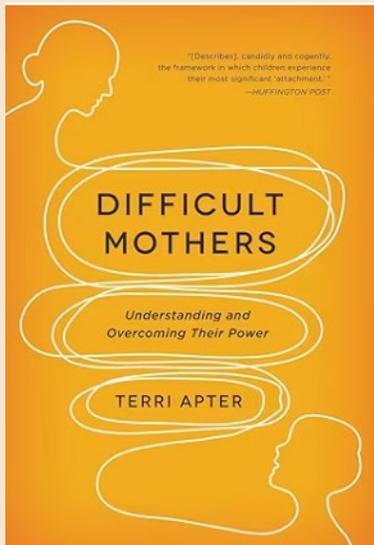




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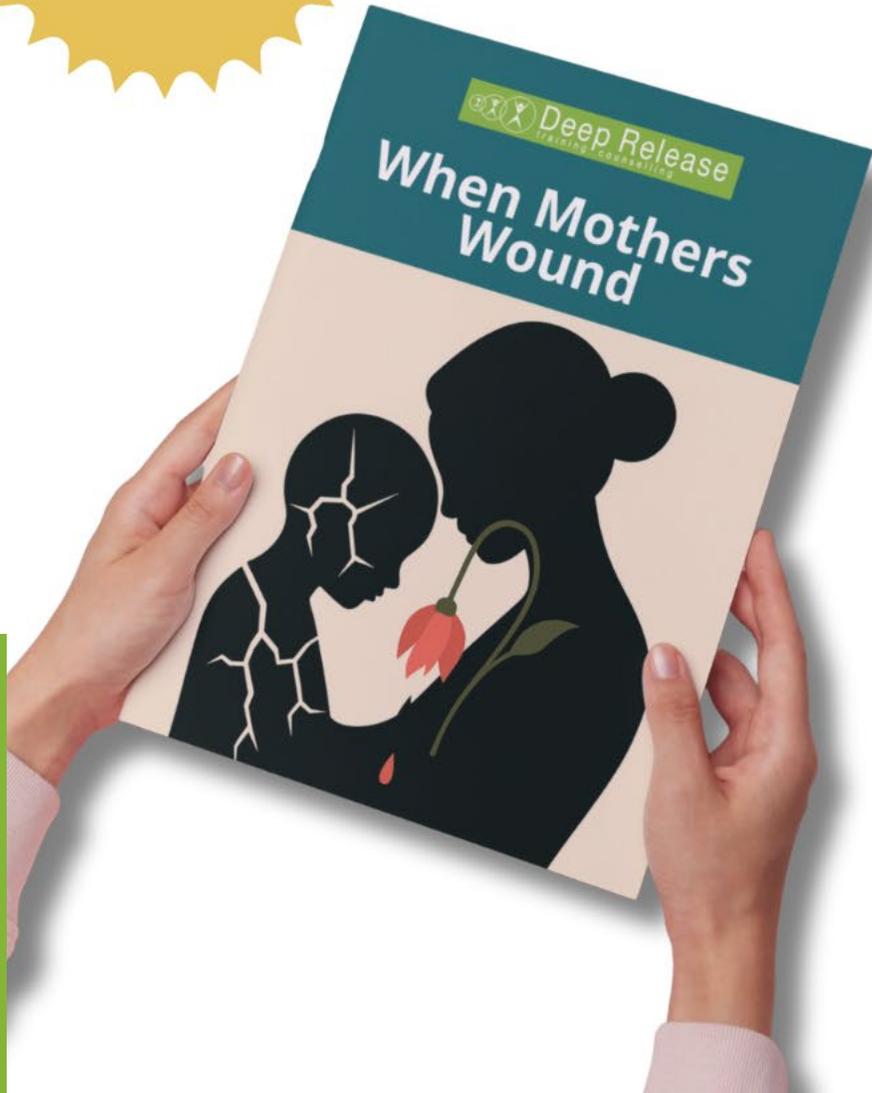
When Mothers Wound

With thanks to
Terri Apter



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When Mothers Wound



Therapeutic touchpoint:

As counsellors, it can be valuable to pause and reflect on our own experience of being mothered in light of the five patterns described by Terri Apter: angry, controlling, narcissistic, envious, and emotionally unavailable.

We might ask ourselves:

- How did these patterns show up, if at all, in my own experience of being mothered?
- Do I notice myself replaying or reacting to similar dynamics in my current relationships with clients, partners, friends, or colleagues?
- Do any of these behaviours appear in my own parenting or caregiving, perhaps without intention?

Noticing these threads can offer gentle clues to where healing is still unfolding. Awareness opens the possibility of change, helping us move from unconscious repetition toward more conscious, compassionate ways of relating, both personally and professionally.

Across these patterns of difficult mothering, one truth runs through them all: every child adapts. Each defence, each coping strategy, once made perfect sense in the world that child inhabited. What we come to call "issues" in adulthood were, at first, forms of survival, ways of maintaining connection when connection was fragile or unsafe.

Terri Apter writes candidly about her own challenging relationship with her mother, someone she describes as sharp, critical, and hard to please. Growing up with that kind of scrutiny left her with low self-esteem, a heightened sensitivity to criticism, and a tendency to appease others to keep the peace. Yet Apter reflects that her relationship with her own children has been very different. She believes that developing insight - simply recognising and naming the patterns in your relationship with our mother - can itself begin to break the cycle. Awareness, she suggests, can make us more responsive, more attuned, and ultimately more loving in our relationships.

Relational Beginnings

The "Good-Enough" Mother
Donald Winnicott (1953, 1965) offered hope and realism with his idea of the good-enough mother - not perfect, but responsive, adaptive, and willing to repair when things go wrong. This consistent, loving presence allows a child to learn that relationships can survive mistakes. In this way, love endures through imperfection.

When a baby cries, their whole body speaks distress. A good-enough mother notices, mirrors that emotion in her face and tone, and helps the child begin to make sense of what's happening inside. Fonagy and Target (2003) called this marked mirroring: the way a caregiver's gentle exaggeration helps the baby feel known. Over time, that mirroring becomes the seed of emotional understanding - my feelings make sense, and I can manage them.



The Dance of Mutual Attunement
Daniel Stern (1985) described the mother-infant relationship as a "dance of mutual attunement." Through this wordless dance, both come to know themselves. Stern wrote that "a passionate and absorbing bond with the primary caregivers, who is almost always the mother, is the infant's first experience of loving and of being on person of a loving pair." From this dance, sense of self begins to form.

The Neurobiology of Connection
Attachment is not just a feeling - it's biology in action. Clinicians and theorists including Allan Schore, Daniel Siegel and Sue Gerhardt have shown that emotional regulation is one of the main developmental tasks of life. Through the daily rhythm of soothing, feeding, and eye contact, a brain learns to calm down, to wait, and to trust that help will come.

