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Nothing is ever good enough for my mom

My mom told me once that my first sentence was “It’ll be okay, Mommy.” That might be the last time I ever said the “right” thing to my mom. Her mom had died the year I was born, and once I began to speak I started my lifelong journey of trying to comfort her. Since I can remember, I’ve been a go-to person for my mom in a time of crisis: she complains & rants for as long as I can stand it while I rack my brain wondering what I could say that might help and not set her off. Unless my response to her sounds exactly like, “you are right; they are wrong” it has always been an impossible feat. The difficulty for me arises because I really do care about my mom and want to help her. I don’t want to tell her she is right if she is clearly wrong & clearly pushing away every single person that cares about her. Still, my mom is the help-rejecting complainer type. She says she is tormented and living in misery, but all solutions offered are deemed impossible, ridiculous, & lacking compassion or a true understanding. It is truly a no-win situation. The conversation never ends well. She almost never feels comforted and I always feel drained. Today, I spend most of the day texting with her, semi-ignoring my own kids, only to eventually hear her disapproval. Sigh... I’ve recently realized that my constant feeling of never being good enough began in a relational context, due to the simple fact that my mom has leaned on me as a confidante/therapist/parental figure for most of my life, and yet I’ve never satisfactorily fulfilled these roles. I can’t. Her previous therapists haven’t been able to, either. Although I can’t fulfill these roles, and don’t particularly want to, they are the roles I am assigned whenever I resume a relationship with her. Her crises & needs become paramount; her plight unavoidable. It is a constant effort for me to resist the desire to try to help. (The truth is she doesn’t really want help.) For the longest time, I did not understand my own inability to forgive myself. I didn’t connect it directly to my relationship with my mom. However, just yesterday, I found myself full of regret for mistakes of the past when a coach asked me how long I’ve been unable to be gentle with myself when I make a mistake. Did I ever learn how to comfort and forgive myself when I messed up? The question brought me to tears. I have never learned how. I know that other people shake it off, learn from it, and keep going, but I don’t know how they do it. I feel so much regret and incrimination when I make a mistake. I always have. When I was a little kid, I would try to make everything perfect in my surroundings. I would re-write my school notebooks — the whole year’s worth — if my handwriting didn’t look nice enough or if I liked another person’s style better. I had no idea how to accept a mistake, a blunder, a less-than-ideal version. That’s why I could never accept my physical flaws. That’s why I would always beat myself up, starve myself, and hate my mistakes. I really didn’t know another way to be. And now I know why. Even today, as a mother myself, I am sitting at my computer well past my bedtime wondering how I managed to fail again during a text conversation with my own mom. In truth, I do know why. I failed because it was impossible. I failed because I’m the only one left. I didn’t really fail, actually. I stuck it out and tried to help. I lovingly responded and didn’t lie to her, which felt to me like it would enable too much rage and entitlement. I deeply cared. It wasn’t enough. It will never be enough. How can you save a parent from their own private hell? You can’t. I have put myself through so much because of my learned hatred towards myself, but today I am determined to choose otherwise. I am choosing to forgive. My mom thinks I failed her today, and maybe I did. But I tried, and I am going to have compassion on myself for lovingly engaging. I can choose to forgive myself for ALL of the ways I hurt myself when the cumulative stress of a lifetime of guilt and shame became too much for me to bear. The legacy left by an unhappy parent leaves wounds that run deep. I know how much different my life could have been if I’d learned how to forgive myself for minor mistakes (like saying the “wrong” thing to a parent). The truth is, it took me a long time to learn how to have self-compassion and I am just beginning this process. If I’d learned these lessons sooner, I’d have experienced more joy and freedom and I’m confident I’d have less regrets. Still, my life is not over and I want to believe that true freedom is in my future. I feel empowered to teach my children how to forgive themselves and have fair expectations of themselves. I feel resolved that I will never expect them to fulfill roles that aren’t theirs. Have you experienced a lack of self-compassion and forgiveness in your life? Can you attribute this to the attitudes your PD parent had towards you? How has the cumulative effect of these unforgiving frameworks affected you? I’d love to hear your thoughts. Please private message me or respond if you can relate. Young People Ask . . . Why Is Nothing I Do Ever Good Enough? “I found it very difficult to please my father when I began working for him. I was only 15, and the work was very complicated; when I made a mistake, he became critical.”—Randy. “My mother seemed like a police detective—always looking for areas where I failed. Before I had time to finish my chores, she would inspect my work, looking for mistakes.”—Craig. “My parents were always lecturing me about something. They said I just couldn’t seem to get my act together. School, home, congregation—they just wouldn’t give me a break.”