OUR MOTHERS, OURSELVES

How Understanding Your Mother’s Influence Can Set You on a Path to a Better Life

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Chapter One

What About Mom, Anyhow?

Beth hung up the phone, frustrated, confused, and discouraged. She had just spent ninety minutes talking to her mother—ninety minutes of wasted time. As a working mother, Beth didn’t have that kind of time to spare.

She had tried to explain to her mom that their vacation plans wouldn’t include a visit to see her. “You know we’d love to see you,” Beth said, trying to reason with her mom, “but this vacation we really wanted to see the Grand Canyon.”

The silence that followed was too familiar to Beth. Hurt, distance, and coldness were the hallmarks of saying no to her mother. Beth tried to scramble and make some connection with her. “Mom, we’ll make a real effort to see you on the next trip.”

“That won’t be necessary. I’m sure you’ll be too busy for me then too.” Her mother hung up, and the dial tone accented that ache in Beth’s stomach that she knew too well. Again, she realized that her mother couldn’t be pleased; Beth was always “not enough,” or “too much” something. It was confusing: Was she really an ungrateful, selfish daughter, or did her mother have too many expectations?

Beth loved her mother deeply and desired more than anything to have a close, respectful relationship with her. She remembered the commandment to “honor thy father and mother,” and thought, This is impossible. If I honor her, I dishonor my family, and if I honor my family, I dishonor her. She resigned herself to the way things always had been and went back to planning the vacation. However, emptiness now surrounded the entire project.
WHAT’S WRONG?

This scene repeats itself millions of times daily around the world. Every six seconds, another adult alternates between resentment, anger, guilt, fear, and confusion about ongoing interaction with a mother.

Most people want a comfortable, mutually satisfying friendship with that very significant person in our life—our mother. But the reality falls short of the ideal. You may experience “mother trouble” in several areas. You may feel:

- unable to communicate with her
- her lack of respect for your choices and values
- her refusal to accept your own family and friends
- a lack of freedom to have a separate life without losing her love
- disconnected from and misunderstood by her
- difficulty in saying no and confronting her
- you have to hide your real self and be perfect
- responsible to make her think that she is perfect
- guilt when you don’t take care of her as she wants you to
- disillusionment and conflict over her interactions with your spouse
- guilt over not living up to her expectations and wishes
- sorrow that she can’t seem to comprehend your pain
- childlike in her presence
- frustration over her seeming self-absorption
- like cringing when she treats your children in familiar hurtful ways
- discouraged that this list is so long

The list could go on, but it points to a fundamental truth: Our relationship with our mother either in the past or present hasn’t left us where we want to be. You may wish you and your mom were closer. And you may wish she had better prepared you for other aspects of life.

For not only does the quality of your relationship with your mother dictate how things go between the two of you, it also drasti-
What About Mom, Anyhow?

Globally impacts all areas of your life. Not only do we learn our patterns of intimacy, relating, and separateness from mother, but we also learn about how to handle failure, troublesome emotions, expectations and ideals, grief and loss, and many of the other components that make up our “emotional IQ” — that part of us that guarantees whether or not we will be successful at love and work. In short, the following two realities largely determine our emotional development:

1. How we were mothered
2. How we have responded to that mothering

Dave got out of the car in the flower shop parking lot. It was another apology bouquet day. His wife, Cindy, had been in tears last night when she had staged a special evening alone with him without the kids. Dinner had gone well, and she had been looking forward to an evening of intimacy and vulnerability. Yet when she looked into his eyes and asked him how he was feeling about their marriage and life in general, Dave had shut down inside. As usual he was at a loss for words and could not bridge the emotional gap between himself and his wife.

“Maybe I just don’t deserve her . . . a husband is supposed to love his wife, so why don’t I even desire this closeness that’s so important to her? What’s wrong with me?” he wondered, as he plunked down another bill for the flowers. “Are flowers the best I’ll ever do?”

Dave’s dilemma would seem at first glance to have little to do with mothering problems. He just knew he had a problem with his wife. But the reality is that Dave’s pattern of relating was working exactly as God planned: we learn from our parents about relationship. In his relationship with his mother, Dave had learned that closeness could be dangerous. For example, when he was scared or hurt, his mother would become anxious and fuss over him to the point that he felt smothered. As a result, any time his wife moved toward him in an emotional way, his walls went up, and he braced himself against emotional overinvolvement. He found himself in a lose-lose situation.
While he did not like being cut off from his wife, he did not like being close either. Either position left his wife feeling unfulfilled. Until Dave dealt with his fears of intimacy, this pattern would continue.

Dave’s struggle illustrates the major point of this book: What we learned in our relationship with our mother deeply affects every area of our adult life.

DOES IT HAVE TO BE THIS WAY?

Just as God’s plan for us to learn patterns of relating from our mothers can end up wreaking destruction in our adult lives, so can his plan of repair bring change and growth.

As a single man, Mark had noticed patterns in his relationships similar to Dave’s pattern with his wife: He couldn’t sustain long-term, intimate relationships. He’d get close to an eligible woman, even consider marriage, and then inexplicably back off from the relationship, complaining that she was “too demanding,” or “too serious,” or “not serious enough,” or whatever. For years he simply told himself that he just couldn’t find the “right one,” until a friend suggested that the problem might be him. In response to his friend’s suggestion, Mark joined a support group that dealt with issues of intimacy and trust. It was hard work at first as those were the very dynamics in which he felt the most deficient. Yet, as he opened himself to the consistent nurturing and confrontation of the group members, something began to change in him. As they held him accountable for his own fears and deficits, as well as gave him what he missed with his own mother, he began to notice that he avoided intimacy less. In fact, he even began to long for it. And his long list of requirements for a partner became much more realistic.

