

# **The Emotional Crisis between Mothers and Daughters**

**by Rosjke Hasseldine**

Why is mother-daughter conflict and misunderstanding so common? Why do so many daughters recoil at the suggestion that they are turning into their mother? Rosjke Hasseldine, a psychotherapist, has discovered what is harming the mother-daughter relationship and believes that the mother-daughter relationship is a mirror reflection of the emotional condition women and girls are living in.

Mother-daughter relationship conflict is far too common to be explained away as just individual disagreements or adolescent daughters being 'hormonal' or argumentative. There are just too many daughters admitting to having a difficult relationship with their mother. Too many mothers and daughters feeling misunderstood, invisible and hurt by the emotional distance between them. Too many adolescent girls are reacting with anger and too many new mothers are mourning the lack of connection and support they need from their mothers, for this to be explained away as stemming solely from their unique individual problems and issues.

In this article I outline what I have found to be the cause of all this conflict, misunderstanding and heartache. Mother-daughter conflict has been too easily brushed aside as if it isn't important. When in truth the mother-daughter relationship is the most powerful relationship for a woman. A daughter's relationship with her mother lays the foundation for her relationship with herself. From her mother she will either learn how to claim her life and be fully visible in all her relationships or how to silence herself, accept invisibility as a normal way of being, and believe that caring for others and not herself is "a woman's lot in life".

My journey in discovering what harms and heals the mother-daughter relationship started twenty years ago, during my twenties. My heart yearned to feel known and loved by my mother, so I started to read books and talk with other women about their mother-daughter relationships. The more I read and listened, the more passionate I became about understanding what was really going on between mothers and daughters. I also became more confused. It felt as if a large piece of the puzzle was missing.

I wanted to know why I heard so frequently a daughter admit to not being close with her mother. I was often deeply moved by the daughter's confusion around why her mother and her weren't close and her heartbreaking need to feel heard and understood by her mother. I now understand their heartbreak. For daughters, from four to forty and older, feeling heard and understood by their mother is code for feeling loved. Feeling heard and understood by mum, are the essential key ingredients for feeling loved and accepted by her. Yet understanding this part of the jigsaw puzzle did not help me understand why daughters did not feel heard or understood in such numbers. Why so many felt the conflicted pressure to meet their mother's needs.

It wasn't until I gave birth to my own daughter that I started to understand the deeply rooted themes that run through all mother-daughter relationships. I woke up to what was happening between my

mother and I moments after my daughter was born. I was living in New Zealand and had been fighting to be heard by my mum since my early teens. I remember the moment I heard the midwife's voice telling me that I had a daughter as if it was yesterday, and not eighteen years ago. As the reality of having a daughter sank into my consciousness, the room I was in started to fade away into blackness. In the darkness that suddenly surrounded me I saw in front of me, as if projected on the wall, a time-line of all the abusive experiences, events and emotional neglect my great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother had experienced. I saw and even felt how each of them had suffered life-stripping emotional neglect because no one had asked them what they needed or felt. I also felt how each of them had survived this silence and invisibility by learning to believe that silent invisibility is a normal state of survival for women.

As each experience appeared on the time-line, I started to see how the emotional neglect and invisibility had shaped not just their relationship with themselves, but how it had shaped their relationship with each other. I saw how their shared experience of emotional deprivation had created an emotional hunger in the mothers that they then passed on to their daughters. Not having anywhere to be emotionally fed, and not knowing how to feed themselves or that they could ask to be responded to, each mother had turned to their daughter for feeding. Each mother had developed an emotionally manipulative way of communicating their emotional needs to their daughter. They had made their daughters responsible for their emotional needs because they didn't dare voice their needs directly. They didn't know the words to say or how to feel entitled to claim ownership for their needs or their right to feel heard, visible, and nurtured. This understanding was as foreign to these women as a language they did not understand or had even heard of.

This left their daughters starved for attention from their mothers. They were left feeling the same invisibility and emotional neglect that their mothers had felt daughters themselves. And again, it left the next generation of daughters spending their childhood and adult years learning about what their mothers needed rather than learning about what they needed. The mothers had passed on to their daughters their own complete oblivion that something essential was missing. In their flurry to care for their mothers, the daughters did not realise that their own emotional needs were missing and that they didn't know the language or own the sense of entitlement to claim their needs. Just like their mothers, they did not recognise how emotionally starved they were and that they had learnt to accept emotional starvation as normal. In this starved state, they also did not recognise how dangerous it is to be disconnected from your emotional needs. They did not understand that not feeling entitled to ourselves leaves women (and men) vulnerable to being and accepting abusive behaviour from others.

