

Whether you like it or not, your mum may be responsible for more than your curly hair and sweet tooth. It's time to take a look at what emotional health issues may also get passed down the family tree

WORDS Deborah Watson

# Thanks mum?

She gave you your pear-shaped figure, big feet and bright blue eyes. But apart from those unmistakable physical quirks, there's every reason to believe she might have passed down a legacy of emotional and behavioural traits too.

If you're a life-loving type with plenty of friends and a happy self-image, it's highly likely your mum is more deserving of your praise than you ever gave her credit for. But, of course, if your mother lived a lifetime of dieting, obsessing about money or waging war with her own self-esteem demons, it's likely your own mental attitude has been shaped by such issues.

Experts believe it's more than just a coincidence that so many women share the emotional make-up of their mum. They are convinced that positive maternal role models can make all the difference in how adult women go on to lead their lives.

'If our mother is someone who can connect with us, and help us believe in ourselves and our dreams, it's a wonderful thing and really shows in how we behave, love and work,' insists Rosjke Hasseldine, psychotherapist and specialist in mother-daughter relationships. 'Positive role models are like road maps that help us connect with our inner strengths and abilities.'

But negative role models can also dramatically affect our psychological make-up. When it comes to addictions,

it's widely accepted that daughters of women suffering from alcoholism, eating disorders and depressive illnesses are more likely to experience them too.

'If we, as daughters, see an addictive behaviour like alcoholism, it's then highly likely we will copy that,' says Hasseldine. 'But some go completely the other way in a bid to rebel from the mirror image of their mother.'

Hasseldine is better placed than most women to talk about the effects that our mothers have on our emotional development. Not only is she in the process

of publishing her first book, *The Silent Female Scream*, but she's also fought her own parental-passed demons. 'I know myself what it's like to have a mother who doesn't think that highly of herself and

therefore passes on negative messages in the way she behaves,' she says. 'I spent 10 years of my adult life believing that I was a bossy person if I ever asked for anything. My mother had always led me to believe that to ask for your needs to be met was in some way wrong. But when I had my own daughter I became very determined to change my behaviour so I valued myself and my child. Now I realise that I'm not a bossy person at all. I'm perfectly entitled to have my needs met.'

Aside from the potential for hardcore addictions to be passed from mother to daughter – like alcoholism and eating disorders – there are plenty of other behaviours

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## 'It was history repeating itself'

Donna Lancaster, 38, is convinced her adult experiences have been very deeply rooted in what she saw in her mother as a child. She now runs Something More, which specialises in helping women build their confidence and self-esteem.

'My mum was a victim of domestic violence, so I saw women as victims. I think I rebelled against that to become emotionally detached. All I ever saw of my mum was a woman who cried and was weak and needy, which was very sad. My answer was to be very strong and act as if I didn't need anyone, but in doing so I actually became cold, and pushed people away.

'My mum has been depressed for most of her life, and I have suffered with it too. She was desperately in love with a man who was an alcoholic. When I grew up I found myself drawn to men who had addictions or were violent like my dad. It was history repeating itself.

'Because of what I've seen and experienced in my own life, I definitely believe our mothers' emotional wellbeing has a huge impact on us as adult women.

'I've been determined as a mother not to recreate the same negative patterns with my own daughters, and am grateful that I now share a very good rapport with my two girls, which is built on mutual respect and trust.

'I also believe my experiences have made me who I am today, and that is why I've been drawn towards helping women and to setting up my own company as a means of supporting others to overcome the many issues they face.'



### REBUILD YOUR RELATIONSHIP

Tips on changing the relationship you have with your mother:

- Decide what is right for you by how it feels. If something makes you feel angry, resentful or over-exhausted, then it isn't right for you.
- Build up your confidence by working on believing in your own worth and not needing your mother's or anyone else's approval to feel good about yourself.
- Communicate! Talk to your mum if you're unhappy about your relationship with her and want to change things.
- In conversations with your mother, try to own what you are expressing by saying, 'I feel...' or 'I need...', which will reduce the risk of her feeling blamed.
- If your mum doesn't respond or still chooses to blame you for what you are saying, understand that her reaction is not your fault and comes from her inability to change. »







that seem to travel through the generations. Attitudes towards emotional vulnerability, marriage, money, work and even sex can all have a great bearing on the woman we turn out to be.