Difficult Mothers

As adults, these clients often appear capable and composed yet describe an inner emptiness or disconnection they can't explain. They may long for closeness while simultaneously fearing it, expecting that others will turn away when they need invisibility, the echo of waiting for a mother who never truly arrived.

Healing from Enmeshment

Becky reflects on what it means to grow up with a mother who could not meet her emotional needs



My mum was mostly emotionally unavailable when I was growing up; in fact I often felt like her counsellor. At the time, I didn't mind. In fact, I almost felt proud of the role, was far too heavy a burden for her to protect her from my dad's emotional and mental abuse. It was important and belonging. I didn't realise that what I thought was love was actually emotional survival.

As I grew older, that dynamic deepened. I became her confidante, her listener, her emotional caretaker. I loathed my dad for his volcanic temper and the way his rages fractured our family. My mum couldn't protect my sisters or me from my dad's shaming words or anger. I see now that she couldn't defend us because she couldn't defend herself.

Much of my childhood and adolescence was spent in depression and I attribute this to being caught in an unbearable drama triangle with my parents - rescuer to my mum, in and I believe has affected my ability to feel wanted, included and loved for a lot of my life. I sometimes still live with a nagging sense that I don't belong and people either don't like me or are angry with me.

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Also available...

Understanding Loss & Grief



Attachment & Shame





Why are mothers so important?

In most cases, it is the mother who is the key Attachment figure for the child.

She carries you in her womb for 9 months, sustaining your life, providing nourishment, and finally bringing you into the world.

Her arms of love hold you, her voice speaks warmth and tenderness, a way of being that continues through childhood, teenage and adulthood. She carries the message:

I love you. You are safe.

Sometimes...

Why are mothers so important?

Marked Mirroring

- When a baby is distressed, their entire body is overwhelmed
- The good-enough mother responds with concern, mirroring the baby's facial expression and exaggerating it so the baby can see what she is seeing, and how she is responding
- And as she senses the baby's mental state, she also **transforms** it, by soothing, comforting and attending to her child's needs



As mother and baby interact, their mutual focus is so intricately coordinated that it has been described as an elaborate flowing dance, wherein the participating partners get to know one another and get to know themselves through one another.

Human psychology, as we know it, begins in this primary relationship.

A passionate and absorbing bond with the primary caregiver, who is almost always the mother, is the infant's first experience of loving, and of being one person of a loving pair.

Daniel Stern



Affect Regulation

- The child gradually learns that their internal world can be understood by others who will help them regulate feelings of fear, pain, hunger and other distress
- They are not 'difficult', 'a nuisance', 'bad', 'needy' ...
- **A hallmark of secure Attachment: people are there to help you when you need help. This is how life is meant to work.**
- *Affect Regulation is the primary developmental task of the first two years of life*
- Dads and other key Attachment figures can do it too!



<https://www.mindmoves.co.za/2019/06/07/mirror-neurons-and-baby-development/>

Developmental Issues

Mother-baby communications enable neural networks to develop, which structure the child's emotional intelligence



Positive eye contact from parent to infant (through dilated eyes) promotes positive arousal and becomes **the biggest catalyst in the growth of the emotionally healthy brain.**



Babies can tell the difference between happiness, sadness and anger – combination of face and tone of voice



Research has shown even when they are asleep, babies register anger as well as more neutral tones of voice



The Still Face Experiment



Edward Tronick
American psychologist

<https://youtu.be/f1Jw0-LExyc>

The Alien Self

- When a parent is persistently frightened or angered by a baby's distress, they don't mirror the baby's feelings, but express their own
- This is what the baby sees in the mother's face
- This is what the baby takes into themselves (*"This is what she saw in me... this is who I am..."*)
- But it is not who they are: the feelings belong to the mother





*I'm
overwhelming...*

*I'm ugly and
hateful...*

*I make her
sad...*

*I make her
angry...*

Hold me...

Accept me...

Love me...



**Be there
for me...**

Touch me...

Fill me...

I'll be ok if...

Hold me...

Accept me...

Love me...

Be there
for me...

Fill me...

Touch me...

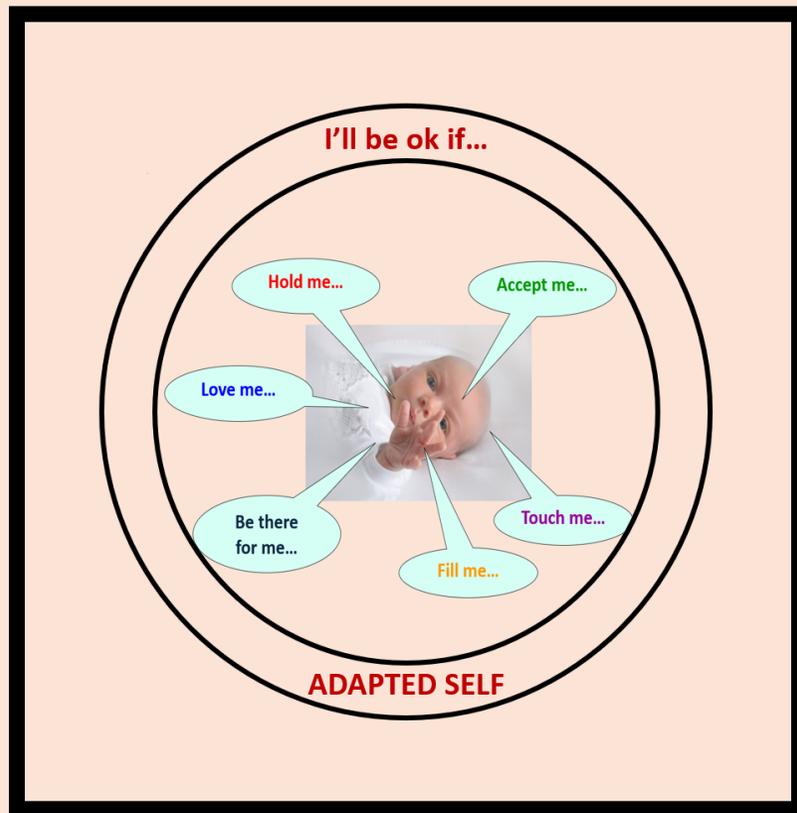
ADAPTED SELF



**GO
AWAY**

Defences

**I'M
FINE**



**LEAVE
ME ALONE**

Defences

**I DON'T
NEED
YOU**

She carries us in her womb We carry her in our head



We seldom stop caring about what our mother thinks of us, and we yearn for her love

Our sense of self is developed in relationship with our mother – *so it's easier to understand, when she is difficult, we feel we are losing our mind...*

(Terri Apter)



