

Detachment

This article was written by Rachel Curry (<http://rachelcurry.com>) and inspired by the wisdom of How Al-Anon Works, which can be purchased online: <http://al-anon.org>.

Surrender is one of the most timeless and valuable practices of those of who seek peace and harmony. When we surrender and give up control, we naturally detach. Sometimes, however, we must *choose* detachment even when feelings of “being surrendered” aren’t present.

Detachment involves emotionally separating ourselves from another person or institution. It is motivated by compassion and respect, not vengeance or self-righteousness. Detachment is the most loving alternative to compulsive involvement when our addictive thinking is active. By detaching, we give others the space to be exactly as they are. We do not try to manipulate or change them to our liking. Detaching from someone’s behavior does not mean we do not love them, care for them, or respect them. We can love and respect someone (or something, such as a life-long dream), while at the same time, decide to detach.

If we want to detach from someone or something, we must first take a long, reflective pause before reacting or “jumping in the ring” when upset or inspired. We remind ourselves that we are not the center of others’ lives; therefore, others’ behaviors are not personal to us in any way. Their choices are simply manifestations of their personalities.

Whether a situation triggers anger or fantasy, it helps us to repeat, “This circumstance is not a reflection of something I did or didn’t do. This person has their own values, struggles, and goals. Their life journey is much different than mine. Their conduct isn’t about me, my worth, or my position. Their choices are not about how much they do or don’t respect or love me.” Considering these ideas helps us stay in our own lanes.

Are we attracted to people who stir chaos, fear, pain, and crisis? Are we living or working amongst them now? Remember – even if others are involved, we don’t need to participate in the commotion. Each of us plays a role in the shared energy of a group, whether a household, office, religious community, or political movement. In confusing or contentious environments, there is often a *dysfunctional dynamic* or a *dysfunctional culture*. Don’t be enticed or drawn in to the tornado of turmoil. Watch for the desire to automatically defend against critical words, interrogate a broken promise, charm an apprehensive bystander, or scramble to protect someone’s reputation. Also watch for the urge to chase an illusory high, falling prey to false promises of love, validation, or success. Even if we are right in our defenses and opinions, these individual incidents are not the crux of the problem. What is the crux of the problem?

In Step One, we learn that we are powerless over institutions and collective relationships because they involve many moving parts that are beyond our control. By naming this unseen institution – by recognizing *culture* as a collective force that is much stronger than we are – we see our limitations and the futility of pushing our way. Instead, we back up, let go, and detach. We remember our powerlessness, and don’t get wooed back into our old emotional and behavioral patterns. “What’s happening around here is just a force I can’t control,” we say, and let it go.

The following is a quote from page 84 of How Al-Anon Works. This excerpt has been visibly modified to serve a broader audience. Feel free to change the general phrase “dysfunction” to something more specific, like “family dysfunction”, “workplace dysfunction”, or “marital dysfunction.”

“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 this to see ~~alcoholism~~ *dysfunction* in the same compassionate yet impersonal way. When ~~alcoholism~~ *dysfunction* causes a change in plans, or sends harsh words...in our direction, we needn’t take it any more personally than we would take the flu symptoms.”

Simply *knowing* that negativity isn’t personal may not be enough, however. We may have to take physical actions to help us reach or sustain our emotional sobriety. Options could include changing the subject, leaving the house, or exercising to “let off steam.” Other actions need to be more extreme depending on a persons’ inability to resist the enticing allure of self-will. These may include moving residences, changing jobs, or hiring a mediator to communicate with a difficult person. Since we are addicts, we should take heed of the Big Book’s 10th Step instructions and process our experiences with supportive, solution-oriented fellows (page 84). A phone call or meeting could be what we need to help us remember the truth, find serenity, and not engage.

Working an honest program involves being honest about our limitations. Honesty makes us stronger, happier individuals. Remember: arrogance about “what we can handle” is the opposite of Step One. We must not overestimate our emotional tolerance or we’ll be overtaken by the unmanageability that brought us to this workbook in the first place.

When it comes to detachment, we celebrate progress, not perfection. In the beginning, we may not detach very diplomatically. Many of us cut ties with passive-aggressive silence or pretentious judgment. Starting the process, however, is the important part. If we are offensive at first, we can always make amends later. We will eventually realize that forming personal boundaries is not the same as constructing walls; our ultimate goal is to change ourselves and the way we connect with other human beings, not to become emotionless or distant.

Questions for Group Reflection:

- Do I feel myself get defensive or irritated when a certain topic is discussed, when my image is threatened, or someone acts a certain way? Is there an idea, belief, or philosophy I cannot let go of that is causing me to suffer?
- Do I tend to personalize the successes, failures, or behaviors of others? If so, why (is there a pay-off)? How might detaching benefit me and/or the relationship?
- Am I honest with my limitations, or do I overestimate my ability to remain “unaffected” by the person or circumstance that brings me stress? If I overestimate my abilities, what justifications keep me in denial?
- What mantra or prayer might I use to prevent myself from getting involved in the turmoil of another’s drama?

- Consider these acronyms:
 - TRUST: Try Really Using Step Three.
 - DETACH: Don't Even Think About Changing Him/Her.
- The four M's can be used to spot control when it's masked as altruism, heroism, or caretaking: Manipulation, Mothering, Martyrdom, and Managing. Can I relate to any of these?
- A popular Al-Anon phrase goes: "guilt goes away faster than resentment." What might I learn from this slogan?

Personal Notes:
