



Five Relationship Tips for Former Foster Youth

1.) Cognitive dissonance is a psychological term describing the uncomfortable tension that may result from engage in behavior that conflicts with one's beliefs and self-concept or experiencing something that conflicts with everything the person previously "knew" about the world.

This can happen with abusive parents, or caregivers who allowed abuse to occur without protecting a child. They want to believe they are good people. Doing something harmful to another person can cause them to feel a prick of their conscience. They need to make it right in their heads, and there are three responses they can choose:

- a.) **Denial:** They can tell themselves that what they did wasn't wrong or that it never happened.
- b.) **Excuses:** They can say that the child or teen deserved it.
- c.) **Truth:** They can confess and admit responsibility.

Those who experience abuse experience cognitive dissonance because, "*This is my parent. I love my parent. How could someone I love do this to me?*" and we have three choices as well:

- a.) **Denial:** "*The abuse never happened.*"
- b.) **Excuses:** "*I deserved it.*"
- c.) **Truth:** "*I was a child or teen who deserved to be protected. The fact that this didn't happen is due to bad choices by another person. It is not a reflection of my worth.*"

2.) Forgiveness vs. reconciliation: Forgiveness and reconciliation are **not the same thing**. Forgiveness takes one person, but reconciliation takes two. It is okay to forgive someone and still keep yourself safe from being hurt by them in the future.

People often don't 'get' that when it comes to former foster youth. If there were an adult who had experienced domestic violence, and they had gotten divorced and had a restraining order... and if that person said they had forgiven their ex, no one would ask them, "Do you two spend the holidays together now?" But people do ask that of former fosters who have forgiven their abusers. Forgiveness from a distance can be healthy and necessary.

3.) Chosen family: One of the beautiful things about life after foster care is that we are able to **choose** who to surround ourselves with...

There is the family into which we are born, and then there is the **chosen family** that we create for ourselves. This is a wonderful thing because just as pain can come into our lives through relationships, healing can come that way also.

4.) When helping you is hurting me: Many of us who have experienced foster care desire to save the world, and safeguard and protect others. But it's also okay to have boundaries in doing so. If you fill up a **paper boat** with too many marbles, the boat will sink – just as, it's vitally important to keep our own boat afloat, when trying to help other people.

Likewise, when on an airline, passengers are instructed to put the **air mask** on themselves first, before trying to help others. This is because if a caregiver passes out from lack of oxygen, they will be unable to help others.

We can each only make decisions for ourselves. Some people, we are going to be able to help. It can be difficult to help someone who is addicted to drugs or alcohol, who steals from you, who tries to manipulate you, who lashes out at you, who refuses to change their behavior or who won't admit that something they did in the past was wrong. If you ever find yourself in an abusive relationship, please seek help.

5.) Defining your own worth: During our time in foster care, our behavior was charted in case files. Small mistakes or temporary struggles could lead to magnified consequences, such as being sent to an entirely new place to live.

That is weighty stuff for a child or teen to handle. These experiences and others can shake the cornerstone of self-confidence, and lead to uncertainty regarding identity and worth.

Please know:

- You are worthy
- You are loveable
- You are deserving
- You are unique and bring irreplaceable value to the world

"When I was young, I thought that I had to be perfect for people to love me. I thought that if I ever did something wrong, their love would be withdrawn..."

"We need to give ourselves permission to be human, to try and to stumble, to be momentarily weak and to feel shame but to overcome that shame with moments of strength, courage and generosity."

-H. S. Krushner, [You Don't Have to Be Perfect to Be Loved](#)