Christine Whiting, who runs life coaching business Life Resolutions, says, 'So many of my clients have issues that relate to their mother's behaviour. There are two main problems I see on a regular basis. The first is where women are either very fortunate and have had very positive role models in their mothers, or where they have grown up in a household in which their mother has been particularly passive. These daughters then live their adult life in a driven, workaholic way, almost determined to prove themselves far stronger and more forceful than the women they grew up with.'

**THE FIRST THING WE NEED TO LEARN IS THAT WE CAN'T ACTUALLY CHANGE THE WOMAN OUR MOTHER IS**

'The other problem I commonly encounter, is with women who have difficulties forming and maintaining strong emotional relationships with men. Again, that may have been something they've mirrored from their mother's poor relationship history, or that they have developed because they never had the benefit of feeling fully loved by their mother. The result is a struggle with either giving or receiving affection.'

## BECOMING A MOTHER

'One of the saddest consequences of having such inherited traits is that some women then worry about their own ability to mother,' says Whiting. 'It takes so much effort and understanding for an adult woman to break cycles and behaviours that have somehow dominated her thinking since childhood.'

'I know many women who are genuinely scared to be a mum because they don't want to inflict the hurt or insecurities on their own child that they feel their mother passed on to them.'

The chances of inheriting your mother's emotional legacy have little to do with the words she used, but more to do with her behaviour. For example, she may not have *told* you to go on a diet, look after your money or throw yourself into a career, but her actions and attitude appear to sow the seed of specific behavioural patterns in your head.

'Issues about money are a classic example,' says Hasseldine. 'For the first time, we're only now in a generation where the idea of females working in good jobs is the norm. Before, our mothers may have had a sense of fear about money because they weren't made to feel as though they were in control of it. As a result, I now see women with good incomes who have inherited their mother's fear about money and thus feel guilty or uncertain about dealing with it.'

'One common response is that they may swing from hoarding money to having a huge spending spree. Perhaps they don't expect to manage money, and have no positive female role model to mirror because the family purse was effectively controlled by their father.'



## 'I feel very grateful'

Jo Reeder, 35, believes she has very positively benefited

from the emotional legacy passed down through her mother.

'I feel very grateful for the way in which my mother's behaviour and wellbeing have affected me, but I wonder how she managed to provide such a positive role model.'

'Her mother had walked out on her when she was just two years old, leaving her to be brought up entirely by her father. Because he was a businessman, mum was in boarding school for a lot of the time and had no real female presence in her life to learn from. I'm sure that's part of the reason

## TAKING CHARGE

Of course, many mums have a very positive influence on their children, but if there are some aspects of her personality that you would rather not inherit, what can you do to stop turning into the physical and psychological mirror image of your mum? Is it possible to maintain a perfect mother-daughter relationship, while letting her know we're not happy with the emotional instruction manual we've inherited? 'It is possible to have a good relationship with our mother as an adult, even if we haven't started out particularly well,' says Hasseldine. 'The first thing we need to learn is that we can't actually change the woman our mother is. We have to accept her faults and then vow to do a good job as a mother when it's our turn.'

'Some mothers and daughters agree to have joint sessions and are prepared to explore their issues together. Working with your mother or daughter means you are both more likely to reach a happy conclusion.'

Of course, your emotional heritage may not all be down to your mother. 'It's also worth remembering that we shouldn't lay all the blame at our mother's feet. It's likely that some emotional heirlooms have come from our father, grandmothers or even our great-grandmothers,' says Hasseldine. 'But whatever your mum is like, the secret is being able to recognise the positive bits about her that you do want to mimic, and learning to ditch the ones that are likely to be destructive,' she insists. 'If you can do that without crushing her feelings or destroying your relationship, you've got a great deal to be grateful for.'

To contact Rosjke Hasseldine, visit the Counselling for Women website [www.counsellingforwomen.com](http://www.counsellingforwomen.com).

For self-esteem courses through Something More, email [info@somethingmore.wanadoo.co.uk](mailto:info@somethingmore.wanadoo.co.uk).

that she went out of her way to be there for my sister and me during our childhood. She didn't go to work until I was eight – and even then she was always there to pick us up from school.

'My mum seemed to always be seeking the approval of her father, probably as a result of not having a second parent there for her, and I find I'm very much the same. I've always tried to achieve and to please my parents.'

'As a mother myself now, I think my mum did an amazing job of raising my sister and me so well. I'm always asking her for advice and am grateful that I seem to have inherited the same fair and open-minded attitude that she's got about life.'