

Thoughts for Parents of Adult Children

Karl A. Menninger, MD said, "Love cures people – both the ones who give it and the ones who receive it."

1. Love Deeply

It isn't possible to be too loving and accepting of others. Everyone needs to know they're loved deeply and acknowledged where they are. This isn't the same as agreeing with the choices someone is making and it certainly isn't giving in to unhealthy demands or enabling destructive behaviors. Love that leads to growth, love that builds is constructive love. All great religious leaders, great teachers, and great parents understand that you don't wait for people to be worthy of your love, attention, and action. The growth toward a better tomorrow begins with loving someone enough to meet them where they are and lifting them in the state they are in. To do this you must try and detach the person from your common enemy – the problem. Love the person and defeat the problem.

2. Embrace Optimism

Take hope. Claim your power to help restore a loved one to their full potential. Do not look at someone's resistance as final and do not believe that the growth process can be denied forever. After all, we can and do change constantly and both growth and regression are socially contagious. In other words, who you surround yourself with and how you see the world will move you forward or hold you back. The first tool of constructive love is hope. Without hope growth is almost impossible. Hope is believing in spite of present conditions, and then watching while situations change for the better. Goethe wrote: "Treat a man as he appears to be, and you make him worse. But treat a man as if he were what he potentially could be, and you will make him what he should be." Our brain is flexible and adaptable. It can generate new neurons, make new neurological pathways and connections, and grasp new data to help us change our behavior, and our entire way of being in the world. Take heart. Be hopeful. Inherent in human nature is the capacity for change and choice.

3. Stay Close

When you are cultivating growth the more regularly you are in contact with that person the more effective you can be. You want to be with or talk to that person on a regular basis because then you will have more opportunities for influence and relationship. The quantity and quality of contact builds the restorative relationship that leads to growth. With your constructive love, help, honesty, and support growth is possible. And you will have to be persistent because hurting people often push others away or demand affirmation for their unhealthy choices as a condition of relationship. As you reach out, celebrate when things go well, but do not become overly discouraged when they don't. The next conversation, the next family gathering, the next connection gives you another opportunity to make a positive impact in their lives. Also remember that the power of a united family or community to achieve a common goal cannot be overestimated so help encourage a constructive support system around them.

4. Be Clear

It is important that those you love know what you believe and what your standards are. This will help them to better understand what your personal boundaries are and what behavior you expect of yourself and hope for from others. You can't expect them to respect your boundaries if they don't know what you believe. That being said, once someone understands your beliefs they also understand how you feel about their lifestyle choices. While you can certainly continue sharing and deepening your understanding of each other's viewpoints, it's not going to build your relationship or change their thinking or behavior when you repeatedly share – particularly when they aren't asking for input – your perspective. It isn't loving or helpful to drive others away. Nothing kills a relationship faster than repeated nagging (that you mistakenly see as being helpful or caring).

5. Listen Attentively

You can't help someone if you don't understand them and you can't understand them if you won't truly listen. Just because you're listening to someone doesn't necessarily mean that you agree with them. Listening to someone else is the most basic form of constructive love we can offer. With those you truly care about your presence, interest, and connection can't be conditional on their personal choices. Ask them about their life or their activities and then stop talking and listen. Growth happens and changes can occur when someone feels good because they are motivated by your constructive love and concern, not because of your desire to change or control them. If you understand what they think and feel you can be inspired to respond appropriately. Listening with your heart without the need to tell your story, "straighten them out", express your disappointment, or to say the critical thing is constructive love.

6. Set Boundaries

When we refuse to advance bad behavior, yet refuse to turn our backs on them or ever give up on them - that is constructive love. Remember that each individual gets to be in charge of their own accountability to themselves, to God, and to others, which leaves you free to constructively love them without thinking you are responsible for their life choices. Your home is a sacred place and all who can respect your standards while they are there should be welcomed. Their presence is your opportunity to teach. For example, are you

being asked for financial or other types of assistance that might border on enabling unhealthy behavior? You can show constructive love and compassion by maintaining boundaries with your resources. Setting clear, consistent boundaries is essential to modeling healthy, constructive love.

7. Self-care

Whenever someone we love is facing difficult circumstances we are all prone to focus too much attention for too long a time on them and their experiences. This is an example of destructive love. We risk our relationships with spouse, children, friends and family when too much of our energy centers on one individual to the neglect of others who also need our love and care. Others feel our lack of attention and rather than uniting with us in our positive efforts they may begin to resent both us and the individual we are trying to support. In addition, we can easily start to neglect ourselves. Our health – both mental and physical – can suffer. Constructive love is knowing when to step in and when to step aside. If the challenges someone else is experiencing are filling our life and mind with unhelpful feelings, obsessive thinking, or useless worrying to the degree that we are unable to take positive actions or appreciate enjoyable distractions we may need to seek some counseling assistance for ourselves.

8. Resist Fear

The more you try and scheme or coerce someone you love to change, or seek therapy, or come to church, or get rid of their friends the more they will resist. They will often lie and sneak around behind your back to get you to leave them alone or to avoid losing favor. You demand change and they will fight to hold on to control. Deception and lies increasingly separate you as the power struggle grows as both of you refuse to lose. And trying to frighten or threaten them into changing is almost as successful as nagging. Attempting to grow anything or anyone by force never works very well for very long. To offer any kind of meaningful help you have to lose the fear, step into hope, and begin to constructively love. Experience shows that the joy of living and the prospect for a more fulfilling life are more powerful motivations than even the fear of dying. Your fear for them can cause you to do exactly the wrong things.

9. Respond Constructively

When challenges arise it is far too easy to look for someone or something to blame. Fixing blame never makes anyone stronger. What does lift us is focusing on our strengths and surrounding ourselves with hopeful people. When others interact with you model the behaviors and attitudes you want to encourage in them. Eliminate actions that reinforce (even subconsciously) the problematic behavior by becoming an underreactor. Attention is a great motivator in a loving relationship. Feed their constructive, helpful, resilient behaviors or comments by responding enthusiastically with increased attention and starve any unhelpful remarks or actions by ignoring them. Remind them of their best selves by referring to their strengths. Generally, someone will only seek change when they are offered a better alternative to their present situation. That desire will be fueled by a constructive loving plan, encouragement, respect, and compassion along with your demonstrated increased trust and support when they are making good decisions.

A final thought. Generally, parents are not directly the agents of change in the lives of their children. Parents provide the constructive love – the good soil – where growth can take root. The seeds of that growth will often come from trained professionals or outside resources. However, without that “good growth soil” there may never be the necessary elements for change or growth to take place. Your role is essential. Love constructively! Stay engaged!

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