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Detachment, Love, and Forgiveness

PERSONAL BOUNDARIES

Al-Anon recovery is about reclaiming our own lives. We do this by learning to focus on ourselves, build on our strengths, and ask for and accept help with our limitations. But many of us find it difficult even to begin this self-focused process because we have lost track of the separation between ourselves and others, especially the alcoholic. Having interceded for so long on the alcoholic's behalf, constantly reacting, worrying, pleasing, covering up, smoothing over, or bailing him or her out of trouble, we have often taken upon our shoulders responsibilities that don't rightfully belong to us. The result is that we lose the sense of where we leave off and the alcoholic begins. We have become so enmeshed with another person's life and problems that we have lost the knowledge that we are separate individuals. When asked about ourselves, we often respond by talking about the alcoholic. We perceive ourselves to be so connected that, if something happens to the alcoholic, it seems only right, only natural, for us to respond.

Many of us even confuse this absence of personal boundaries with love and caring. For example, from the moment the alcoholic goes out the door, we sit, immobilized, unable to do anything but think obsessively about him or her. We lose the ability to distinguish between the alcoholic and ourselves until the alcoholic's past, current, and potential actions become our sole focus. This is not love; it's obsession. When we cease to live our own lives because we are so preoccupied with the lives of others, our behavior is motivated by fear. Not only is it harmful to a relationship to hover anxiously or suspiciously over a loved one night and day, it is also extremely self-destructive.

Likewise, when we cancel our own plans and stay home because we fear that the alcoholic will drink if left alone, we may protest that we act out of loving self-sacrifice for the sake of the alcoholic. More likely, it is an effort to feel that we have some power over the drinking. The choice to abandon our own plans for such a purpose is an act of fear, not an act of love. Cancelling plans and staying home to avoid the consequences of “defying” the alcoholic is another form of self-abandonment and has nothing to do with love.

Genuine, healthy love isn’t self-destructive. It doesn’t diminish us or strip us of our identities, nor does it in any way diminish those we love. Love is nourishing; it allows each of us to be more fully ourselves. The enmeshment that characterizes an alcoholic relationship does just the opposite.

DETACHMENT

Detachment is one of the most valuable techniques Al-Anon offers those of us who seek to reclaim ourselves. Simply put, detachment means to separate ourselves emotionally and spiritually from other people.

If someone we love had the flu and cancelled plans with us, most of us would understand. We wouldn’t take it personally or blame the person for being inconsiderate or weak. Instead, in our minds, we would probably separate the person from the illness, knowing that it was the illness, rather than our loved one, that caused the change of plans. This is detachment. And we can use it to see alcoholism in the same compassionate yet impersonal way. When alcoholism causes a change in plans, or sends harsh words or other unacceptable behavior in our direction, we needn’t take it any more personally than we would take the flu symptoms. It is the disease rather than the individual that is responsible. By seeing the person as separate from the disease, by detaching, we can stop being hurt by groundless insults or angered by outrageous lies. If we can learn to step back from alcoholism’s symptoms and effects just as we would from the sneezing of a person with a cold, we will no longer have to take those effects to heart.

Learning to detach often begins by learning to take a moment

before reacting to alcoholic behavior. In that moment we can ask ourselves, “Is this behavior coming from the person or the disease?” Although at first the answer may not be clear to us, in time it becomes easier to discern whether alcoholism or our friend or relative has prompted the disturbing behavior. This distinction makes us better able to emotionally distance ourselves from the behavior. We can remember that although alcoholics often surround themselves with crisis, chaos, fear, and pain, we need not play a part in the turmoil. Blaming others for the consequences of their own choices and acting out verbally or physically are some of the smokescreens that alcoholics use to conceal the real source of the trouble—alcoholism. Everyone’s attention goes to the harsh word, the broken glass, or the bounced check rather than to the disease. It becomes automatic to defend against the insult, weep or rage at the thrown glass, scramble to cover the bounced check. But by naming the disease, we see through the alcoholic’s smokescreen and therefore needn’t be distracted by it at all. Instead of taking the behavior personally, in time we can learn to say to ourselves, “That’s just alcoholism,” and let it go.

