

SEARCH

[BLOG](#) [EPISODES](#) [NEWSLETTER](#)
[HOW TO LISTEN](#) [ABOUT](#)

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Presence and Recovery

BY ANNEKE CAMPBELL, GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

I always thought of myself as singularly non-addictive until my daughter entered treatment seven years ago and I started attending Al-anon meetings for the family members and friends of alcoholics. It didn't take long to realize I was in denial about my compulsive responses to

the beloved addicts in my life. I could not bear to simply be with my daughter's behavior or suffering, but instead of taking a drink, I assuaged my anxiety by writing her a check or giving her advice.

"Alcoholics want it now — whatever it is: thrills, satisfaction, pleasure, the end of unpleasantness" —Kevin Griffin

I too wanted it now: the end of my daughter's pain, her depression and anxiety, her addiction. I wanted a happy, healthy daughter.

In resistance to reality, my interactions with her were aimed at trying to fix her. Into her mid-thirties, I was still paying for therapies, medications, alternative health regimes, not to mention her rent on occasion. I was still giving lots of advice and suggestions, still fixated on making her better or different. I could not be present with her as she was.

My father was an alcoholic, and my sister had long struggles with drug addiction. With my father and sister, I learned to accept them as they were and to shield myself from the worst of their behavior. With my daughter no such detachment was possible. I not only wanted her to be different but felt it was my job to help her change. This seemed to be my responsibility as a parent, not just when she was a child, but also when she was an adult. Denial accompanies addictive habits, and we don't necessarily recognize what is driving us, especially when it comes in the guise of love.



A father and a daughter walk together on a beach in Ireland. Credit: Chany Crystal License: Flickr (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0).

In his beautiful book on Buddhism and the Twelve Steps, *One Breath at a Time*, author and teacher Kevin Griffin describes the tendency to want to change our experience as “the root of the alcoholic/addict’s dilemma — the desire to feel differently.” I did not have to be an alcoholic or addict to want to feel differently, to want to escape the discomfort caused by the self-destructive behaviors of those I loved.

“First noticing that craving, then not reacting to it, strengthens our sobriety, and also begins to wear down our habitual escapist tendencies. And when we aren’t escaping, we are, by definition, here and now.”

We now know, based in part on findings from neuroscience, that not only substances but processes can become addictive when used to numb or avoid pain, stress, anxiety, boredom or other uncomfortable states. Many of us who don’t identify as addicts, find ourselves nevertheless unable to stop some particular behavior, playing video games, for instance, or in my case, checking my email five times a day.

This is not to minimize the seriousness of other addictions. That is, my compulsive desire to “fix” my daughter does not equal a compulsion to gamble away one’s mortgage or an addiction to cocaine. Nevertheless, whether we are learning not to give into a craving for a drink or drug or junk food or a compulsion to play a slot machine or to change another person, the process is basically the same. It requires a particular kind of attention.

If we turn our attention towards the unwanted experience in the present, something new is possible.

It is this miserable need to escape and struggle for control that is interrupted by the counterintuitive first step of Alcoholics Anonymous: *“We admitted we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives have become unmanageable.”* For me that step translates as admitting to my powerlessness over other people, over my daughter.

The reason this first step works for so many is that it involves a moment of awareness and clarity, which pierces the denial of the suffering entailed in this futile battle for control. Then the second and third steps allow one to “turn the struggle over” to a power greater than ourselves, which may deliver us out of fighting mode and into a state of acceptance and openness to receive help.

Such help came to me through my Al-anon meeting and the sense of community, shared wisdom, and support. When I realized that my need to alter my daughter’s experience was not a choice but actually a compulsive need to alter my own experience, I saw that she and I shared the urge to avoid the pain of the present, albeit through different means.

The compulsion to control someone else’s life is based on a dependence on others for one’s sense of self, or one’s emotional security. Emotional sobriety is what I needed to cultivate in relation to my daughter. Fixating on her kept me busy with the past (what did I do wrong) and the future (what can I do) and prevented the actual experience of the present discomfort. I learned to take the focus off her and turn it back towards myself, and my automatic responses to her actions. I learned to “turn her over,” which for me meant to accept that she, not I, was responsible for herself.



