

**TOUGH  
LOVE**



**FAMILIES  
ANONYMOUS**

# **TOUGH LOVE**

**Bill L.'s**

**ALTERNATIVE TO ENABLING**

This pamphlet is addressed to parents, partners, husbands, wives, brothers and sisters and friends of the abuser; for example when “parents” are referred to in the text, this can also mean any member of the family or friend etc.

\* Throughout this pamphlet the word “abuser” is not limited to the chemically dependent person, but refers also to those persons exhibiting negative, hostile, or self-destructive behaviour that is disrupting harmony.



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## INTRODUCTION

Families affected by drug abuse or drastic behavioural changes usually respond in predictable ways which are marked by guilt, anger, unhelpful protection, the rewarding of bad behaviour and diminished love. What is needed is “tough love”.

## GUILT

The impact of drug abuse or serious negative behavioural changes on the family is normally one of terrible pain and confusion. Parents typically feel guilty. “Where did we go wrong? How did we fail?” This reaction is normal, but usually not very helpful. In fact, the abuser\* often takes advantage of this guilt and concludes, “Yes, you are to blame. You don’t understand me. You just want me to be miserable, queer, left out, etc.” This, in turn, compounds the parent’s (or spouse’s) feelings of guilt.

## ANGER

Everybody gets angry. Under the pressure of drug abuse, or excessively poor behavioural attitudes of a family member, it is not uncommon for normally rational adults to say and do things that are completely out of character. Some adults act like raving idiots; blaming, threatening, preaching, scolding, screaming, even displaying violence. None of this helps, of course, but threatened people who feel betrayed and used can get pretty crazy.

## UNHELPFUL PROTECTION

Under the umbrella of “helping” and “love” many persons cover bad cheques, pay fines, provide bail, lie to employers, write phony excuses to the school, etc. They are afraid the abuser will be hurt or even destroyed by his actions. All of this is done for the “good” of the problem person. Some, understandably, are concerned with their own good reputations. Also, some of this “protection racket” comes from their own guilt feelings; they don’t want to see the offender suffer, and they feel guilty when he does.

## REWARDING BAD BEHAVIOUR

Rescuing or covering up for the abuser only strengthens the tendency to continue the behaviour that got the person into trouble in the first place. If poor behaviour is rewarded by the pleasure of drug usage with no unpleasant results such as paying his own bail, covering his own bad cheques, being expelled from school, dropped from the varsity team, etc., the abuser is never allowed the valuable opportunity to experience the consequences of his poor decisions. The spouse or child who is repeatedly “forgiven” if chores are not done, homework not finished, school skipped or work missed, is ill-prepared for the real world and has been dealt a disservice in the guise of parental or family concern and love.

## DIMINISHED LOVE

The loss of love and good will is another almost certain result of the impact of drugs or negative behaviour on the family. Because we are human and not divine, most of our behaviour is conditional. That is, we don't go on doing something forever unless we are rewarded in some way for doing it. Even love grows cold and turns to bitterness when there is no kindness returned. Love is kept alive by love.

## NEED FOR TOUGH LOVE

When drugs (including alcohol) and or poor behaviour become more important to the abuser than people, love is strained; tragically, sometimes is it extinguished. In FA we discuss a proven, positive alternative to the love that enables continued bad behaviour. We call it “Tough Love”. It is the kind of love that cares enough to be willing to hurt if necessary, not to do intentional harm, but to be willing to offend the abuser. Tough Love says, “We have had enough. We are not rescuing you from the trouble you have caused; we love you enough to say, “no”.

When “Tough Love” takes hold, healing begins for everyone in the family. Only then does the family illness have a chance to heal.

