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Dealing with a difficult mum

[FAMILY] In an ideal world, our mother is our best friend, confidant, ally and her love for us is unconditional. But what if our relationship with our mother is the opposite – confusing, hurtful, painful and, dare we say it, a little toxic? Thea Anderson investigates

When Jessie was a teenager, she broke her back in a road accident. Driving home on country roads from a nightclub, in the early hours of the morning, her best friend briefly fell asleep at the wheel. The car plunged down a steep bank, finally hitting a tree on Jessie's passenger side. The doctors thought she might never walk again, but with the aid of much physiotherapy and a metal plate knotting her vertebrae together, miraculously, she managed it. It cost her four months away from her A-level studies so the school advised her to come back instead the following year. But Jessie resisted, took her exams and still managed to finish with good grades, happily securing herself a university place. 'And I remember vividly,' says Jessie, 'what Mum said on hearing my results – "it's not what you were predicted Jessica. What am I going to tell everyone?" That's *all* she said.'

The mother-child relationship is seen as sacrosanct – 'you only have one mother,' we say. For most of us, there's a strong bond, with the occasional moan about irritations and miscommunications. But what about for those like Jessie, where the relationship isn't so easy? How *can* you tell if you have an unhealthy relationship with your mum? Peg Streep, author of *Mean Mothers: Overcoming The Legacy Of Hurt* (Collins, £16.99), explains that skirmishes between mothers and adult daughters are normal, however daughters of difficult mothers, 'are keenly aware that either they feel emotionally starved or ignored by their mothers or, in the alternative, actively attacked and hurt by them. But, thanks to the myths of motherhood and the power of the commandments to honour your parents, most daughters assume it's *their* fault.'

Author of *Difficult Mothers: Understanding And Overcoming Their Power* (WW Norton & Company, £10.99), Dr Terri Apter explains that the children of a difficult mother suffer more pain than comfort or pleasure. 'A difficult mother flies into regular rages, never apologises, and finds it difficult to empathise with her children,' Apter says. 'She will criticise your efforts and choices and she sees you as a possession or as a reflection of her. A "difficult mother" is also the woman who can take all the air in a room by needing more attention and pleasing than anyone else, either subtly or overtly, with her barbed comments or playing the victim.'

What do you do if you have a difficult mother?

Dr Karyl McBride, author of *Will I Ever Be Good Enough? Healing The Daughters Of Narcissistic Mothers* (Free Press, £10.99), recommends that before you take any practical action, you start with what she describes as your recovery work – which means taking time to heal the damage of this painful legacy by feeling unacknowledged emotions (the daughters of difficult mothers are often >>>

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>>> taught to deny these). Finding a good therapist can help you negotiate the guilt that can arise from what feels like disloyalty, says McBride. Journalling about your feelings can also help.

Acknowledge that dealing with a difficult mother is never easy, and all the more so if others around you seem to have happy and healthy relationships with their mums. Finding out a little of your mum's history can offer some understanding but, ultimately, finding your own way through, practically and emotionally, is worth it.

'Daughters of difficult mothers often have a hard time finding out who they are or wish to be. You're not the version of you that she sees and you're not your mother either. You will discover that you are a strong, creative, resourceful and lovable woman with or without her,' says McBride.

She suggests four ways of dealing with a difficult mother:

Take your mother to therapy

When family therapist McBride asks her clients: 'Would your mother attend therapy with you to address mother-daughter issues?' most people instinctively know the answer will probably be no, based on prior experiences of attempting to discuss feelings. However, there are those mothers who are prepared, like you, to work on issues, so it is worth asking gently. According to McBride, many difficult mothers are also on the narcissistic spectrum, and they typically project their feelings, finding it difficult to connect with their emotional inner life. They generally refuse therapy, are uncooperative, blame the daughter and might even walk out. You may instead need to create a civil connection (see below).

