



### Don't Take It Personally

As a parent of a child struggling with substances, you have probably heard suggestions that include distancing yourself, using tough love, or detaching until they bottom out and decide to change. On the one hand, given how awful you feel, these recommendations can make a lot of sense. On the other hand, the odds are that you really want to help your child. And when you try to detach or distance yourself you *still* feel angry, tired, and scared. Perhaps you feel even more scared because now you have so little contact!

The reality is that as a parent you can have a tremendous impact on your child's decision to change, and family influence is one of the main reasons people seek treatment. The first step, however, is to gain perspective on your own feelings and the problems you are facing.

Here are some feelings you may be having:

- *Disappointment* that your family isn't "normal," and that your dreams for your child elude you.
- *Anger* for all your child is putting you and your family through.
- *Fear* that your child is zoning out, dropping out, and/or ruining their life.
- *Discouragement* when your child doesn't change after a long heart-to-heart, a scary incident, a second time in treatment.
- *Shame* over your child's choices.
- *Sadness* that your child doesn't seem to want the happy life that you always wanted them to have.
- *Guilt* because you blame yourself for causing or contributing to the problem or at least for not preventing it.

Here are some things to remember about these emotions:

- It is totally reasonable and normal that you are feeling some or all of them.
- It is very helpful to move forward constructively if you can acknowledge your emotions to yourself, but *not* have them play out in your discussions with your child. Otherwise, they will likely drown out any other message you are trying to deliver.

Your feelings are valid and are a direct result of the complicated, painful problem that you are facing. At the same time they need to be managed if you are going to be successful at instigating change.

How can you keep that confusion and fog of emotion from knocking you off course as you try and help your child make changes? It helps to not take your child's decision to use substances personally. This is critical to keeping your balance and not sinking when the going gets tough, like when they are snippy, they are lying, they are late, or they are doing any number of things for which you feel insulted/hurt/disregarded.

How are you supposed to **not** take it personally?

- Try thinking about your child as if they were your neighbor's child when they tell you about the unfortunate thing they did last night. Doing so might help you have a little distance as you think about how to respond.
- Remember how you feel when someone gets upset with you. Do you ever feel defensive or shut down yourself?
- Recall the last time you had a calm discussion with your child that went well, and the last time you were emotional and it went badly.
- If you are dealing with a young person, recognize that it's your child's job to rebel to some degree and to push to see how far they can go. When they find the boundary, you want that boundary to be solid and safe. Remember that being young involves exploring, experimenting, figuring out who we are, and trying to find ways to feel good.
- Try and shift your focus away from what's happening "to you" and put it on what you can do.
- Finally, take care of yourself. The more emotionally resilient you are and the more coping tools you have on hand, the less reactive you will be.

Not taking your child's behavior personally may feel unnatural. However, the most effective strategies for change depend on your ability to focus on what you can do to help.

Material adapted from: <https://cmcffc.org/article/dont-take-it-personally>

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