



By Kate Thompson

Do you love a crazy-maker? Do you sometimes feel like tearing your hair out? Do you *really* know what people mean when they say, “You can pick your friends, but you can’t pick your family”?

Loving You is Killing Me

Tips & Tools for Those Who Love a Crazy-Maker

Crazy-makers are your loved ones who drive you crazy! They are adult friends or family who repeatedly engage in actions that cause serious stress for themselves and those who love them. They are the needy folks that suck the life out of you, and take an inordinate amount of your thought, time, money or energy. They come in all shapes and sizes, and all income and education levels. It’s what crazy-makers both *do* and *don’t do* that causes problems and creates chaos and stress.

For purposes of this article, we’ll now politely refer to these crazy-makers as “TLO’s” (*troublesome loved ones*). Take a look at these examples of TLO’s:

- ✓ Your brother gambles so much that there often isn’t enough food in the fridge for his kids, his phone’s been cut off, and he’s missed two rent payments.
- ✓ Your mother is drinking everyday now, and you know she hides bottles around the house. You often confront her about it, but can’t stand the lies and scenes that follow.
- ✓ Your adult daughter keeps hanging out with people who party wildly and often. She’s been taking big risks more and more often, and you’re really worried she’ll get hurt, arrested, or even killed.

Add to this short list other adult loved ones who are addicted to one thing or another, have untreated mental or emo-

tional issues, are easily victimized, self-absorbed, cruel, or manipulative. Others may be chronic liars, neglect themselves or their loved ones’ needs, be abusers, or control freaks.

If someone you love is a “crazy-maker” then chances are you’re feeling frustrated, frightened, angry, sad, and worried. TLO’s can bring a great deal of heartache, stress and trouble to your life.

Is There Any Good News Here?

The good news is that you can learn to use tools that will help you live more happily and deal with your loved one more calmly. Many people who care about troublesome people have learned to deal with their “crazy-making” loved ones in satisfying, productive ways – and you can too. Take a look at some tools you can add to your relationship toolbox.

My Relationship Toolbox

Acceptance. Don’t worry; this doesn’t mean you have to accept the stuff your TLO dishes out! It means your life will get easier if you accept two simple facts:

1. You can only change yourself.
2. You cannot change the TLO.

Let go with love. This handy tool is made up of two parts:

1. Accepting your TLO without accepting their harmful behavior.

2. Taking care of yourself, which is a loving thing to do that also benefits others.

This is not about letting go of your TLO; it’s about letting go of trying to change him or her. Learning to separate your TLO’s actions from his or her worth, and from your own worth, is what letting go with love is all about. Learn to recognize and accept your own feelings and thoughts; look at difficult situations in new ways and plan new approaches; act on your views and decisions.

Self-awareness. As you come to understand and accept your thoughts, feelings, and actions, you’ll be in a better position to make choices that honor your own preferences. What often happens is that people either get so worn out they shut the door on their TLO, or they spend years trying to help him get the message that his actions are harming others. They get very good at predicting what the TLO will do in various situations, learning to read his body language and tone of voice to know what’s going to happen next. They tune in like a radio to the TLO’s problems and either make excuses or give up in disgust.

Unfortunately, none of this improves things much, because all that energy is being invested in learning about the wrong person. *You* are the only person you can change, so in order to do that, get to know *your* feelings and *your* thoughts. Learn to recognize *your* actions and reactions, and you will

regain control of situations that once felt hopeless.

Choice. It's very common for people who love a TLO to feel stuck – really, really stuck. But this does not have to be the case. Every minute of every day we all have choices. Some are small, such as which shoes to wear or what to eat for lunch. Some choices are bigger – whom to marry or where to move. We also have the choice, at every single turn, of what we will think, feel, say, and do. Consider these examples of how to think about your options:

- ✓ “Will I stay in the room while she yells at me, or will I go somewhere else?”
- ✓ “Just because he blames me for his problems doesn't mean I have to feel guilty or responsible. He made his situation himself. I love him, but I can't fix his life.”
- ✓ “Do I have to give my thirty-year-old sister money to cover her rent? No, I don't.”

Clear language. Here are three tools that can clear up communication and demonstrate your decision to become more responsible for yourself, and less responsible for your TLO.

1. Four words worth losing: should, why, always & never

Should. Don't inflict your “shoulds” on anyone else, especially your TLO. You can't actually know what's best for somebody else. We often *think* we know, of course, and therein lies the problem. We're wrong. Even if we're right, do we have the right to prescribe how another adult lives? Do you want anyone else dictating what you should or shouldn't do? No!

Why. This word is the dark key that opens the portal to a twisting, downward spiral of despair! “*Why* doesn't she take care of her kids?!” “*Why* won't they quit fighting?” “*Why* is this happening to me?” What we actually mean when we moan the *why's* is, “I don't like this!! I feel helpless to do anything about it! I'm having a rough time here!” If you find yourself asking “*Why?*” try noticing what you feel underneath the question.

Maybe you feel frustrated, lost, or afraid, which are all common reactions to stress. A wonderful replacement for *Why?* Is: “What am I going to do about it?” Think positively and gratefully about what you can do to improve your part of the troublesome relationship.

Always & Never. Emotional words like “always” and “never” rarely have any helpful effect, because they're exaggerations. For example, if someone makes risky choices, do they *always* make risky choices? Probably not. Even a serious drug addict sometimes spends money on food or rent. Telling someone, “You *never* listen to me!” or “You're always late!” is probably not accurate, but even if it were, many people, and TLO's in particular, are likely to respond defensively, making the conversation very unproductive. Accurate, non-blaming words are more neutral and helpful, especially in stressful relationships.

