

*I Love
My Mother,
But...*

DR. LINDA MINTLE



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Now, Let's All Just Try to Stay Calm...

Changing Defensive Reactions

I Love My Mom, But...

Defense, Defense

Evaluate Your Reaction Style

How to Respond to Triggers

More Ways to Respond to Triggers

How do you feel about your mother?"

"Well, since you asked *today*, I feel good about my mother. But if you had asked me last Friday, I was ready to wring her neck! And tomorrow I may want to exchange her for a different model. I love her, hate her, feel guilty, and wish I were a better daughter. How long is this session—have you got a few years?"

"My mother died when I was seven years old. She was my best friend. I often wonder what my life would be like if she had lived. I miss her terribly."

"I don't want to talk about her. She's just the woman who gave birth to me. That's how I see her. Basically she screwed up my life, and I think I probably hate her. Most times, I'm just indifferent about her. You know, sort of numb. Next question."

"I consider my mom my best friend. She's such an encourager, always there when I need her. We are so much alike, it's scary. If I can be as good a mother as she is, I'll be happy."

“Are you going to talk about how she didn’t breast-feed me and weird stuff like that? Because I just want to know how to get along with my mom. Right now, that’s a big problem.”

“My mother? Sounds like a shrink question to me. Does it matter how I feel about her? I don’t know, Dr. Linda. How do you feel about yours?”

Even though I’ve asked this question hundreds of times in therapy, I’m always amazed at the intense emotions it evokes. Women laugh, cry, grow silent, get deep in thought, yell, swear, smile...it’s a simple but tough question with a complicated answer that can change from day to day.

The powerful mother-daughter bond is a hotbed for all kinds of emotions. And it doesn’t much matter what age we are or if our mother is alive or deceased. When emotions run positive, the bond is like no other. But when negative emotions rear their ugly heads, poor reactions and coping can lead to depression, anxiety, anger, and a host of defensive feelings.

I Love My Mom, But...

Most women tell me, “I love my mother, but...” And it’s that “but” that trips us up. “But I don’t feel close to her.” “But she tries to control me.” “But I can’t please her.” “But I have a lot of guilt.” “But she won’t treat me like an adult.” “But I get so angry with her.” The list is long.

So the question is, how do we handle these strong emotions—this emotional reactivity, as therapists call it? Can we avoid becoming emotional wrecks or stop feeling like we are ten years old again? And how can we move from a defensive posture with Mom to a more supportive one? By the time you finish this chapter, you should have answers. And by the time you finish this book, you’ll have a variety of information, strategies, and methods that will help you develop a rewarding relationship with your mom.

I’m going to remind you over and over of this one helpful truth; please keep it in the back of your mind as you work through this book: You can’t change your mother, but you can change your reaction to

her. And when you change your reaction to Mom, it changes your interaction, which impacts your relationship. Change comes when you decide to react differently. So many daughters waste their time trying to change their mother. Let me tell you from personal experience, it's an exercise in frustration. Your mother is *not* your patient asking for help from her doctor daughter!

Our goal is to rein in our emotions and get control. We want to respond in ways that promote love and connection. Don't get caught up in what Mom is doing. Focus with me on *your* reactions. In this chapter, we'll look at ways to help you make the mother-daughter relationship more rewarding by controlling the part of your relationship you do have control over. Yes, you guessed it—your own reactions.

Defense, Defense

When I was a college cheerleader, we yelled the cheer, "Defense! Defense!" mostly when we were losing a game. Out of frustration, we wanted our team to defend the goal and prevent the other team from scoring. It was a strategy aimed at stopping the other team's offensive efforts. However, defense didn't put points on the board for *our* team. Consequently, a great defensive effort could still result in a lost game.

The same is true for mothers and daughters. When we put all our time and energy into defending our point of view (defending the goal), we don't encourage the building of an intimate relationship (scoring points). Defensive reactions block our communication, and as a result, intimacy is lost. When we become highly defensive or upset we don't listen. We aren't reasonable. And all we want to do is win our point.

In this chapter, I will identify the traps that pull you into defensive communication and move you toward developing more supportive communication that is conducive to a healthy relationship.