As I reached the end of the time-line I felt how my new daughter would also become emotionally starved, invisible and feel insignificant if I didn't do something about this legacy. My heart constricted as I realised that she and I would have the same agonisingly difficult relationship as my mother and I had, if I didn't heed this message. Some people may say that I was just hallucinating after the intense hormonal experience of giving birth or as a result of the drugs. But I know that those voices of doubt need to be ignored. I know that in that precious moment two

women were given life in that small country maternity hospital on the outskirts of Christchurch. As my daughter came into the world, so did I. I was ripped awake from having been put to sleep long before I could remember anything different. Through giving my daughter life, I was given insight into how to give myself a life that is not blighted by emotional neglect and starvation. The kind of life that surely all girls and women are entitled to live.

This experience was one of those surreal life-changing moments that you ignore at your peril. It was the first time that I was awakened to the disastrously damaging messages that I had learnt from my mother, and that she had learnt from her mother, which the culture had reinforced for all of us. We have not progressed much emotionally from our grandmothers' and mothers' days. Today still, girls' and women's emotional needs are not recognised as central to empowering women to speak, be heard, be visible, and to know that anything less is just not okay.

After many years of working with mothers and daughters, I know that my vision on that Christmas day (my daughter's birthday), told me the underlying theme behind mother-daughter conflicts. Erica Jong alludes to it in "*What do women want?*" "If all feminist progress is dependent on the mother-daughter dialectic (as I believe it is), then we are in for a new generation of stay-at-home mums, whose problems will be closer to our grandmothers' than our own. Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* will be as relevant in 2013 as it was in 1963 – and our granddaughters will have to regroup and start feminist reforms all over again. No wonder feminism has been ebbing and flowing since Mary Wollstonecraft's day. We *have never* solved the basic problem that afflicts us all – who will help raise the children?"

Though I agree with Jong's words, I believe it misses a deeper issue. I would say that underneath all women's disempowerment and mother-daughter conflict, lies the question that we have not yet dared to ask, let alone answer - *who is taking care of mum?* We need to start looking at why mothers do not know how to claim their own needs. Why they do not feel entitled to their emotional needs? Why they let themselves become completely exhausted and given-out? And why they do not realise that this is an unsustainable way of living and a warning that something is terribly wrong? We need to ask why so many young women are sitting in my office with a terrified blank look on their faces when I ask them *what they need*. Why they do not know the answer and have never even thought to ask themselves? And why no one has ever asked them this key question before?

Daughters are screaming to be heard and understood by their mothers. They are angry that their mothers are passing on to them the invisibility of women's emotional needs and the role that mothers and women are still the uncared-for carers of families and communities. I remember being angry with my mother during my middle adolescence because she looked so depressed and bored as she went each day to the shops to get bread and provisions for the family. I did not want that to be my future. I hated that she was showing me a future where my life and energy would be completely taken up with caring for a family and feeling bored and depressed. But in my adolescent mind I did not understand the

pressures that had placed my mother in that role. All I knew was that she was showing me my future and I did not like it.

As her daughter I needed her to show me something different. To show me how to find my way out of being stuck with something that was not making me happy. I needed her to teach me how to say and believe in my right to speak my needs, and create for myself a life that nurtured and fed me, as well as my family. I needed her to teach me that feeding my family and ignoring my own needs is not a sustainable existence for any mother.

The journey to claiming the lost language that speaks a mother's emotional needs starts with the women who have come before. I started with my great-grandmother and grandmother. I tried to understand all I could about their lives, what their relationships and experiences had been like, and how they had been treated and treated themselves. I had to understand my family's emotional map. This technique helped me to discover where needs and feelings were heard and ignored, what events and beliefs had harmed and even erased emotional needs, and how this had affected their relationship with themselves and each other. One of the strongly held themes I discovered in my family was that selflessness by women was treated as a badge-of-honour that they had learnt to wear proudly.