2. I-messages

An I-message is a statement that supports open, more productive communication. It expresses how you feel, and what you want. The opposite type of message is called a “you-message.” It is the way many people talk when they're upset, and its main effect is to cast blame by telling the other person what they've done wrong or why they're no good. Look at these examples:

- ✓ you-message: “Well, you screwed up again. Can't you ever get home when you say you will?”
- ✓ I-message: “I get worried when you say you'll be home at midnight, but you're still not home at 2 a.m. I'd really appreciate a phone call.”
- ✓ you-message: “Can't you ever call just to see how I'm doing!? I'm sick of you always wanting money from me!”
- ✓ I-message: “I've been feeling used because you only seem to call me to ask for money. I'd love it if you'd call just to chat sometimes.”

I-messages encourage calm, productive communication, while you-messages generally incite defensive, closed responses.

3. Fair warning

Here's a helpful communication tool that can diminish the discomfort or guilt you may feel when you start changing how you relate to your TLO. With fair warning, before you make the change you've decided to make, you can tell your TLO what's coming. For example:

- ✓ “I want to let you know that the next time I see you put the kids in the car when you've been drinking, I'm going to call the police. I love all of you, and I am not going to beg anymore or silently watch you risk all your lives.”
- ✓ “I'm making some changes, so the next time you start to yell at me or try to blame me for your problems, I'm going to leave the room. When you want to talk about anything else, I'll be all ears.”

Learning to use these three communication tools can help decrease stress and increase your confidence in difficult situations.

Boundaries

A personal boundary is like a fence between two properties. If Mrs. Misery next door bugs the heck out of you, you can build a fence. In relationships, you can do the same sort of thing. When your TLO (or anyone, for that matter) causes you strife, you can set a personal boundary to help yourself stay on a more even keel. Boundaries can be defined as:

- ✓ something you will or will not accept
- ✓ something you will or will not do.

For example, let's take a look at Devin and Josie:

Josie and Devin had been married for ten years. Their marriage was pretty good, but they had one big problem – Devin's dad, Cal. He was angry, critical, and touchy, and he was driving them both crazy.

At first Devin had thought Josie was making too big a deal of it, but he came to realize that he'd just gotten used to his dad, so Cal's behavior seemed normal. But that didn't make it okay or easy to be around. It caused really serious friction between him and Josie.

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Cal was hard enough to take in day-to-day life, but at special family events, he was even worse. He seemed to relish criticizing and making everyone miserable. And to top it all off, he had recently told Devin he wanted to move in with them once the family home sold! Devin and Josie had no idea what to say or do about any of it.

In this case, Devin and Josie have several problems as a result of Cal's nasty ways:

1. The conflict of wanting him in their lives while hating how he behaves causes stress and loyalty confusion in their marriage.
2. They now dread holidays and other special events and resent this development in their family life.
3. They feel completely lost about how to handle Cal's desire to move in with them, when they absolutely don't want him to. Yet they feel guilty because he's elderly and probably lonely since his wife died.

To create a healthy boundary that will make their relationship with Cal easier, Josie and Devin decide to start with just one of the problems Cal causes: special family events. Before the annual family picnic, they decide they'll no longer accept his criticism and complaints about the family picnic. They use fair warning and tell Cal that every time he says something negative about the picnic, they will excuse themselves or hang up the phone. If he starts in at the picnic itself, they will walk away from him. If he continues, they will politely tell him they are leaving.

When you're first learning to set boundaries, it usually works best to start with one single, clear problem, as Josie and Devin did. Think about it, talk about it, and picture how it might play out – then give it a try. Afterwards, spend a few minutes assessing how it worked.

“Me” is Not a Four-letter Word

For many people, putting their own needs first feels odd or selfish. But think about these examples, and as you do so, be willing to question your usual

responses. Let's say you're quite poor. Is it selfish to eat some of the food at your table if it means you'll be well enough to go to work to provide for your family? Airlines tell parents to put on their oxygen masks before they help their children. Is that selfish, or does it make good sense? After all, parents must be well enough to help their kids.

Look at your own situation with your TLO. Are you exhausted from running after him? Are you going broke from bailing her out of trouble? Do you feel resentment or rage because of your TLO's irresponsible actions? If so, it's very important to learn to take care of yourself so you can live a more satisfying life, no matter what your TLO is doing with his or her life. Try these self-care tips:

- ✓ Give up the fantasy that you can change your TLO.
- ✓ Learn to say “no” when it's best for you to do so, and when you want to.
- ✓ Decide for yourself how you feel. No one else has to approve of your feelings, thoughts, or actions.
- ✓ Ask for help from people you trust.
- ✓ Give yourself credit for your efforts and accomplishments.
- ✓ Allow yourself to make mistakes as you ride the learning curve of self-growth. Practice makes *better*.

✓ Take care of your whole self with rest, enjoyable pastimes, healthy food, exercise, and friendships. You'll do no one any good if you get sick or run down.

✓ Do *your* best instead of worrying about what is *the* best – there's no such thing.

The bottom line is that no matter *why* your TLO does what he does, the key is to recognize that his actions are affecting you, and that it's not only okay to take care of yourself, it's critical to do so. When you look after yourself, you're better able to help the ones you love and live the life you want to live. GB

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