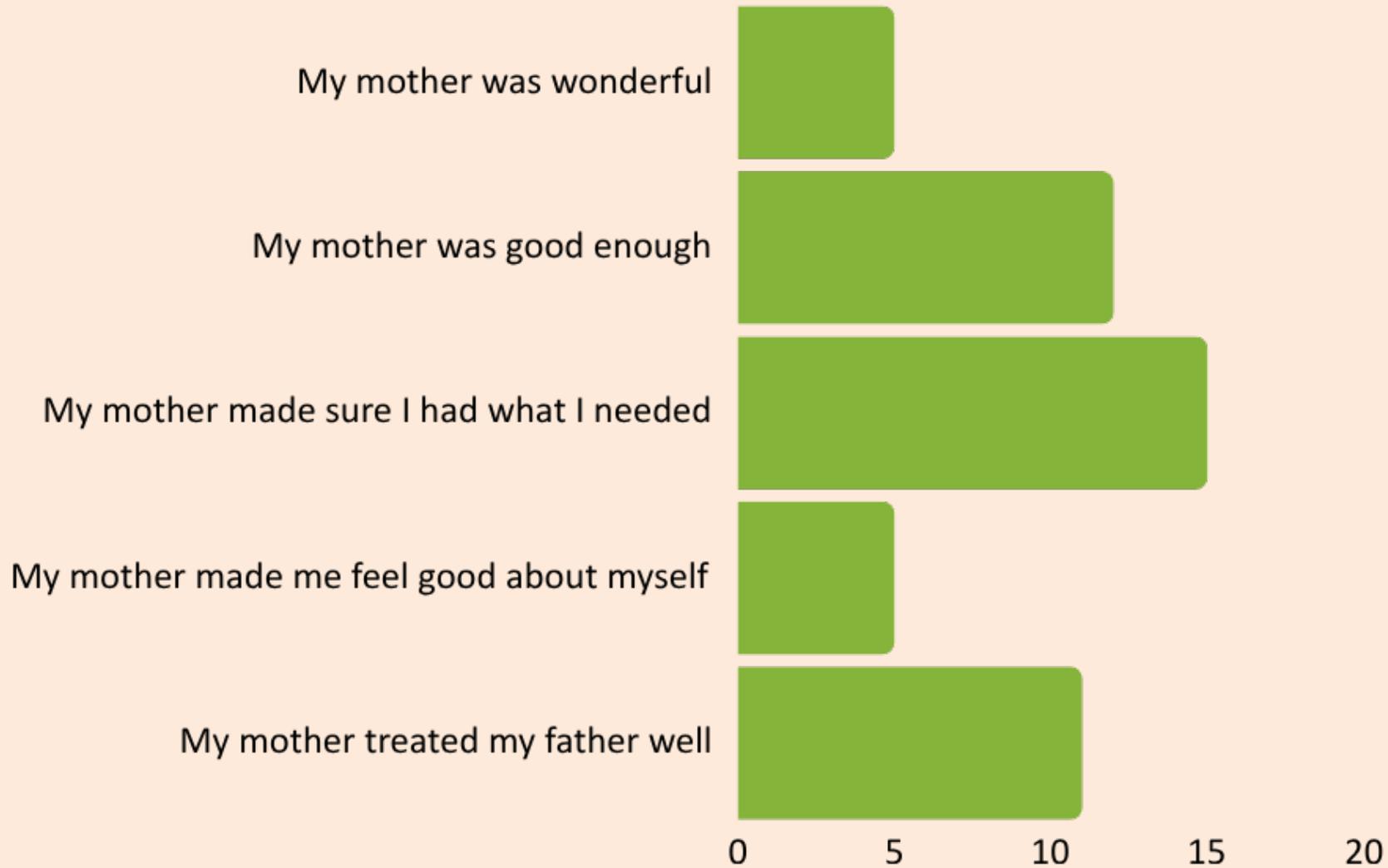
Ideas to share in Buddy Groups

- How has the teaching affected you as you think of your own childhood?
- Share what feels safe
- Questions and comments to Katy Bodman in Chat, please

