

# Let Them Be Uncomfortable

Dear parent,

I want to talk about something hard. Your young adult, the one finding their way into independence right now, whether that's across town, in a program, at college, or in their first apartment, is going to struggle. That's not a sign something has gone wrong. That's how the growing works.

But this letter isn't about their hard part. It's about yours: watching them struggle and not stepping in.

Your young adult is going to call you this month with a problem. Maybe the roommate situation is tense. Maybe they overslept and missed a shift. Maybe they're out of groceries and out of money and it's only the 19th. Or maybe you'll get the other call, the two-minute "I'm fine" that tells you nothing and somehow worries you more. We'll get to that one. Either way, every instinct you have, every instinct that made you a good parent for two decades, is going to tell you to step in and fix it.

*Please don't.*

Here's the truth I've watched play out over twenty years of clinical work: when you step in to fix, rescue, or reassure, you rob your young adult of the exact experience they need to have. Discomfort is not the thing standing in the way of their growth. Discomfort *is* the growth. Every problem you solve for them is a rep they didn't get. Every rescue is a quiet message that says, "I don't think you can handle this." They hear it. Even when you don't say it out loud.

I know why you do it. You've spent years watching your child struggle in systems that weren't built for them. Rescuing became love. Fixing became connection. And letting them sit in a hard moment feels like abandoning them.

It isn't. It's the opposite.

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## What to do instead

When your young adult calls with a problem, your job is not to solve it. Your job is to believe in them out loud. Try responses like these:

*"Wow, that sounds hard. How do you plan to navigate that?"*

*"That's a tough spot. What have you tried so far?"*

*"I hear you. What do you think your options are?"*

*"That sounds frustrating. Who could help you think this through?"*

*“I’m confident you’ll figure this out. Tell me how it goes.”*

Notice what these responses have in common. They acknowledge the struggle without absorbing it. They keep the problem where it belongs: in your young adult’s hands. You get to be warm, present, and connected. You just don’t get to be the solution.

Now the harder version. Sometimes they don’t vent. They ask. “Can you Venmo me \$60? I get paid Friday.” “Can you call the pharmacy for me?” A direct request is the hardest call to hold, because saying no feels like rejection in a way that not-volunteering never does. It isn’t rejection. It’s the deepest form of “I believe in you” there is. Try:

*“I’m not going to send money, and I’m saying that because I know you can solve this. What’s your first move?”*

*“That’s yours to handle, and you can handle it. Want to think out loud with me for a minute?”*

*Say no to the request. Say yes to the relationship. Both can be true in the same sentence.*

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## **What this will feel like**

Awful, honestly. At first. You will hang up the phone and want to call someone, fix something, do anything. Your anxiety will spike right at the moment your young adult’s growth begins. That’s not a coincidence. Your discomfort and their development are happening at the same time, on purpose.

Sit in it. And take your worry somewhere that isn’t them: a partner, a friend who gets it, your own therapist. You need a place to process this that doesn’t hand the anxiety back to your young adult. The struggle has to stay theirs. The worry gets to be yours, held with support.

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## **When they don’t call, but you can see it**

Some of you are facing a different version of this. Your young adult isn’t calling you with problems. But you can see them. The bank account you still have eyes on is nearly empty. The texts get short. And because they haven’t asked for help, you’ve found quieter ways to give it. The DoorDash order that shows up “just because.” The surprise coffee gift card. The grocery delivery.

We need to name this for what it is: rescuing at a distance. It feels smaller than fixing. It feels like love with a light touch. But your young adult knows exactly what that DoorDash order means. It means you’re watching. It means you don’t think they’ll feed themselves. And it means the consequence they were about to run into, the one that was going to teach them something, just got canceled by a delivery driver.

To be clear, this is not about the support you’ve committed to on purpose. If you pay the phone bill or keep them on the car insurance, keep doing it. The difference between support and rescue isn’t the money. It’s the trigger. Support was decided in advance, in a plan, on purpose. Rescue is triggered by a tired photo, a

short text, a bad feeling on a Tuesday. If it was planned, it's support. If it was prompted by your anxiety, it's rescue.

There's a quieter version of this too, and it happens right inside your weekly phone call. Remember that two-minute "I'm fine" call from the beginning of this letter? This is usually what comes next. The twenty questions. Did you make it to work all week? Are you cooking? How's the apartment looking? Did you follow up on that thing? You're not really asking about their week. You're filling in a report card. One you built yourself, with categories you chose, grading progress you can't see, to quiet a fear you haven't said out loud: that nothing is happening.