—James. DOES it sometimes seem as if nothing you do is ever good enough to please your parents? Do you ever feel like your every move is under a microscope, that you are always being watched, constantly critiqued, but never passing inspection? If so, you may feel that you are living under a cloud of parental disapproval. Your situation is hardly unique. Dr. Joyce L. Vedral observes: “According to most teenagers, parents nag. . . . They harp on everything from keeping your room neat to taking out the garbage, from using the bathroom to the way you dress, from your choice of friends to your marks and homework.” While this may understandably get on your nerves sometimes, it is not necessarily a bad thing. It is only natural for parents to give their children discipline and correction; it’s one way they show their love for them. As the Bible puts it, a father will reprove “a son in whom he finds pleasure.”—Proverbs 3:12. Now if you never received a word of correction from your parents, wouldn’t you wonder if they cared about you? (Proverbs 13:24; compare Hebrews 12:8.) You can be grateful, then, that you have parents who care enough about you to set you straight! After all, you are young and relatively inexperienced; correction may sometimes be in order. Without guidance, you could easily be overpowered by “the desires incidental to youth.”—2 Timothy 2:22. Consider some of the problems those desires can cause for youths. Says writer Clayton Barbeau: “It’s a dangerous world for teenagers: every hour, a young person is killed in an auto crash related to drinking; an estimated twelve thousand teenagers commit suicide each year; a million girls a year get pregnant; three million kids today are alcoholics; sexually transmitted diseases are widespread.” (How to Raise Parents) No wonder your parents may be bent on giving you a steady stream of correction! As the Bible says, “a wise person will listen and take in more instruction Wisdom and discipline are what mere fools have despised.”—Proverbs 1:5, 7; compare Proverbs 10:17. Why It Hurts Still, “no discipline seems for the present to be joyous, but grievous.” (Hebrews 12:11) This is particularly so when you are young. After all, your personality is not fully developed; you are still growing up and discovering who you are. So criticism—even when carefully thought out and delivered in a kindly way—may trigger resentment. The book How to Survive Your Adolescent’s Adolescence concludes that teens have an “extreme sensitivity to criticism.” As one youth says, “criticism hurts me.” But when it is coming from your parents, the hurt can be especially deep. In her book Helping Your Teenager Deal With Stress, Dr. Bettie Youngs reminds us that it is through “the approval or disapproval of others” that a youth “develops an opinion about his self-worth and value as a human being.” Parents, though, are the greatest factor in helping a youth form this self-concept. So when a parent corrects you or complains about the way you do something, it can be devastating, painful. Even so, should you conclude that nothing you do is ever good enough? Or that you are a complete failure simply because your parents have pointed out a few of your flaws? Really, all humans fall woefully short of perfection. (Romans 3:23) And making mistakes is part of the learning process. (Compare Job 6:24.) The problem is, your parents may have little to say when you do something right—and may be quite vocal when you err! This hurts, but it hardly means you are a total failure. Learn to take reasonable criticism in stride, neither belittling it nor being overwhelmed by it.—Compare Hebrews 12:5. Unfair Criticism What if the criticism is unfair? Some parents do set unreasonably high standards for their children. They may irritate their children by constantly nagging them about trifles. And parents who have legitimate causes for complaint may mete out criticism in a harsh, demeaning way. Dr. Bettie Youngs also says that parental “name calling, lecturing, sarcasm, shaming, blaming, and threatening” are “destructive patterns of communication, . . . which undermine the child’s self-confidence and sense of worth.” When the righteous man Job was attacked with a barrage of unfair criticism, he cried out: “How long will you men keep irritating my soul and keep crushing me with words?” (Job 19:2) In a similar way, being constantly put down by a parent or being measured by unrealistically high standards can exasperate a youth, causing him to “become downhearted.” (Colossians 3:21) The book Coping With Teenage Depression, by Kathleen McCoy, even claims that “the inability to live up to high parental expectations can cause significant loss of self-esteem and trigger reactive depression in adolescents.” Indeed, such unhealthy criticism often triggers a vicious circle: Your parents find fault with you. You react by feeling bad about yourself. Because you feel bad about yourself, you tend to perform poorly when your folks ask you to do something. The result? More criticism! Behind the Criticism How can you stop this destructive cycle? First, try to understand why your parents feel the way they do. Is their nagging or constant criticism really malicious? Not likely. Asks Dr. Joyce L. Vedral: “Why do they nag? They nag because no one is listening, or at least no one is letting on that they are. The more they feel ignored, the more they nag.” Do you really give your parents evidence, then, that you are responding to their complaints? Or do their words fall on deaf ears? If so, don’t be surprised if the faultfinding becomes more and more frequent—and intense! Might it stop, though, if you simply applied the words of Proverbs 19:20? That verse reads, “Listen to counsel and accept discipline, in order that you may become wise in your future.” Sometimes a parent becomes overly critical, not because of any particular failing on your part, but simply because he or she happens to be in a bad mood. Has your mom had a tough day at work? Then she might be more prone than usual to pick on you because your room seems sloppy. Is your dad angry and frustrated over failing family finances? Then, he might unwittingly speak thoughtlessly “as with the stabs of a sword.” (Proverbs 12:18) Granted, this is unfair. But “we all stumble many times. If anyone does not stumble in word, this one is a perfect man.” (James 3:2) So if Mom or Dad seems tense or upset, the smart thing to do is to try to tread lightly and avoid arousing any criticism. As imperfect humans, parents can also be afflicted with feelings of inadequacy. Failure on your part can make them feel as if they have failed! Explains Dr. Vedral: “You may bring home a bad report card, and your father may say, ‘What, are you stupid? I have an idiot for a son.’ Your father of course doesn’t really think you are an idiot. What he’s really saying is, ‘I’m afraid I am not doing my job in motivating you to study.’” Such fears can also move parents to set unrealistically high standards. One youth named Jason lamented: “Nothing I’ve ever done has ever been enough. If I rake the leaves, Dad wants to know why I didn’t clean the garage while I was at it. If I make an ‘A minus’ in school, my folks want to know why it wasn’t an ‘A’ and tell me I’m a failure.” But a school counselor spoke with Jason’s parents and made this discovery: “Their excessively high expectations for their son reflected their own feelings of inadequacy and their disappointment with their own career choices and financial status.”—Coping With Teenage Depression. Whatever your situation at home is, perhaps you can better appreciate why your own parents may tend to be critical at times. But what are some ways to cope with parental faultfinding? Are there ways to benefit from their criticism? These questions will be discussed in a future article. (Picture on page 26) When a parent complains about the way you do something, it can be devastating I don’t call enough, stop in enough. We see them 2 to 3 times a week. They don’t live with us but they live about 5 min. from us. I work, have a family, we are new grandparents and we still have a life too. I always feel guilty. I think about it all day every day. I start to feel resentful. I feel guilty all the time.This question has been closed for answers. Ask a New Question. INTRODUCTION Our relationship with Mother is birthed simultaneously with our entry into the world. We take our first breath of life, and display the initial dependent, human longing for protection and love in her presence. We are as one in the womb and on the birthing table. This woman, our mother...all that she is and is not...has given us life. Our connection with her in this instant and from this point forward carries with it tremendous psychological weight for our lifelong well-being. Oddly, I have never wanted to believe this. First, being a feminist-era mom myself, I didn’t want mothers and women to bear so much responsibility or ultimate blame if things go wrong. Certainly many factors other than mothering shape a child’s life. Second, I didn’t want to face how feeling like an unmothered child had such a devastating effect on me and my life. To acknowledge this meant I had to face it. While doing research over the years, I have read many books that discuss the mother-daughter bond. Each time I read a different volume, unexpected tears would stream down my cheeks. For I could not recall attachment, closeness, memories of the scent of Mother’s perfume, the feel of her skin, the sound of her voice singing in the kitchen, the solace of her rocking, holding and comforting, the intellectual stimulation and joy of being read to. I knew this was not natural, but could not find a book that explained this lack. It made me feel somewhat crazy. Was I delusional, or just a chick with a poor memory? I could not find a book that explained that this phenomenon of feeling unmothered could be a real deal and that there could be mothers who are not maternal. Nor could I find a book that discussed the conflicts that their daughters have about these mothers, the frustrated love, and even sometimes the hatred. Because good girls aren’t supposed to hate their mothers, they don’t talk about these bad feelings. Motherhood is a sacred institution in most cultures and therefore is generally not discussed in a negative light. When I decided to write a book on mothers who don’t mother their daughters, and the pain this causes girls and adult daughters, I felt as if I were breaking a taboo. Reading books about the mother-daughter bond always gave me the sensation of a deep loss and the fear that I was alone in this suffering. Experts wrote of the complexity of the mother-daughter connection, how it is rife with conflict and ambivalence, but I felt something different -- a void, a lack of empathy and interest, and a lack of feeling loved. For many years, I did not understand and tried to rationalize it. Other members of the family and well-intentioned therapists explained it away with various excuses. Like a good girl, I tried to make excuses and take all the blame. It was not until I began to understand that the emotional void was a characteristic result of maternal narcissism that the pieces began to fit together. The more I learned about maternal narcissism, the more my experience, my sadness, and my lack of memory made sense. This understanding was the key to my beginning to recover my own sense of identity, apart from my mother. I became more centered, taking up what I now call substantial space, no longer invisible (even to myself) and not having to make myself up as I go along. Without understanding, we flail around, we make mistakes, feel deep unworthiness, and sabotage ourselves and our lives. Writing this book has been a culmination of years of research and a soul journey that took me back to when I was a little girl who knew something was