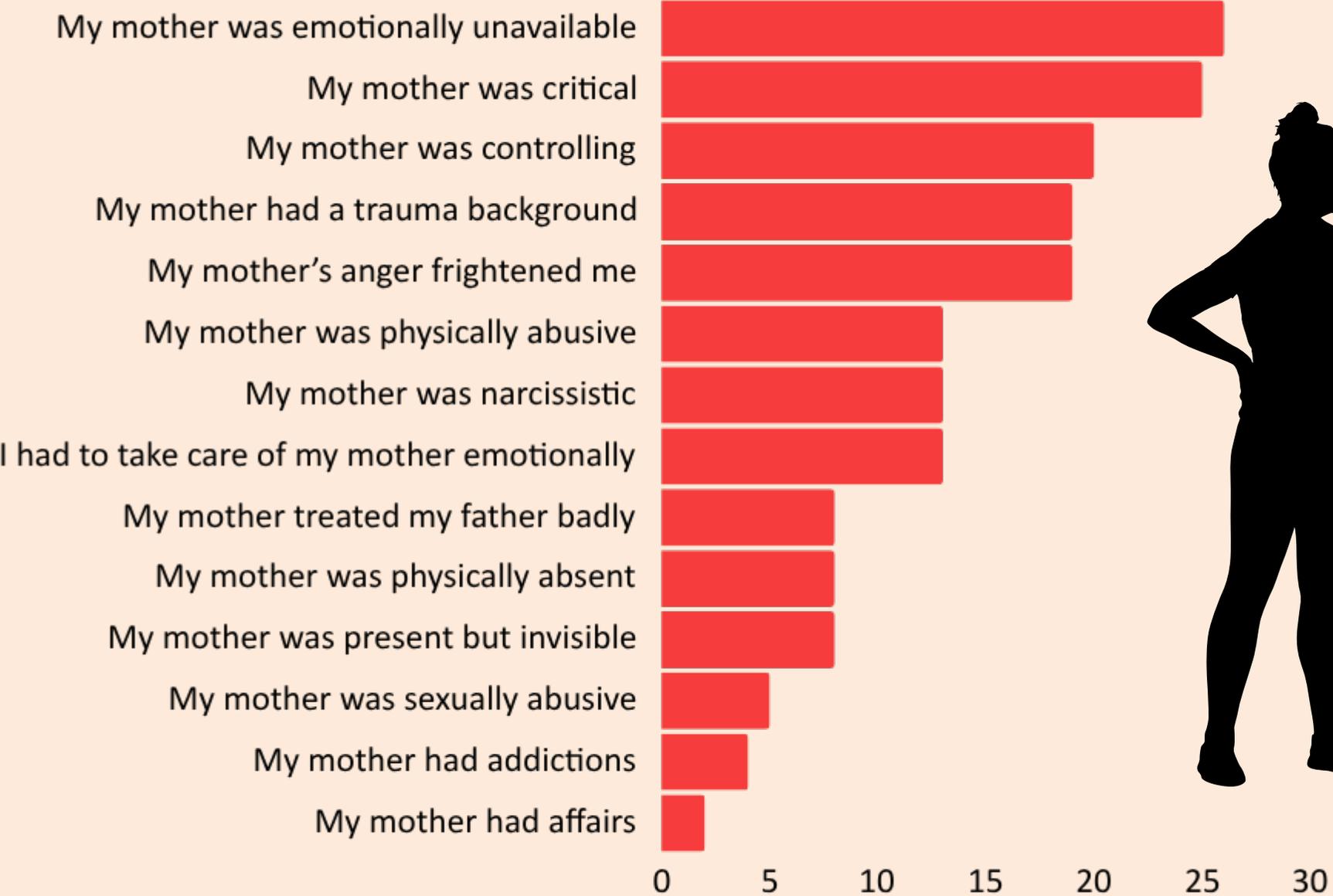
15 minutes



My mother when I was growing up (38 counsellors surveyed by Deep Release, Oct 2025)



My mother when I was growing up survey (cont)



I felt like I was unloved, never good enough.

Learnt to be self-sufficient at too young an age.

It gave me shame. Mum wanted a boy...

Always feeling that I was a problem, a nuisance.

No guidance or encouragement.

I don't recall her showing me love through hugs or words...

I became the compliant child...

Survey: How did your relationship with your mother affect you in childhood?

She ignored my father's emotional abuse...

I felt scared as she didn't protect me...

I learned my mum's angry outbursts resulted in fear...

I had no sense of self...

I constantly felt naughty/bad/sinful.

Shy, anxious, lacked self-worth...

I was the adaptive child, scapegoat.



I tried hard to please her and make her happy by doing what she wanted me to.

I felt very alone.

I lacked confidence, feared teachers, didn't ask for help...

Left to own devices unless she was jealous, then she curtailed anything positive.

Teenage years difficult - alone, blamed, mocked.

I was the mother and she was the child.

I lied a lot, was secretive, wanting to be my own person.

Inside I felt hate, but sought her love... mental breakdown at 17.

Survey: How did your relationship with your mother affect you in your teens?

I supported her emotionally; I was her confidant.



I continued being the good girl... entered a coercive relationship at 17.

I became deceitful to conceal things she'd disapprove of.

Rebelled, low confidence, self harm, suicidal ideation.

Played hockey and joined youth groups to escape home.

I was timid - afraid of failure.

She was critical about my weight and confidence.

Continued to try to please her until therapy at 37... she couldn't take it and estranged for 18 months.

It took long to accept she wouldn't defend us; I visit out of duty.

Isolation and being hated until I chose estrangement.

I got satisfaction being out of her control... married my 'Mum'.

I became a missing person for 15 years.

Still felt controlled; feared her reactions even as an adult.

I often feel like a disappointment making my own choices.

Survey: How did your relationship with your mother affect you in adulthood?

Difficult relationship-she cancelled my wedding and hid my dad's death.



I don't have a relationship with my mum-just obligation and small talk.

Did not know my voice or choices; accepted abusive behaviour.

People pleasing led to unhealthy relationships and DV.

I regularly feel not good enough; this affected my marriage.

Missed her hugely-became a people pleaser, scared of loss.

I still hid things from her to 'protect' her.

Survey results: What Helped in Therapy

- **Being deeply heard and believed** - space to speak without judgement, permission for anger and grief.
- **Understanding without excusing** - holding both truths: 'She was damaged, and she also damaged me.' Compassion without minimising harm.
- **Consistency & trust** - safe, consistent therapeutic relationship, therapist who stays steady and unafraid.
- **Inner child & Attachment work** - reconnecting with younger self; naming unmet needs; developing a nurturing inner voice.
- **Creative expression** - journaling, art, and unsent letters giving shape to complex feelings.
- **Community & shared experience** - group work or sharing with other, reducing isolation and offering belonging.



Survey Results: What Didn't Help in Therapy

- **Therapist over-involvement** - over-sharing, 'shocked' response, rescuing or filling silences left clients feeling unseen.
- **Minimisation or moralising** - comments like 'It was a different time' or 'But she's your mum' invalidated pain.
- **Counsellor's own agenda** - Attempts to explain, fix, or reframe before feelings are fully felt.
- **Unsafe relationship** - Inconsistency, emotional distance, or lack of attunement.
- **Over-identifying with the mother** or taking sides.
- **Losing curiosity** - assuming they know what the client means or needs.
- **Premature forgiveness** - urging peace before acknowledging pain.



