

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My friend – I’ll call him Andrew – had a very bad childhood. His mother ran off, and his father was a violent alcoholic. He lived in foster homes for most of his teenage years. On the other hand, I was raised in a loving family without any of those terrible problems. Andrew always brings up just what a sad life he has had. When he’s late for a date, he says, “I never learned responsibility because my family was so messed up.” When he blows up in anger, he explains it away by saying, “That’s the way my father yelled at me.” He distrusts everyone, and it seems like every time he makes a mistake, he blames it on the past. He admits this, but then says, “I can’t change.” Do you have any advice for him? I really like him and, in his heart, he’s a very caring, generous, and loving person and often takes care of other people before himself.

-- Kira

Dear Kira,

Andrew deserves compassion. No child should ever be subjected to the kind of challenges and trauma that he has. Unfortunately, though, many children have been, and continue to be raised in toxic families with multiple dysfunctions and unbearable pain. That being said, Andrew does not have to continue to live the way he has been. He has a choice to make. He can change, or he can live in the dangerous spot of forever remaining a victim of his autobiography.

We cannot change our past, of course, but each of us has an innate human ability to change our present and our future. Andrew will grow when he can acknowledge his history, allow for feelings of anger, and grieve the fact that he never had the comfort and safety of loving parents. He has a choice: remain a victim, or begin to view himself as a survivor. The fact that you believe that he is – in his heart – a caring, loving person should fill him with pride. He might have turned out very differently given his early experiences. He might have become – like his father – an angry, abusive alcoholic. But he has not. His suffering may even have allowed him to feel a natural empathy for others that he expresses in a generosity of spirit and heartfelt compassion.

First, Andrew needs to fully understand and believe that he doesn’t have to remain in the victim role for the rest his life. He will benefit by getting help from a therapist or support group like ACoA (Adult Children of Alcoholics – www.adultchildren.org). In these safe and nurturing relationships, he can discover how to more accurately identify and express his feelings, grieve for the past, and move toward forgiveness and freedom.

He can understand that some people are trustworthy, and he can learn to better discriminate between people who should be trusted and those who should not. When Andrew begins to understand that he is worthy of love, he will be able to take care of himself in new ways, while still having compassion for others.

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4/13/05

The first and most important step for Andrew is to recognize that he deserves a better life than the one he is living. With time, patience, and hard work, Andrew can stop letting the past control him. He has the full power to step into the future with new attitudes, more effective behaviors, and healthy relationships. These changes are as close as making the decision to change and accept self-empowerment in his life. With that one single decision, Andrew can leave behind the pain of the past and step out onto the brilliant, bright path toward his authentic self.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2005 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.