

The Power of the Mother Daughter Bond

“To become optimally healthy and happy, each of us must get clear about the ways in which our mother's history both influenced and continues to inform our state of health, our beliefs and how we live our lives”.

Christine Northrup, MD

The mother daughter bond is clearly the most complex relationship I have studied. The literature suggests that a woman's psychological development is greatly shaped by her mother. The type of relationship daughters experience with their mother can profoundly affect all other relationships. Dr. Robertiello says, “We introject Mom's notion of love and project onto others – husbands, lovers, daughters. There is nothing that approximates this relationship in which a mother teaches her daughter to be a woman”.

Although the original bonding in infancy is with the mother which is true for both sexes, boys usually break away at an early age to identify with their fathers. A daughter continues to identify with her mother and because her individual boundaries are not always clear, a daughter is more likely to struggle with separation to find her own identity.

This highly summarized review of the mother daughter literature intrigued me not only as a psychotherapist, but when I was an expectant mother; the relationship I had with my mother was the best and the worst. I loved her and I hated her. When I was young, I wanted to be just like her. I wanted to wear her makeup, perfume and high heels. When I was an adolescent, I wanted to be the opposite of her. I blamed her for all of my disappointments and rejections. My early adult life was focused on rebelling against almost everything she taught me! Then, sitting in her kitchen after the birth of my own child, I was watching her gestures, facial expressions and emotional reactions and I realized in many ways, I was just like her. I turned to my husband and asked, “Do I look and act like her”? He smiled and said, “Yes, sometimes”. I was my mother's daughter! Two decades later, I am now incorporating all her strengths and learning from her limitations to arrive at the place where I can say, “I am proud to be her daughter”!

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The following suggestions have helped me and others make peace with our mothers; even for those who did not know their mother.

1. Do not blame Mom for what she did or did not do. Recognize that you are separate with your own thoughts, feelings and virtues. As long as you blame her, you are stuck to feel tied to her.
2. Re-frame Critical to Caring. Mom's comments can be interpreted as judgmental because it may be her only language to express how she cares for you. Before internalizing her comment, check it out with her. "Are you saying I am not good enough"? If by chance she says yes, tell her you are okay with who you are.
3. Identify the `daughter` in your mother. She is probably the mother she is based on how she was parented. By increasing empathy for your mother's life experience, you can depersonalize her behavior toward you.
4. Initiate conversation and activities that will equalize the relationship to reinforce an adult woman to woman relationship. Go to a movie, art show or a fund raiser together as friends.

As we approach Mother's Day, I cherish the last years before my mother's death where we shared the final evolution of deepest friendship.

As a mother, I can now pass on the greatest gift a parent can give their child; that is the gift of independence. To encourage our children to believe in their own worth and potential; to be all they can be, separate from our expectations.

When we can fully accept our children's uniqueness, we will realize:

"What children take from us, they give.
To become people who feel more deeply,
question more deeply,
and Love more deeply."
Sonia Taitz