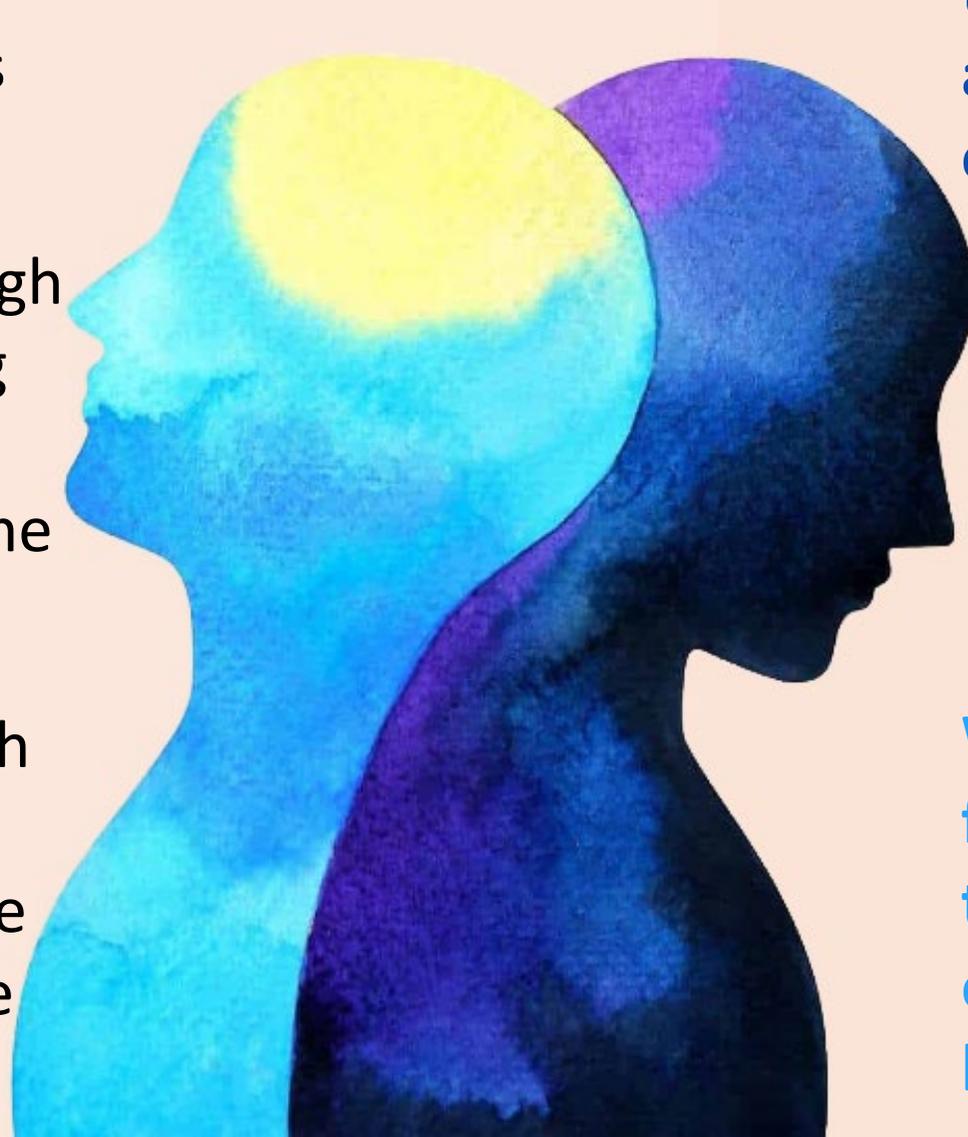
TAKE A BREAK



5:00

Maternal Transference in the Counselling Room

- I am too much for you
- I am overwhelming
- You didn't sign up for this
- I am too needy
- I'm not moving fast enough
- You'll say I'm not working hard enough
- You will get fed up with me
- You will refer me on
- You will be frustrated with me
- You will be irritated by me
- You will be angry with me
- You will abandon me



We are both restructuring the Attachment system and changing the patterns of a lifetime in our clients

What does it mean – for them and us – for them to trust and lean on us, and grow and heal?

**Transference in the Counselling Room
can be both NEGATIVE and POSITIVE!**



**Go away – don't leave me
I can't live without you
Stay with me - I hate you
I can't stop thinking about you**

**Hold me close - I need you
But don't you dare come near me
Don't care for me – I'm fine alone
Why does no one hear me?**

**I'll be good, I really will
If only you will stay
But deep inside, I know for sure
One day you'll go away**



Emotionally Neglectful Mothers

‘Being there’ emotionally is one of the most important things a mother can do.

This includes being:

- accessible
- interested
- empathic
- moved
- able to focus on us and what we need in the moment
- supportive



Core Needs Cards

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pact-resources-online.co.uk

Emotionally Neglectful Mothers

Our adult behaviour can give signs and symptoms that our early needs weren't met.

For example:

- **We find it difficult to explain, experience or regulate our emotions;** we never learnt how to use them and may feel out of control.
- **We are people-pleasers;** we can only relax when we've read the room and made sure everyone is happy. We don't check in with ourselves – what are we feeling?
- **We can feel defensive when questioned;** *I must be doing something wrong, I need to justify what I'm doing.* Triggers the fight/flight response.
- **We feel shame after even the smallest mistake;** we must be perfect.

Kati Morton: 9 signs you experienced Childhood Emotional Neglect

youtu.be/_A62I3kFZnM?si=cyl8zm0ehQKSCzaJ

Emotionally Neglectful Mothers

- **We find it difficult to ask for help;** my needs will overwhelm others, I'm too much. Anything is "too much".
 - **We find it hard to tell the truth re how we feel.**
 - **We withdraw, isolating ourselves** from close relationships in case they want to know 'how we are'.
- We find it hard to make decisions** in case we get it wrong or upset someone; we can feel frozen.



Kati Morton: 9 signs you experienced Childhood Emotional Neglect
youtu.be/_A62I3kFZnM?si=cyl8zm0ehQKSCzaJ

Self Abandonment

**Always trying
to make other
people happy**

**Agreeing with
things I don't
really agree
with**

**Shaming
myself for
making a
mistake**

**Being overly
apologetic**

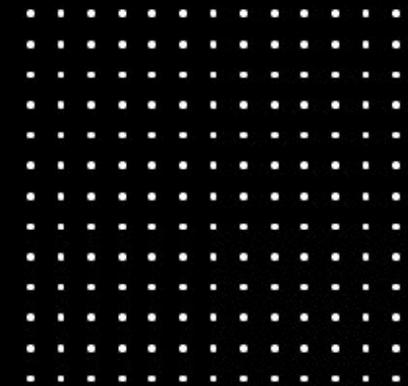
**Doing things
I'm not really
ok with**

**Saying yes
when I want
to say no**

**Letting
people
dishonour my
boundaries**

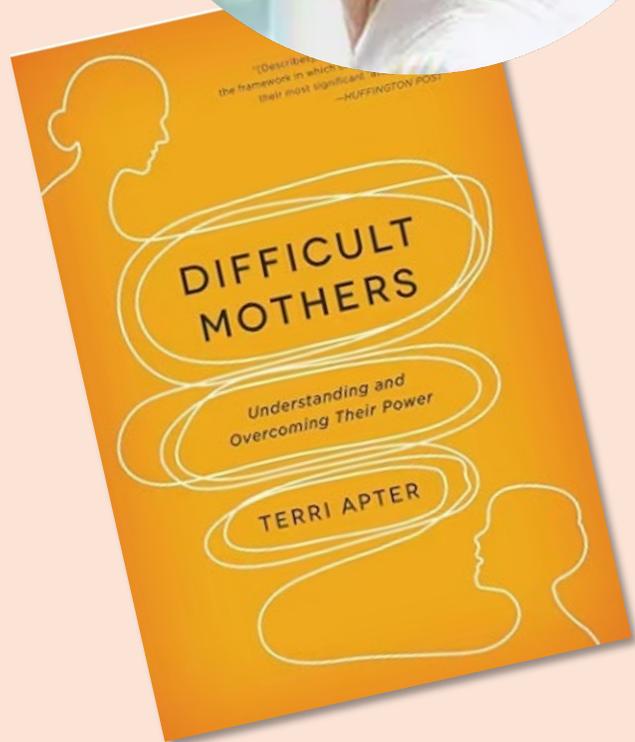
**Not acting
according to
my values**

Sue's Story





- Psychologist and author Terri Apter had a difficult relationship with her own mother, who was cutting and critical and hard to please.
- She has struggled with low self-esteem, a sensitivity to criticism, and a feeling that it is her responsibility to placate others.
- However, she describes her relationship with her own children as warm and strong. She believes that simply gaining the insight to recognise what your mother is truly like is often enough to break the cycle - and that this awareness can help us become especially responsive and loving parents.



