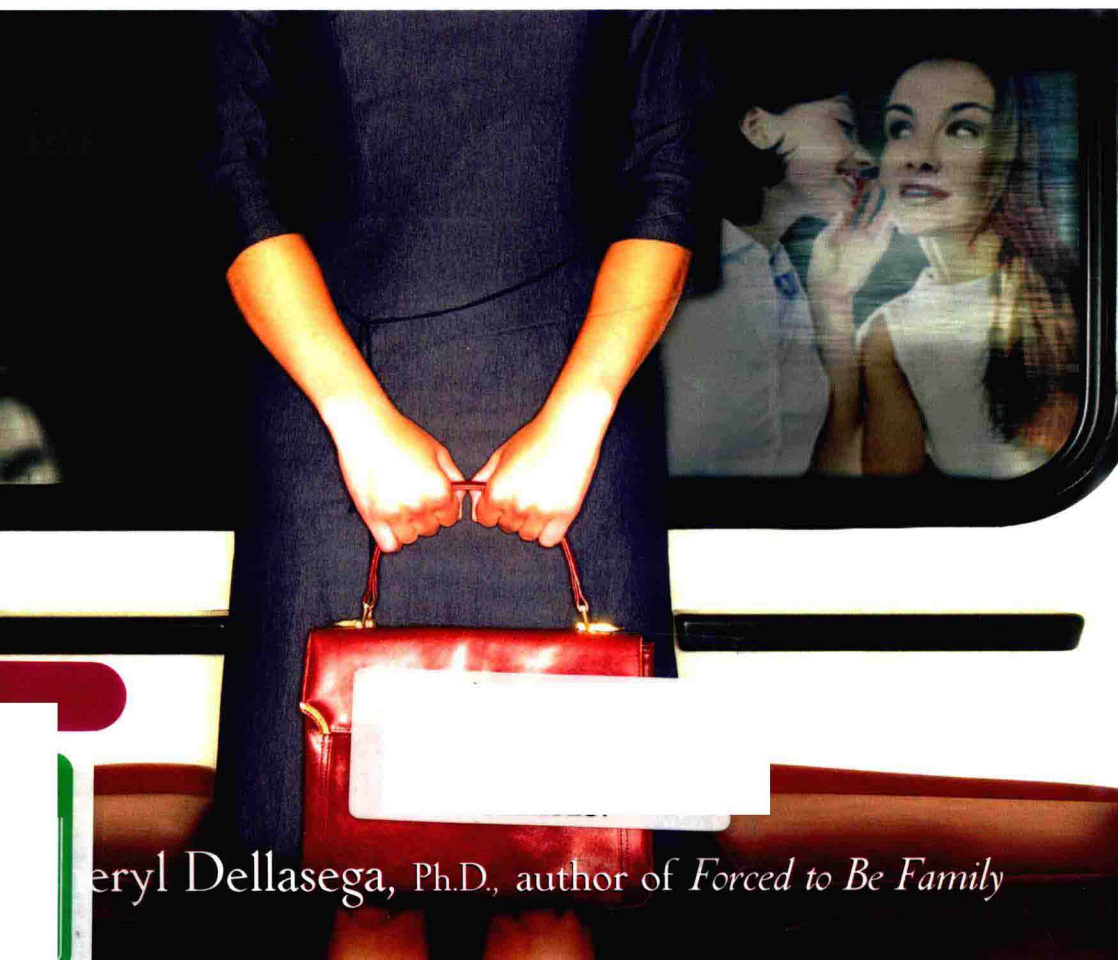


ADULT WOMEN WHO ARE STILL QUEEN BEES,
MIDDLE BEES, AND AFRAID-TO-BEES

mean girls grown up



Meryl Dellasega, Ph.D., author of *Forced to Be Family*

Mean Girls Grown Up

*Adult Women Who Are
Still Queen Bees, Middle Bees,
and Afraid-to-Bees*

CHERYL DELIASEGA PH.D.



John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Copyright © 2005 by Cheryl Dellasega. All rights reserved

Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey
Published simultaneously in Canada

Design and composition by Navta Associates, Inc.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without either the prior written permission of the Publisher, or authorization through payment of the appropriate per-copy fee to the Copyright Clearance Center, 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, (978) 750-8400, fax (978) 646-8600, or on the web at www.copyright.com. Requests to the Publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, (201) 748-6011, fax (201) 748-6008 or online at <http://www.wiley.com/go/permissions>.

Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty: While the publisher and the author have used their best efforts in preparing this book, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. No warranty may be created or extended by sales representatives or written sales materials. The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for your situation. You should consult with a professional where appropriate. Neither the publisher nor the author shall be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

For general information about our other products and services, please contact our Customer Care Department within the United States at (800) 762-2974, outside the United States at (317) 572-3993 or fax (317) 572-4002.

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books. For more information about Wiley products, visit our web site at www.wiley.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

Dellasega, Cheryl.

Mean girls grown up : adult women who are still queen bees, middle bees, and afraid to bees / Cheryl Dellasega.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-471-65517-6 (cloth)

ISBN 978-0-470-16875-2 (paper)

1. Women—Psychology. 2. Women—Conduct of life. 3. Self-actualization (Psychology) I. Title.

HQ1206.D3612 2005

2004027099

305.4—dc22

Mean Girls Grown Up

Also by Cheryl Dellasega, Ph.D.

*Surviving Ophelia: Mothers Share Their Wisdom
of the Tumultuous Teen Years*

Girl Wars: Twelve Strategies That Will End Female Bullying

*The Starving Family: Caregiving Mothers and Fathers
Share Their Eating Disorder Wisdom*

*I'd like to dedicate this book to my mother,
Peg Miller,
who long ago showed me the benefit of connections
between women—even those who are not “friends.”*

*These connections are too powerful to be
undermined, ignored, or suppressed, and I'm
convinced every woman needs them.*

Acknowledgments

I wrote this book not only as a follow-up to *Girl Wars*, but because of female friends and colleagues who have been un-rationally aggressive and supportive over the years. It seems important to look at what goes right in relationships as well as what can go wrong. To Susan, Beth, Maureen, Shelba, Pat, Stacy, Sherry, Adria, Kathleen, Monica, Robin, Lisa, Gail, Barb, and many, many more: thank you! And to Teryn Johnson, a patient and positive editor who weathered the storms of this book with me, much gratitude.

Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 1

PART ONE

Relational Aggression 201: The Who, What, and Why of RA 5

- 1 All Grown Up and Ready to Sting: Adult Female Aggression 7
- 2 Why Women Aren't More Like Men 20
- 3 Big Bullies and Other Aggressive Types: The Queen Bee 32
- 4 From Mild to Bad and In Between: The Middle Bee 42
- 5 Blindsided, Backstabbed, and Bruised: The Afraid-to-Bee 54
- 6 Weapons of Choice 67

PART TWO

Our Own Worst Enemies: Aggression at Work, at Home, and at Play 79

- 7 Women at Work 81
- 8 Sharing Space: Ages and Stages of Aggression 97

- 9 Forced to Be Family: The Good, the Bad, and the Very Ugly of Female In-Laws 108
- 10 Mrs. Popularity and the Mom Clique 119
- 11 Relational Aggression Where You Least Expect It 130

PART THREE

Recognize, Revise, and Internalize: Changing the RA Way of Life 145

- 12 Who Are You in the Bee Dynamic?: A Relational Aggression Assessment 147
- 13 Healing Residual Relation Aggression: Overcoming the Past 162
- 14 The Power of Forgiveness 172
- 15 The Won't Bee 184
- 16 A New Relational You 197
- 17 Don't Stop with Yourself 214

APPENDIX A

Communication That Counts: Connecting through Words 227

APPENDIX B

Talking to Yourself in Ways That Help 231

APPENDIX C

Netiquette Tips 233

APPENDIX D

Mentoring Resources 235

References 237

Index 240

Introduction

When I was eight, my mother gathered with other women to sit in the courtyard of our apartment complex. All summer, after her housework was completed, she would be there, in the center of a cluster of aluminum chairs, gathered with friends to drink ice tea and smoke cigarettes while all the children played nearby. There is a black-and-white picture of the group somewhere—they have haircuts and clothes that have gone out of style and come back in, and they are smiling and happy, just as I remember them.

As our family moved on and lived in other places, a constant of my childhood was my mother's friends and female acquaintances. There was always a diverse crowd of women in her life, ready to help celebrate holidays, mourn tragedies, or just talk about the events of an ordinary day. I can't recall my mother ever being mean to another woman, having a serious disagreement with one of her friends, or ending a relationship due to a dispute. She has had friends for decades: Bev, Evelyn, Gertrude, Joyce, Jane, Ingrid, Irene—the list is long. When my dad retired, these women made a quilt for my mom out of squares they each created; it was king-size and took a lot of effort.