wrong, feeling that the absence of nurturing was not normal, but not knowing why. I am writing this book now in the hopes that I can help other women understand that those feelings were and are not their fault. This does not mean that I want you to blame your mother. This is not a journey of projected anger, resentment, or rage, but one of understanding. We want to heal ourselves and we have to do that with love and forgiveness for ourselves and our mothers. I do not believe in creating victims. We are accountable for our own lives and feelings. To be healthy, we first have to understand what we experienced as daughters of narcissistic mothers, and then we can move forward in recovery to make things the way they need to be for us. Without understanding our mothers and what their narcissism did to us, it is impossible to recover. We have been taught to repress and deny, but we have to face the truth of our experiences -- that our longing for a maternal warmth and mothering is not going to be fulfilled and our wishing and hoping that things will be different are not going to change things. As girls, we were programmed to look at the dynamics of the family in a positive light, even though we knew we lived under a shadow. Our families usually did look good to outsiders, but though we sensed something was wrong, we were told that really “it is nothing.” This kind of emotional environment and dishonesty can be crazy-making. Smile, be pretty, and act like everything’s good. Sound familiar? I am still amazed whenever I talk to other daughters of narcissistic mothers at the similarities of our internal emotional landscapes. We may have different lifestyles and outward appearances for the world to see, but inside, we wave the same emotional banners. My greatest hope is that this book will offer you acknowledgment and validation for your profound emotions and allow you to feel whole, healthy, and authentic in who you are today. In writing this book, I had to fight many internal battles. First, I had to trust my ability to do it, as I am a therapist, not a writer. Second, and of more interest, I had to talk to my mother about it. When I brought it up with Mother, I said to her, “Hey, Mom, I need your help. I am writing a book about mothers and daughters and I need your input, suggestions, and permission to use some personal material.” My mother, bless her heart, said, “Why don’t you write a book about fathers?” And of course, she was worried about being a bad mother, which would be expected. She was able to give me her blessing, however, and I think it is because she was trying to understand that this is not a book about blame, but a book about healing. I have to admit I wanted her to say many things like: “Are there some things we need to discuss or work on together?” “Do you have pain from your childhood?” “Is there anything we can do about it now?” “Can we heal together?” None of this happened, but after all these years of my own recovery work, I know not to expect her to be able to do this empathic inquiry. I was grateful that I had mustered the nerve to broach the book to her, which admittedly took me some time to do. At one time in my life, this exchange would have been unthinkable. Somehow, after taking this risk, I found it easier to move forward and be authentic in talking about my own experience as well as about my research. Although it would have felt emotionally safe to write at arm’s length from a purely clinical perspective, I hope that my own stories of being a daughter of a narcissistic mother will help you know that I do understand. I have been there. I’ve divided the book into three parts that parallel my approach to psychotherapy. Part 1 explains the problem of maternal narcissism. Part 2 shows the impact of the problem, its many effects, and how it plays out in daughters’ lifestyles. Part 3 is a road map for recovery. I invite you now to come with me to learn about yourself and your mother. It won’t always be a comfortable and easy trip. You’ll be emerging from denial, confronting difficult feelings, being vulnerable, and facing characteristics of your own that you may not like. It is an emotional undertaking. Sometimes you will find it funny. Other times you will feel a great sadness as you try to understand what you experienced and heal from it. By doing so, you will change the legacy of distorted maternal love and make a lasting difference for your daughters, sons, and grandchildren. As you face the honest reflections of your life patterns, you will ultimately like yourself more and become better at parenting, in relationships, and in everything else in your life. Emotional legacies are like genetic legacies; they pass along to each generation without anyone really taking a lot of notice. Some of the “hand me downs” are endearing and wonderful and we feel grateful and proud, but some are heartbreaking and destructive. They need to be stopped. We need to stop them. Having done my own recovery work from my distorted maternal legacy, I can say that I’ve been there and I can help you change yours too. I welcome you to read further with me. Sit with me, talk with me, cry with me, laugh with me. Together we will begin to deal with the reality of your emotional legacy. Even if it’s always been “all about Mom,” it’s your turn now. It gets to be about you, the “you” that maybe you’ve never discovered or didn’t even know existed. Copyright © 2008 by Dr. Karyl McBride –This text refers to an alternate kindle. edition edition. Karyl McBride, Ph.D., is a licensed marriage and family therapist with more than thirty years of experience in public and private practice.Karyl McBride, Ph.D., is a licensed marriage and family therapist with more than twenty-five years of experience in public and private practice. --This text refers to the mp3_cd edition.

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