## TOUGH LOVE – ALTERNATIVE TO ENABLING

**1. There is no way that I can keep \_\_\_\_\_ out of trouble or from being hurt. I will release him to God’s care (or my “Higher Power”).**

Families Anonymous through its commitment to the Twelve Steps stresses that we are powerless over drugs and the lives of other people. Admitting that we are powerless over the use of drugs or the negative behaviour of others is not an easy thing to do. In fact, most of us are initially shocked by the idea that we should “let go” of this person. We have been conditioned to think that the problem is ours. “He doesn’t change, so I must try harder,” is the idea we have nourished. We tend to believe things might improve if we pray more, lecture more, threaten more, worry more, plead more, or whatever. But now we are told to admit we are powerless, that there is nothing we can do to keep the abuser from getting into trouble, or being hurt by his habits. In contrast to this advice, we want to believe we should take care of the problem. Sometimes it is only after we have exhausted ourselves and every known avenue of influencing the abuser – only then – that we are ready to admit we cannot protect him or change him.

You are not responsible for another’s decisions or behaviour. You cannot control him no matter how hard you try. You cannot deliver him from temptation or protect him from harm. These statements are facts, and our serenity begins only when we start letting go of the people we try so hard to control and protect. When we risk releasing the abuser to the care of God (or our “Higher Power”) peace starts to heal us. This is not to say we are never again afraid of what will happen when we stop attempting to control and protect. Even those who have gained serenity know in their hearts they have many fearful moments, many times of dread. But serenity does start, and it continues to grow as we expand our ability to let go. Accepting our powerlessness is the first step in our recovery.

**2. I am aware that \_\_\_\_\_ has many needs and emotions. I will try to respect these needs and emotions.**

People of all ages have needs. Babies need tender care, nurturing and protection. Children need security and guidance, plus firm and fair treatment. Adolescents need to find things out for

themselves, and to feel accepted by their peers. Adults need a sense of worth and purpose. Everyone needs the basic survival requirements of food, shelter, and clothing. But people also need to feel wanted and appreciated, and we all need to have some degree of peace with ourselves and others.

It is hard to be sensitive to the needs of people who seem indifferent to our needs or even to their own. When the abuser berates, discounts, manipulates and uses us (typical drug related behaviour), we tend to get frustrated, angry, and even act a bit crazy at times. When he neglects himself and appears bent on wrecking his health and his future, it is difficult to remain sensitive and caring toward him. Similarly when a teenager skips classes, lets his grades slip, or quits school entirely; when he verbally and/or physically vents abuse on members of the family, or when he withdraws from family activities or personal communication, we have great difficulty “loving” this person.

FA helps us to renew our sensitivity to the needs of the abuser. It helps us to see beyond his negative attitudes and destructive behaviour. We begin to understand that he is often seeking to be free of adult control, to win peer approval, and to experience forbidden pleasure. We disagree with many of the methods he chooses in his search because we know how harmful they are to the abuser and the people around him. Often we can see that he has lost his way and his search has become a sickness which threatens him and the people around him. With new-found serenity, we can begin to understand the things he seeks and become a bit more patient with him and the needs that he desperately struggles to meet. We can also see the depth of his illness and the intensity of his needs.

### **3. I also accept my own needs and emotions, and I expect \_\_\_\_\_ to respect these too.**

Accepting our own needs is sometimes more difficult than accepting the needs of others. Parents, spouses, brothers, sisters, relatives, and close friends of the abuser often put his desires before their own needs. Frequently our need for peace and quiet is disrupted by the noise of the stereo or the shouts and demands of the abuser. Our work or rest is sometimes disturbed by a bad-news call from the school, the hospital or the police department.

On occasion we may be aroused by a pathetic call for help from the abuser himself, who seems to be totally unaware or unconcerned about our need for peace, or sleep, or our need to recuperate from the last upsetting episode.

Sometimes we even feel guilty about having personal needs. Some of us have trained ourselves to respond to every request or demand of our children or other family members. We wear ourselves out trying to please, or trying not to offend. Unfortunately, this pattern leads us to neglect our own needs, and sooner or later we “burn out”. We become exhausted physically, emotionally, and spiritually. If we are to survive with any sanity and satisfaction, we must insist that our needs be respected too. The alternative to having respect for your own needs is frustration, depression, or total exhaustion.

