Contents

Foreword by Carol Kent .............................................. 9
Why I Had to Write This Book ................................... 13

Part One: The Parent as Enabler
1. “But I’m Only Trying to Help” .............................. 27
2. Why We Enable, and Why We Must Stop ............... 41
3. Get Smart and Take Action! ............................... 61
4. “But Deep Down He’s Really a Good Kid” ............. 71
5. The Power of Love and Forgiveness ..................... 85

Part Two: The Six Steps to SANITY
6. “S”—STOP Your Own Negative Behavior ............. 101
7. “A”—ASSEMBLE a Support Group ..................... 111
8. “N”—NIP Excuses in the Bud ......................... 117
10. “T”—TRUST Your Instincts .............................. 137
11. “Y”—YIELD Everything to God ..................... 143
12. Developing an Action Plan ............................... 153
13. Considering the Consequences ......................... 171
14. Other Vital Issues ........................................... 185
   * When Drugs and/or Alcohol Are Involved
   * When Your Child Is Disabled
   * When Your Adult Child Is a College Student
   * When Little Children Are Involved
   * When Blended Families Come Together

Epilogue .............................................................. 199
Resources .......................................................... 209
Notes ............................................................... 213
Foreword by Carol Kent

There is nothing more painful to a parent than watching your grown child experience a meltdown. Whether the process is gradual or an unexpected, sudden departure from wise choices, financial responsibility, and decent friendships, the internal reaction is the same—gut-wrenching agony as you try to figure out what went wrong when you had all of the best intentions.

You feel betrayed because as a parent, you’ve tried to practice unconditional love. You’ve offered forgiveness for inappropriate behavior and provided enough encouragement and tangible help to give your child a fresh start. But the cycle of pain continues as time after time your adult child accepts your help, promises this is the last time your assistance will be needed, and then falls flat on his or her face again—with no one to come to the rescue but you.

At such times, the enemy swoops in with taunting lies and tempts you to believe:

- If I had been a better parent, this would not be happening.
- If I had read my Bible more consistently and prayed more fervently, God would have protected my child from this crisis.
- If I had been less busy, I could have stopped this cycle of destruction before it got to this point.

On one level, we may feel guilty and even in some way responsible for the wrong choices of our children. Yet at a heart level we believe that even if our child’s behavior doesn’t warrant our support, his or her potential does! If we can just help them get out of a plummeting lifestyle and desperate circumstances, we’re convinced they will finally take good advantage of their clean slate and demonstrate a new beginning that warrants all of our support and encouragement. But then, to our great disappointment, the cycle of destructive behavior begins again.
Like Allison Bottke, I’m the mother of an only child—a son. My son was not caught in a web of addiction and financially destructive behavior—but he unraveled mentally, emotionally, and spiritually when he believed his legal options for protecting his two stepdaughters from sexual abuse at the hands of their biological father had been exhausted. My husband and I received a shocking middle-of-the-night call informing us that our son, a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, had been arrested for murder.

After two and a half years of waiting through seven postponements of his trial, our son was eventually convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. I know the agony of wondering what went wrong in our parenting and of trying to “fix” things for my child so we could all go back to a more normal life.

In Setting Boundaries with Your Adult Children, Allison Bottke powerfully describes how subtly we begin to enable our children by “helping” them. She understands from personal experience that we parents believe our children are fundamentally good kids who have made some mistakes, so our impulse is to dive in to rescue them from the messes they’ve made, believing the power of love and forgiveness will conquer all of the negative choices they have made.

If you have time to read nothing else, don’t miss Allison’s description of walking into her son’s home following his arrest in the opening chapter, “Why I Had to Write This Book.” The emotional impact of her experience grabbed my emotions and made me gasp for air. If you can’t read all of the chapters in a row, go to the letter she wrote (but never delivered) to her son in chapter 8. You may find pieces of your own parental emotional reactions on the pages of these chapters. But you’ll uncover more than that. Perhaps for the first time you’ll find a workable plan for setting appropriate boundaries with your adult child. You will discover how to form a plan of action that works. Whether your child is emotionally and/or physically disabled through addictions or wrong thinking, Allison Bottke will reveal the six steps that will bring back your SANITY. Her acrostic will help you to
remember to implement new choices that will result in healing and hope for your family.