As Mark continued on his growth path, he found “the right one.” But in reality, Mark had become “the right one” because he had allowed his friends to provide the mothering he needed and thus learned the patterns of relating he had missed the first time around. When we aren’t mothered perfectly, God will provide others to fill in the gaps. He can redeem our early experience, either building on the good our mother did, or providing basic essentials our mother may have missed.
TWO CONSIDERATIONS

Many people suffer under the delusion that their mother is the real problem. Many modern pop psychology approaches promote the following:

- blaming parents for all of the client’s problems
- focusing only on dredging up “pain from the past” and “getting the pain out,” thinking that catharsis cures
- identifying the client as a victim and commiserating with how bad “Mom” or someone else was
- excusing behavior, lack of performance, and failure in love or work because of what mother failed to provide
- encouraging the client to live more in the past than in the present
- arranging sessions with mom, thinking that reconciling with mom or having mom “own” how bad she was will finally fix the hole in the client’s heart

This thinking focuses on the mother of the past, not on the process of mothering in the present. Thinking that resolution will come from blaming parents, trying to get them to change, or continuing to process the events of the past, they miss out on the necessary character change that leads to real healing.

While we believe that working out one’s relationship with one’s mother is very important in the growth process, it is not the whole picture. We must also look at the process of mothering in the present as well.

Therefore, the two considerations that we will be focusing on in this book are your relationship with your mother and the process of mothering itself. Let’s look at each one of those issues for a moment.

YOUR MOM

When we talk about “dealing with the past,” we aren’t saying to “go back into the past.” You cannot go back to 1950, 1960, 1970, or even yesterday to deal with mother. But, dealing with mother is possible because, whether you like it or not, she lives with you every day in the present.
Two very important issues are at work every day that result from unresolved aspects of our relationship with mother. The first issue has to do with the feelings we have for our mother, the injuries we felt from her, and the needs that she didn’t meet. The second issue is the dynamics and patterns of relating that we learned in our relationship with mom. The first deals with how we feel today about the past; the second deals with how we repeat patterns from the past.

Leftover Feelings

Let’s look at the first issue—the feelings that we have toward our mother.

Jim and Debbie were preparing for a trip. She was packing, and he was getting the car ready when Debbie suddenly remembered that it was time to change the oil in her car. She walked out into the garage. “Jim, did you get the oil changed?” she asked. Maybe he had remembered and taken the car in earlier in the day.

“Will you get off my back?” Jim screamed. “What do you think I am, an idiot? Of course I got the oil changed. I told you I would take care of the car, and you don’t ever believe anything I tell you.” He stared at her with such contempt and hatred that an icy feeling moved down her spine. Debbie, not ever knowing what to do when Jim reacted in this way, withdrew to her room and cried.

Debbie had asked an innocent question. But Jim reacted as if she thought he was an “idiot,” and he was prepared to fight and defend himself against her.

Why? Jim grew up with a mother very unlike Debbie. A domineering and controlling woman, Jim’s mother did not trust Jim to do things on his own, nor did she believe him when he told her he had done his jobs. He grew up trying to please her and at the same time resenting her.

One reason Jim had fallen in love with Debbie in the first place was because she was so unlike his mother. Although not consciously thinking about his mother at all, he was drawn to Debbie’s warmth and lack of domination. He felt close to her almost from the first time they met. She was his ultimate fantasy woman.
As time went on, the relationship naturally deepened — and then the problems emerged. Jim began to lose his warm, tender feelings toward Debbie, and instead began to feel a growing resentment resulting in angry outbursts like the one above.

The sad thing was that Debbie hadn’t changed. She was still the same warm, noncontrolling person he had loved.

What had happened? As Jim’s attachment to his wife increased, his unresolved feelings about his mother began to emerge and interfere with how he experienced Debbie. His anger toward his mother and his feelings of being controlled, mistrusted, and dominated by his mother got displaced onto Debbie. He experienced Debbie as an adversary, as he had his mother. In reality, he could no longer even see Debbie for the woman she was, because of his feelings about his mother. He actually began to experience Debbie as if she were his mother.

Psychologists call this phenomenon “transference.” It is our tendency to direct feelings toward people in the present that should really be directed toward people in our past. It’s the old “burned dog dreads the fire” routine. If someone hurts us, and we fail to work through our wounded feelings, we will distort future relationships that appear even close in character to the one in which we were hurt. If we have unresolved feelings toward our real mothers, we need to deal with that relationship.

The Bible calls this process forgiveness. Forgiveness involves looking honestly at problems in a relationship, facing them, letting them go, and grieving our losses. It frees us from our past. We name what went wrong, look at it, feel the feelings, and let them go. The goal is to get to the place where we are “finished with mother” and ready to see people as they are.

Patterns of Relating

The second issue related to our mother has to do with understanding the dynamics and patterns of relating that we learned in our relationship with mom. Let’s go back to Dave for a moment. He had learned some patterns in his relationship to his mother that he was exhibiting now with his wife. These patterns of relating, called
“dynamics,” are like maps laid down in our brains; they determine how we will operate in different kinds of relationships. Dave’s map of closeness worked this way: When he became intimate, he feared he would be smothered and overwhelmed, losing himself. In order to regain his own space that he feared his wife (like his mother before her) was about to take away from him, he withdrew.

Dave is living out the pattern of relating that is familiar to him, and until he changes it, he will continue to “walk in the ways of [his] elders.” The Bible tells us that we repeat unhealthy patterns of relating until we take ownership of them and work through them (see Mark 7:8–9). Dave needs more insight into the patterns that he had learned in his relationship with his mother, so that he can turn from them and begin to create healthier ones with his wife.

We need to look at the patterns that we learned in our relationship with our mother. Patterns of avoidance, control, compliance, dominance, passivity, aggressiveness and overcontrol, mistrust, and a host of others can get hardwired into our brains. We were made to take in those patterns and to live by them. That is what parenting is about. We internalize the ways of our parents, and then live by them.

Thus, we are destined to repeat troublesome internalized patterns of relating or performing until we become aware of them and change. In this way, our relationship with mom needs more than forgiveness: We need to become aware of dynamics and patterns and change them into more helpful ones.