People with experience in dealing with a drug abuser know that asking (or even demanding) that their needs be respected is like “talking to the wall”. We don’t often expect to be heard or honoured in our request for his recognition of our needs. Sometimes the only way our needs are going to be met is by our taking personal action to see that we don’t become the slave or doormat for others. Such slavery occurs when we have surrendered our rights and needs as persons. To avoid this we learn to say “no”, or “I’m sorry but I have needs too”. We learn to set limits on what we will do for others and make it clear that life is a two way affair in which our needs are as real as theirs. We realise that the abuser will sometimes not agree with our newly learned respect for ourselves. More importantly we must continue to know this for ourselves, with or without agreement from him or others.

Families Anonymous encourages a serenity that comes from accepting ourselves and feeling O.K. about our own needs and emotions.

#### **4. I will attempt to do my part to act like a responsible parent (or wife, husband, etc.).**

Being a responsible person is never easy. Being responsible in the face of irresponsibility or even sheer lunacy on the part of the abuser seems almost impossible at times. How often have individuals or whole families “gone crazy” in their reactions to the behaviour of the drug abuser? Most FA members have become

completely caught up in the madness of the effects of drug abuse during some period. Normally controlled, rational people may act like idiots under the impact of the fear and anger prompted by the drug abuser. Exhausted emotionally, physically, spiritually, and sometimes financially by his antics; we find it hard to be responsible people ourselves. Often we become impulsive, self-pitying and vindictive.

It is not hard to understand how people under great pressure may act irresponsibly. We say that at such times they are “not themselves”. When we allow the abuser to control our feelings and behaviour, we become involved in a family illness. The problem began with one irresponsible and sick person, and now has expanded to include the whole family in a kind of madness.

So our effort to gain serenity is also an effort to regain a hold on responsibility. If ever there was a time for cool heads and responsible action, it is when the abuser presents us with trouble. Rational mature behaviour at such times is worth all the effort it takes. Of course, learning responsibility is a continuous process that goes beyond the crisis situation. Practising serenity (which means living a day at a time) helps us to increase our ability to be responsible, to get “back on the track” or “pick up the pieces”. Serenity allows us to go on with life even after we have lost our way for a time.

**5. I also expect \_\_\_\_\_ to do his/her part as a member of the household or family.**

This statement may be met with considerable cynicism or even laughter by people who have lived with drug abuse or very erratic behaviour in the family. Expecting the abuser to do his part as a member of the family may seem to be an utterly silly notion. Some who read such a statement may be thinking, “It’s foolish to believe that my son (or daughter, or whoever) will ever behave like a normal person. He has no ambition for anything but getting high. I can’t trust that he will keep his word even if he promises to do something worthwhile.” Such thoughts are not far from the truth. Most of us have learned through bitter experience to be wary of expecting anything responsible from the addict. We have been conditioned to expect little else but trouble and hurt.

However justified our doubts, it is not helpful to give up all expectations of responsibility on the part of the abuser. Parents must still be in charge of their own homes. We cannot prevent drug

abuse or abusive behaviour, but we do not have to put up with all the insanity that often accompanies it. We can and should allow the abuser to experience the painful consequences of his poor decisions. If he gets himself into trouble and we get him out, we are encouraging his irresponsibility. We can and should set limits on what happens in our own homes. Hours, noise, fighting, stealing and getting “high” at home are but a few of the issues about which we can have a say. If no lines are drawn, and no demands made, our homes become battlefields and flop houses.

If the abuser is allowed to live at home, he needs to have family members expect that he be treated as one among them. Parents who do everything for their children become discouraged and often develop feelings of self-pity and resentment. When others do everything for the abuser, they unconsciously set him up for depression, guilt and acting out. Cultivating dependency by doing everything for another person ultimately makes for bitterness and frustration for everyone, including him.

It is important to try to maintain a reasonable level of expectation for the abuser’s performance. Expecting too much is unrealistic and only sets us up for disappointment. But we should also know that expecting too little is an invitation to the abuser to lean too much upon us, with the result that everyone is miserable.