The process of setting boundaries with adult children is difficult. At times it seems harsh. The road is filled with temptations to revert back to giving financial handouts and falling back into patterns of being an enabling parent. Don’t give up. Change is possible as you choose to stop the destructive cycle by placing your confidence in God, receiving emotional and spiritual support from others, acquiring additional knowledge, and consistently speaking the truth in love.

My new favorite verse is one I hope you will cling to: “See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland” (Isaiah 43:19 NIV). My prayer is that Allison’s book will launch a brand new beginning in your life. Right now, you may feel you’re in a desert place as you struggle in your parenting crisis, but be alert! There’s a stream in the wasteland—and you can begin making hope-filled choices that will forever change your future for the better.

Carol Kent, Speaker and Author

*When I Lay My Isaac Down* (NavPress)
*A New Kind of Normal* (Thomas Nelson)
The SWAT team left a horrible mess in their wake. Glass cracked under my feet like ice on a frozen pond, ready to break and suck me down into an abyss of frigid peace. The rancid smell of alcohol and stale cigarette smoke hung in the air like noxious perfume. The atmosphere was bathed in agony and despair. Assaulted and plundered, the house was in ruins—my heart not far behind.

It was New Year’s Day. Less than 24 hours earlier, my husband and I had said good-bye to what had been a challenging year, praying the coming months would be better. Though only a few miles separated our quiet home from this catastrophic mess, I felt light-years away from comprehending how someone could live so barbaric an existence.

Yes, the SWAT team had done their share of damage in the course of duty, but it didn’t take a trained eye to see that things had been far from tidy before they’d paid their surprise visit.

“It looks like the county landfill,” my husband said, shaking his head.

The home had been rented to one person but appeared to have become a crash pad for many. It was obviously the site of a New Year’s Eve party, and I wondered how many people had been here to celebrate only hours earlier.
What we don’t notice on TV cop shows—what they can’t convey after a team of highly trained police officers methodically ransack a home—is the smell of desolation that fills the air, hanging from the rafters like poisonous bats waiting to attack.

It had been weeks since I’d been inside the home, and it was not as I remembered it. I gaped at the squalor. I stood stifled against a counter in the kitchen that a few months earlier I’d cleaned and organized from top to bottom. Now the contents of the cupboards had been yanked unceremoniously from their nesting places, strewn haphazardly in heaps on the counters and floor. Like a giant petri dish, the aluminum sink held stacks of dirty dishes in a puddle of stagnant water. Shards of glass glistened in the spoiled food that clung to the plates and silverware. My stomach turned. The window behind the kitchen sink had been broken—from the outside in. It was a small window, too small for anyone to have used as a forced entry point.

“Smoke bomb,” an officer said quietly as I stared and nodded.

Grease-encrusted pans sat stale on the stovetop. Beer bottles, soda-pop cans, overflowing ashtrays, and burgeoning trash cans assaulted my senses. Half-empty bottles of whisky, rum, tequila, and vodka sat upright like sentries on the counter, somehow missing the recent mêlée that still had neighbors peering from nearby windows and local thugs circling the block in their cars like sharks around a capsized boat. The front and back doors to the house had been kicked from their hinges, locks splintered and dangling like broken limbs. Kitchen drawers lay on the floor, contents tossed like debris from a fallen Dumpster. CDs, video games, DVDs, a host of electronic equipment, and stacks of clothing littered the kitchen floor. A glance toward the adjoining dining and living rooms revealed more of the same mayhem.