Angry Mothers



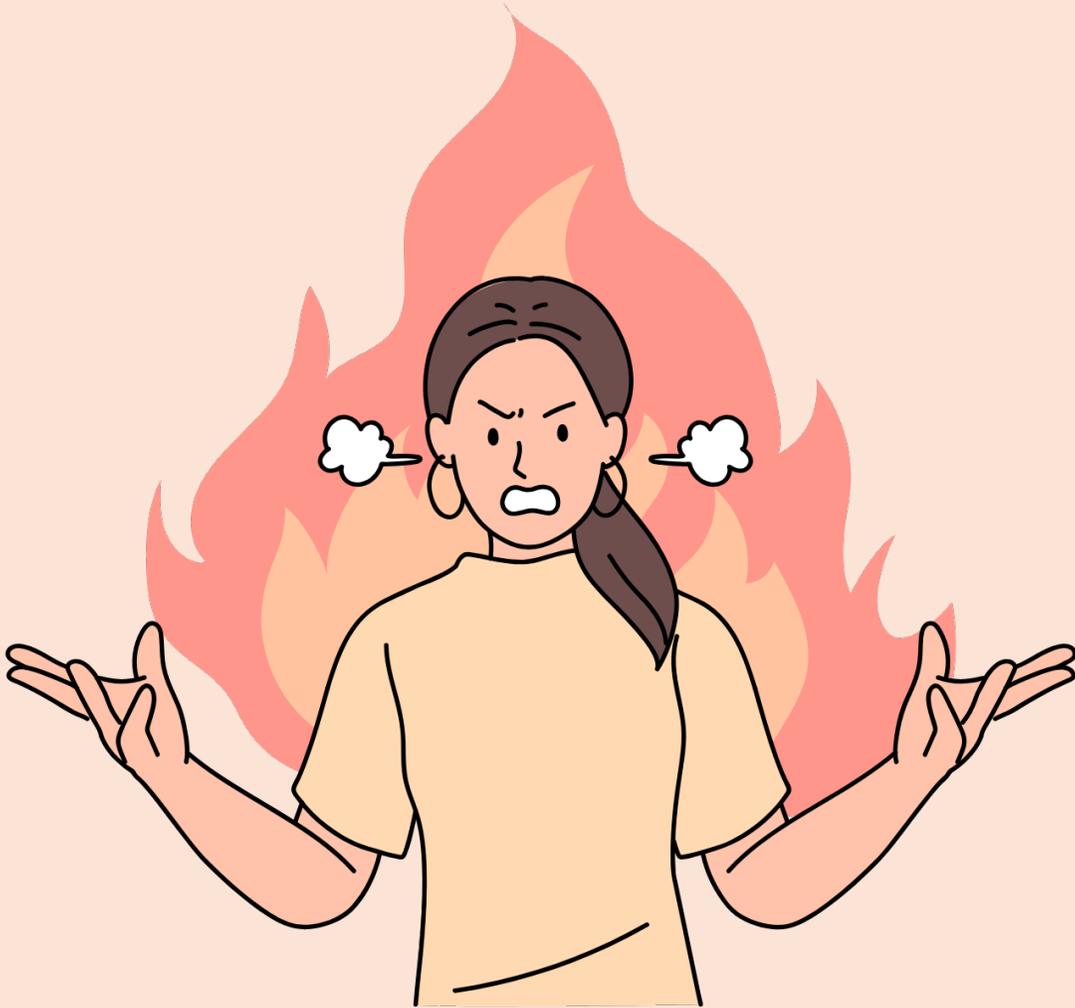
- 1) Occasional outbursts are normal and ok, if repaired
- 2) Where the anger is repeated, sustained and unpredictable, this generates a stress-filled environment, leaving the child in a state of constant low-level anxiety, long into adulthood

Angry Mothers



- 3) Volatile, unpredictable anger is very stressful for the developing brain
 - a. it slows the development of neuropathways for emotional regulation
 - b. it makes the brain less plastic
 - c. it generates a deep primitive panic in the face of a mother's anger
 - d. it evokes the memory of not being able to process it
 - e. IT IS FELT AS ABANDONMENT**

Angry Mothers



The longer-term effect on us

We may

- appease
- resist
- replicate the anger

Points to Ponder

Are we still inhabiting our childhood response?

Are we still spending more time trying to control her anger, rather than regulating our own responses?

Ideas to share in Buddy Groups

- How do you relate to Emotionally Neglectful or Angry Mothering?
- How did you relate to Sue's story?
- Questions and comments to Katy Bodman in Chat, please

15 minutes



TAKE A BREAK

5:00





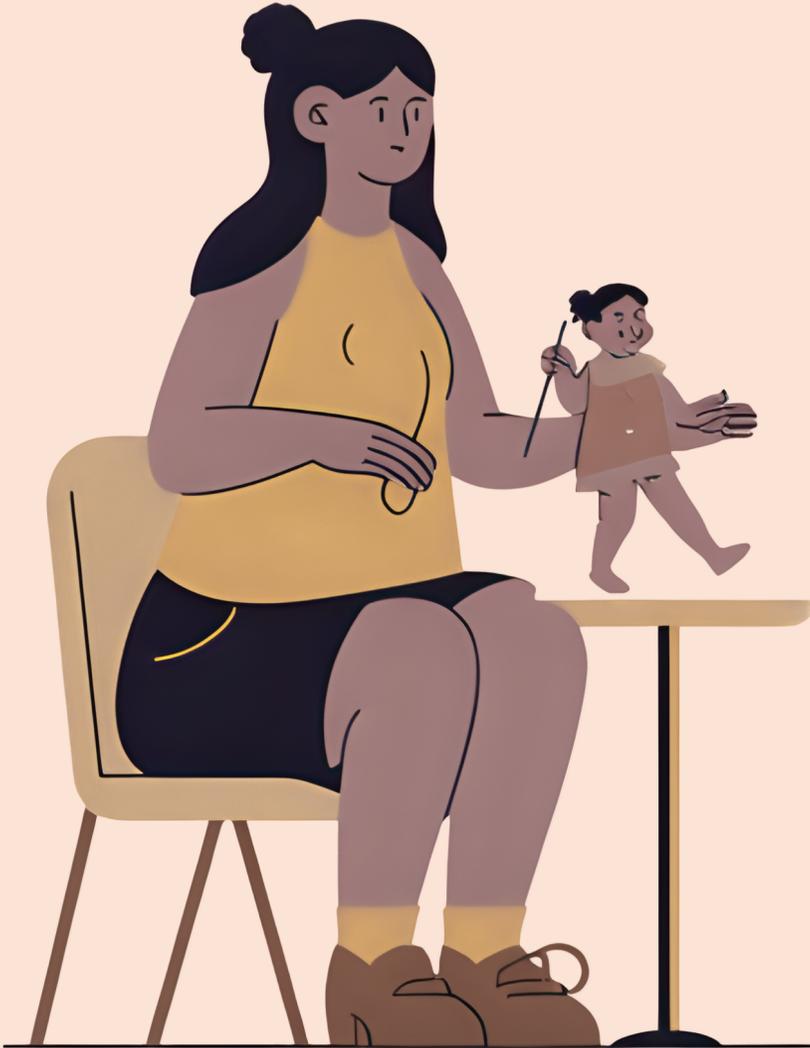
Questions
Comments
Discussion

Mother Knows Best



<https://youtu.be/-7jWt3JvJto?si=aFEAYBtlrpdfFr7R>

Controlling Mothers



1. All children need parents to exert appropriate control, structure and good boundaries
2. Over-control rejects the child's natural impulses and communicates a message that the child cannot trust themselves
3. The child's preferences, thoughts and wishes are deemed to be
 - wilful
 - bad
 - defective
 - dangerous or even
 - evil