**6. I will try not to be negative or punishing to \_\_\_\_\_. I know that everyone likes praise, approval, acceptance, and I will try to praise any effort \_\_\_\_\_ makes to be responsible.**

Most of us are members of FA because we have been hurt by the sickness and irresponsibility of the family member who abuses drugs or adopts a life style contrary to the family’s beliefs. We are sadly aware of the tragic personality changes that develop with drug use. People who were once basically good seem to have become monsters who lie, cheat, and steal to maintain their habits. Their values deteriorate and priorities seem to be turned upside down. How natural it is for us to become negative and punishing! We would like to exterminate the roots of the evil we see warping the life of someone we love. Unfortunately, our punitive attitudes often spill over from the cause to the victim. We begin to hate the one we love. Sadly, the situation began with one sick, negative person, and now it has grown to include us in the circle of bitterness. The illness has embraced the family.

In saner moments we are aware that our hurt and anger are not very helpful feelings. Sometimes they become destructive emotions which make the achievement of serenity impossible. We may alienate the people we need and who need us. Finally, by hanging on to hurt and anger we make life miserable for the abuser. While we may feel he deserves to be miserable, we are probably not doing much for his recovery. Unintentionally we may be giving him another excuse for attempting to escape life by withdrawing from society or going into drugs.

A more adult and constructive way to deal with the abuser is through the rewards of our approval and praise. This is especially true when we see signs of the abuser's real effort to recover and rejoin the human race. Many of us are sceptical about being too encouraged by short-lived efforts or by phoney "con" actions. We grow cautious and even cynical about being too friendly. Having been "burned" so often we are wary of extending ourselves. We should be. But we should also try to be models of what we want the abuser to be: a responsible, pleasant, human being who can give as well as take. So, it does make sense to give up negative, punishing attitudes to become more rewarding with praise and approval when these are warranted by the abuser's positive efforts, however small. Being pleasant persons is good for us, our families and the abuser.

**7. I will attempt to be reasonable in my expectation of \_\_\_\_\_, but I also accept my right and responsibility to set limits on his/her behaviour in my home.**

Being reasonable about our expectations of an abuser's behaviour takes a lot of effort. Dealing with a person who has abused himself over a period of time requires us to be realistic about our expectations. It is not likely that we are often going to experience the abuser as a considerate person who is concerned about our needs. At times he is demanding, hostile, and rude. At other times he may be withdrawn and depressed. On still other occasions the abuser may be abnormally friendly and talkative. These behaviour changes are frequently related to drug usage. So our lives are often erratic, changing from day to day, or even hour to hour, with the shifting moods of the abuser. Being reasonable under such circumstances may seem totally beyond our ability. Still we must have expectations, we must have ground rules and guidelines in our homes.

Without these, the abuser is totally in charge, our lives become an emotional roller coaster and our homes the scenes of chaos.

While FA encourages us to recognize that we cannot control or change the lives of other people, it also reminds us that we have rights of our own. Through FA's philosophy of "tough love", we are reminded that we, too, have rights and needs. We have the right to secure and peaceful homes. We have the right to refuse to have our nights disrupted by shouting, loud stereos, ringing telephones, or banging doors (the list is endless). We have a right to determine what is acceptable to ourselves as long as we do not injure another person when we enforce our rights. We certainly have the right to say "no" to many of the irrational and destructive demands and expectations of the abuser.

There is also the matter of our responsibility to set limits. Through our need to be nice people ("good guys") or our need to be loved, we sometimes agree to do things which are clearly against our own welfare and better judgment. We must be realistic, not expecting the impossible. But we should also respect ourselves enough to refuse to be doormats or slaves for others. When we neglect our own rights and responsibilities, we become targets for contempt from others while losing self respect.

**8. I know people cannot be perfect, so I will try not to expect perfection of myself or \_\_\_\_\_. I will be honest about my imperfections and do my best to be an OK person.**

Most of us recognize clearly that human beings are not perfect. We have lived too long to expect people to behave like angels. As long as they don't bother us, we accept people pretty much the way they are.