Defensive communication usually comes about because you feel attacked, judged, guilty, fearful, or anxious. Because our mom's appraisal of us matters, we may become defensive when we think she is undercutting our sense of worth or not validating who we are—an individual who's separate and independent of her. When this happens, it can breed regret, hostility, and other strong emotions. Hostility and anger

are so prevalent in mother-daughter relationships that I am devoting an entire chapter to them (see chapter 2). For now, let's understand what goes into defensive communication so we can make changes to avoid it.

Evaluate Your Reaction Style

When you and your mom hit a point of contention in the relationship, what is your style of reacting? Do you become highly defensive? If so, what do you do when you feel attacked or judged? Your answers matter because when you respond with strong emotions, nothing gets solved. And that's not the only problem. Usually after an unpleasant, emotional confrontation with your mother, the residual emotions that you carry around can stress you out and even create physical problems. The goal here is to help you become less reactive and more responsive in your dealings with your mother. To stay calmer and more mature, you may have to practice reacting less and responding better.

What Are Your Defensive Styles?

Let's begin by identifying possible defensive styles. When you're dealing with your mother, do you engage in any of the responses listed below?

- 1. Go on the attack and then try to rationalize or justify what you said or did.** In order to protect yourself from Mom, you take the offensive and attack her. That way you don't have to feel vulnerable or risk getting hurt.
- 2. Blame others and not take responsibility for yourself.** Someone else is always at fault, and you are the perennial victim. Or even if you are at fault, you don't want to "own it." That is, you don't want to acknowledge your mistake and take responsibility for it. So you find someone or something else to blame.
- 3. Give in—and later regret that you did.** Are you easily swayed by the person-to-person contact—then do you kick yourself later for not standing up for what you really think or believe? Are you easily persuaded because you don't really know what you think and feel?

4. Agree with Mom up front but then go behind her back and try to get even. This is a passive-aggressive way of dealing with your mom. It's indirect and dishonest because you don't have the guts to deal directly with your disagreement; instead you find secretive ways to get back at her. You may appear to do what she wants while hiding your true actions. In other words, you give Mom the impression that you are going along with her advice, thinking, and values, but then you behave in different ways. This creates a false self—the one that Mom sees. The real self behaves very differently away from her presence.

5. Just avoid problems. There is no communication because you are avoiding the issues. Your reacting style is to pull away and withdraw. Nothing is accomplished except that you are temporarily removed from the tension. But that tension doesn't go away.

Think about what you tend to do when the heat rises in your relationship with your mother. None of the defensive styles described above will deepen intimacy or move you toward more open communication channels. If you tend to become defensive by using any of the above strategies, you need to make changes. Stop attacking, blaming, and avoiding Mom, and stop agreeing with her when you don't want to. Learn to listen and be honest and direct. As you lose your defensive posture, you'll be able to have more interactions that are less volatile. Here are some tips to help you do that.

Identify the Triggers

Most of us have emotional triggers that set us into orbit with Mom. Triggers are those things that set off, or cue, an emotional reaction in you. They can be specific events, conversations, or people; they can be your thoughts or Mom's behavior. Here's an easy example. Let's say every time you try a new fashion idea, Mom makes a negative comment, a put-down. So you learn that expressing yourself through fashion is bound to bring criticism and thus is a trigger.

Here's another example. Your mother calls to complain that "nobody" cares about her because *you* don't call her every day. She fails to mention

that you have three sisters who could pay attention to her needs as well. Whenever she makes these self-pitying comments, you feel really guilty and apologize out of a sense of obligation. Later, you get upset with yourself for playing this emotional game. (This is number three on the previous list of defensive strategies.) The truth is, you haven't been ignoring your mom, and your sisters haven't done their part. But her phone calls trigger an overwhelming sense of dread and guilt in you.

Think about this example. You were deeply hurt over your mom's comments about working outside the home. You are a single mom and must work to support your children, but your mother keeps bringing up her wish that you would marry and be able to stay home. Because you are stressed and worry about being a single parent, you blow up at her. The trigger is your thought: *She thinks I'm a bad mother for having to go to work. I don't need to hear this. I already feel bad enough.*

Your thoughts may not be based in reality, but you attribute blame to her anyway.

While these are examples of specific triggers that might be at work, there are also common triggers that send many of us into a defensive state. Usually they include three general areas:

1. Triggers related to our feelings.
2. Triggers related to *not* dealing with our own "stuff" (that is, the issues in our lives that incite strong emotions within us).
3. Triggers related to Mom's not dealing with her own stuff. (Be careful here. Most daughters would like to believe this is the main problem, when it may not be.)