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The practice of mindfulness is perfectly designed to help the recovering addict stop trying to dominate craving, by providing the opportunity to simply be present with the craving or compulsive habit in ever deepening self-awareness until it loses its power. Thus physical sobriety can lead to emotional sobriety — the learned ability to witness one’s emotional weather while not engaging or reacting to it. As Griffin points out: “Learning non-reactivity in meditation practice gives a formal structure to the non-reactivity you have to learn in order to stay sober.”

Meditation was not new for me. It has supported me in meeting other life challenges — such as nursing another sister through her struggle with breast cancer — with relative calm and acceptance. But my involvement with the Al-anon program reinvigorated and deepened my practice as I began to understand the intensity of the conditioning holding me hostage. I was helped and inspired by other parents who faced their adult children’s addiction with serenity. They could love their children — living on the street, living criminal lifestyles, or in prison — without that love driving them to unwise action or compromising their values. If they were able to let go, maybe I could too.

I stopped identifying with my thoughts and became more aware of emotions, sensations in the body, memories, attitudes, and images. I became able to observe all of this without believing the story I was spinning: *What if she OD's? What if she never gets it together? What if she ends up in a mental institution? What if I have to care for her the rest of my life? When I die, what will become of her?*

I developed the ability to witness and distinguish fear for my child's health and safety from a need to keep my self-image as a good mother intact. I learned to distinguish the desire to escape the pain of disappointed expectations from basic human empathy. Instead of analyzing her behavior and planning some new strategy to spur a change, I became aware of the heaviness in my sternum, the tightness in my gut. I started to recognize embodied in me all sorts of inherited and automatic fears that had me breathing shallow, chewing fast if I were eating, keeping my jaw tight when I was sleeping. How conveniently my fixating on the problems of others has allowed me to escape awareness of the tensions inside me.

Whether in the process of recovery from addiction or in letting go of a bad habit, it is mindfulness that helps one recognize the "triggers" that start the craving or the automatic behavior. The most challenging trigger for me is my daughter's depression. In that state, she is non-verbal and exudes hopelessness. She stops washing her hair. Being with her in those times stimulates fear, grief, and guilt — all feelings that I had tried to escape by trying fix her problem — from asking questions to making her tea and treats, to looking up the latest information on the internet to calling therapists, to handing her a bottle of shampoo or writing a check.



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As I gained the ability to be present with myself while spending time with her, I became able to accept my own experience — and to hear the birds outside the window, to see the dust motes in the air, to feel the rhythm of my own breathing and the round shape of the teacup warming my hands, to smell cinnamon on the steam rising up.

At such moments, presence happens. This presence might include a wide palette of emotional tones and flashes of memory. Sometimes I was simply blessed with an appreciation of how connected we are, my daughter and I. This connection may be rooted in biology but at the deepest level, it is independent of this interactive dance of her habits and mine.

I used to justify my obsessing as normal maternal worry, assuaged by giving good advice. There is nothing wrong with giving advice, especially when asked. But I started to notice when my daughter (or spouse or friend or acquaintance) was engaged in any kind of struggle, the pressure building inside me and the pleasurable change in my own chemistry when my mouth opened and suggestions tumbled out. I had little choice over this response. This showed me not only the intensity of my own inner conditioning, but my arrogance in thinking "I know what is right for other people and how things are supposed to be." I realized: "If it is so difficult

for me to keep my mouth shut, how can I judge anyone else for picking up a drink or drug when there is the additional brain chemistry system of reward and release from pain involved?"

Silence and simple listening on the other hand, challenge a lifetime of habits cultivated in response to fear and uncertainty. The process of recovery has meant many such moments of waking up out of an unconscious or automatic behavior, a release from the small me or ego into an expanding and aware spaciousness. Paradoxically then, working with addictive habits can be a powerful method of growing our capacity for presence, in which the compulsion or discomfort itself becomes the dharma bell ringing us back from our mind's habitual dwelling in fantasy and memory into the present.

This essay is printed with the knowledge and permission of all parties mentioned who are in recovery.

36 REFLECTIONS

Submitted by MELISA on Tue, 2015-05-19 11:21

I really needed to read this today! Thank you for such a thoughtful and well-structured essay. I'm struggling with something similar with my adored sibling and the most useful thing I've learned is just to let go of my urge to fix him, but instead to just listen and love unconditionally no matter how painful. Thanks again!