THE MOTHERING PROCESS

Jordan was a diligent mother of two, and she loved her children very much. But her children were disorganized, as children often are; they would leave their toys lying around and generally create chaos. When this happened, Jordan would grow more and more irritated, until finally through clenched teeth, she would yell, “Put your toys away.” Fearing her blowups, her children were beginning to show signs of anxiety. Whenever she would yell at them, or respond harshly, she would feel like a “horrible mother” and be overcome with guilt.
Jordan began to talk to a trusted friend, Susan, about her problem; it was the first time she had ever openly shared a shortcoming with a friend. Susan responded with empathy and understanding, so Jordan began to admit other imperfections.

Over time, Jordan began to notice the difference between Susan and some of the other women she hung around with. The others talked about their wonderful lives, their successful children, and their incredible spiritual growth. There was nothing wrong with sharing successes, but these women never shared failures. Susan was open not only to the good things Jordan had going but also to her struggles.

Jordan was changing. As she continued to share all of herself—the good and the bad—with Susan, she was becoming a more relaxed person. The little things she did not have “all together” did not bother her as much. And she found she was less bothered by what her children were doing. She found that she was able to just be with them in their imperfections in a whole new way. Susan’s acceptance of her was being passed on in her mothering.

What was happening here? Jordan was getting restored to the process of mothering. Susan was providing Jordan with empathy and containment, a basic aspect of mothering Jordan had not received from her own mother. For us to become comfortable with ourselves, all of ourselves, we need someone with whom we can be ourselves. We need acceptance and understanding, so that we can contain and integrate all parts of ourselves. A good mother does this. She listens to and accepts the negative, contains it, and helps her child not feel overwhelmed. She is comfortable with her child’s imperfections. The child takes her comfort into his personality, and he becomes comfortable with imperfections as well. The mothering process of acceptance integrates the child.

Some people, however, do not receive this empathy and understanding from their own mothers. They experience the “uncomfortable with imperfections” mothering that Jordan first gave to her children. This was the kind of mothering she had received from her own mother, and the only kind she knew how to pass on to her children. Her mother had failed to give her empathy and understanding, and so she did not have it inside to give to herself and to her children.
God has designed several ingredients into the growing up process that a “good-enough mother” provides. Our aim here is to help you understand that you may not have received everything you needed from your mother, and only when someone gives you those ingredients can your life work correctly. This is what Susan did for Jordan; she gave her what her mother failed to give her. This is what friends do for each other every day. This is what it means to be restored to the mothering process.

So, not only do we need to resolve things with one real person in our past as we mentioned above, but we must get from others what we did not get completely from our mother.

In the rest of the book, we will outline the major aspects of the mothering process so that you can understand why some areas of your relationships and your performance are not working, and so you can know what you need for it to change. Just as Jordan discovered that she lacked empathy and was restored to that aspect of mothering through Susan, you will find what it is that you have missed.

RESPONDING TO MOTHERING

Remember the two issues we identified above that determine who we are as people: (1) the kind of mothering we had—both from our own mothers and from our significant relationships since then—and (2) our response to the mothering process.

When we have gotten negative mothering, we can begin a pattern of mistrusting for the rest of our lives. We hide our needs and vulnerability. We become combative and aggressive. To show that we can’t be controlled, we control others. And the list goes on. We respond to mothering in defensive and reactive ways, as did Jim, which, in turn, like Jim above, prevents us from getting what we need, thus perpetuating our own problems.

Jordan had not received the acceptance that she needed from her mother. As a result, she had also developed a pattern of avoiding the acceptance that was available to her later in life. Others, even before Susan, would have listened to Jordan and accepted her. But she was so caught up in her efforts to be perfect that she was not responding to the good mothering that was around her at all times.
Jordan’s rejection of good mothering is in contrast to what the Bible calls responding to the light. Things of light—like honesty, vulnerability, trust, responsibility, acceptance, forgiveness—are around us all the time. Our part is to open up and respond to them.

**OUR ASSUMPTIONS**

In this book, we are making three assumptions:

Our first assumption is that there is no such thing as the “good child” and the “bad mom.” Sometimes people in recovery and psychological movements encourage “parent bashing”; every negative thing is the fault of one or both parents. Mothers do fail in being all that they need to be. Some fail in being almost anything that they needed to be. Still others do a pretty good job and just leave a few things undone or in need of fixing. But, children have defensive and inappropriate responses as well, and as adults they often continue in inappropriate patterns. Consequently, adult children need to shoulder much of the responsibility.

As you begin to see and understand the missing elements in the mothering you received, your responsibility is to grieve and forgive so that way you may be healed of whatever your mother might have done wrong. Then, as you see and take responsibility for your side of the problem, you will be able to receive what you did not get, gain control, and change those areas where life has not worked for you thus far. In this twofold process of forgiveness and responsibility, you will find unlimited growth.

Our second assumption is that there are preordained tasks of mothering and responses to mothering. We will outline the universal and predictable process that all children need to go through with their mother. We will take you through that process and help you understand how that process relates to you, your history with your mother, and your current life. We will start with basic issues like the importance of making emotional connections and proceed to leaving your mother and cleaving to your spouse.

Our third assumption is that you need love and limits along each step. Your mother needed to be loving so that you learned to bond with others, and your mother needed to set limits so that you learned
to shoulder your own responsibilities. If your mother neglected to provide love and limits, or if she provided one but not the other, you will need to find a way of completing what is missing.

So, join us on the wonderful, difficult, and challenging process of dealing with mom and mothering.
Chapter Two

The Phantom Mom

I (Dr. Cloud) was speaking one evening, and I asked the audience which words came to mind when they thought of “mothering.” They answered: *nurture, care, bondedness, cookies, trust*. These are normal responses to the word *mother*. It is mother who gives birth, who gives life to the infant. It is in her arms that we learn safety and trust and that we are not alone in the world. Indeed, for most of us, mothering has something to do with a caring connection.

The psalmist said it this way: “Thou didst make me trust when upon my mother’s breasts.” For as long as humankind has been on the earth, we have associated mothering with trust and nurture. Yet many have not received nurture and trust from their mothers. Instead of connecting safely to their mothers, they have found an emptiness and a void.