Controlling Mothers

Effect on us

We may

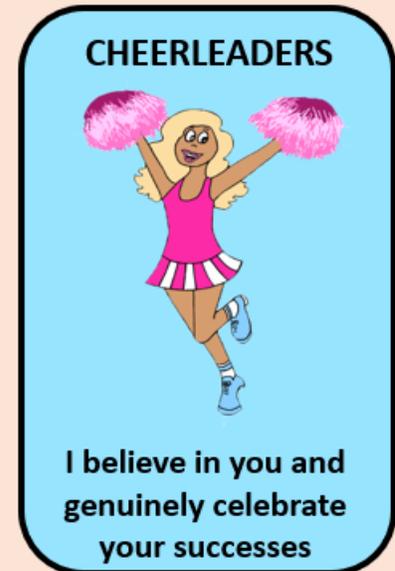
- internalise the feeling that we really don't know what's best for us
- struggle to make decisions
- fear 'getting it wrong'
- fear the judgement of others
- 'hear' a voice giving dire warnings



Controlling Mothers

Suggestions

- Identify how the maternal relationship was difficult and its effects on us
- Develop self-reflection and expression – what *you* think and want? (Locus of Evaluation)
- Find relationships where people listen to us



Narcissistic Mothers

- Love Bombing
- Narcissistic Supply
- Gaslighting
- Isolating



Narcissistic Mothers



**Look how my
daughter
adores me!**

I hate you

1. There can be many narcissistic process and traits in mothers
2. A young child is keen to reflect the mother and win her approval
3. Confusing message: *You must make me look good, but not outshine me*
4. A teenager may be more willing to take her on, being nearer her size
5. The mother can see this as a betrayal when the teen challenges her

Envious Mothers



1. Betrays the most basic parent-child contract – *I will take pleasure in seeing you thrive*
2. A child's delight, achievement and happiness become bad things - and that is confusing to a child
3. Dormant envy can be activated at certain times in the relationship – for example, is my adolescent with their new skills and knowledge going to find me irrelevant?

Envious Mothers



4. Parent usually disguises it with
 - a) denigration
 - b) debt collection (after all I've done for you)
 - c) coldness
 - d) medical emergencies, even suicide attempts
 - e) "you think too much of yourself"
 - f) "your hopes are about to be dashed"
 - g) "If you laugh too much today, you'll be crying tomorrow"

Envious Mothers



The Effect on us

We may

- find it hard to leave her
- blame ourselves for her dissatisfaction
- charms others to make ourselves acceptable
- encourage others' success while avoiding the limelight ourselves
- be a compulsive achiever but never feel satisfied

Becky's Story

I was my mum's counsellor growing up.

I didn't mind at the time, even relished the role of 'protecting' her from my emotionally and mentally abusive dad, even though it was heavy on my shoulders and inappropriate for a child.



My role as confidante continued into my teenage years and I came to loathe my dad and how he damaged our family with his volcanic outbursts, feeling exceptionally sorry for my mum, his victim.

It was years before I was able to realise the emotional support only flowed from me to her. She was largely unavailable to me and always had been. She didn't ever protect my sisters and me from my dad's rage and shaming words.

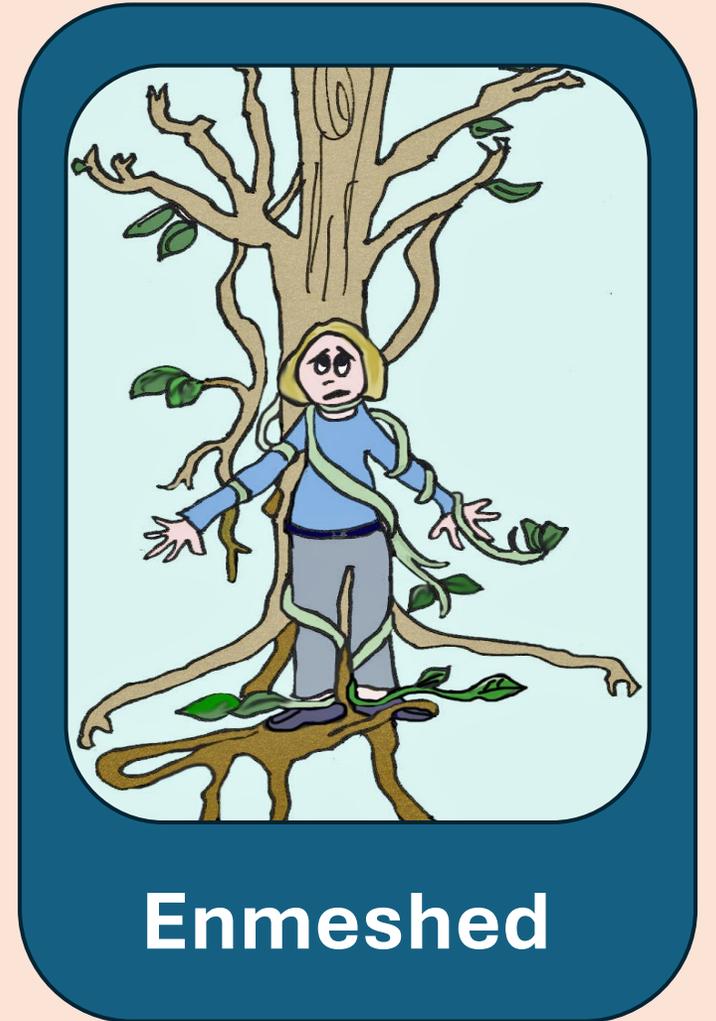
I guess she couldn't defend herself and therefore couldn't help us either.



I was depressed for a lot of my childhood and teenage years, even attempting to take my own life at one point. It was a revelation to hear about the defence of 'retroreflection' talked about in Gestalt therapy (the concept of turning pain back in on ourselves). That helped me to understand self-harm I had used in adolescence to cope with my raging inner world.

I started to realise how enmeshed my Mum and I were.