It's no surprise that like my mother, I rely on and value my female friends, both the lifelong ones and those I know only through the Internet. I'm continually grateful for women who come into my life unexpectedly and give me the gift of themselves (like my neighbor Lisa Plotkin, who volunteered to read and critique this entire manuscript while she nursed her newborn son).

Then there are women I dread to be near, who sometimes

seem as plentiful as the women I cherish. They are the ones who are stuck in that middle school “bee” behavior: the Queen Bee bullies (a particularly memorable one buzzed furiously around me on my first job, as if she actually was protecting “her” hive from intruders); the Middle Bees, who spread gossip or stand by as others do so; and Afraid-to-Bee victims, who retreat into passivity. Encounters with any of these women are painful reminders of the teen years, when female bullying is at its peak and mean girls don’t hesitate to use words, gestures, or behaviors to wound another. Women who get stuck in these roles are still involved in the same harmful dynamic years later: Queen Bees bully their way to the top, Middle Bees serve as the go-betweens, and Afraid-to-Bee victims are targeted for aggression. It isn’t confined to the work setting, either. These situations play out in virtually any place where women gather—even online.

Like many women, I have found myself playing each of the “bee” roles. There have been times when I responded to a threat with aggression, got caught up in a gossip fest that was downright malicious, or withdrew from another woman in frightened silence. Until I wrote a book for adolescent girls, I didn’t realize there was a name for those behaviors: relational aggression (RA or female bullying).

During interviews and talks about that book, I was asked again and again if RA stops after high school. Many of the men and women who posed that question already had their own answers, as did I. When I searched through existing literature for confirmation, I found no in-depth discussion of RA in adult women. There were books on nasty bosses and some on hostile women, but I had a sense that the scope and magnitude of RA extended well beyond the workplace and often involved more than one bully and one victim.

Are there midlife mean bees? Do grown women gossip and campaign against other women in an attempt to bring them down? Are there cliques in the corporate lunchroom as well as the car pool? Can older women be as two-faced and competitive as their younger counterparts? As I talked to women—the true experts on these behaviors—their resounding response was, yes!

Consider what these women have to say:

Yes, other women definitely look down on me because I'm a stay-at-home mom and didn't even leave a successful career to take care of my family. When we go to a party or someplace where there are adults of both genders, men are more likely to accept me as a stay-at-home mom than other women.

Tanya, age thirty-two, mother of two young children

I swam competitively in high school, but it was cake compared to my experience with the group of women I worked out with not too long ago. Guys don't like it when I'm faster than them, but these women were worse, acting offended to share a lane with me and making rude comments about my body or the length of my workouts. At this point, I swim for fun, not to compete, so I dropped out and decided I'm better off exercising alone.

Barb, age twenty-nine

It's like playing a game of cards, only your kids help you win. Everyone is out to "trump" everyone else with some new accomplishment of her son or daughter.

Tessa, age twenty-six, part of a mother's organization

The jealousy among the women here is unbelievable. They watch each new person who moves in to see if he or she might own something valuable, and the gossip is incredible. The men do their own thing, but the women notice and comment on everything!

Sasha, age seventy, who lives in a retirement center

The pages that follow contain stories from women around the world who encountered mean girls grown up and have something to say about it. I obtained these stories in a variety of ways: through ads for submissions in writing magazines, women's publications, and Web sites; fliers sent to conferences; and word-of-mouth. This book contains a sampling of the best pieces I received. Some of the women who wrote were Queen Bee bullies and others were Afraid-to-Bee victims who had suffered through

months, years, or a lifetime of abuse. Middle Bee women, those who had found themselves in between the aggressor and her target in one way or another, also shared their experiences.

Other parts of the book contain material from women who were interviewed to obtain input on how aggression plays out in specific groups, such as the very young or old and those from ethnically diverse backgrounds. Experts who have helped women overcome the impact of aggression in one way or another contributed as well.

Where details of a story would be damaging to an individual who could be identified, the story was edited to preserve the content but protect confidentiality. Contributors had the choice of using their real name or a pen name. If you want to contact any of the contributors or experts, e-mail me at opheliasmother@aol.com.

