

We Can Lead a Horse to Water ...

Sometimes it's impossible to keep a train wreck from happening. We see it coming, but the person we love is wearing blinders. Their path is set and nothing seems to deter them from that path.

Unfortunately, we can't make others see what they don't want to see, can't see, or are simply not ready to see. Life has a way of reminding us of this fact over and over again, but it doesn't seem to stop us from trying again and again.

The result is endless headaches—from all the futile head-banging—and grief. Yes, grief from sitting on the sidelines, powerless to change a catastrophe that's about to happen.

Brandt, a 33-year-old client, knows the feeling all too well. His sister Kylie, who graduated from high school a year ago, isn't listening to him.

"Her list of bad choices keeps growing," he said in our counseling session. "She's adrift—led by her whims and desires. She dropped out of college, but assured us all that she'll try again later. I wish I could believe her."

That aspiration, along with a pile of others, seems to have evaporated into nothingness.

"Now I think her ultimate life goal is to have a car," he said, "and live in an apartment with her current boyfriend."

Brandt doesn't really expect the relationship to last.

"She gets into relationships, gets bored, then finds herself pining for some new hottie," he said.

Although he sounded aggravated with Kylie, I could see the pain in his eyes.

"I want the best for her," he said. "I want her to grow and thrive and love her life."

"You really care for her," I said. "No wonder she consults with you. It's a good sign that she still seeks out your opinions, Brandt."

"Yes, but I don't understand!" he said. "She knows I've experienced way more of life than her. I give her good advice, time and time again. But if I don't tell her what she wants to hear, she ignores me. Then later, when a bad decision blows up in her face, she admits I was right, but it doesn't increase my credibility the next time she asks me for advice. She just continues to make

a mess of her life.”

“But your relationship stays on solid footing, even when her life falls apart?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “And I always ask her why she still comes to me. I mean, she pretty much ignores my suggestions. But still she keeps calling.”

“She may ignore you now,” I said, “but in time it may be a different story.”

Life experience and maturity may increase her trust in his wisdom.

In the meantime, Brandt should be patient and continue to keep the lines of communication open between them.

In this situation, an unbroken relationship is absolutely necessary. It is the very foundation of trust—it keeps the connection alive and makes even the tiniest effect on her trajectory possible. Over time, Brandt may find that his words of warning actually begin to hit home.

He needs to look at it as planting seeds that may eventually take root.

As for his well-being, “Stop torturing yourself,” I said. “It’s beautiful that you care so much, but Kylie’s not your project. You are, in truth, your only true responsibility. She’s an adult now; she’s in charge of how she steers her life and ultimately responsible for the outcomes.”

The urge to help others is one of the noblest facets of being human. But when that caring becomes too much of a burden, when the person we’re trying to help isn’t doing enough to help themselves, we have to recognize where our sense of responsibility ends and our personal happiness begins.

Situations like Brandt’s—that are beyond our control—humble us. Not only are we faced with the truth of our powerlessness, but with the understanding that life itself is the teacher. Knowing that fact, however, doesn’t make it any easier to endure. We’re left with a form of grief that we resist absorbing.

It takes courage to let go, and it takes courage to feel the grief that follows. It’s far easier to fight, push or get angry.

We must remain optimistic and hopeful with those we love, but their choices are their own. We can advise, and even shout warnings when it seems appropriate, but the other person is ultimately the conductor of his or her own train.