In the dining room, void of furniture except for a few bookcases, a large glass aquarium held two large snakes—boa constrictors, I surmised. The gentle hum of a heat lamp broke the silence. The snakes looked as out of place here as I felt. A dark foreboding began to wash over my soul, sending shivers up my spine.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow...”
There was no escaping the facts. Clearly the SWAT team had done their work, thoroughly searching for what they had come to find, leaving little unturned.

When we arrived, an officer had indicated, “The bust was good.”

“Clean,” she’d called it. “He’s going to have a hard time getting out of this one.”

I couldn’t begin to wrap my brain around that statement. “He” was my only child—my son.

Everywhere I looked, evidence of the raid stripped my senses bare, threatening to expose the pain I choked back.

“Man, oh man, it’s a total mess upstairs,” my stepson said. “Wait till the landlord sees what they did. Who pays for this?” He pushed aside a pile of dirty laundry with his foot, walking through the room as though dodging land mines.

*Most likely me.*

My name was on the lease; they’d be coming after me.

*I should never have signed. When will I learn?*

“He’s being booked now at the local jail, along with a few of his buddies. It’s a holiday; no telling when he’ll be arraigned,” an officer volunteered to my husband. “You can have your lawyer call to find out.”

*My lawyer? I don’t think so.*

Shame and embarrassment washed over me, flushing my face as I watched my husband talking with the uniformed officer. A fifth-generation native of this small town with an upstanding reputation, my husband shouldn’t have been pulled into this disgraceful drama. He didn’t deserve this association.

None of us did.

Everywhere I looked was evidence of a life lived not on the edge but somewhere deeper—in a pathetic pit of depravity. The tumor of addiction, irresponsibility, recklessness, and crime could not be excised. It kept returning, each time more virulent than the last.

The stench of a wasted life filled my nostrils.
“Get the TV and electronic equipment out of here,” I instructed my stepsons, who had come to help, as I searched the rubble on the floor for the roll of trash bags I knew had to be there somewhere. “The place will be picked clean by morning if we leave it. I doubt he’ll be coming back here anytime soon. We can store his stuff at the farm until he gets out. I’ll figure out what to do with the rest of it tomorrow.”

“I’ll see if I can secure the doors,” my husband said.

Finding the trash bags, I tore one off the roll and began tossing in the putrid dishes from the sink, carefully extracting shards of glass. The alcohol came next as I emptied one bottle after another down the drain, exhibiting no amount of gentility as I threw the empty bottles into the swelling bag of refuse.

I was possessed. Raw, primitive emotion shot through my body like neon gas, lighting every fiber of my being with increasing tension. I was irrational, impervious to propriety—as though propriety mattered in the wake of a SWAT team bust!

I continued throwing away dirty cups and utensils, emptying moldy food from the refrigerator, dumping ashtrays, and collecting empty beer and pop cans. I began heaping trash bag after trash bag on the back porch.

My anger grew in proportion to the rubbish.

I marveled that a few months earlier, with the help of a dear friend, we had prepared this very space for my son’s hospital homecoming. He’d survived a critical motorcycle accident and was coming home to mend multiple fractures, determined to make a fresh start. He’d returned to a clean, neat, almost pristine environment.

Looking around, I didn’t believe I was seeing the same house. Then a new pain pierced my heart as my eyes turned to the lighted curio cabinet in the corner of the living room. I’d somehow missed seeing it in all my righteous indignation over the mess surrounding me.

My husband returned, with toolbox in hand, and said, “The locks are trashed, but I secured the doors until we can get someone out to fix them tomorrow. I think we should go home now, honey.”

When I didn’t respond, he followed my stare to the cabinet.
Deep sadness turned to anger then rage as I took in the disturbing collection of military memorabilia proudly on display—arm bands, belt buckles, helmets, flags, and photos, all carrying the black-spider insignia of the Nazi regime.

Dear God…

The weight of evil was heavy on my soul. To me, this collection represented the total opposite of all that was good, decent, holy, and just. Shrouded in illuminated silence, this abominable display shouted unspeakable expletives without uttering a word.

