in Al-Anon initially advise family members to relinquish control, it often seems nonsensical to them. They may either fail to recognize their attempts to seize control or find the idea of yet another person surrendering control absurd. The question arises: if they don't exert control, who will? In their efforts to solve problems, they attempt to control others' feelings, decisions, behaviors, and outcomes. They futilely strive to control aspects beyond their influence. Family members dedicate significant energy to chasing the illusion of control. Despite believing they've discovered solutions to reduce drinking or its adverse effects, attempts prove unsuccessful. They persist in repeating these futile efforts, unable to comprehend that "letting go" could alleviate emotional distress rather than exacerbate it.

When someone with substance use disorder is clearly at the center of the chaos in the family, letting go of the compulsion to fix their problem might initially seem incomprehensible. Upon reflection on prior attempts to micromanage the lives of people with addiction, one should realize that these efforts consistently fail over time. Every solution that family members devise to change that person and their relationship with a mood-altering drug requires their cooperation and willingness to change.

Addiction is an illness that defies reason and logic, particularly in terms of addressing it. When control is visibly lacking, it's natural to feel that "someone" should step in and take charge. The assumed restoration of control would ostensibly resolve all problems stemming from addiction, including the emotional turmoil experienced by family members who watch anxiously from the sidelines or are actively engaged in the struggle.

Family members' attempts to seize control typically stem from a desire to solve problems. However, to solve a problem, it must be one's own to solve. It's exceedingly difficult to solve problems that belong to someone else, especially when the person with the problem often resists cooperation or even acknowledging the issue's existence.

The initial step for family members earnestly striving to address a loved one's addiction is to recognize their efforts to control or solve their loved one's problems and acknowledge the ineffectiveness of those efforts. It's also beneficial to discern which of these "helping" behaviors have facilitated "enabling."

The subsequent step is to cease assuming responsibility for the loved one's recovery or ongoing addiction and to step aside, allowing them to face the natural consequences of their addiction. People are more motivated to change in the face of discomfort, fear, or pain. The family member is simply relinquishing the "illusion of control" over the person with an addiction and renouncing responsibility for their decisions and behavior.

While there appears to be a paradoxical relationship between "letting go" and empowerment, compulsive attempts to solve problems that aren't

one's own detract from effectively addressing personal responsibilities. When you can detach with love, you can still let them know that you care, that you are rooting for them to be able to choose recovery, and that you are willing to help them in that recovery. That does not mean taking up the mantle of caring for them again.

In the twelve-step recovery program for family members of people who have a drinking problem (Al-Anon), a sense of spirituality, faith, and peer support aid in alleviating fear while practicing "letting go" of others. However, the practical mechanics of "letting go" remain somewhat elusive. "Letting go" differs from detachment fueled by anger or emotional withdrawal. "Letting go with love" involves recognizing that you have no control over others and releasing the responsibility for solving their problem. It grants others the dignity to assume responsibility for their own lives.

Abandoning the illusion of control over others empowers individuals to determine how to live their lives to the fullest authentically. To let go, one must ask, "Whose business is this?" If it's not one's own, it's best to refrain from involvement. If the response is, "It is my business because their behavior affects me," then one must discern where their responsibility lies. For instance, if you're hiding your purse in your own home to prevent theft by someone with addiction, your solution is not to allow that person to reside in your house until they are in recovery. Taking responsibility for one's life entails making difficult choices.

Many family members hesitate to deny their addicted loved one a place to live out of fear that they might succumb to death before achieving sobriety—a fear not unfounded, as many do perish due to addiction, even while residing in the family home. Each family member must make choices based on what they can live with. For many, letting go is a gradual process characterized by successive steps and ongoing growth in awareness and insight.

How do you know when you're letting go? You no longer fret over someone else's actions or inactions. You refrain from trying to sell the family member with addiction the solution. You find that you have the

resources to tend to your needs instead of depleting them trying to take care of someone else fighting against you. You may find that amidst life's fluctuations and challenges, you often experience serenity or peace.

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Letting go of control, particularly with love, entails acknowledging our limitations in influencing others' actions and decisions. Learning to detach with love involves untangling ourselves from the web of compulsive problem-solving and enabling behaviors. It requires a willingness to release responsibility for others' choices and outcomes. Tools such as The Worry Workbook, which offers practical guidance on managing stress and worry, can facilitate this process.

Individuals can differentiate between areas where they have control and those without power. Through exercises like The Worry Worksheet, you can develop strategies to let go of needless worry and unhelpful beliefs that hinder your effectiveness and happiness. In aligning with the principles of detachment with love, these tools empower individuals to cultivate healthier boundaries and prioritize their well-being while still maintaining compassion and care for their loved ones struggling with addiction.



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