

The Detachment Wall

How to Let Go of Your Adult Children

Christine Field

Some of us have a problem with our attachment to our children, to the point where the bond can become unhealthy.

Can we love our children but not let their choices or behavior make us crazy? Is some detachment actually a good idea?

The idea of detaching from a person can seem terrifying. But is there a way to practice healthy detachment?

Another way of thinking about it is this—when we live detached, we are not placing a wall between us and others. Instead, we are examining our own expectations and dependencies.

With those in perspective, we are free to love another person because the focus is shifted to them and is not solely on us.

With our adult children, though we love them unconditionally, we try to satisfy unmet needs in us:

- Our need to be needed.
- Our desire to nurture someone.

- Our desire to see that our work and love produces an effect—a child who loves us back.

What we often do is keep a picture in our minds of our child and how they will fulfill these needs and desires for us. What happens when that child rejects us? In my case, and for many other moms, we completely freak out!

What Went Wrong?

When we are ‘good mothers,’ we begin to define ourselves by our mothering. While this can be positive and can encourage us to fulfill our role responsibly, by totally adopting that definition we can forget all the other aspects of ‘me.’

In dealing with estranged children, we still tend to look within ourselves. We ask ourselves what we did wrong. We obsess over every interaction and question whether we could have responded differently.

This Monday-morning quarterbacking neglects some basic facts about humans:

You Can’t Control Other People: We surely have influence over our children, but we do not mold them like clay. When they don’t turn out the way we planned, we neglect this fundamental truth.

You Can’t Rely on Your Children for Your Happiness: We may have looked ahead to our golden years and seen ourselves surrounded by loving grandchildren. This neglects another fundamental truth: People change. If we rely on other people for our happiness, we may be disappointed.

My source of joy and happiness is an inside job, not dependent on the actions of others.

Your Emptiness Is Yours to Fill Up: Your adult children don't exist solely to fill the void of your unmet needs. Do you need the love and admiration of children and grandchildren to be happy? Perhaps meeting your own needs by loving yourself sufficiently will bring more peace and satisfaction.

Complete People Can Love Completely: I remember well the first time my young daughter gushed about a new boyfriend, saying, "He completes me!" We had many long talks deep into the night discussing how love can be real and true only when two people who are complete within themselves come together.

True love rejects the notion that the other exists solely to please you. True love is therefore not threatened when the other displeases you, because the love is not dependent on the other fulfilling your needs.

Having the other person conform to our desires so we will love them is manipulation, not love. Focusing on "what's in it for me" is a death knell for true love.

Yet, as parents, we sometimes forget that in our relating to our adult children. When we can view them with some detachment, when our reactions to them are no longer based on expectations or being dependent on them, we are then able to love them fully and freely.

Do not look at your adult child as completing you, giving you a fulfilled life, or meeting your needs. When you set those aside, you begin to understand love.

What to Do Now?

If you are a hurting parent, laid low in the dust by the estrangement of an adult child, what should you do now?

- Examine your feelings and thoughts. What does it feel like when attachment hurts? What thoughts are you thinking at the time? Can you begin to think differently?
- Be with others and love them, but don't look to them as your source of happiness.
- Learn to be alone, not lonely. Loving ourselves enough that we can be our best companions is healthy.
- Quit blaming yourself for the state of the relationship. You didn't and couldn't control the outcome. Why beat yourself up?
- Writing or sketching your feelings and thoughts puts you in the moment and helps to get you out of your thoughts. Buy yourself a pretty journal and write in it whenever you feel overwhelmed, sad, or lonely.