“Help me get this disgusting garbage out of here,” I cried to no one in particular, tossing out the contents of a nearby laundry hamper so I could use it as a box.

“What do you plan to do with this stuff, Allison?” my husband asked, carrying a box on his way to my car. “Some of this looks pretty valuable; he’s even got signed documents from the Third Reich. Look at this…” He stopped.

“I don’t want to look!” I said. “I don’t want to see it, and I’m sickened even touching it. I don’t know what I’m going to do with it! Throw it away, give it to a Holocaust museum—something. I’m not leaving it here to poison someone else.”

Valuable indeed; this collection represented the annihilation of countless innocent lives.

The atmosphere was heavy as we packed up the offensive collection.

“Let’s get out of here now.” My throat was tight as I looked around at a scene that would be forever burned on my brain.

Then, on my way out the door was another sign of how far my son had wandered. Half buried beneath the rubble of a wasted life, I picked up the plaque I’d given him long ago as a gift, and the words of Henry David Thoreau unlocked the tears of my broken heart: “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.”

As someone who had always felt a bit out of place myself, I’d
connected with this sentiment as a young woman, growing to better understand its intrinsic meaning the older I got.

I remembered my son's words the day I gave him the plaque: “My drummer is beyond different.”

Yes, my son was certainly a unique individual. On one hand, intelligent, attractive, articulate, and charismatic, and on the other, foolish, dangerous, frightening, and misguided. Yes, he was the product of a unique life. So much in fact that few of his peers were ever able to relate to him, which kept him segregated for the most part from anything that smacked of traditional influences.

With limited social and emotional skills, stunted by years of drug and alcohol abuse coupled with my maternal enabling, he had a skewed perception of reality that always afforded him an excuse for why his life was a mess.

I wondered whose fault it was this time? Who would shoulder the blame for this latest infraction, for surely it could not be a result of his choices alone.

It almost never was.

My son was nearing 35 years old, and he was seldom responsible for anything that happened to him.

It took this extreme situation and the following days and weeks for me to understand—with a clarity that broke my heart—the part I had been playing for years in the drama that was his life. And more important, what I had to do to stop the cycle once and for all.

Your story may not be as dramatic as mine. Then again, it may be worse. No matter where you fall on the continuum, if you have an adult child whose life is one crisis after another, and you find yourself entangled in his or her ongoing drama as though it were your own life, there is a way out.

Whether your child is 18 or 50, there are steps you can take to free yourself from the overwhelming bondage of guilt, fear, shame, anger, frustration, grief, and denial. You can (and must) get off the catastrophe carousel that has been spinning out of control for years. You can (and must) find hope and healing.
Almost a full year had passed since my son’s New Year’s Day arrest, and I hadn’t seen or heard from him in months. I didn’t know where he was living. The phone number I once had for him had been disconnected long ago, his postal box had been shut down, and his e-mail address was no longer in service.

I had periodically tried to locate him—several Web sites to search prison databases are saved on my Favorites list in my Internet browser, as if frequent searches to find out whether your only child has been incarcerated in a federal prison could be a “favorite” thing for a mother to do.

And then one night I received a phone call from a friend.

“Have you seen today’s paper, Allison?” she asked.

Like a late-night phone call that sends fear coursing through your body, the tone of my friend’s voice said it all. Something had happened to my son.

“No, what is it?” I swallowed, holding my breath.

“The county just unveiled a new Web site. It’s supposed to help citizens identify the county’s ‘Most Wanted’ criminals. Your son’s on the list. His picture is in the paper.”

I retrieved the unread newspaper and found the article, which took up the entire top half of the local news section, in color no less.

*Just like the FBI, our county now has its own “Most Wanted” list.*

My son’s face stared out at me. His name, age, and pending charges were listed underneath. Yet his photo was the only one identified with red letters that read “Captured.”

