

DON'T BLAME MOTHER

MENDING THE
MOTHER-DAUGHTER
RELATIONSHIP

Paula J. Caplan, Ph.D.

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Don't Blame Mother

For my parents,
Theda Ann Karchmer Caplan and Jerome Arnold Caplan,
and my children,
Jeremy Benjamin Caplan and Emily Julia Caplan,
with all my love

Acknowledgments

A BOOK LIKE THIS cannot be written in isolation. I was blessed to be able to write it from within a rich web of relationships.

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Since I failed to know my mother, I was denied the gift of knowing the other women who would cross my path.

—Pat Conroy, *The Prince of Tides*

Except for those who have given permission to appear in this book, all names and identifying details of individuals mentioned in this book have been changed. In some instances, composite accounts have been created based on the author's professional expertise.

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1 *Getting Started*

How are we to be the mothers we want our daughters to have, if we are still sorting out who our own mothers are and what they mean to us?

—Letty Cottin Pogrebin

[In the story of mothers and daughters] the plot is not entirely of our own making. We may be free to unravel the tale, but we have not been free to create the social relations upon which it is based.

—Marcia Westkott

YOU'RE READING A BOOK called *Don't Blame Mother*, so chances are, no matter how sad, upset, or angry you are at your mother, you'd rather improve your relationship with her than simply stay upset. This book is an offering to you, to let you know what has helped other mothers and daughters resolve their difficulties.

If you're busy blaming your mother or wishing you could "divorce" her, you are caught in a psychological prison. You can't get free, and you can't really grow up. There are practical problems. For example, you dread family parties: Your mother might not like what you're wearing. Or she might love what you're wearing and say to everyone, "Doesn't my daughter look gorgeous?!"—and you'd be mortified.

That kind of practical problem is a symptom of the fact that mother-blame limits your freedom: You can't be an adult who freely considers all of life's possibilities. You restrict yourself to certain activities, interests, and friends in order to prove how different from Mother you are. You can't look honestly at who *you* are, because you might discover ways that you are like her! Frantic to avoid what you consider her failures, you overreact, throwing out the good with the bad: You grow tough because you think

she's sentimental, or you become a doormat because she wasn't warm enough. All that reaction *against* her, that desperate drive to prove your difference, restricts and damages your relationships with the other people you love—your mate, your children, your other relatives, and your friends. You offer them only a part of your true self, a caricature.

✓ ANGEL-IN-THE-HOUSE OR WICKED WITCH?

If you feel sadness, irritation, anger, or even outright fury toward your mother, I suggest that you stop right now and let yourself experience it. Look at it. Cry. Scream. Hit pillows. Make ✓ a list of the five worst things she's ever done to you. Then consider this: The biggest reason daughters are upset and angry with their mothers is that they have been *taught* to be so.

Most women sincerely but mistakenly believe that anguish in their relationships with their mothers is inevitable because their ✓ mothers are so limited, so dependent, or so terrible. Largely unaware that our culture's polarized mother-images create barriers between mothers and daughters, we have held each other responsible.

Mothers are either idealized or blamed for everything that goes wrong. Both mother and daughter learn to think of women in general, and mothers in particular, as angels or witches or some of each. Our normal, human needs, feelings, and wishes are distorted in ways that erode our relationships by making us expect too much of each other and by making us exaggerate the bad or mistake the neutral and positive for negative. As many mothers and daughters admit, one minute they can overflow with love and admiration for each other, thinking of each other as positively perfect, and the next minute they can be overwhelmed with rage and contempt.

The polarized images have long and complicated histories. In part, in our predominantly Anglo-American culture, for instance, the idealized ones stem from our heritage from the Victorian era, when the mother was supposed to be the "Angel in the House" who soothed husband's and children's tired feet and fevered brows, spoke sweetly and gently, and considered meeting their needs her life's mission.

The “Wicked Witch” mother-images familiar to most of us come partly from fairy tales about horrid women. Although they’re rarely called mothers, they are often stepmothers or characters who harm children while filling mother-type roles, like the witch in “Hansel and Gretel” who lures the children with food, or the horrid stepmother who appears in motherly guise and offers (poisoned) nourishment to Snow White.