There are exceptions to this rule, however. When it comes to judging ourselves and the people with whom we live, it is often quite another matter. While we may be ready to accept the flaws in the majority of people, we are often very severe in our judgment of ourselves. The parents of drug abusers often feel they have failed in their roles of rearing responsible, happy children. As parents we often feel guilty, unworthy, and ashamed. "Where did I go wrong?" "What did I say or do to have a child so sick and confused as mine?" This kind of agonised soul-searching is typical of the people who come to FA. They are often harder on themselves than on their drug abusing child.

Through FA we come to learn that being hard on yourself does not help anything. Honestly recognizing that you may have attitudes that need changing is one thing. It is another matter to put yourself down, to feel that you must apologize because your abuser isn't head of his class or that he may be in trouble. The real point is that we work on whatever needs changing in ourselves, not him. Regaining our self respect and composure is crucial.

The same principle applies to our expectations of the abuser. Obviously he is far from perfect in his attitudes and actions. We need not pretend otherwise. But there are times when he makes real efforts toward positive change. At such times it is important that we not cling to our hurts and disappointments from the past. To live in the present, coping a day or even an hour at a time; not expecting perfection from ourselves, other family members or the abuser. This is the approach to living that we learn in FA.

**9. I know most parents (or family members) are inclined to rescue their children (or husbands, wives, etc.) when they get into trouble of their own making. Because I realize that taking responsibility for another person's problems does not help him but actually weakens him, I will do my best to allow \_\_\_\_\_ to experience the natural consequences of his/her own poor judgment or behaviour.**

One of the most natural things for family members (especially parents) to do when the drug abuser gets into difficulty is to attempt to rescue him. We want to keep him out of trouble, to protect him from harm, to help him avoid pain or embarrassment. Many family members have paid fines, provided bail, made excuses, lied and in one way or another covered up for the abuser. Some parents literally have spent thousands of pounds trying to keep the abuser out of trouble. We must all make our own individual decisions about what we will do when faced with a difficult problem about helping the abuser. FA assists us in looking at what we are doing in response to the abuser's behaviour and challenges us to consider whether our frequent rescuing ultimately helps the abuser. By rescuing we may unintentionally encourage him to keep up his destructive behaviour. Without experiencing the physical or emotional pain that can follow abusive behaviour, the abuser may see no reason to change. When such behaviour means only pleasure or escape, it is unlikely the abuser will have any

reason to change. When we step aside (“detach”) to allow some of the negative consequences of his behaviour to affect the abuser, there is a chance that he may decide that there is need for him to change.

Usually we are motivated to rescue by our desire to help. Many of us say we cannot allow anything painful to happen to the abuser because we love him. A closer look indicates that helping and loving the abuser should involve assisting him to become stronger and more independent. Certainly we do not intend to help him to be weak, dependent or irresponsible. Unfortunately, doing too much for the abuser and never allowing him to grow to face the results of his decisions (or indecision) contributes to his weakness. FA reminds us that being a real friend of the abuser often means allowing him to be hurt in order that he may eventually grow.

**10. Everyone should pull his/her own load. I will do my best to resist allowing \_\_\_\_\_ to be dependent upon me. When I allow this I only encourage resentment from him/her and self pity and bitterness from me.**

In order to feel good about themselves, most people have to have a sense of doing their share, of “doing their part”. When we are too dependent upon others, we lose our self respect. It is no different with the abuser. Frequently he becomes a master manipulator who gets others to do things that he should do himself. Family members often work, while the abuser does little to take care of himself. It is not unusual for the abuser to attempt to make parents, or brother and sisters feel guilty about not providing everything he wants. He will claim his parents treat his brothers and sisters far better than they treat him. He will imply that if they “love” him, they will get him another car; allow him a certain privilege, give him money, etc. It is easy to give in, even against our better judgment. Often, because of hidden guilt, we feel obligated to do things we know we will regret.

