



**Letting Go of Adult Children:  
How to Get to the Other Side of the Grief**

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## How to Get to the Other Side of the Grief

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Over the course of this series, we've taken a look at why boundaries are so critical to the success our relationships and why they can be so difficult to maintain. We've explored strategies for setting healthy boundaries, and now, in this final installment, I'll give you the insight you need to check your progress. Are you keeping the boundaries you think you are?

Some time ago, I spoke with a mother who was having a terrible time with her adult daughter. She was in her early twenties, lived at home, and the tension between parents and child was becoming too much to bear, straining--to the point of almost breaking--what had long been a wonderful relationship.

It's not an unfamiliar story. Many more children live with their parents into adulthood today than they did even twenty years ago. For many, the decision is primarily financial, and with proper respect for healthy boundaries, such arrangements can work out just fine.

Other parents, however, have a terrible time letting their children go. 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. They 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 result? When we refuse to let go, we prevent our children from learning the skills they need to be successful in life. We stymie their growth into adulthood.

In my patient's case, she fought with her daughter regularly. She admonished her for not getting out of bed until noon. She criticized her for not being more helpful around the house. In essence, she stayed in her role as 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 talked about "getting to the other side of the grief." Rather than staying stuck on this side of her grief, I talked about how rewarding one's relationship with their adult child can be. To get there, however, parents have to walk through the hard stuff--letting their kids make their own mistakes and find their paths.

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 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 an easy 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.

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 in order 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.

This article comes in response to a patient request. Do you have a topic you'd like me to write about? Send it to me at [dabney@DrLDabney.com](mailto:dabney@DrLDabney.com).



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