*Does this mean he’s incarcerated now?*

I logged on to the new Web site, but strangely, the page that filled my screen no longer contained his name and photo. A continued search revealed a list of outstanding bench warrants for him and the long list of charges that had been brought against him as a result of the SWAT raid on his home. I couldn’t tell if the capture the Web site referred to was recent or in reference to his year-old arrest.

*Dear Lord, please continue to watch over him—Thy will be done.*
I found myself looking at the other “Most Wanted” photos in the paper. Along with my son, there were 9 other males and 2 females. Except for one 54-year-old man, the remaining 11 were all in their 20s and 30s.

I couldn’t help but wonder how many other parents and grandparents just like me were staring at the photo of their loved one, trying to make sense of it all, wondering how things had gone so wrong. What would we say if we were together in one room, sharing our stories of how our adult children got to this place? How many of us had been enablers of our children’s disastrous choices—and how many still were?

I wondered if the other parents and grandparents had the slightest idea they weren’t alone. Not by a long shot.

Some parents feel they need to shout “Unfit parent!” to those around them, so deep is their pain and guilt. But letting people in on their “secret” is unthinkable. Yet this conflict is far more prevalent than we think.

I’m just one of the many, many parents traveling this crowded, yet lonely road. I know that for most of us there are no easy answers for why things went so wrong, for how we got to this place of utter frustration and fear. We did the best we knew to do at the time. And even if we now recognize where we might have failed, there is simply no way we can alter what’s happened in the past.

That may sound discouraging, but the good news is that we can do something to alter the future.

We can take back our lives—starting now.

As you begin, you should be warned that this is a book about tough love. It’s about coping with dysfunctional adult children, whether male or female, living with us at home or not. It’s about recognizing our own enabling patterns of behavior and learning how to finally stop the part we as parents play in the vicious cycle of repeated irresponsible behavior in our adult children.

As parents who love our children, we really do want to do the right thing—we always have—but what is the right thing? For me,
the right thing turned out to be far different from anything I ever imagined.

I must also add that this isn’t a book about drug-proofing your kids or a how-to manual about making rebellious kids behave. This is a book for parents who are way beyond that point. There are many helpful books available today that focus on those issues; I wish some of them had been around when my son was younger. Yet knowing what I know today, I’m not sure I would have listened to the advice they presented, so caught up in “helping” my son was I.

Not only that, but I think I had to experience every level of this epidemic of enabling in order to see clearly what was happening. God has a plan for my life and for my son’s life, just as He has a plan for your life and the life of your adult child. Everything happens in its own time for a reason. I believe I had to come to the realization of the right thing to do regarding my adult child at exactly the right time.

Likewise, hopefully you are coming to the same realization of what you have to do now. That’s why you’re reading this book: you know something has to change, and you’re ready. In the event someone has given this book to you as a gift, I pray you will keep an open mind as you read.

The truth is that I had to write this book for you—and for me. For all of us who want to break free from the stranglehold our adult children have on our hearts—for those of us who have for far too long beaten ourselves up with “What if I had…,” “Why didn’t I…,” and “If only I hadn’t….” I’ve learned that being hard on myself now serves no purpose and is in fact counterproductive with respect to the change that must happen.

For a long time—too long—I thought I was ready for change. I cried, whined, complained, prayed, and pretended I was ready for things to change, yet my heart of stone had not yet become a heart of flesh. I wasn’t ready to do what it was going to take to change my life and, by extension, the life of my adult child.

As a result of my experience with my son and my many talks on this topic to groups of parents, I’ve come up with some principles I
believe will work for you and for any parent willing to make the necessary changes that will result in a return to sanity. These principles, which spell out in acronym form the word SANITY, are detailed in part 2 of this book. The hope is that SANITY support groups will spring up among parents who recognize the need to regain control of their own lives, regardless of the outcome in their adult children’s lives.

From my interactions with other parents in pain, I know the need for help is great. And to be honest, I think the problems we’re seeing in our society with adult children not taking responsibility for their own lives are going to continue for a long time. Our society seems to be experiencing an epidemic of dysfunctional adult children. I see it everywhere.