Keith recalled his childhood with vivid imagery: “I remember feeling a comfortable numbness much of the time. Our house was big, and when I was small it seemed like it went on forever and ever and had a sort of darkness to it, even in the daytime. It’s funny, when I think of being in my house, I don’t even see anyone else there. It’s empty.

“I know that my mom was there a lot, though. I just can’t remember interacting with her. When I can picture her, I see her reading or working in the kitchen. She always seemed so busy when she was up and around. If I try to picture talking to her, I really don’t come up with anything.

“There are other memories too. I remember her being in bed a lot. She seemed to just lie there sometimes for hours. Dad would tell me to leave her alone, that she wasn’t feeling well. I would usually go outside and make up games or create imaginary worlds. It’s kind of
funny because I don’t really remember feeling what you would call lonely. In other words, I didn’t really feel as though I was wanting something and wasn’t getting it; it’s more like I just felt a sort of darkness or emptiness.

“When she would come home from work, she seemed a little put out by the day. She was kind of irritated almost, but not really with anything that I had done. It was more of a mood that left her a little unapproachable. I just didn’t feel like I wanted to be around her. But she would take care of dinner, and we would all eat together most of the time. I just can’t remember much of a warm feeling.

“Then, as I got older, I just mostly stayed away from home. I wasn’t thinking that I was avoiding home or her. I guess I just didn’t want to be around the emptiness. It’s funny. She is a pretty neat person. I just don’t understand why it was so emotionally empty.”

Keith looked up at me at this point. “Does that have anything to do with why I struggle in relationships?” I just nodded, not knowing how else to express my agreement.

**KEITH’S LIFE SINCE THEN**

Keith was gifted academically, athletically, and socially. Most people found him warm and engaging, and he had a lot of friends. In close relationships, however, he was cool and aloof. His girlfriends felt that he did not need them; they felt emotionally unfulfilled. He vacillated between being in relationship and being alone for long periods. In addition, in his day-to-day interactions he could be harsh and sarcastic.

He continued this way well into adulthood until he finally saw his pattern of broken relationships and significant depression. That is when he came to see me and began to discover the emotional void he had carried around for a lifetime.

What was going on? Keith had experienced a Phantom Mom—a mother who was detached and absent. His mother had not abused him, but she had not been emotionally available. Thus Keith never learned how to connect and be intimate with others. In many instances, the Phantom Mom is a lot different than Keith’s. He experienced a Phantom Mom who didn’t connect but did not abuse.
Following are some of the many variations on the Phantom Mom theme:

- overt abuse that makes connection impossible
- control issues that block true connection
- perfectionistic demands that leave the real self alone
- abandonment that makes trust too dangerous
- difficulties in the mother’s life that take her away from the child
- reactive mothers with whom the child cannot freely share for fear of upsetting her

The common and unfortunate scenario in all of this is that the child cannot develop an attachment to his mother that fosters his emotional ability to become a truly relational person.

**THE NEED THAT WON’T GO AWAY**

What is the need that Phantom Moms are not fulfilling? What is it that an absent and detached mother is not doing? A child — and later an adult — has five basic needs that must be met by a mother.

1. **Safety**

   As little people, we experience the world as dangerous. We feel alone. We don’t have love inside — we have overwhelming needs and feelings. This is painful. You can see this pain on the face of any infant who needs to be picked up or of the child who is terrified of something in her imagination. The child does not have safety inside but danger. Safety can only be found in the mother — or in whoever is providing the mothering.

   Safety comes in the form of a person who is predictable, stable, and danger-free. This kind of mother creates a foundation for all the other tasks of mothering. Without this person, the child remains in a state of panic or anxiety, unable to love or learn. The mother’s consistent, caring, and soft and understanding attention gives the child a safe place to turn; she transforms the dangerous world into a place of safety.
2. Nurture

Webster says that to nurture is to “feed or nourish.” A mother’s nurture is fuel for the soul. Good mothers pour care into the souls of their children much like sunlight and water pour nutrients into a plant. Our souls flourish when we are being nurtured and cared for. We grow, develop, and change according to the way we were designed.

Without nurture we wither. The “failure to thrive” syndrome and many other childhood problems are directly related to a lack of nurture. In some cases, institutionalized babies have even died from maternal deprivation and a lack of nurture. We were created with needs that go deeper even than our physical need for food. We need the immaterial and spiritual requirements of relationship in order to live.

3. Basic Trust

Basic trust is the ability to invest oneself in a relationship. We must first experience many instances of trustworthiness before we can truly trust others. We aren’t born trusting; trust is learned. Trust enables us to reach out, to depend, to need, and to see others as the source of good things. We can depend on our caretaker—when we reach out, she will be there and she will respond to our needs.

When we trust someone, we invest something of ourselves and hope for a good return. If we invest our money, we want safety and dividends. With a good mother, we invest our hearts and our being and find a good return, which leads us to invest again and again in relationships. Trust nurtures our ability to need and to depend, which allows us to grow and develop relationally. We need to need, and we need to feel comfortable with dependency. A trustworthy mother develops those abilities in us. Healthy people let themselves need and depend on others without fear.

4. Belonging and Invitation

We all have a need to belong to someone and to something bigger than ourselves. Belonging and love are at the root of our humanness. The foundation of our existence is relationship, and we cannot
provide that for ourselves. The Bible tells us to be “rooted and established in love.” If we are rooted and grounded with God and others, we belong; we feel nurtured, secure, and free from the universal experience of isolation. And it is our mother’s responsibility to rescue us from alienation and isolation and to usher us into the world of relationship.

Mothers, through their love and care, make us feel wanted, which transfers into later feelings of worth and confidence in relationships. We have worked with countless people who feel “unlovable” or “unwanted,” when in reality lots of people love and adore them. It’s obvious that they have failed to receive good mothering. The sense of feeling wanted and loved is not an intellectual exercise that we can do for ourselves. It comes through the experience of being invited into relationship with another person. You may know intellectually that you are loved, but if you never felt loved by your Phantom Mom, your feelings won’t match up with what you know intellectually. When we experience being consistently wanted early in life, we move easily into other relational settings later, never wondering if we belong or not.