Both extremes cause trouble: How *can* you have a relationship with a perfect being who’s way up on a pedestal, but who would *want* to get closer to a person you believe caused all your problems? Even without these images, other problems in mother-daughter relationships would still exist—such as problems of communication, of sibling rivalry, of real individual psychological problems. But each of the two images is supported by a number of trouble-making myths or beliefs; for example, if we believe the “Perfect Mother myth” that a mother meets *all* her children’s needs, we feel cheated and angry when our mother doesn’t measure up, and if we believe the “Bad Mother myth” that it’s wrong for a mother to stay closely connected with her adult daughter, we fear and resent our mother’s offers of help or advice. These myths create *avoidable* problems that make dealing with the *inevitable* ones much harder.

The angel-witch, Perfect Mother-Bad Mother myths that alienate mothers and daughters from each other are rooted in a powerful tradition of mother-blame that pervades our whole culture. Most mothers are insecure about their performance as mothers and desperately need the approval of other women, including their own daughters. Yet, tragically, as daughters we are taught to belittle the work of mothering and to blame our mothers for almost everything that goes wrong in our lives. We all too easily point out our mothers’ failings, without ever examining how much our negative view was shaped and intensified by the myths that lead to mother-blame.

As daughters and mothers, we have for generations been trapped in a dark web we did not spin. But once we are aware of the myth-threads that form the web, as we tell our mothers’ stories and our own, we can begin to sort them out and pick apart the web. Daughters have to go beyond both kinds of images, taking away the masks of motherhood, as they try to see who their mothers really are. ✓

At some level we all know how hard it is to be a mother, and most of us sense how hard our mothers have *tried* to do right by us, even if they didn't always succeed. Understanding societal barriers to good mother-daughter relationships frees you to see your mother's good *and* bad points in all their complexity and subtlety, rather than as examples of anti-mother stereotypes—guilt-inducing mother, demanding mother, needy mother, overwhelming and judgmental mother, cold and remote mother. When you look at your list of the worst things your mother has done to you, after you've read *Don't Blame Mother*, you'll probably understand more about why she treated you the way she did, and as a result you'll feel differently about both her and yourself.

✓ Relationships based on myths and stereotypes rather than on clear visions of one another have no chance of improving. But when you look at your mother realistically, you begin to break down barriers and reduce the energy you both waste on anguish about each other.

This book is based on my experiences as a therapist, on my research and the research of other people, on women's responses to my earlier writing about mothers and the mother-daughter relationship, and on my university course on "Mothers."

I have not systematically explored the effects of race, religion, class, age, or sexual orientation, or such factors as whether the daughter is an only daughter or an only child, or has or does not have children of her own. The women described in this book vary in all of these ways—and more. But the focus here is on the commonalities in mother-daughter experiences, because in so many respects we women are treated alike, regardless of our differences and membership in other groups.

As you read true stories from my own life and from those of my friends, family members, students, workshop participants, and patients, I hope you will come to see that you are not the world's worst daughter, nor is your mother the world's worst mother—and, conversely, that *you* are not the world's worst mother, nor do you have the world's worst daughter. The stories and examples should also help you decide how to put to work the principles and research presented in this book, so that you can plan what to say the next time your mother calls or the next time you feel a fight with your daughter coming on.

THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES: SEEING THROUGH MOTHER-BLAME

Mother-blame used to come easily to me, and it continues to come easily to most therapists, because that is how generations of therapists have been trained. I spent years seeing therapy patients before I realized how common mother-blame is and how much damage it does. Mother-blame is as rampant today as it was when I began my graduate training in 1969. In fact, it was and is so common that for years I hardly noticed it.

When I worked in the U.S. and Canada with psychiatric patients of all ages in a general hospital, with delinquent teenagers who were mental hospital inpatients, with children who had school problems, and with families whose members had a variety of problems, I heard my colleagues lay at mothers' feet the responsibility for most of the patients' problems. If anyone in the family was depressed, aggressive, or otherwise emotionally disturbed, the mother was likely to be blamed: "She's overprotective," "She makes her kids so nervous," and so on. If the mother herself was the patient, she was blamed for her own problems—"She's a masochist" or "She comes on so strong—no wonder her husband hits her!"

