

I can love my daughter without trying to manage her life

Growing up in an alcoholic household, I learned at a young age to be a problem solver. When I was 12-years old, the alcoholic in our family died and, as the oldest boy, I became “the man of the family.” This burden of responsibility was the catalyst for over-achievement, which served me well as a youngster but became my downfall as the mature father of a teen-age alcoholic daughter.

From the time my daughter was 15 and until she turned 30, we tried every drug, alcohol, and eating disorder program we could afford. Some were Twelve Step oriented; some were not. There were lock-down facilities, group homes, in-patient and outpatient therapy, recovery ranches, and wilderness programs in different parts of the country. I considered myself a smart and resourceful problem solver, and it would only be a matter of time until we found the right solution to our daughter’s problem.

Fifteen years and tens of thousands of dollars later, we were no closer to “curing” her than we were at the start. She had become my daily obsession. The quality of my life depended entirely upon the quality of hers. Was she in a crisis this week, or was she safe? Was she in a psych ward or in jail, or was she temporarily okay? The pain of living my daughter’s life for her finally became too much to bear. I started therapy and began to attend Al-Anon meetings.

One winter day on a business trip, I stopped in at a church to say a prayer. As I knelt, the thought occurred to me that our daughter had been a gift to us from a Higher Power, and that I needed now to let go of that gift if I were ever to know any peace. With tears streaming down my face, I absolutely surrendered my child’s life to a Higher Power.

A feeling of enormous relief came over me, and I felt as though the heavy burden I had been carrying for many years had been lifted. I no longer had to be the efficient problem solver. I could love my daughter without trying to manage her life. I didn’t have to be competent at everything, and I am entitled to take care of myself before taking care of another. Most of all, I understood that it’s okay to ask for help, and it’s okay to be helpless sometimes.

These were life lessons I somehow had missed growing up, and listening to the experience, wisdom, and hope of others in Al-Anon had prepared me to receive them when my spirit was ready.

Today, my daughter still struggles with her addictions, but I clearly understand that she has her own Higher Power, and that letting her learn from her mistakes is the only way she can grow and benefit from experience, which is the most effective teacher. Aside from telling her that I love her, I don’t interfere. Most of all, I enjoy the relationship I have with our other daughter, who was a second priority for too many years, and my grandchildren who are such a blessing. I have come to know peace and acceptance, and for that, I am enormously grateful.

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