5. Someone to Love

Emotional development comes not only from the mother’s investment in the child but also from the child’s investment in the mother. A mother provides someone for the child to love—she is a good “object of love.” In order to develop emotionally, physically, intellectually, and socially, we need not only be loved but to love. Love fills us up, and colors our outlook on others and the world in which we live, so that we view life with hope and optimism. We have a basic need to love people, and that requires someone to love. If mother is safe, we love her. If she is not, we either are overwhelmed by isolation or we are filled with hatred.

These needs are universal and documented by research, clinical experience, people’s experiences, and the Bible. If mother or the surrogate mother provides safety, nurture, trustworthiness, belonging, and lovability, then the child is on his way to healthy development.
RESULTS OF THE PHANTOM MOM

Keith’s life of detachment is a fairly common one. We have seen what this life looked like after he left home. What other signs of Phantom mothering show up in adult life?

Relational Problems

An unavailable mother causes devastating consequences to her child later in life. You might ask, “So why does our past have to determine our future? So Keith’s mother didn’t connect. Can’t he just connect her later?” The answer is no, not unless he is open to healing and change.

We are talking here about the development of a child’s relational equipment. We can relate this process to the manufacturing of a car. The car will only run in 1996 if all the cylinders were installed in the engine in 1960. It does not matter that the car was built so long ago. What matters is whether or not all the parts were installed. This is how early development affects later life: It leaves us with or without ability. If we lacked good mothering, our ability to relate well to others in the present must still be built. If we experienced good mothering and we respond, we possess the ability to relate well to others.

Here are a few other relational problems that people with a Phantom Mom may experience:

  Shallowness in relationships. These people experience shallow relationships—they can’t get “below the surface.” Their partners complain of a lack of satisfaction in trying to connect.

  Aloofness. These people are “in the world of relationships” but are removed. They are distant with others. They may hold themselves emotionally apart from their family, leaving their spouse to emotionally care for the rest of the family members.

  Withdrawal. The natural “seeking” parts in these people don’t function. Instead of seeking out others during painful times, they withdraw into themselves, often to the disappointment of those who love them.

  Mistrust, hostility, and aggression. These people use a pattern of aggression and hostility to keep others away. They distrust others and will attack and fight off anyone who tries to get close.
Overvaluation of relationship. These people search for significant others in adult life to “fill the void” left by a Phantom Mom. They expect a friend or lover to fill all that their mother failed to give them. They see their spouse as a prince or princess who will transform their empty experience to a life of wonder. But a spouse will never be able to live up to such high expectations and demands. Unhappy single people who think that getting married will make them happy are often looking for maternal love.

Negative relationships. These people enter into negative relationships that are the result of an insecure start in life. A secure start in life with a good mother is what we need to sustain us during the loneliness of waiting for a good relationship in our adult life.

Theresa belonged to a support group in which she was asked over and over again why she chose to continue dating George. This man was not anything like what she needed. She’d come from a home with little love, and she had chosen a man with little love to give. An angry person, George hurt her in many ways and very infrequently did he do loving things. Finally, one day after he had hurt her again and the group had asked again why she put up with him, she replied in tears, “Because if I break up with him, I won’t have anyone.”

Because of her disconnected relationship with her mother, Theresa had severe problems with abandonment. When a relationship would end, she would go into such a painful state of loss that she would return to the relationship, no matter how bad it had been. She was so afraid of being alone that she would rather be in an abusive relationship than in no relationship at all. This is often why, when someone like Theresa gets close to ending an abusive relationship, she finds that she can’t do it; she is terrified of the aloneness in between relationships.

Functional Problems

If our mother was emotionally unavailable, our ability to function in other areas is affected. Studies have shown that health, physical development, and learning are all affected by the quality of our early attachments. When we lack the basic security that an attachment with
mom provides, we often avoid risk, are devastated by failure, are unable to take criticism and solve problems, suffer from devastating guilt, and feel estranged from our talents. To function well, we need the basic security that comes from mothering.

Randy, a bright financial manager, had achieved much success in his field. As chief financial officer for several companies, he was valued for his ability to forecast a company’s financial needs. But whenever someone questioned his decisions or opposed him in any way, he could get vicious. He had a knack for turning normal conflicts into win-lose confrontations; matters of simple disagreement quickly became adversarial. His basic orientation was “for” and “against.” If someone questioned him, he assumed that person was “against” him, and he began to mobilize his defenses to fight off the “attack.”

Randy’s pattern of insecurity interfered with his ability to keep a job. He would do well for a while in a company, his strengths shining and the CEO generally pleased with his accomplishments, until his adversarial mode of operation would divide the management team. Lines would be drawn until finally the president would figure out what was going on and let Randy go. Randy’s insecurity came from a lack of basic trust at his core. Without a mother’s love inside, Randy experienced the world as a hostile and dangerous place. His role in this world was to defend himself.

Our ability to function well in the world does not depend on aptitude, intelligence, or talents alone. All of these are only useful to the person who has resolved the question of whether or not the world is a safe place, and only good mothering provides that kind of safety.

**Spiritual Problems**

The writer of Psalm 22 learned to trust at his mother’s breast. We quoted him earlier, but in a different translation the verse reads this way: “Yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you even at my mother’s breast.” The idea of trust in God is connected with learning trust in our earliest relationships. This idea of a connection between how we experience God and how we experience people permeates the Bible. The two are interrelated.
If we believe in a personal God, then we will relate to God as a person. He might be very different than what we have experienced with humans, but we often have expectations for him to be the same. Those who did not learn to trust at their mother’s knee have difficulty trusting God.

Marty got interested in spiritual things in college. He began to attend church and fellowship groups and was very excited about building a spiritual life. Somewhat mystical and aesthetic, Marty liked the idea of developing a personal relationship with God.

