

Detachment with love takes on deeper meaning

One of the great gifts of the addiction recovery movement is the concept of detachment with love. Originally conceived as a way to relate to an alcoholic family member, detachment with love is actually a tool that we can apply with anyone.

Al-Anon, a Twelve Step mutual-help group for friends and family members of alcoholics, pioneered the idea of detachment with love. A core principle of Al-Anon is that alcoholics cannot learn from their mistakes if they are overprotected.

That word "overprotected" has many meanings. For example, it means calling in sick for your husband if he is too drunk to show up for work. Overprotecting also means telling children that mommy didn't show up for the school play because she had to work late, when the truth is that she was at a bar until midnight.

Such actions were once labeled as "enabling," because they enabled alcoholics to continue drinking. Today, the word "adapting" is more often used because it is less blaming.

Originally, detachment with love was a call for family members to stop adapting. But as Al-Anon grew, people misunderstood detachment with love as a way to scare alcoholics into changing: "If you don't go to treatment, I'll leave you!" Such threats were a gamble that fear could force an alcoholic into seeking help.

Detachment with love means caring enough about others to allow them to learn from their mistakes. It also means being responsible for our own welfare and making decisions without ulterior motives - - the desire to control others.

Ultimately we are powerless to control others anyway. Most family members of a chemically dependent person have been trying to change that person for a long time, and it hasn't worked. We are involved with other people but we don't control them. We simply can't stop people from doing things if they choose to continue.

Understood this way, detachment with love plants the seeds of recovery. When we refuse to take responsibility for other people's alcohol or drug use, we allow them to face the natural consequences of their behavior. If a child asks why Mommy missed the school play, we do not have to lie. Instead, we can say, "I don't know why she wasn't here. You'll have to ask her."

Perhaps the essence of detachment with love is responding with choice rather than reacting with anxiety. When we threaten to leave someone, we're usually tuned in to someone else's feelings. We operate on raw emotion. We say things for shock value. Our words arise from blind reaction, not thoughtful choice.

Detachment with love offers another option -- responding to others based on thought rather than anxiety. For instance, as parents we set limits for our children even when this angers them. We choose what we think is best over the long term, looking past children's immediate emotional reaction.

In this sense, detachment with love can apply whenever we have an emotional attachment to someone -- family or friend, addicted or sober. The key is to stop being responsible *for* others and be responsible *to* them -- and to ourselves.