Rather than share a litany of abuses and lead readers to believe women really are just mean and nasty, the focus of this book is on changing behavior and developing relationships with other women that help rather than harm. At any age, Queen Bees, Middle Bees, or Afraid-to-Bees can transform their behavior by shifting away from an aggressive dynamic and embracing a spirit of cooperation and collegiality in interactions with others. Victims, bullies, or in-betweeners caught in the trap of RA at home, work, or play *do* have alternatives. Many of the contributors offer their opinions on this topic, and the third part of the book describes specific steps that can be taken to deal with aggression or passivity.

You may feel you will never be able to escape mean girls. Don't despair. Although female relationships full of rivalry, jealousy, or maliciousness may be poisoning your life right now, change is always possible. Even if bee-type behaviors have plagued you since adolescence, you can now take advantage of new opportunities for positive connections with other women. This book first helps you identify *what* adult RA is, then describes *how* it affects women like yourself in a variety of situations, and finally, *shows* what can be done about it.

PART ONE

Relational Aggression 201

The Who, What, and Why of RA

*You've always been there, even in
Kindergarten, pushing my face into
a can of worms on the playground.
In grade school, calling me a witch
and telling me you'll burn me
at the stake at recess.*

*In middle school, you didn't want to
be my friend, you said I was weird,
too smart, too serious.*

*High school moments of pure hell,
of National Honor Society,
leads in school plays. Kisses of death.*

*In college, I kept to myself,
stayed clear of your jealousy,
alone with my own self-loathing.*

*In the real world, at every job,
you've always gone out of your way
to hurt me.*

ALIZA SHERMAN, "TAKE ME DOWN"

CHAPTER 1

All Grown Up and Ready to Sting Adult Female Aggression

*Mean girls grow up to be mean women,
make no mistake about that.*

—A WOMAN CALLER TO A RADIO TALK SHOW ON BULLYING

It happens when you least expect it: the sudden, painful sting that hurts deeply, because you thought you were in a safe place, with other women and immune from harm. A word, a gesture, or some other seemingly innocuous behavior can be all it takes to wound in a way that hurts more than any physical blow. This is female relational aggression (RA): the subtle art of emotional devastation that takes place every day at home, at work, or in community settings. Unlike openly aggressive men, women learn early on to go undercover with these assaults, often catching their victims unaware. Many carry this behavior into adulthood.

What Is Relational Aggression?

RA is the use of relationships to hurt another, a way of verbal violence in which words rather than fists inflict damage. RA seems to peak in the early teen years when girls use a variety of behaviors that wound without ever pulling a punch. Word wars are often dismissed as “just the way girls are,” or “she’s just jealous.” Whether or not you’re a mother, you probably understand these scenarios

intuitively: the girl who gets excluded from a crowd she previously belonged to; the newcomer who fails to be accepted by other girls no matter what she does; the girl who is somehow different and targeted for that reason; or the popular Queen Bee, who buzzes from place to place spreading discomfort and manipulating others with her words. Sounds pretty juvenile, doesn't it?

Unfortunately, some women never outgrow these behaviors, turning into adults who slay with a smile and wound with a word. The mean girls of middle school may change into grown-up "shrews," "witches," "prima donnas," and "bitches," but underneath, the same game that started in grade school is still being played. In and out of the workplace, as individuals and in groups, these women continue to interact in aggressive ways reminiscent of high school hallways where girls jockeyed for social status.

After encounters with such women, you walk away wondering exactly what happened, and, sometimes, why you care so much. In a search for answers, you may even reflect back on your adolescent years, when behaviors such as jealousy, gossip, and forming cliques were the *modus operandi*. You may remember the moments when you sighed thankfully, thinking it was all behind you. The end result, when you discover it isn't, is feelings of confusion, hurt, and even fear. Consider the following real-life situations:

Rhonda, age thirty-four, is one of twenty-five female secretaries at a midsize legal firm. Her boss, impressed by Rhonda's computer skills, suggests she go for further training so she can help with the information technology needs of the firm. He offers to accommodate her time away for classes if she will agree to stay with the firm for a year after she finishes. When Rhonda tells her coworkers about the opportunity, they congratulate her, but in the weeks that follow, the emotional climate of the office grows noticeably cooler. Within a month of starting classes, Rhonda is no longer invited to lunch with the other women, and they frequently "forget" to pass on important messages that arrive while she is in class.

"What did I do wrong?" Rhonda asks Marci, the only coworker who isn't shunning her.

"Can't you see it?" Marci answers. "They're all jealous because you're getting an opportunity they aren't."