- She would tell me how upset she would be if we ever moved away.
- My friends (and their flaws) were of special interest to her, and I started realise it was because she was jealous and didn't want me to be too close to anyone else.



Enmeshed

- My allegiance was to be to her and if she couldn't get me on the phone when she wanted to talk, she would hunt me down through other people.
- Under my Dad's rule she had not been allowed to have friends, live a free life or be successful, and here I was with a husband who actively encouraged me to follow my heart, which I think she envied.

Facing the feelings of being used and abandoned have been hard. Even writing this piece generated a dream that I was biting my mum out of sheer frustration!



Frustrated

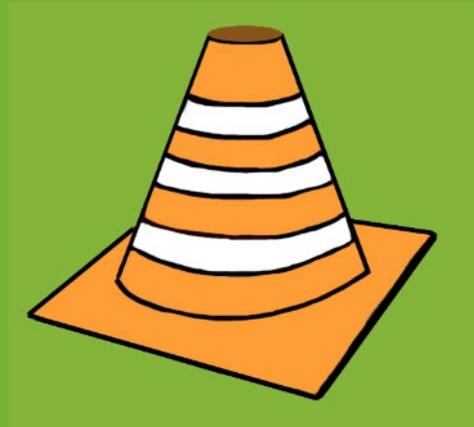
Today our relationship is not overly close, but it is functional, and even sometimes warm.

There are boundaries and I have learnt to 'care less' about what she thinks of me.

I have some amazing older women in my life who offer me 'mum stuff', and being attuned to my own children has been surprisingly healing for me.

I do have compassion for my mum; she is as she is for a reason, but I have compassion for me too and could not continue to allow myself to be hurt and swallowed up in this relationship.

ASSERTIVENESS



options card

options card

**I will set boundaries
as to how others
may treat me**

Ideas to share in Buddy Groups

- How did you respond to Controlling, Narcissistic and Envious mothers?
- How did you relate to Sue's and Becky's Stories
- Questions and comments to Katy Bodman in Chat, please

15 minutes





Questions
Comments
Discussion



Further reading

- **Difficult Mothers: Understanding and Overcoming Their Power- Terri Apter**
- **The Emotionally Absent Mother: How to recognize and cope with the Invisible Effects of Childhood Emotional Neglect – Jasim Lee Cori**
- **Why Love Matters – Sue Gerhardt**
- **Affect Regulation, Mentalization and the Development of the Self - Peter Fonagy et al**
- **The Drama of Being a Child – Alice Miller**
- **The First Relationship: Infant and Mother: Infant and Mother – Daniel Stern**

Coming up!

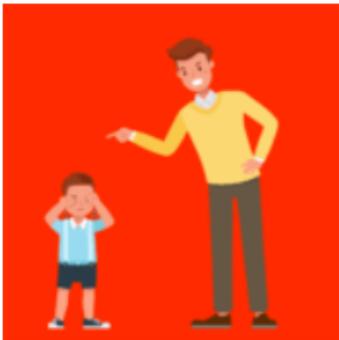
DEC
1



((o)) 7:00 pm - 9:00 pm

FREE! WebApps Workshop

DEC
9



((o)) 9:30 am - 1:00 pm

When Fathers Wound

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Resources

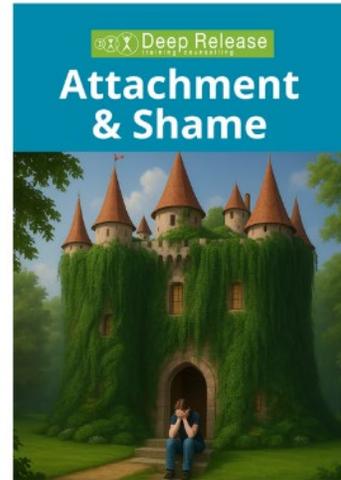
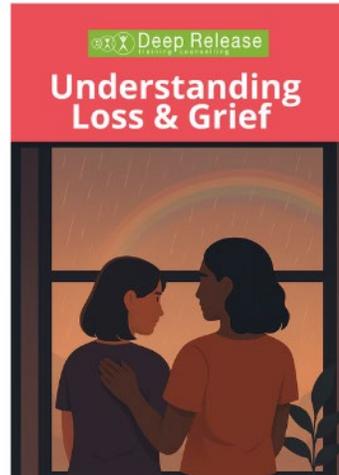
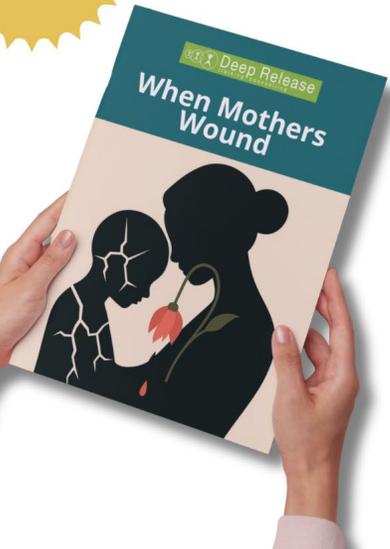
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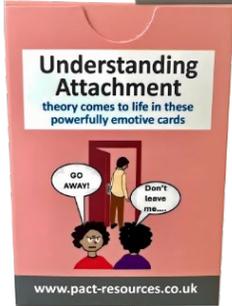
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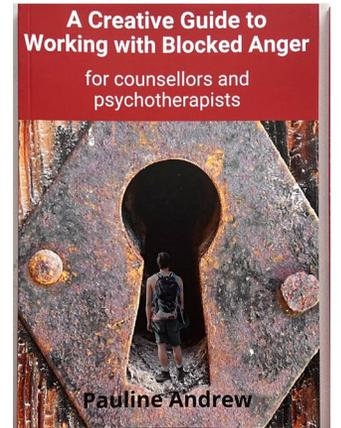
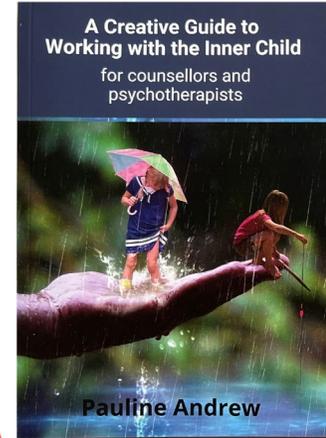
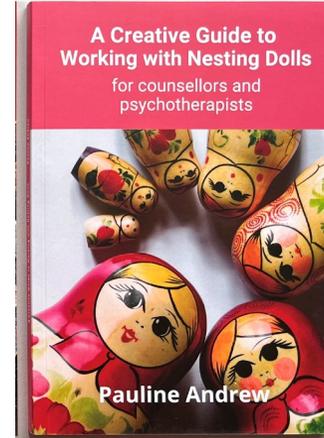


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