

What Every Parent of an Addict Needs to Know About Healthy Detachment

What is healthy detachment? There was a time when I had no clue. My husband and I first learned about detachment at a conference for parents of addicts. I wasn't sure I had the strength or courage to let go of Renée. I was too nice, too scared and too weak. Besides, it felt cruel, unloving.

I've talked to many hurting parents who have the same opinion. Confused, they don't believe detaching is the right thing to do. In our culture, to detach often means being indifferent, disinterested, unconcerned, not caring. Perhaps that's why it feels confusing and wrong. But this isn't what they promote in recovery circles.

The kind of detaching they recommend is to separate ourselves from the adverse effects of another person's destructive behaviors. Physical separation isn't always required. It's neither kind nor unkind. It doesn't imply judgment or condemnation. It's not cutting ourselves off from the people we care about but from the agony of our involvement with them. Detachment helps us to be more objective.

What We Learned

Our recovery groups taught us there's nothing we can say or do to cause or to stop another person's destructive behavior. We're not responsible for our children's problems (unless they are a minor) or their recovery from them.

Detaching allows us to let go of our obsession with them. Then we can begin to lead happier, healthier lives.

We can live with dignity.

We can still love them without liking their behavior.

When we begin to stop enabling, we begin to detach.

We start reaping emotional and psychological rewards.

Through detachment, we can learn to stop:

- suffering because of the actions or reactions of other people
- allowing ourselves to be used or abused by others in the interest of their own needs
- doing for others what they can do for themselves
- manipulating situations so others will eat, go to bed, get up, pay bills, not drink or use drugs or behave the way we want them to
- covering up for some else's mistakes or misdeeds
- preventing a crisis if one will occur in the natural course of events

How to Know When You're Learning to Detach

I knew I was learning to detach when I stopped looking at Renée's social media pages, stopped calling to check up on her, slept better without the torment of wondering if she was safe, quit calling her friends to ask if they'd seen her or what they thought about her condition, worried less about the consequences she might face, didn't feel guilty about not helping financially or not paying her medical bills, no longer reminded her about taking care of important details and didn't feel bad about it and could put her problems out of my mind. I knew I was making progress because I was gradually experiencing more peace and less angst, I could focus more on myself and my life and less on hers.

This Bible verse encouraged me:

"We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly,

unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead" (2 Cor. 1:8-9).

God of peace, strengthen me to detach from my troubled child in a healthy way. I need to for my own well-being, but it's so hard. I'm tired of the agony of being overly involved in their problems. I'm relying on You for the courage I need. In Jesus' name. Amen.

This article is an excerpt from my book, You Are Not Alone: Hope for Hurting Parents of Troubled Kids, p. 114-116. Available here to purchase from our website or wherever fine books are sold. {eo}

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