

“ALL THINGS MATERNAL” – A THERAPIST’S PERSPECTIVE

By Deena Solwren, LCSW

Q: Ever since having children, my relationship with my mother has deteriorated. What used to be mild irritants are now completely intolerable. I want my children to have a relationship with their grandmother, but I don’t particularly want to work on our relationship. I don’t believe she can really change. How can I make this situation manageable?

Becoming a parent represents a major life transition. We change in significant and subtle ways when we assume this new role and the responsibilities it demands. Quickly, we feel older and wiser. We’re much busier. We often find ourselves striving to remain patient with our children, but then discover we have less patience with other people and things that seem like a waste of our precious time. Whether it’s from becoming a parent or simply getting older, there comes a time in most people’s lives when we are less willing to put up with trying behaviors from people we think should know better. It’s one thing for a child to be needy, messy and make mistakes. It’s something entirely different for an adult to exhibit similar behaviors.

Raising children touches the deepest reaches of our subconscious and brings forth our preverbal memories. When we experience our aging parents as continually responding to us in similar ways they did throughout our lives, it may renew the unfulfilled longings and unresolved frustrations of our early years. Our efforts to be the best parents that we can be juxtaposed against the lingering pain of our formative years may become virtually intolerable.

Not only do you change when becoming a parent, but your mother changes, too. She’s now a grandmother. In our society, youth and productivity are valued. Too often, the elderly, especially women, are discounted and displaced to the outskirts of power and authority. How she responds to this shift will be impacted by how she lived her earlier life. Her role also changes in connection to you. It may be painful for her to recognize your full independence and respect your boundaries. It may be difficult for both of you to transition to a more mutual relationship now that you are an independent adult and may not need her as you once did. As we age, people get increasingly set in their ways. Just as you may find yourself less tolerating of what you see as others’ shortcomings and traits you experience as irritants, your mother, likely will be even more set in her ways, too. Character traits come into sharper relief. Yet, this is not to say that people at any age can’t or don’t change. Every life transition offers its own challenges and the opportunity to grow.

Our relationship with our mother is heavily laden with emotion – whether good or bad, but rarely indifferent. Often there’s competition and envy between mother and daughter which may be more prominent for either the mother or for the daughter. She is our first role model. Separating can be troublesome. We often think of teenagers rebelling from their parents in order to separate. But this model tends to be based more on male rather than female normative experiences. Remaining connected in an honest, supportive way in order to develop a mutual relationship takes energy, work, desire, and willingness from both parties’. Demanding, directly or indirectly, that her mother change can be threatening – just as a mother requiring her daughter be a certain way is restricting. In both cases, neither mother nor adult daughter is able to fully accept the other as a unique and separate individual each with her own strengths and challenges. The ability to establish a mutual relationship is limited when a lack of differentiation remains.

Ideally, the best thing is to try and talk through your differences – so you can create an open, honest and mutually supportive relationship. But, you say you're not willing to work on the relationship with your mother. Maybe you feel you've already tried, were unsuccessful and have given up. What do you have to lose by trying again? If things are already uncomfortable, maybe the situation can actually improve. Could it be worse? Sometimes, things have to get worse before they can get better. If she acknowledges that there is a problem and she's willing to work on it – the relationship will not merely survive but be stronger for going through the hard work together. By not trying, you don't give yourself or her the chance to have the loving relationship you both desire. Whether in process together or individually, it's important to come to peace within yourself. Ultimately, you have to mourn what you didn't receive as a child and accept what you did. Part of growing up, becoming mature, is to accept ones parents' and one's own limitations and fallibility – our foibles and thus, ultimately, our humanity. It is helpful to do this work in the boundaries of a warm, safe, supportive therapeutic relationship. There's always hope for positive growth as long as you are willing to maintain connection.

“All Things Maternal” is a trademark of Deena Solwren's. Deena is an experienced licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) and a mom who's been there. She has a private psychotherapy practice with offices in Rockridge and Pinole. She works with individuals and couples regarding infertility, pregnancy, post-partum adjustment, attachment parenting, changing roles & changing self image, balancing work & family life, and mother/daughter relationships. She is currently accepting new clients and may be reached at **(510)364-2864**.