Submitted by TINA on Tue, 2015-05-19 11:50

Really an excellent piece. Thank you for so beautifully sharing your experience. I happen to be a sober alcoholic. Yet - I can relate so well to the emotional addiction I have engaged in, to those closest to me. As you put it, "Denial accompanies addictive habits, and we don't necessarily recognize what is driving us, especially when it comes in the guise of love." I have three teens who experience the ups and downs that accompany that age. They may not be addicts, but I have found myself trying to "fix" their emotional lows. And I also chose denial as a coping mechanism throughout my marriage. It wasn't until I stepped away from the marriage that I was able to clearly see that emotional addiction for what it actually was.

Submitted by MARY on Tue, 2015-05-19 11:56

This is the most accurate explanation I've read. I am 40 yrs sober in AA, so of course it was super important I "fix" my drug addicted daughter. Watching the pain was horrible, and all my "fixes" failed. In the area I'm from, an AA Al Anon meeting was available, and I started to attend. I learned that I didn't need to figure out my child's addiction, I needed to take care of me, and love my daughter exactly where she was at. I cannot express the gratitude I feel. I no longer saw her as a "drug addict" She was my daughter again. Drugs were no longer keeping us apart. As we all know addiction can only end in 3 ways, sobriety, mental institutions for the rest of our lives or death. Addiction took my daughter's life. I am so very grateful to God, AA, Al Anon, for giving me the tools to love her where she was at. Thank you!

Thank you. I have read this twice already, and plan on reflecting further in my journal. This is definitely something I struggle with in relation to my own children. Thank you for your transparency and generosity this post. It will help me!

Submitted by COLLEEN MYERS on Wed, 2015-05-20 07:48

This resonates with me as mother of a young adult who struggles with anxiety and depression, multi-cultural issues and the longing to belong to someone besides me. I so long for that for her as well, but have come to the end of the line in terms of ideas to "fix" her. So here we are, present to whatever is, no choice but to take the next breath and follow it.

Submitted by BETSY BERRY on Wed, 2015-05-20 07:49

In order to let go I had to develop new scripts. I also had to have faith that the consequences of someone else's behavior belonged to them...not to me. Revising how I communicated and responded was excruciating. Realizing that I was addicted to fixing meant that I might lose my purpose and some of my self definition. Here's where the real work began. I had always defined love as fixing and controlling. Learning to be present, to acknowledge someone else's issues without jumping into the middle of them was what I needed to do. But how? With some guidance, I learned how to listen. I learned how to encourage without adding outpourings of minute directions. I learned not to lead conversations but to let them flow. I learned how to "step back". I learned how to look straight into someone's face and say, "That's difficult. I am certain you will find your way through this...you have what it takes to make good decisions, and you will." I learned not to ask too many questions, and to make clear when what I was being told was too much information. (usually something that would disturb my sleep with worry.) When asked for rescue, I learned to say, "I love you. I also have faith in you. I cannot pull you out of this, but I am here to cheer you on." Even in the most dire of circumstances my loved ones could describe, I remembered that I was here to save the only person I can save....myself. I put the oxygen on my face first and handed the other mask(s) to any grown up who could figure out how to put it on. This was the beginning of a freedom and joy filled life I cannot really describe. And I believe (regardless of the disclaimers and manipulations of co-dependents around me) that it is the best chance for them to find the same freedom and joyful life.

Submitted by KAREN on Mon, 2015-05-25 10:53

Thank you Betsy, for the detailed "walk through" of your process. The conditioning to manage and fix runs so deep it's a struggle to find New Words and Ways for healing. Thank you so much Anneke for this heartfelt offering. Your timing is *perfect*

For years I tried to "fix" my husbands drinking but that just enforced his belief that he wasn't good enough and made him feel more guilty - all triggers for drinking!

It wasn't until I put myself and our children first that he took responsibility for his own actions (after countless times of giving up!).

He knew that I loved him, worried about what would happen if he was alone but that I was making the right decision to finally care for myself and my children.

I still struggle not to fix everything and counselling has helped us massively to learn how to treat each other like adults again. I know it feels like there is no hope but I guarantee you there really is.

Sometimes you need to just let go.

