

How Detachment from an Addicted Person Can Be Loving For All

By Wayland Myers, Ph.D.

"Detachment is a means whereby we allow others the opportunity to learn how to care for themselves better." I heard a drug rehab counselor say that many years ago and I was confused and disturbed. I was a parent. My child's life, and our family, was being ravaged by her struggle with drug and alcohol use. Was I being told I should abstain from trying to protect her from the consequences of her addictive behaviors? That I should not try to control her recovery? I had heard about this "loving detachment" before. Then, it just sounded like some form of self-protective abandonment. But now, this counselor made it sound like a gift. How could that be?

Over time, I came to see the counselor's point. I slowly discovered there were a number of benefits to using loving detachment as a way of relating to anyone struggling with a self-harming behavior pattern. And, when I met Marshall Rosenberg in 1986, I came to believe that even more. The insights and values of his Nonviolent Communication process greatly enhanced my understanding of how detachment can be loving for all involved.

Today, I consider myself lovingly detached when,

I am willing and able to compassionately, and without judgment, allow others to be different from me, to be self-directed, and to be responsible for taking care of themselves.

I have identified four ways that detachment is loving for those I care about, and four ways it is loving for me.

How detachment is loving for others:

1. Those I care for might learn to look within, and trust themselves for self-direction, including when and how to ask for help.

If I refrain from trying to manage their problematic situation, the people I care about may learn something about thinking for themselves, problem solving, and when and how to ask for help. They might learn to better listen to their feelings and intuitions, to heed those little voices we all wish we listened to more. They might learn to better recognize when they want help and how to request it in ways that leave them feeling good, rather than embarrassed or ashamed. In short, letting them manage their own affairs gives them the opportunity to draw on their own inner resources, instead of mine, and from this direct experience of their abilities, no matter how groping or uncertain, they can build competence and may thereby increase their confidence. I believe this is the number one, and most natural, avenue for creating an increased sense of self esteem.

II. They might learn more about cause and effect.

My not intervening allows others to have an uninterrupted experience of the cause and effect relationship between their actions and the natural consequences of those actions. In this way, they have a direct encounter with their personal power to contribute to their own pleasure or pain. Allowing people to have appropriate sized, real problems, and real responsibility for working out their solutions, seems to greatly facilitate this learning.

III. They might experience the motivation to continue on, or change.

Pleasurable and painful experiences often provide us the motivation to repeat what brought satisfaction and change what didn't. We all use this kind of emotional energy to move us forward in life. These motivating energies arise naturally within and feel much better to respond to than the attempts by others to motivate us through guilt, fear and other forms of coercion.

IV. Self discovery and self enjoyment might increase.

If I grant others the freedom to think, feel, value, perceive, etc. as they wish, and they relax because they feel respected and safe, they might discover many new things about themselves. They might discover what they really like, feel or think. They might have moments of creative insight that inspire, excite and encourage them. They might invent new, more satisfying dreams for their lives than ever would have appeared under the pressure of my controlling presence.

Whenever I find myself struggling with the impulse to step-in and begin trying to manage another's life, or solve his or her problems, I find it helpful to review the four points just presented. They strongly motivate me to remain lovingly detached.

Now, how about the ways loving detachment benefits me?

How detachment is loving for me:

I. I am relieved of the strain of attempting the impossible.

By carefully reviewing my experiences of trying to control other people's physical behavior, sobriety, health, learning, emotions and opinions, I have come to one conclusion: The only thing I might be able to control is a person's physical behavior and that requires that I possess enough physical strength and am willing to use it. If I accept my powerlessness to control the other things, the inner lives and wills of others, then I relieve myself of the stress and strain of attempting the impossible. This is a primary way for me to create more serenity in my life. In fact, if I practice this process deeply enough, I sometimes reach the point where I form no opinion about what another should do. This is a truly liberated and refreshing moment for us both.

II. What other people think of me can become none of my business.

If I am powerless to control the thoughts, perceptions, values or emotions of another, then I can liberate myself by accepting that their opinions of me are none of my

business. Accepting this as fact, I not only free myself, but the other person as well, because I cease my attempts to control their inner workings.

III. My attention and energy are freed to focus on improving my own life.

I have plenty of problem areas in my own life. Obsessing about another's life can help me avoid the pain within mine. But, the time and energy I spend obsessing about another's life I don't spend on mine, and if I do this enough, my life stays at its current level of unmanageability or gets worse. Loving detachment gives me the opportunity to invest my energies in my life.

IV. I can express my love or caring in ways that bring me joy and satisfaction.

When someone I care for is struggling with a problem, or feeling some kind of pain, I usually want to be supportive or helpful. But, I want to offer the kind of help that would bring me joy to offer, and them joy to receive.

One of the ways that I have developed a picture of what this help could look like is to recall the times when caring friends or others have offered me assistance in ways that I enjoyed. What did they do? While showing no sign that they felt responsible for solving my problems, they offered me four things;

- *their compassionate, empathic understanding of how I perceived and felt about my situation,*
- *their experiences and learning from similar situations for my consideration,*
- *their genuine optimism about my abilities to work through my struggles, and*
- *their willingness to help, on my terms, in ways that were congruent with their needs.*

To be offered understanding, companionship, encouragement and assistance, but not interference, is the most satisfying help I have known. Offering this to others increases both the joy in my life and my self-esteem.

Looking at the eight ways that I see detachment as being loving, I conclude that the most basic reason for practicing it is to provide an opportunity for people's lives to be improved. Both people's. The lives of those I love may be improved because I respect their powers of self-care enough to let them have a chance to reap the potential benefits of struggling, learning and succeeding on their own. My life is improved because I avoid unnecessary distress, retain energy I might have wasted, and offer caring and support in ways that bring me joy. In these ways loving detachment plays a powerful and rewarding role in helping me to both Live and Let Live.

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