However, Marty soon got into trouble with his new spiritual life. As he read the Bible, he became more and more confused about God because everything he read seemed to condemn him. He was afraid that God thought he was “bad” and was about to “get” him in some way. His guilt and fear increased until he finally decided he must be headed for hell.

He went to see a couple of pastors associated with the school, and even though they explained to him that he had misunderstood the Bible and that God really loved him, he could not feel God’s love. Fear continued to paralyze his spiritual walk for a long time.

He finally received some in-depth counseling and discovered that his spiritual problems were linked to his lack of an emotional connection with his mother—he felt unwanted at a deep level. Through the love and acceptance of some friends and his counselor, he gradually began to trust God and others. But the impact of his early life on his spiritual walk took a lot of work to overcome.

Our early relationships have a significant impact on our ability to enjoy the spiritual life. They affect our view of God and our ability to integrate spiritual development into the whole of life. Specifically, our relationship with our mother affects our ability to trust and to love and receive love. The way that we experience security, freedom, healthy self-esteem, and a mystical connection with God is strongly influenced by the kind of mothering we received.

Emotional Problems

In the movie Manhattan, Woody Allen was dismayed because his wife had left him for another woman. He was particularly upset
about his son’s living in such an arrangement. At one point, he voiced his dismay over his son’s having two mothers. “Nobody ever survives one!” he said.

Sadly, many people feel this way. The relationship that should provide the bedrock of emotional security too often ends up providing just the opposite—the seeds and paths of emotional insecurity. Following are a few of the emotional consequences of the Phantom Mom:

**Depression.** Many kinds of depression stem from something that happens, such as the death of a spouse. But the person who has no “good mother” inside feels a sense of perpetual loss. This depression comes from deep inside. If we miss out on a sense of connectedness early in life, we live in a state of emotional emptiness that translates into a deep, dark feeling of depression. It is often triggered in adult life when we lose a significant relationship and are forced into the deeper feelings of not having someone to love.

**Feelings of emptiness.** Emptiness is one of the most intolerable emotional states known to humanity. We are unable to stand emptiness for long, however, and usually will try to do something to fill the void felt inside. The feeling often has to do with early mothering patterns. The child, and later the adult, is “filled up” inside by his own feelings of responsiveness to the love and nurture of his mother. As adults, we often think that someone’s love “fills us up,” and we will often hear empty people wanting someone’s love to “fill the void inside.”

But in reality, it is our response to love that “fills us up.” It is our own loving feelings inside that provide a feeling of “being full.” As we are loved, we love back, and that response is fulfilling. We would have a problem if no one were there to consistently “love back.” Having no one to love and attach to sets a child up for feelings of emptiness that continue into adulthood. Detached mothers—Phantom Moms—create detached children who grow up into detached and empty adults.

**Addictions.** The word *addiction* is used loosely these days as we speak of being addicted to everything from food to work to sex. Traditionally, we reserved the term to refer to enslavement to alcohol or other drugs. But as people now think of addiction as a mood-
altering behavior, addiction can certainly have its roots in the search for mother. It is a way to deal with the emptiness that we saw above; a substance or a behavior is used to avoid the feeling.

_Thinking problems_. While emotional attachment is a primary process, thinking is a secondary process. We must be nurtured before we can begin to think and use language. This is why babies begin talking in the second year of life, after they have received a lot of nurture. In this way, thinking rests on a bedrock of safety and security so that it is relatively unhampered by the need for love.

The thinking of people without early security rests on the sand—on feelings of being unloved, and feelings of suspicion and lack of trust. These people entertain suspicious thoughts, paranoid thoughts, mistrustful thoughts, negative thoughts about themselves and others, negative evaluations of their performance, and negativity about the world at large. Generally, these thoughts attack the connection in some way or another. Either someone does not love them, or they don’t find the other one lovable. This is why some efforts at positive thinking fail. The problem is not with the thinking, but with the lack of love underneath. Insecure people think insecure thoughts.

The most extreme example of thinking problems is “psychosis,” when someone loses his or her ability to know what is real and what isn’t. This is experienced in differing degrees by people with very early developmental attachment problems.

_Hopelessness and meaninglessness_. Hope is one of the most important virtues that can be instilled in our soul. Many people think that hope has to do with the future, when in reality it has to do with the past. We develop hope as we experience pain transformed into comfort. When this happens enough, we begin to have faith that our pain will not do us in and that comfort is on its way.

Mothers are crucial to this process. When babies or young children are upset, their only comfort is the secure safety of a loving mother. When they are hurting, and a loving mother offers comfort, their misery is transformed to safety and gratitude. When that happens literally thousands of times, they come to expect an end to their pain, and they develop the virtue we call hope—the expectation that good will come eventually, no matter how bad things are right now.
Finding meaning in life is similar. Love and relationship with God and with other people are the true meaning of life. If we did not have a mother to connect to and did not get a good relational start in life, we lose the whole picture. We do not find the true meaning of life but look for meaning in places other than fulfilling relationships, such as work, achievement, or materialism.

WHY ME?

People with mothering problems often ask, “Why me?” They wonder why their mothers did not or could not love them in a way that helped them. Why couldn’t mom be “good enough”? They may even feel as if mom singled them out on purpose.

But nobody really knows why. If your mother found it difficult to feel or express love, it could be for any number of reasons, few, if any, having to do with you. These problems are often carried down generational lines. She may not have felt loved or nurtured herself, and she couldn’t give away what she didn’t have. So, an understanding of her situation is very helpful as you work through your feelings toward her.

Here are some possible reasons for her limitations:

- She lacked the connection and nurture she needed as a child.
- She was abandoned or hurt in the past and was unable to allow herself to attach deeply to anyone, even her own child.
- She was emotionally empty.
- She feared intimacy—knowing and being known.
- She was depressed and did not have the emotional energy to give.
- She had marital pain and was being torn apart.
- She was ill or had various other difficulties.

