

Kind to be cruel

By Ruth Ostrow

SOMETIMES you have to be cruel to be kind. A friend has a partner who suffers from depression. Being a rescuer, she kept trying to save this man's soul, giving him daily advice on what to do, nagging him to have therapy, getting lists of people he should see, helping him to complete work assignments, and taking control of his life.

The more this "do-gooder" tried, the more her partner sank into the lethargy of his condition, believing correctly that there was always going to be someone who would take responsibility for his wellbeing.

This attitude frustrated her and she admitted to me that she vacillated between being "kind mummy" and "mean mummy", bursting into fits of rage when she found him lying about, slovenly, unkempt and unable to help himself. After two long years with no improvement, she did what some people call "tough love". She threw him out of the house. "Heartless," said many people. And for a while it seemed that she'd signed his death warrant.

But slowly and surely, without the reassurance of either her chastisement or praise, he started getting himself together, paying bills, nurturing himself and surprisingly going into therapy and on to an appropriate course of care. After a short period, he was working again, and has now moved back home.

Tough love is an expression used when someone must treat another person harshly to help them in the long run.

From the well-respected book of that title, tough love was originally designed to support parents with difficult or drug-addicted children - recommending zero tolerance until the child or teenager entered rehabilitation or stopped drinking, stealing, whatever the problem.

I think it's time to broaden the "tough love" movement to include adults and the gamut of addictive behaviours that plague us: internet and sex addictions; workaholism; philandering; bulimia; TV addiction; and the behaviour of those with treatable (low-grade) mental disorders who choose to become co-dependent or self-medicate rather than take responsibility for their condition.

Most people who behave this way are like "children" anyway - as my friend found. Clearly, she did the right thing with her partner. And having had my own battles with Churchill's "black dog", I don't say this lightly. Tough love has its place. Or as the adage goes: "Heaven helps those who help themselves."

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First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 15 JUL 2006