Here's what that interrogation does. It turns every conversation into an audit. Your young adult starts managing your anxiety instead of their life. They learn to give you the answers that end the questions, which means you get less truth, not more. And the relationship you're trying to protect becomes one more performance they have to get through.

Retire the report card. Ask one real question and then actually listen: "What was the best part of your week?" You'll learn more from what they volunteer than from anything you extract.

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## Struggle is not the same as danger

Let's name the line clearly, because you deserve to know it exists. The struggle worth protecting is the kind that builds: the empty fridge, the missed shift, the awkward conversation. Danger is different. If your young adult's health or safety is at risk, suicidal thinking, self-harm, a substance crisis, psychosis, that is not a stepping-back moment. Step in, immediately, every time, and bring in professional help. Letting them be uncomfortable applies to the discomfort that grows them, never to the kind that harms them.

So what can you do when you see struggle and they haven't called? Sometimes the most loving move is no move at all. Doing nothing is a real option.

*Stay connected without steering: "Thinking of you. How's your week going?" Then let their answer be their answer.*

*If they mention the struggle, use the responses above. Acknowledge, don't absorb.*

*If your worry is eating you alive, bring it to your own support, not to them.*

*An empty fridge that they notice, feel, and solve is worth more than a full one you bought. The noticing is the growth.*

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## When they take a step, stay there

One more habit to name, and this one hides inside the good news. Your young adult calls: they got the job. Made it to every shift this week. Cooked a real dinner. And before their sentence is even finished, you're

already three steps ahead. “That’s great! Have you thought about asking for more hours?” “Awesome. Now you should set up direct deposit.” “Wonderful. What about the gym?”

That’s the report card again. Even the wins get graded against where you think they should be by now. And here’s what your young adult hears when you leap to what’s next: “The step I just took wasn’t enough.” Every “now you should” quietly converts their win into your agenda. In their ears, they didn’t take a step. They fell further behind on your timeline.

The timeline is the problem. Your young adult isn’t behind. They’re on their own clock, moving at the pace their growth actually allows. Pushing toward the next step doesn’t speed that clock up. It just teaches them to stop telling you about the steps.

And if the step looks small to you (a load of laundry, a phone call they finally made, dinner that wasn’t cereal), measure it differently. Don’t measure it against their age, their cousin, or where you pictured them by now. Measure what it cost them. The step that looks tiny from the outside may have taken everything they had that day. When you size the win by its cost instead of its comparison, the celebration stops being a performance. It becomes true. And they can tell the difference.

So when they hand you a win, stay in it. All the way in it.

*“You did that. Tell me everything.”*

*“How did it feel to walk out of that interview?”*

*“I’m proud of you. Not future you. This you, today.”*

Yes, there are questions in there, and yes, I told you to retire the twenty questions. The difference was never the number. Report card questions check up on them. These questions open them up. One extracts a status update. The other invites a story. Ask the kind they want to answer.

Then comes the hard part: stop. Don’t tee up the next step. Don’t even hint at it. Celebrate this one, hang up, and wait. The next step is theirs to see and theirs to take. And when they take it, it will belong to them in a way it never could if you pointed at it first.

*A step they chose is worth ten steps you assigned.*

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## **One more thing, before the payoff**

If you found yourself in every section of this letter, welcome. You’re in good company, mine included. As I write this, I’m catching the places in my own parent journey where I still need to take my own advice. That’s the honest truth of it: this is a practice, not a destination. None of us gets it right every time. We just keep showing up, and we grow alongside our kids.

These habits are what love looks like after years of fighting for a kid the world wasn't built for. Nobody handed you a manual. You built one out of rescues that worked, and you kept using it. You're not doing it wrong. You're doing what worked, one chapter after it stopped working. This letter isn't a report card. It's an invitation to the next chapter.

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## **The payoff**

Young adults who are allowed to wrestle with real problems start to trust themselves. They stop looking for someone to hand the problem to and start looking for a way through it. That shift, from "someone will fix this" to "I can handle this," is the whole point. It's what independence actually looks like. And no one can give it to them. They have to earn it, one uncomfortable moment at a time.

You did the hard work of getting them here. Now do the harder work of letting them grow.

*I'm in this with you.*

Warmly,

Amee Hardy, LCPC

Creator of the CSO Framework™

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## **If this letter named your house**

The CSO Framework™ Parent Bundle goes deeper: a foundation guide to understanding your neurodivergent young adult, and an eight-week guided journal that retrains the lens from "why can't you" to "who are you." Find it, and more, at [ameehardy.com](http://ameehardy.com).

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