Like the old proverb, if we have not walked in someone else’s shoes, we have no idea what that person is dealing with or what it is like to be that person. If we look at various times in our own lives and think what it would have been like to be a mother of a young child with “all of that going on,” it can lead to greater understanding. We just don’t often know.
Another possible answer to why your mother couldn’t be all that you needed her to be is that she chose the selfish path. Everyone, no matter what their past dealt them, makes choices that they are responsible for. No matter what was done or not done to your mother, she is still responsible for how she responds to the truth. “Not good-enough” mothers are rarely evil people. They are often just too caught up in themselves and their own concerns to see the needs of another. Children are used only as objects to meet their needs. This is the basic sin of selfishness: they believe the world revolves around them. Jesus invited all of us to treat others in the way that we would want to be treated. In this case, these mothers chose not to heed his invitation.

We are all responsible for our own selfishness and lack of response to the light of God, who invites us into the life of love. So, the answer to “why?” is probably a mixture of what was done to your mother as well as how she responded to what was done. The first should move us to compassion and the second to forgiveness, as we understand that we, too, are selfish and in need of forgiveness. We will look at the process of healing in the next chapter, but for now, it is important to know that the reason your mother failed to love you the way you needed to be loved had much more to do with her than it did with you.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE NOW

We have looked at some of the results of the Phantom Mom in a child’s life, but what about mom now? What goes on between the adult child and the detached mother? What does this look like in adult life? Here are some common scenarios:

Please Love Me

Maria looked forward to her parents’ visit. She hadn’t seen them for about a year and relished the thought of sitting down and talking with her mother.

Maria’s most recent visits with her mother had not gone well. Not that they had argued; that was not Maria’s style. Arguments were the style of her sister, the “black sheep of the family.” Maria’s style was
to be “nice.” But, even without overt fights, something didn’t feel right. Maria usually came away from her mother feeling empty.

She was twenty-eight now, and though visits with her mother had been without conflict, she longed to feel a closeness with her mother. She wanted to share what was going on in her life, her plans and dreams, her pain, and all the things she treasured in her heart now that she was an adult.

But when Maria attempted an intimate connection with her mom, she experienced frustration. Her mother just could not connect with her feelings and more intimate parts. She would immediately start talking about her own life, or the life of a friend, and it would usually be something of less depth. Her interests seemed so shallow to Maria, so petty and image-conscious.

But each visit Maria would try again. She would long to see her mother, and before the visit, they would talk on the phone as if it were going to be so glorious. And for her mother, it usually was, for she did not know what had not happened. But for Maria, it was another unsuccessful attempt to get her mother to love her in a way she could feel. She found herself performing—listening, cooking, and sightseeing. She bent over backward to show her the kind of life she had created for herself, so her mother would be proud. And she was. But pride did not fill Maria’s soul. And if she would have been objective, she would have seen another disappointing trip on the horizon—before it happened.

**Where Did the Family Go?**

In Maria’s case, the kind of detached relationship she’d always had with her mother simply continued on. In other situations, the lack of relatedness tends to go to its logical conclusion. The parties have less and less contact, and the relationship just seems to go away. I treated one young man in his early thirties who had a Phantom Mom. I asked him one day how his parents were doing, for he hadn’t mentioned them in a long time.

“I guess we really don’t have a lot to say to each other anymore,” he told me. “I just don’t talk to them.” This kind of separation is always
sad, but in reality it had always been there. As he’d grown into adulthood, he’d found some people with whom he could really connect, but this made him more aware of the separation from his parents that had always been. While sad, a lack of connection that comes to the forefront like this can be a time of great growth and reconciliation, as we will see later.

I Hate You, Don’t Leave Me

In this scenario, the adult child covers up his longings and feelings of disconnectedness with anger. But rarely is the anger directed toward what is really wrong: the lack of connection. Quarreling and bickering in the family is usually over lots of little things—wrong kinds of presents, plans for who is or is not going to visit whom, how one person is choosing to live, or a whole host of other distractions.

The real issue, of course, is the lack of connection that the adult child feels. The tendency to pick fights is generally a sign that we want something from someone; the quarrelsome adult is most likely still wanting the connection and finding it difficult to face it directly. In all of this, a clear tie of “don’t leave me” is evidenced by the inability to let go. Anger may be the language, but the need for love is the strong message.

THE SAD REALITY

You can see that there are many different versions, sizes, and shapes of scenarios of adult children with Phantom Moms. The longing for connection may cause one person to move toward mother and try to please her; this pattern of “mother pleasing” can go on for decades, like Maria’s case. Or the adult child can move away from mother, avoiding the relationship and the lack of relationship all together, like the patient I mentioned who never talked to mother. An adult child may express anger to cover up the longing for connection. These dynamics go on in a variety of ways, but the salient message is that “we are not finished yet.”

And that becomes our question. If we are not finished, either with mother or mothering, how do we complete the process? We have
seen what detached and absent mothering looks like, what it causes, what the need is, and how it can set up a painful pattern of relating even in adulthood. The need that God programmed into us for good mothering just does not go away until it is met. In the next chapter, we will explore how that happens and how this kind of healing will help you relate to your detached or absent mother in a more satisfying way.
Chapter Three

Rebuilding Your Connection

Val was about to “graduate” from her season of therapy. She had worked through her detachment and lack of trust issues, both in our sessions and for a while now with supportive friends, and it had paid off. She was now able to connect without panic and to reach out without withdrawing. She could let herself feel her need for closeness and belonging, and she could openly respond to the safe people in her life.

Val’s marriage had deepened and blossomed. She was in a satisfying career and had found a church where she could contribute her musical talents. This was a good time in her life.

In fact, Val and her husband were thinking about having a baby. This would have been unthinkable before, since Val was terrified by the prospect of motherhood. She feared that her attachment problems would hurt the child. “I don’t want to bring someone into the world and then not be able to give him what he needs the most,” she would say. However, as she began to grow and change, the part of Val that woke up to relationship also woke up to the desire to mother and to comfort as she had been comforted.