To resist allowing the abuser to increase his dependence on us is complicated. Our good intentions, our guilt, and our desire to please, plus the abuser’s ability to manipulate, all combine to increase his dependency. But inevitably, being dependent on us increases the abuser’s resentment toward us as well. This is difficult to see at first. When we do things for the abuser, we are

likely to assume that this will make him happy and grateful. Actually, it is more apt to result in his increased hostility. Having things done for him regularly, the abuser will become disgusted with himself. Eventually he begins to resent the very people who allow him to be dependent. He comes to hate the people he feels he needs so desperately (despite his denials).

Our good intentions, our guilt, and our desire to help can contribute to the abuser's dependency problem. This is a poor arrangement. If we really wish to be of help, we must be firm. In the face of irrational demands we must often say, "No, I can't," (without having to explain our actions). FA reinforces our desire to be of real help by not encouraging the dependence of the abuser. The philosophy of "tough love" helps us to begin to feel comfortable in refusing to contribute to the abuser's weakness and his disrespect for himself.

**11. I know that the only person I can be responsible for is me. It isn't easy, but I will do my best to think, and feel, and act in ways that make me and the people around me feel good. My resentment and self-pity are feelings I can do something about.**

There is no way that we can be so strong or so adequate that we can do for another person that which he must ultimately do for himself. We can't breathe for another or see for another; neither can we do another's job nor be another's conscience. We know from sad experience that we cannot prevent another from taking drugs or adopting abusive behaviour. Certainly there are some things we can do to help another person, but we can never take over for him that which he must learn to do himself. FA teaches us how crucial it is to let go of the abuser for his sake and our own. Despite our tendency to do for him and protect him from the harm he inflicts upon himself and others, FA urges us to take a new approach to things which involves concentrating not on his attitudes and behaviours but on our own.

We have enough to do to be responsible for ourselves. Being mentally, spiritually and physically as healthy as possible is the task we must accomplish for ourselves. We begin the task by exchanging our negative, anxious, and guilty feelings for the serenity that comes with letting go of the abuser (detaching). Accepting the fact we cannot change him or do for him allows us to

concentrate our efforts on ourselves ... where they are effective. We make efforts to be positive, serene, and comfortable in the face of less than perfect circumstances. We make the effort to think and act and feel in ways that make us and the people around us feel good. We stop our scolding, preaching, and threatening that make everyone (including the abuser) want to avoid us. We give up our resentment and self-pity because they are destructive to everyone ... including ourselves. We adopt the attitude, "I know I can't change him, so I think I will work on bringing out the best and the most pleasant in me." With such an attitude we benefit and so do the people around us.

**12. I need other people, and they need me. I will do my best to contribute to my own growth, and the growth of the members of my Families Anonymous group, and the growth of Families Anonymous wherever it is needed.**

Our need for others is usually pretty clear to most of us. We recognize that in daily life our place in society is dependent upon the actions of many persons important to us, but whom we may never know personally. The persons who put the food on the shelf of the grocery store, install our telephones, and refine the petrol for our cars all make it possible for us to function as we do. Closer to home, the members of our families depend on each other for everything from survival to happiness. The members of FA also need each other in a very special way. Each has a part to play for all the rest.

As members of FA we develop helpful approaches to our problems. We develop such basics as releasing the abuser to the care of our Higher Power and accepting the serenity that occurs when we stop trying to change and rescue others but work on ourselves instead. These new attitudes and skills do not occur suddenly. They take time and patience. However, through FA, positive changes do come, and we do experience growth despite our initial fears and scepticism.

The changes that take place in FA members happen to a considerable degree because of those who have grown and benefited and are now encouraging growth in others. FA is a movement of real people who have not arrived at perfection but who are willing to lend a hand to others while continuing to work

on their own growth. All of us in FA need each other. It is obvious that the newcomer needs the perspective that comes from the experienced members. However, we all come to see our need for each other no matter how experienced we are. In the same way, new groups struggling to get started need the help of older established groups. Being a member of FA puts you in contact with caring people; it also invites you to become a person who will help others in their need.

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