In many of these settings, we therapists often saw patients together and then, in case conferences, heard each other describe them and attempt to identify the causes of their depression, anxiety, violent behavior, or other problems. Most of what I actually *saw* most mothers do ranged from pretty good to terrific; but my colleagues usually described their actions in negative ways. I tended to leave case conferences feeling vaguely ashamed but not knowing why. One day, I realized that it was because, as a woman—and even more, as a mother—I was a member of the group that my colleagues seemed to think caused all the world's psychological problems.

I felt like the child in the fairy tale who knew the emperor was naked while everyone else praised his elaborate clothing. A most distressing characteristic of mother-blaming among mental health professionals is how few of them seem to be aware they do it. Even when therapists are alerted to mother-blaming attitudes

and comments, they usually deny that they themselves could do such a thing.

After I became conscious of the clash between what I saw with my own eyes and what my colleagues said they saw, I began in each case conference to ask a simple question: "In addition to the mother's influence, what are the *various* factors that *could* have contributed to this person's (or couple's or family's) problems?" When I asked my question, my colleagues said I was "soft on mothers" and "overidentified" with them. And their case presentations continued to be focused not on *whether* the mother had caused the problem but on *how* she had done so.

In spite of these responses, I was inspired to continue my questioning by the growing literature on mothers. At last, it seemed, mothers were deemed a subject worthy of study. Such studies were a mixed bag, however. Only a few books—Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, Judith Arcana's *Our Mothers' Daughters*, and parts of Phyllis Chesler's *Women and Madness* and *With Child*—offered positive views of mothers.

Most writers continued primarily to find fault with mothers and describe the ways they ruined their children's lives. Some writers (such as Nancy Chodorow, Luise Eichenbaum, and Susie Orbach) began well, saying that all women have a rough time in our society; but mother-blaming is still present in essential threads of their writing, when they explain how mothers can't let go of their children, keep their daughters too dependent on them, are never satisfied, profoundly disappoint us, and burden us with unbearable guilt. For instance, in their book *Understanding Women: A Psychoanalytic Approach*, Eichenbaum and Orbach tell us:

A daughter hides the little-girl part of herself because she has picked up a painful and powerful message from mother that tells her she should not have expectations of being looked after emotionally, or of having her desires met, either by mother or by anyone else. Mother encourages her daughter to look to a man to be emotionally involved with; she teaches her daughter to direct her energies toward men and to someday depend on a man. But at the same time there is another message. As she lets her daughter know she must look to men, mother simultaneously transmits a message of disappointment and frustration. She conveys that her daughter must not expect a man to really help or understand her. Mothers often let their daughters know both overtly and covertly that men

are disappointments. They may convey disdain and contempt for them. Mother's messages about men are thus more than a little ambivalent.

Eichenbaum and Orbach unfortunately offer no explanation of *why* a mother may fail to be nurturant, why she may feel she has to warn her female child not to expect much from this world in general or from men in particular; nor do they ask why the father doesn't provide much nurturance in a family in which the mother "fails" to do so.

In the enormously popular book *My Mother/My Self*, Nancy Friday presented such a pessimistic view of mothers and the mother-daughter relationship that many women found themselves more hopeless after reading it than before—and thought that meant something was wrong with their mothers and with them, rather than with the book.

Despite this continued focus on mothers' limitations, I noticed the beneficial effects of all the loving, empowering things that mothers were doing—they rocked babies, cooked nourishing meals, soothed hurt feelings. These things were hardly mentioned by anyone. For all the inspiration of books by Rich, Chesler, and Arcana, little or nothing changed among mainstream psychotherapists. From my own experience, I saw that simply voicing objections to mother-blame had no positive results. I needed to document systematically the scapegoating of mothers by mental health professionals. In Chapter 3, I shall describe some of the documentation that I gathered, but I was not surprised when our study revealed that mother-blame had not abated, even in the face of the modern wave of the women's movement.

To document the problem and its effects on mother-daughter relationships was one thing; to figure out what to do about it was another. Rich, Chesler, and Arcana had begun to describe what it feels like to be a mother and to be a daughter, and Jean Baker Miller—in her classic *Toward a New Psychology of Women*—had clearly described the nature of the subordination of women in general. But still missing was some idea of where or how to begin to mend the rifts between daughters and their mothers.

For the most part, this is still unexplored terrain. In fact, almost no *systematic* research has been conducted on woman-woman relationships of any kind; the funding for such research has simply not been available. Despite a recent spate of books