Having understood the emotional map that you have inherited, the next step is to start changing the script by learning how to emotionally feed yourself. The recipe for this is both simple and hard. All we have to do is start asking ourselves "*I need . . .*" We need to start to look at how we relate to our needs and how visible we expect our needs to be in our relationships. We need to learn to start saying "*no*" and to ask "*I need you to . . . , because I am not feeling important to you.*" Yet answering these questions and learning to feel entitled to them is far from easy. Speaking our needs changes the balance of power within our relationships and many clients have found that their new visibility was not always met with joy and encouragement. When we start claiming our selves and needs, we are up against the wall of expectation that women, especially mothers, are always available. Many may not like it. Other women may not like that you are doing what they cannot do for themselves. Do not lose courage when you are suddenly called selfish, aggressive or needy. We need to learn that these words are used to keep women silent about their needs.

How mothers and daughters get on, reflects how emotionally healthy and safe it is for females within their family, community and society. The conflict and misunderstanding between mothers and daughters is a mirror reflection of the degree of silence around women's emotional needs and how they are treated as human beings. In families where women's voices, and especially their emotional needs are heard, treated as real and important, and where girls grow up feeling entitled to expect others to listen to them and respect their voices, mother-daughter conflict is far less. In families where women are treated as unpaid servants, where their role is to meet the needs of others, where their emotional needs are treated as irrelevant or non-existent, and abuse in any form is present, then mother-daughter conflict is experienced at much higher levels.

This is because emotionally starved mothers who have no way to voice their hunger are in danger of turning to the closest female, often their daughters, because they see in their daughters the next female who is supposed to be caring of others' needs. I see many emotionally starved mothers and daughters who turn to each other for feeding through well practised behaviours of emotional blackmail, guilt-tripping, martyrdom, fighting about anything but their emotional selves, or speaking their needs through constant illness. Some mothers treat their daughters as if they are somehow the cause of their emptiness. Others withdraw from their daughters because their daughter's freedom is too painful because it reminds them of their own suppressed dreams. These daughters end up feeling hurt and confused about how or why they have upset their mother. In the worst case, a daughter will stop claiming her own life in the hope of regaining her relationship with her mother. I see adult daughters who are struggling with their elderly mothers who have become what I call "payback" mothers. A "payback" mother is someone who believes that it is now her daughter's or daughter-in-law's turn to make up for all the sacrifice and self-neglect she has suffered.

The denial of female emotional needs is lethal for women's emotional wellbeing and the mother-daughter relationship. Our emotional needs are the bedrock of our ability to know ourselves, take care of ourselves, know what is right, set boundaries, be authentic and visible in our relationships, and importantly, protect ourselves from abusive people. At its worst, (as seen on the Oprah Show, 2005 programme), emotionally starved mothers will not recognise when their children are in danger. On that programme, three mothers whose children had been abused by the paedophiles they married were trying to explain how that had happened. They showed what happens when women's emotional needs are switched off. If we do not learn to feel what we need, it is hard to feel what our child needs.

The mother-daughter relationship holds the key to changing women's rights and experiences worldwide. As mothers learn to save themselves and reconnect with themselves, they will be saving their daughters and changing the reality their daughters and granddaughters inherit. I believe that women everywhere need to start a revolution that asks "*who is taking care of mum?*" The silence around women's emotional needs is so deeply ingrained that it requires a revolution on the same scale that got women the vote. We need a paradigm shift within the mindset of men and women everywhere that recognises that silencing women's and girls' emotional needs is the same as sentencing women and girls to lives of emotional starvation, invisibility, inequality, and being set-up for abusive relationships. We need a motto like the one I have created for *The Silent Female Scream Revolution* - "*Every female has the right to be heard, valued and respected, and to know that anything less is just not okay.*"

To start the revolution that speaks women's emotional needs,

1. Why am I doing this? Am I doing this because it is right for me or because I think I should?
2. Why do I think I should? Where did I get that message? Who told me?

3. What do I need for myself today? Don't worry if the answers do not come immediately. When our voices have been switched-off for a while, they need some time to get switched back on again.
4. How much time for myself do I have? Time at work doesn't count. Work is not the place to recharge your batteries.
5. Do I say what I need in my relationships?
6. If not, why not? Is there something within me that is stopping me from claiming and speaking my needs, or do I sense that my needs are not welcome in my relationships, or both?
7. Why am I still in relationships where my needs aren't valued?
8. Reflect on your family's history with female needs. Was there a conversation in your family that acknowledged women's needs? Did your mother and grandmother communicate their nurturing needs? If not, why not? If they did, how? What words and sentences did they use? Were they effective?

(Exercise from Rosjke Hasseldine's book *"The Silent Female Scream – Lessons in hearing, claiming and speaking our lost voices"* - *Claiming my emotional needs* chapter.)

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