Sending love to everyone suffering but learn to love the moments x

Submitted by **PHOEBE** on Sun, 2015-05-24 08:29

Thank you, Anneke, for this clarity and simplicity. I am recovering from a divorce after 33 years together and can see in your article my lifelong addictive need to fix everyone around me while I struggled to function myself. Your reflection is so helpful and compassionate. I most often played the victim in my life with the sign "Rescue me!" on my forehead all the while giving other people advice. Thank you for sharing your process. It gives me hope.

Submitted by **MARLEEN ATHORP** on Sun, 2015-05-24 10:33

Thank you so much for this article, as it is jus the reading I needed today. I am struggling not to rescue my daughter from psychological and financial challenges and have recently returned to Al-Anon to help with caring for myself and not others.

Submitted by IRENE on Mon, 2015-05-25 13:36

My daughter shared this with me because she is intuitive enough to see my struggles with my alcoholic boyfriend. We broke up for two years and recently reconnected. As he is falling into his old patterns, I found myself falling back into my old patterns and becoming angry. I, too, felt justified in giving advice. Thank you for your story. I will meditate and be present in the moment. I take walks, especially when he is depressed and angry with everyone because of himself and his drinking. Even typing my reflection is helping! Thank you so much! :)

Submitted by JANET on Thu, 2015-05-28 12:11

While detaching with love often seems counterintuitive, it is the absolute truth to letting and giving the other person the ability to find their own higher power and their own Will towards recovery from an addiction. I too am a mother with an alcoholic daughter who suffers from depression now in recovery after 10 years of enabling behaviors from two loving parents. AlAnon principals and fellowship is what has saved not only ourselves but our daughter as well. It took a good dual diagnosis treatment facility and geographic distance to separate us and to give our daughter the strength and ability to rely and learn from other. And, that she is the only one who is in control of her destiny and life. While she is now on her own spiritual journey so am I, and I am grateful for it. The future is still unknown but the present is where I now find peace and actual happiness. This article really hit home and mirrored myself, it is only a reminder that I am not alone. Thank you!!

Submitted by KIRSTIN on Fri, 2015-05-29 11:11

It was such a gift that I stumbled upon this article today. This describes me perfectly in relation to my husband who is an alcoholic. I become so overwhelmed with fear and anxiety when he struggles with his drinking that I in turn begin to overwhelm him with questions and advice and a general verbal outpouring of my concerns. I end up feeling lost and alone and

hopeless. But recently made the decision to find an Al Anon meeting and I'm looking forward to taking care of myself and finding a community of people to help me along in this process of focusing on my own needs while I continue to love my husband where he currently stands. Thank you for this article and thank you to everyone else who has commented, I don't feel so alone anymore.

Submitted by PAULETTE on Sat, 2015-05-30 13:23

Thank you for this helpful and enlightening article! Such is my suffering, too, as the parent of an adult addict. I have read Kevin Griffin's One Breath at a Time and am now motivated to read it again. I have a solid mindfulness practice and embrace the twelve steps also. Another helpful book is Mindfulness and the Twelve Steps by Therese Jacobs-Stewart. The Buddha said letting go of suffering is the hardest work we'll ever do. Perhaps detaching with love will be the hardest work I will ever do.

Submitted by SUSAN RICHARDS on Mon, 2015-06-01 01:29

A friend emailed me this article, but at the same time apologising in case it offended me. Thank goodness she did. It came at the right time, when my 37 year old daughter is about to go into, yet again, another crisis (her partner of 2 years has decided to leave her). Whilst I think it is a wise decision on his part, and some scapegoating going on, by blaming it all on her alcoholism, those same old thoughts came flooding back. Perhaps this time, she will change. That thought is fine and perhaps she will but I managed to stop those 'I must help her' kind of thoughts. I have, at long last, made a lot of progress through attending a group for Carers and loved ones of those with an addiction, and managed to detach myself emotionally from my daughter. It is so liberating when you feel you have actually achieved that (it has taken 10 years). However, like the addict, the temptation is to take up our 'addiction' again, especially when they go into a crisis. I know now not to react in that way, it just won't work. She needs to feel the pain of the consequences of her behaviour, not me. It still hurts, but I have to put it aside and get on with my own life. I am of the opinion though, that unless I continue with help and support, it is highly likely that I will relapse too. Thank you dear friend for sending me this article and thank you so much to the author of this essay for re-inforcing it through your powerful and moving story.