Simply knowing that alcoholism is the source of the unacceptable behavior is not sufficient, however. We may have to take action to help us achieve greater emotional distance. We might change the subject, leave the room or even the house, or involve ourselves in some physically demanding activity. We may need the support or perspective that only a sponsor or fellow Al-Anon member can provide. An Al-Anon call or meeting could be just what we need to help us separate ourselves from the symptoms and effects of the disease without separating ourselves from the human being.

At first, we might not detach very gracefully. Many of us have done so with resentment, bitter silence, or loud and angry condescension. It takes time and practice to master detachment. Beginning the process is important, even if we do it badly at first and must later make amends. But it is even more important to remember that establishing personal boundaries is not the same as building walls. Our goal is to heal ourselves and our relationships with other human beings, not to coldly distance ourselves, especially from the people

who matter most to us. In fact, detachment is far more compassionate and respectful than the unfeeling distancing or the compulsive involvement many of us have practiced in the past, for when we detach with love, we accept others exactly as they are.

Detachment with love allows us to hate the disease of alcoholism, yet step back from that disease in order to find love for the alcoholic. For some of us, this love was apparent all along. For others, love may be the last emotion we would associate with the alcoholic. Those of us who grew up in an abusive alcoholic environment may be hard pressed to summon any love for the alcoholics we have known.

FORGIVENESS

Resentment will do nothing except tear us apart inside. No one ever found serenity through hatred. No one ever truly recovered from the effects of alcoholism by harboring anger or fear, or by holding on to grudges. Hostility keeps us tied to the abuses of the past. Even if the alcoholic is long gone from our lives or has refrained from drinking for many years, we, too, need to learn to detach. We need to step back from the memories of alcoholic behavior that continue to haunt us. We begin to detach when we identify the disease of alcoholism as the cause of the behavior and recognize that our ongoing struggle with unpleasant memories is an effect of that disease. We, too, must find within us compassion for the alcoholic who suffered from this terrible illness.

Each of us is worthy of love, and each of us is doubly blessed when we are able to dig down past our grievances and resentments, no matter how justified we may feel in harboring them, and find within ourselves the recognition of that part of the other person that is and always will be lovable. How better could we learn that we ourselves are eternally and irrevocably lovable than by recognizing that same quality in everyone around us?

Yet some of us balk at the idea of adopting such an attitude toward people who, in the past, may have caused us great physical, emotional, financial, or spiritual harm. If we find their behavior totally reprehensible, why should we bother to look for a place within

ourselves that can relate to them with love? Aren't some things simply unforgivable?

To answer these questions, we must ask another: What is the purpose of our recovery? If we are truly in pursuit of serenity, of healing, of a sense of inner peace that will help us to deal with and possibly even enjoy whatever life brings, we must improve the way we interact with others. This doesn't mean that we close our eyes to the unacceptable or tolerate the intolerable. It has no bearing on what behavior we will accept, nor on whether or not we continue our present relationships. It simply means that we cultivate the ability to look beneath the surface. By shifting our focus away from the objectionable behavior and looking more deeply, we recognize a part of every human being that remains untouched by disease, the part of each of us that deserves unconditional love and respect regardless of the circumstances. It is equally possible to appreciate this quality in those whom we do not know as it is in someone with whom we hope to spend a lifetime. This is what forgiveness is all about. We don't forgive the actions another person has chosen, because it was never our job to judge the person for those actions in the first place. Instead, we forgive when we acknowledge our common humanity with everyone, even the person we feel the most entitled to condemn. In this spirit, we can even forgive ourselves, no matter what we've done or how guilty or shame-filled we may feel. We, too, deserve love.

Forgiveness is no favor. We do it for no one but ourselves. We simply pay too high a price when we refuse to forgive. Lingering resentments are like acid eating away at us. Rehearsing and re-rehearsing old injuries robs us of all that is precious. Shame never liberated a single spirit. And self-righteousness never softened a heart. Can we afford to perpetuate such self-destructiveness? Surely we can make better use of our time and energy. Although we may despise what others have done, if we keep in mind that everything we are now trying to do has the goal of healing us, we are bound to decide that the best thing we can do for ourselves is to forgive.