Recently a mother and her teenage son were in front of me as I stood in line at the local Subway deli. He asked his mother if his coupon would still be valid if he split a foot-long sandwich into two six-inch subs, and she said, “I don’t know; you’ll have to ask.”

He began to speak to the sandwich-assembly man when Mom rudely interrupted, “Can he still use his foot-long coupon if you make it a half-and-half sandwich of two different kinds?”

The young man cast his eyes downward, allowing her to speak for him.

I felt pain for him, then anger at the mom. Then a mixture of feelings washed over me, and I wondered how long she had been speaking for him and what he no doubt felt when she sent mixed messages telling him, “You can take care of this yourself,” but then undermining his confidence with her “I’ll handle it for you” actions. Actions that may indicate an “enabling” parent-in-training.

Earlier that same day, I was running an errand when I found myself talking to a small-business owner who was operating on her last raw nerve. We had never met, but clearly God had connected us at such a time. She was frazzled and, I suspect, another enabling parent-in-training.

In record time she was sharing her dilemma of getting no help
from her two teenage sons—or from her husband. Then she mentioned in anger that she was always giving them money for this and that and never getting any change.

“They ask to borrow a 10, I give them a 20, and I never see the change!” she said.

She spoke of feeling used and disrespected, then she asked, “Couldn’t they ever once pick up after themselves? Is that asking too much?”

This woman ran a successful one-woman service business; she was clearly the major breadwinner in the family. Her husband also worked a full-time job, but once he punched out for the day, he was off the clock. As a small-business owner, she worked considerably longer hours than most people.

“Why don’t you think you deserve to be treated with respect?” I asked her.

She looked at me blankly for a moment, then she continued on about how her husband and kids used her, how they didn’t treat her with respect, how they did this and that. In fact, she talked on and on about their issues and their needs, their troubles and their “stuff.” Every time there was a break in the conversation, I turned my question back to her.

“But what about you?” I asked. “Why have you allowed your personal boundaries to be trampled on? Your kids and your husband don’t know your boundaries because neither do you.”

This made her think. Now remember, she was a total stranger; we’d never met. I was just in her shop to order something, and an hour later we were still talking, but about her life, not my reason for being there in the first place. Then again, perhaps that’s exactly why I was there in the first place. God has a way of orchestrating divine appointments.

She went on to talk about her own parents—how cruel her mother had been to her when she was young, and how she vowed never to treat her children the same way.

So then I asked, “What’s cruel about defining your boundaries
and teaching your children right from wrong? What’s cruel about setting a healthy example so your children will learn? Right now, all they know is that Mom doesn’t mean what she says, that she’ll always give in, that she’s a walking ATM machine, and that they don’t need to be held accountable for their choices or behavior...because Mom is the ever-present safety net.”

I held my breath, worried I had said too much.

But after a moment’s pause, she said, “You’re right; I know you’re right. But they’re good kids. They don’t do drugs or drink, they don’t get into trouble—”

“And yet you’re standing here telling me they’re making your life miserable. That you are stressed beyond belief, that no one helps, and that you’re feeling used and abused and disrespected. Is that any way to treat someone who does so much for them?”

“No, it’s not,” she admitted.

“So, then,” I asked, “why do you keep doing for them? Why do you keep handing over the money? Why do you keep repeating the same behavior? It’s you who has to change, not them.”

She began talking more about her sons, about their issues, and then about her husband. I found myself shaking my head at the situation—because she still didn’t get it.

It wasn’t about her kids or her husband, or what they did or didn’t do. It wasn’t about changing them. It was about her ability to establish healthy boundaries and then stick to them. It’s about our ability to do the same thing. It’s about being consistent with our responses when our boundaries are violated.

We cannot change another person. We can only change ourselves and how we will respond to the good and bad behavior of our loved ones, who continue to cause us to live in daily pain.

Are you ready to set those boundaries and gain back your life?

Read on. My prayer for you is that by using the principles of SANITY, your life will change for the better.