

CHAPTER 3

Letting Go of Control

Introduction

Many children of substance-abusing parents blame themselves for their parent's substance abuse. They try to control the drinking/drug use by making good grades, keeping the house immaculate, or withdrawing, hoping not to create a disturbance. Very few children realize that they neither caused nor can they change a parent's substance problem (American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress 2012).

Control can become a major issue for many children of substance-abusing parents. This begins as a coping mechanism in a chaotic and unpredictable environment but, because of its rigidity, it can have maladaptive consequences (Markowitz 2013). In fact, one of the Adult Children of Alcoholics' published 14 traits of an adult child of an alcoholic (called "The Laundry List") states, "We have an overdeveloped sense of responsibility, and it is easier for us to be concerned with others rather than ourselves" (Adult Children of Alcoholics World Service Organization 1978). Children in substance-abusing families have a great deal of anxiety and sometimes spend a great deal of energy trying to control or eliminate their parents' use of drugs or alcohol.

Frequently, substance-abusing parents are unable to care for their children's needs and many of their own needs and, consequently, create a role reversal where children take responsibility for parents and themselves. This is called parentification—a phenomenon that has been found among children of addicted parents (Backett-Milburn *et al.* 2008; Grella and Greenwell 2006; Tracy and Martin 2007). These children come to feel responsible for running the family. When a child takes on parental responsibilities, it brings order back into the family but at the cost of a child's increased rigidity and overdeveloped sense of control (Pasternak and Schier 2012). Research shows that girls are at higher risk for parentification than boys and have a stronger "depressive affect" from that parentification (Grella and Greenwell 2006; Stein, Rotheram-Borus and Lester 2007).

Best Practices and Treatment Recommendations

Although children in substance-abusing homes cannot control their parents' drinking and drug use, they can learn to cope with it. One method of coping is called *adaptive distancing*—healthy emotional detachment from parents' problems. Detaching while remaining concerned (embracing ambivalence) has been shown to be an important part of children's adjustment in the face of dysfunction (Mylant *et al.* 2002). Rubin (1996) described it as:

the ability to hold onto a self, even in the face of the assaults they suffered—make it possible to stand back and observe the fray without getting bogged down in it. They may have been pained, angered and frightened by the events of their lives, but they retained enough distance not to get caught in endlessly blaming themselves. (p.225)

In related research, *psychological distance* appears to play an important role in facilitating adaptive self-reflection (vs. maladaptive self-reflection/rumination) (Ayduk and Kross 2010; Kross 2009). *Psychological distance* is the ability to minimize people's egocentric experience of a situation which may be helpful for children of substance-abusing parents.

There is a scarcity of research addressing treatment approaches for hypervigilance, control and parentification in children of substance-abusing parents. However, in related research, adolescents who successfully coped with emotionally disturbed parents were able to distinguish between themselves and their parents' illnesses and, consequently, realized that they did not cause the illnesses (Beardslee and Podorefsky 1988). In the same way, it is important for children from chemically dependent homes also to know that they did not cause their parents' drug and alcohol problems and certainly cannot change them.

Acceptance is a significant predictor of psychological functioning in various populations (Hayes *et al.* 2006). For many years 12-step recovery programs have used the Serenity Prayer as a reminder of the importance of acceptance. Trying to fight against the way of things only leads to suffering.

Finally, beliefs about control and self-blame certainly qualify as thinking errors. Cognitive therapy has been shown to be an effective treatment approach for a plethora of emotional and behavioral problems. Identifying cognitive distortions or irrational beliefs (such as being able to control a parent's drinking) and changing those unhelpful thoughts to realistic ones is important.

General Suggestions

- Continuously remind children that they didn't cause their parents' problems; they can't cure them; and they can't control them.
- Encourage children to be open-minded about thoughts and opinions expressed in the group—teach them how to “agree to disagree.”

- Model curiosity and open-mindedness as children present ideas and share feelings.
- Model non-defensiveness if children become angry with you or if you make a mistake.
- Be willing to change plans during the group if needed. Draw attention to this and verbalize how you are coping with the change (letting go of control).
- Challenge any thinking errors or irrational thinking that you hear children verbalize. Ask if the thought is really true; if there is evidence of it.

Script

“Many children who have a parent who drinks too much alcohol or uses mind-altering drugs think that they are to blame or that they should try to help their parent stop. Neither of those things are true. You are *not* to blame for your parent’s drinking or using drugs, and you *cannot* make her/him stop. You cannot control what your parent does. You can only control yourself.

Don’t try to be perfect and don’t try to hide your parent’s alcohol or drugs. You did not cause her/his disease and you are not the reason that she/he continues to drink or get high.

You may worry about your parent, of course, but try to take a step back and let her/him go through what she/he needs to go through so that she/he may want to get help some day. But remember that her/his problem is her/his problem—not yours.”

Activities

(1) CREATING WITHOUT CONTROL

OBJECTIVE

To increase flexibility and reduce the need for control.

MATERIALS

Shaving cream, food coloring, paint tray liners, popsicle sticks and paper.

DIRECTIONS

Explain to the group that many beautiful and interesting things can happen when we let go of control and that this activity will demonstrate that fact. Give each child a paint tray, a popsicle stick and a piece of paper. Spray shaving cream into each child’s plastic container and direct them to drip food coloring (not too much!) onto the shaving cream. Next, direct them to gently run a popsicle stick through the shaving cream a few times in order to mix some of the colors together. Then have them gently place their piece

of paper into the foam and pull the paper out. Scrape off any excess shaving cream to reveal a marbled brightly colored picture.

FOLLOW-UP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How did it feel to have no control over how the painting turned out?
- While you were making it, were you *curious* about how it would turn out?
- How is curiosity better than control?
- What other things in your life have you been able to be curious about rather than try to control them?

(2) LETTING GO

OBJECTIVE

To visualize letting go.

MATERIALS

Helium balloons and wide ended markers.

DIRECTIONS

Explain that letting go of trying to change other people is a freeing experience. Give each child a helium balloon (have a couple extra on hand in case any pop during the exercise). Direct them to write down a trait or a habit that they have been trying to change in someone else on their balloon (e.g. getting a parent to quit drinking or using; getting a sibling to quit tattling, etc.). Then go outside and ask the children to imagine letting go of trying to change their person as they let go of their balloons and watch them float upwards.

FOLLOW-UP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What did you think about as you let go of your balloon? How did it feel?
- Could you really imagine letting go of trying to change your person?
- What would letting go of trying to change someone else look like in real life? What would you be doing differently?
- What might get in the way of you being able to let go? How will you handle that?

(3) DISTANCING

OBJECTIVE

To experience the advantages of distancing.