The Courage to Change What I Can

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Editor's note: This op-ed was written by Kira Landauer, MPH. Ms. Landauer is a Community Health Educator Supervisor at the Division on Addiction at Cambridge Health Alliance, where she contributes to education, training, and community outreach initiatives focused on addiction. This op-ed is part of our Special Series on Addiction and Affected Others.



I remember my dad building me a playhouse when I was little. He designed it himself and built it entirely by hand. It had swings, a sandbox, a slide, and a little room at the top. In the summers, my dad, my mom, and I would stargaze in the backyard, then roll out our sleeping bags and sleep up there.

I remember my dad reading to me every night before bed, sitting at the foot of the bed while I lay there with my mom. He read me the *Harry Potter* series, *The Hobbit*, and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. They were my favorite books then, and they still are today.

I also remember the pancakes he made every Sunday morning, with chocolate chips and M&Ms mixed in. We called it "special breakfast."

I'm an only child, and growing up, it was always the three of us: my dad, my mom, and me. We were incredibly close. Three peas in a pod. The three musketeers. I couldn't imagine our family any other way.

But that changed.

I don’t remember exactly when my dad’s drinking went from an occasional glass of wine with dinner to something more. I don’t remember what first made me recognize it as a problem. But I do remember the day in 10th grade when I confided in a friend, “I think my dad has a drinking problem.”

My memories of the early days are hazy. I remember arguments about his drinking that became increasingly frequent. As the years went on, the consequences became more serious. There were accidents and injuries, hospital stays, and periods of inpatient and outpatient treatment.

There were also periods when my dad stopped drinking, usually following a particularly serious event. During those times, it felt like I had my dad back. And each time, I felt so much hope! This had to be “rock bottom,” right? Things would surely be different this time. We could finally put all of this behind us and get back to the way things were before alcohol became part of our lives.

But, alcohol always found its way back in. Each time, my hope would dissipate, giving way to disappointment, anger, sadness, and helplessness. It felt like we were right back where we started, and I was left waiting for the other shoe to drop. What would happen next? How bad would it be this time?

Throughout all of this, I struggled to make sense of it. How could this happen to my dad? How could this happen to us?

One of the hardest parts was making sense of my feelings toward my dad. I loved him so much! But sometimes I felt like I hated him. I felt sad for him, too. I knew he had experienced a great deal of hardship throughout his life, and I knew he didn’t want things to be this way. He was a good person who had been dealt a difficult hand in life.

How could I blame him?

But sometimes I did.

Some days, I believed he was doing the best he could. Other days, I felt he wasn’t doing enough. Sometimes I thought that if he loved my mom and me enough, he would change. I couldn’t understand why he couldn’t. Didn’t he love us enough? Of course he did! I knew that.

I was determined that this wasn’t how his life, or our lives, had to be. I tried

everything I could think of to make things better and regain some sense of control. I begged, pleaded, yelled, cried, and negotiated. I tried to be understanding and patient. I listened, offered solutions, and tried different ways of approaching him. I thought that if I could just find the right words or do the right thing, I could make a difference. I could fix it. I could fix him.

But nothing worked.

For a long time, I believed it was my responsibility to find a way to make things better. Eventually, I began to recognize that I couldn't control my dad's drinking or make him get better. That was a hard lesson, and one I'm not sure I've fully accepted even today.

Al-Anon, a peer support program for people affected by someone else's drinking, became an important source of support for me. Going to meetings made me realize I wasn't alone. Being affected by someone else's drinking can be isolating, especially when it's difficult to explain your experience and the complicated feelings that come with it to someone who hasn't been through something similar. In Al-Anon, I heard people share stories that were different from mine but also deeply familiar. It was a relief to be understood.

I found comfort in the Serenity Prayer, which I first heard at Al-Anon: *"Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."*

It helped me recognize that while I couldn't control my dad's choices, I could change how I responded and how I took care of myself. I had spent so much time focused on trying to "fix" him that I had neglected my own well-being. Taking a step back didn't mean I stopped caring or hoping things would change. It meant understanding that I could love my dad and want him to get better while also taking care of myself.

Through my work as a Community Health Educator at the Division on Addiction at Cambridge Health Alliance, I've spent years learning about and teaching others that addiction is complex and is not a moral failing or simply a lack of willpower. I understand this intellectually. But knowing something and living with it are two different things. When someone you love is experiencing addiction, it can be difficult to reconcile what you know with the hurt and frustration you feel. How do you acknowledge that someone's behavior has hurt you while still having

compassion for them?

One idea that helped me think through this was Dr. Hanna Pickard's framework of Responsibility without Blame. The idea is that we can recognize someone's responsibility for their actions without either taking that responsibility away by trying to rescue or fix them, or blaming and judging them. Instead, we can acknowledge the consequences of their actions while still treating them with care and compassion.

This framework helped me think differently about my dad's drinking and how I responded to it. I had spent so much time trying to find the right words or approach to make him stop drinking, feeling responsible for making things better. I began to understand that it was up to him to take responsibility for his drinking and its effects on our family. I could be honest about how his drinking affected me and my mom without letting my hurt turn into blame or change how I saw him as a person. I could still love him and have compassion for him.

Being an affected other has taught me that love, compassion, anger, sadness, and frustration can all exist at once. Understanding addiction doesn't make those feelings disappear, and knowing that you can't control someone else's drinking doesn't make it easy to stop trying. For me, learning to cope has meant finding support, accepting the limits of what I can change, and making room for both compassion for my dad and care for myself.

— Kira Landauer, MPH