Create a 'civil connection'

This is a good option for daughters who do not want to give up on their mother totally, but have accepted that she is

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incapable of true mothering, and keep being wounded by this. The idea is to have less contact with your mother, keeping it light and making no attempt to be emotionally close. You will have fewer expectations then, so you won't be as disappointed when these aren't met, and you won't tend to share much personal information.

However, McBride also recommends having a temporary separation before taking this step.

Have a temporary separation

This means taking a break from seeing your mother to work on your own recovery without being constantly triggered by her behaviour. McBride suggests that you tell your mum you are taking time out for some personal issues and will contact her if there's an emergency. She might not like it – she might even throw a fit – but as McBride says, she doesn't have to. You'll need to learn to set some gentle, but firm, boundaries if she persists.

Take a permanent break

Sadly, some mothers are too toxic for their daughters to be around. If, after your own recovery, work therapy and attempting all the options above, your emotional wellbeing is still being severely compromised, then this may be the only option that protects your mental stability. It can be a hard choice, because others may not understand.

Dr Karyl McBride's website offers lots more information and online courses. See willieverbegoodenough.com

HOW TO RESPOND CALMLY

1 DEALING WITH GENERAL CRITICISM
Your mother says: 'There's a lot of dust in your house. I know you work, but your family needs a clean home.'
You say: 'Mum, this is my house. I'm comfortable with my housekeeping. If there's an issue, I'll deal with it.'

2 PERSONAL CRITICISM
Your mother says: 'I wish you wouldn't wear your hair like that – it makes you look fat.'
You say (calmly): 'Mum, it's my hair and I'm happy with the way it looks. It's hurtful to me that you say this.'

3 OVER-NEEDINESS
Your mother says: 'I need you to phone me every day. I could have a heart attack and you wouldn't know. What would people think?'
You say: 'If you're really worried about this Mum, there's an easy solution – we could buy you an emergency safety alarm to wear.'

4 CONTROLLING BEHAVIOUR
Your mother says: 'You should tell your daughter to do her homework on a Friday.'
You say: 'We work out her homework schedule together. You don't need to be concerned about it.'

5 MANIPULATION
Your mother says: 'What do you mean you're not coming for Christmas? You know how hard I work cooking. We always have it here. How could you do this to me?'
You say: 'It's important for us to spend time with the other side of the family, too. The holidays will be different from time to time.'

PHOTOGRAPH: TONY ANDERSON/GETTY IMAGES

Have you got a difficult mother?

If you answer yes to three or more of the statements below, you may have a difficult mother. She may not behave in these ways all the time – these traits are often part of a spectrum and can be inconsistent. Difficult mothers can also be talented and have wonderful, giving, fun sides to them, too

- It seems like you are there as an extension of her and to reflect well on her. She enjoys the achievements of yours that she can brag about. She worries what people will think if you don't live up to her expectations.
- It appears that she's not really interested in you at all, or she can be caring and interested when she wants something in return. Sometimes, if you try to talk about yourself, she turns the conversation back to her. You might find you give up trying.
- She regularly ignores your boundaries. If you ask her not to call at a certain time, come over or talk about a particular subject, she'll ignore your request, and she might also tell you you're being over-sensitive. This feels like subtle or overt manipulation.
- She regularly criticises or attacks your choices. It feels impossible to get things right.
- Sometimes she is jealous of you, or competes with you. You're surprised your mother would feel like this about her daughter.
- You have to attend to her emotional or physical needs before your own or, if she does give to you, she then acts like a martyr. It's not comfortable either way.
- She lacks empathy and finds it hard to put herself in yours and others' shoes. This can make you feel unloved and that your relationship lacks closeness.
- She feels personally attacked by the world – a victim – and can't understand why you or other people do things that she doesn't like.
- She'll never change (or only very little). She has a need to be right and finds reasonable discussion difficult. If confronted on any issue about her behaviour, she becomes aggressive, defensive, blames you or walks away.