In session, I (Dr. Townsend) asked her, “As you look over your time in treatment, what factors were the most significant for you?” Val thought for a moment, then responded, “Three things: relationship, relationship, relationship.”

Getting Started

In the last chapter we discussed the problem of the Phantom Mom and the needs that may not have been met by this kind of mother. In this chapter we provide the steps to getting those needs met and repairing what was broken in your own mothering process.
FRUIT PROBLEMS VS. ROOT PROBLEMS

The first step in the process of getting well from mothering problems is to recognize that the symptom isn’t the problem. The “alarm bells” we described in the last chapter—relational, functional, spiritual, and emotional problems—signal that something is wrong and that life isn’t working out for you. You may have discovered, for example, that you are depressed or that you’re struggling more than normal in your relationships or work.

You assume that the pain and grief caused by these symptoms is the real problem. And so you address the symptom—you take more vacation time, work out more, change friends, and switch jobs in an attempt to alleviate your suffering. While these changes may be good and help for a time, if you have a real character injury inside, they may also only temporarily anesthetize your pain. For some of us, a good rule of thumb is this: “If a week of R and R fails to solve it, it’s more than a ‘tired’ problem!”

You may also be tempted to get professional counseling for the symptom. You want a therapist to affirm you and help you adjust your perception of life so that you can “feel good again.” While a professional counselor’s ability to help you evaluate your thinking patterns is an important part of the process, it often addresses the wrong issue. The problem isn’t that we don’t feel right. It’s that we truly aren’t right. Something is broken or undeveloped inside our heart and soul.

Pain is always the sign of a deeper problem, much like a fever is the sign of an infection. If you identify with the symptoms we listed in chapter 2, you may have some issues with trust and attachment. As you begin to address these character problems, the painful symptoms will gradually diminish over time, just as a fever declines when you treat an infection with antibiotics. The pain has served its purpose: to alert you to a problem. It is the “fruit” of a “root” issue. Jesus taught us that “A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.” Be aware of your pain—it leads to the root of the problem.

It is easy to get stuck in the “symptom solving” routine for a while. People with absent and detached issues shy away from character solutions, often because of the emptiness they know they will need to face
at some point. Alex, a friend of mine who had severe detachment issues, explained it this way: “Part of me knew the problem was deeper than negative feelings or taking better care of myself. But every time I thought about myself and my past, I felt I was falling into a black hole of despair, where no one would catch me. It was too terrifying to fall into that pit.” Alex had no “good mommy” inside him and could not experience that part of himself alone.

“RELATIONSHIP, RELATIONSHIP, RELATIONSHIP”

After you’ve determined that the problem goes beyond the immediate pain, you’ll need to seek a safe context in which to work on it. As we’ve discovered, it is in relationships that we can get attachment needs met.

Mothering injuries, at heart, are relational injuries. That is, the deficits were caused by the most significant connection in our lives. And, just as a relationship can break a person, a relationship can also restore a person.

It can be difficult to move from the “symptom” phase to the “relationship” phase, particularly for those with absent and detached mothering issues. If you have experienced absent and detached mothering in the past, you have probably become autonomous and independent. You feel you can depend only on yourself for safety and success. The idea of going to another person for help is not only scary, it would also involve unlearning the very survival techniques you have perfected to help you cope and maintain order in your life.

Val, whom we met earlier, was the self-styled “Queen of Self-Help.” An information junkie, she had a huge book and tape library at home on emotions, success, relationships, marriage, and spirituality. But even with all this helpful data at her disposal, things kept breaking down inside. It was when she finally realized that she needed something besides information that she began to seek relational help.

WELCOME TO YOUR NEW HOME

In a very real sense, this chapter is about finding a new home for the lost part of your soul. That part of you that never finished learning
to attach, connect, and trust is still alive and waiting to be developed and mothered. It is most likely split off from the rest of your life in a state of suspended animation; it is still in the same young, immature, or injured state it was in when the mothering process broke down. Though this could have happened decades ago, this part continues untouched and unconnected until it is brought back into relationship.

The idea of finding a new home is an old one. We get what we can from the original family, given their limitations as well as ours. Then those days are over, and we grow up and take responsibility for our lives as adults. However, when it’s time to get certain needs met, we can’t go back to mom and ask her to remother us. Our growth isn’t her job anymore, it’s ours. And the part of us that is still stuck back there can be healed.

Jesus illustrated this idea of home and family when he was told that his mother and brothers were waiting to talk to him. He seized the opportunity to define true family, saying, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” He wasn’t saying Mary was a bad mom—he was redefining family as having more to do with spiritual and relational ties than blood ties. In other words, Mary might have been his biological mother, but what made her truly a part of his family was that she shared the desire to love and accept God and others and do whatever else the Father willed for them. That is family.

WHO IS MY FAMILY?

It’s common for individuals with absent/detached mother problems to think that because there are warm bodies around them, they have what they need. What type of relationship will heal the Phantom Mom injury? We can easily confuse proximity with intimacy. Pam told me, “I thought I was connected. I had lunch three times a week with girlfriends. My husband and I had a full social calendar. I just didn’t know you were supposed to talk to people about your insides!” Having social friends is important. But those friends don’t necessarily meet our needs for intimate connecting with the unknown part of us.
Our Mothers, Ourselves

How Understanding Your Mother's Influence Can Set You on a Path to a Better Life

By Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend

No one has influenced the person you are today like your mother. The way she handled your needs as a child has shaped your worldview, your relationships, your marriage, your career, your self-image—your life. Our Mothers, Ourselves can help you identify areas that need reshaping, to make positive choices for personal change, and to establish a mature relationship with Mom today.

Drs. Henry Cloud and John Townsend steer you down a path of discovery and growth beyond the effects of six common mom types.

You'll learn how your mom affected you as a child and may still be affecting you today. And you'll find a realistic and empowering approach to filling your unmet mothering needs in healthy, life-changing ways through other people.

Our Mothers, Ourselves is a biblical route to wholeness and growth, to deeper and more satisfying bonds with your family, friends, and spouse—and to a new, healthier way of relating to your mother today.

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