In Case of Misunderstanding

One day, as usual, my son didn't call me back. I understood why. We had been estranged ever since I left his alcoholic father. While I know I didn't cause, could not control or cure his father's alcoholism, I did contribute to the disease by hiding the dysfunction in our family.

"Daddy's fine, just sleepy," I would say when he passed out. I hid the arguments, the drunkenness, and my tears from my children and everyone else. I had that phony, "Everything's fine, I've got this" stiff upper lip as I pretended my life was on track. Meanwhile, my beloved struggled with the disease and its consequences.

When my son stopped speaking to me, I cried every day. After seven months, during my Thursday morning Al-Anon meeting, I threw my hands up in the air in front of everyone and surrendered my relationship with my son over to my Higher Power. I am learning to accept people as they are, especially when separation hurts this much.

You won't believe this. He called me a few hours later!

My son and I began to make progress. Recently, when I realized he hadn't returned a phone call, I asked him about it. "Mom, I did call you back," he said and sent a screenshot as proof. To my shock, he had listed me in his phone as "ICE MOM." I immediately assumed it meant the coldest mom on the planet. I felt like I had been stabbed in the heart, believing that my own son, whom I love so much, viewed me as so cold and unfeeling. I started crying right there on Main Street. Later, I called my Sponsor in tears.

"Let's look that up," she said.

“Please, let’s just move on to Step work,” I replied, not wanting to prolong my pain or waste our time. But she persisted. First, she found that ICE could stand for Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

“Well, that’s not it,” I chimed in, rolling my eyes.

“Let’s look again,” she insisted. Turns out it’s also the street name for crystal methamphetamine. That didn’t fit either. “How about this,” she went on, “ICE: In Case of Emergency contact.”

Clearly, that was it. I burst into tears again, realizing how wrong I had been. I was embarrassed. I laughed and cried simultaneously. I could see how out of control my Al-Anon brain had been, constructing all these scenarios and assumptions about how my son felt, when all along, I was simply his emergency contact. I will never forget that lesson.

These days, I try to quiet the noise in my Al-Anon brain. Someone once said at a meeting that the Al-Anon mind “is a dangerous neighborhood.” I understand that now. I talk things over with an Al-Anon friend or my Sponsor. What I know for certain is this: I matter deeply to my son. I am his emergency contact.

By Cynthia G., California

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