

Letting Go of Adult Children

How to Get to the Other Side of the Grief

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Letting go of adult children can be extremely challenging. Some time ago, I spoke with a mother who was having a terrible time with her adult daughter. Her daughter was in her early twenties, living at home. The tension between the parents and child was becoming too much to bear. It was straining to the point of almost breaking what had long been a beautiful relationship.

She fought with her daughter regularly, nagging at her for not getting out of bed until noon and criticizing her for not being more helpful around the house. In essence, she stayed in her role as a parent to a young child while expecting her daughter to act more maturely.

When talking about her struggles, I used a phrase I often use with those who have lost a loved one. I spoke of “getting to the other side of the grief.” Rather than staying stuck on this side of grief, I talked about how rewarding one’s relationship with their adult child can be. To get there, however, parents have to walk through letting go of adult children, letting their kids make their own mistakes and find their paths.

My Patients Breakthrough

Today, my patient's daughter no longer lives at home. She gave her daughter a deadline by which she had to move out and stuck to it. She grieved the entire time; watching her daughter move on was awfully painful. Now, however, she says she's catching more and more glimpses of her daughter as an adult. They can discuss future career options and have even begun to collaborate on ideas for decorating her apartment.

Of course, allowing her daughter to grow up wasn't a smooth transition. As my patient put it, letting go was "horrendously painful." But she recognizes now that without forcing herself to walk through that pain, to "get to the other side of the grief," they'd still be where they were, arguing and combative and deeply unhappy about their relationship.

Some parents have a terrible time letting go of adult children. It's too painful. It feels like a death and consumes them with grief. In fact, for many parents, the reality of letting go is so painful, they simply refuse to do it, and fail to encourage their children out of the nest, literally or figuratively.

For example, parents allow their kids to live at home far longer than is healthy for their development. They pay their children's bills or cook their dinner or wash their laundry. The parents serve as a personal assistant, waking them up in the morning and reminding them to change the oil on their car. They help and advice and worry and nag and turn around and do it again the next day.

The results? When we refuse to let go, we prevent our children from learning the skills they need to be successful in life. We hinder their growth into adulthood.

One of the most important jobs we have as parents is to prepare our children to be on their own. It can be immensely painful, but if we don't, we've failed in our responsibilities, and we failed our kids. It's painful, but it's a grief we've got to walk through to reap the rewards of a new relationship.

After one of my patient's healthier talks with her daughter, my patient was shocked to find herself crying tears of joy. "It's like she's grown up overnight," she told me. I couldn't have said it better, myself. Parents would be surprised to know that children can stand on their feet when they have no other option but to grow up. It's our job as a parent to prepare them for adulthood, and give them the push they need into adulthood.