

Detachment: How the Family Can Be Alright When the Person With Substance Use Disorder Is Still Using

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

It is typical for family members, especially parents, to believe they cannot be okay when someone they love is sick or miserable. They may feel that being alright amid a loved one's illness or discomfort would be a betrayal. However, in the case of familial addiction, it is crucial to learn to be okay regardless of the substance use disorder. Remember airline flight attendants' advice before takeoff: "In case of an emergency, put on your oxygen mask before assisting others." This concept applies here as well.

Detachment is a vital tool for family members' recovery and a common goal in most recovery programs for loved ones of people with addiction. It allows family members to relinquish responsibility for another person's active illness or recovery. In the dynamics of addiction, family members often become hopelessly entangled in their loved one's addiction, becoming obsessed with how to help them or make them change. Healthy detachment is a necessary part of developing a recovery of their own.

Family members often resent recommendations that they need a recovery program for themselves. When you consider the physical, emotional, and psychological symptoms you are experiencing that are directly and indirectly related to living with addiction, it becomes obvious why family members need a program (see [“How Addiction in the Family Impacts You: A Stress Symptoms Checklist.”](#)) An early goal for family member recovery is "healthy detachment." It may still seem wrong to be healthy when your loved one is suffering, but when family members learn and practice healthy detachment, they are more likely to be able to assist their substance-using loved one in seeking recovery.

Family members obsessed with their loved one and their addiction often believe they have the answers, can fix the problem, or know what their loved one needs to do to change. This mindset locks them into a struggle for control, perpetuating the conflict in the relationship and allowing the person with addiction to believe that the conflict with the family member is “The Problem” rather than their own inner conflicts and the addiction. Focusing all one's energy on what a person struggling with an addiction is doing or not doing, thinking or not thinking, feeling or not feeling, does not solve any problems. Engaging in a control struggle with someone with substance use disorder helps them stay in denial by shifting the blame.

When obsessing about someone else, family members become detached from themselves, losing touch with their feelings and questioning their sense of reality and sanity. Loss of sense of self leads to a cycle of worrying, reacting, and obsessively trying to control. Family members often forget they have choices other than reacting this way, with their behavior becoming increasingly compulsive. They become entrenched in fixing the loved one. While the family member who is working so hard puts forth solutions that may be rational and reasonable, addiction is neither. Family members often reach detachment through frustration and anger. However, detachment does not require anger or hostile withdrawal. It does not mean accepting anything that comes your way or withholding love and concern.

Family members can detach with love. Healthy detachment involves mentally, emotionally, and sometimes physically letting go of others' responsibilities. It means acknowledging that you cannot solve another's problems and allowing them the dignity to do so themselves. Healthy detachment eliminates the worry of taking on responsibility for another without the authority or ability to effect change. It also involves taking full responsibility for your own obligations, roles, and tasks.

How do family members detach with love? It is easier to let go of control when you realize you never had control in the first place. Start by identifying how your attempts to take control have failed and created unmanageability in your own life. These attempts include trying to manage

their mood, limit their intake of substances, manipulate, nag, reason, plead, or shame them into changing their behavior. Understand that your efforts to control have been about "chasing an illusion of control." This illusion stems from believing your efforts worked when, in fact, they were ineffective over time. By focusing on your loved one, you become someone you don't want to be, and your own life becomes unmanageable. Recognizing this makes giving up the illusion of control and the need to control easier.

Family members can recover regardless of whether their loved one is still drinking or using drugs. Other skills acquired by family members in recovery include assertiveness and setting boundaries. Allowing your loved one to face the natural consequences of their behavior does not mean you must tolerate the intolerable. It means that you can problem-solve from a different frame of reference and enact different solutions than the ones you keep trying repeatedly with no results. Your changes can lead to a crisis for your struggling loved one, which can be an opportunity for them to seek help. Having peace of mind and stability in your own life enables you to assist your loved one when they are most willing to accept help. People are more likely to accept help when facing the painful realities of their situation.

This "Let Go" poem eloquently sums up 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 to 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.

Note 1: This poem has been attributed to Robert Paul Gilles Jr.

Note 2: This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously

published in 2009, and was titled, "Detachment: How the Family Can Be Alright When the Addict Is Still Using." The content has been updated for contemporary language, clarity and accuracy.

Mastering Worries With Thought Stopping Techniques

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Understanding how to detach with love is crucial for family members dealing with a loved one's addiction. However, detachment is just one piece of the puzzle in maintaining your own mental well-being. Anxiety and worry are an all-too-familiar experience for families that have a loved one struggling with addiction. To further equip yourself with the tools to learn to let go with love and manage your distress, consider "Mastering Worries With Thought Stopping Techniques." This Brief Lesson provides a powerful method for taking charge of your worries and reducing anxiety. By learning to identify and break free from the cycle of worry, mind-racing, rumination, and overthinking, you'll feel more empowered to regain control of your reactions and mental well-being. Mastering these thought-stopping techniques will not only help you achieve a more peaceful state of mind but also allow you to live a more fulfilled life, better equipped to handle the challenges of supporting a loved one through addiction recovery.

Hubbard House Publishing and Transformational Endeavors
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\$4.95



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