Check this list. Think about the times and situations when intense negative feelings are triggered in you. What triggers those reactions? Ask yourself if it usually involves one or more of these issues:

Feelings. The feeling may or may not be based in reality, but this is how you feel:

- unsupported
- unaccepted or unapproved

- misunderstood
- frustrated
- insecure
- obligated

Your stuff. Your problems that might trigger strong emotions in your mom could include

- refusing to see your part in the problem (a situation that leads to unfair blame, denial, rationalizing, and anger)
- suggesting motives that don't exist
- projecting (putting) your feelings onto Mom (confusing your stuff with hers)
- failing to understand and listen
- not seeing the big picture (see chapter 5)

Mom's stuff. Your mom's behaviors that could trigger strong emotions in you might include

- criticism, sarcasm, put-downs
- invalidating your feelings, that is, minimizing them to the point that you believe you "shouldn't" feel a certain way
- using unfair blame or guilt
- excessive control
- avoidance of problems
- playing the martyr
- acting frail and unable to cope

How to Respond to Triggers

Now, you can't control your mother's thoughts or behaviors. And you can't force her to deal with her "stuff." Her reactions are just that—*her* reactions. So stop trying to change her, unless she's *asking* to change and wants your feedback. Most likely, *you* will be the one changing in

order to create a more rewarding relationship. Remember, you can't control her reaction, but you can control *your* response to her reaction. So let's focus on how to respond to these emotional triggers.

Practice Responding Under Fire

Once you have identified the specific triggers that set off an intense emotional reaction in you, practice a new way to respond to those triggers. In therapy, I often have my clients act out or role-play a typical triggered event. Then we rehearse a new way to handle that specific issue.

For example, Mary loses it every time her mom brings up her divorce. Mary knows her mom won't stop talking about the divorce, and now she realizes it is a trigger for her to go on the defensive. So, in therapy, Mary thinks through a better way to react to Mom's comments. She decides to say, "Mom, I'm disappointed by the divorce too. When you bring it up, it makes me feel even worse. There is nothing I can do about it now but grieve it as a loss. He's left me for another woman. I could really use your support to get through this. One way you could support me is to not keep reminding me how much I have failed. Instead help me face the future."

Mary then coaches me to be her mom, sharing what Mom usually says and how she acts. I then play her mother, and she practices her new strategy. She is less defensive because she states how she feels and asks for constructive help. Her mom can choose to ignore her request and continue her divorce-track comments, so I take this position and allow Mary to practice handling this possibility. We rehearse as many scenarios as Mary can think up. The rehearsal helps Mary think through her responses when she's not so defensive so that she can have a more controlled reaction when her mom inevitably brings up the topic.

Rehearsing your responses ahead of time prepares you for the next time the trigger occurs. You may still lose it and go on the defensive from time to time, but with practice, you can eventually learn to respond differently.

Develop Assertiveness and Self-Definition

You'll read this lesson repeatedly throughout this book: The more

you understand who you are apart from your mom, the better you can be true to yourself when you are with her. So an important step to controlling your emotions when you respond to her is to work on developing yourself as a unique person apart from your mom. This means defining your beliefs and letting your own personality prevail. Therapists call this process *defining your "I"* and *finding your voice*. (We'll discuss these processes in more detail in later chapters.) Work on your reactions to emotionally charged issues. Remember, the goal is to be less defensive and more honest in your relationship. In order to be honest, you have to know what you think and feel.

In the earlier example concerning fashion as a trigger for criticism, there are several ways to respond that won't lead you down an angry and defensive path. First, since you have identified the emotional trigger, practice how you will respond to it. Be prepared to be assertive. It helps to keep your response *descriptive* versus *judging*. Describe your own feelings rather than attacking your mom for being critical. For example, you might say something like, "Mom, I like to have fun with fashion. It hurts when you criticize me about it. If you don't like my style, I would prefer you keep your comments to yourself since it creates bad feelings." In this case, you are asserting who you are (you're using your voice), but not in a defensive way. Your reaction isn't an angry impulsive backlash but rather a true *description* of how you feel and a request for her to change. Mom's response is up to her, but at least you've given her a strategy that would help the relationship.

You can take your position without having to prove anything because you are only describing what happens to you. This requires you to spend some time gathering knowledge about yourself (the self-definition work) and to be somewhat introspective about your behavior and thoughts. When you are comfortable with your choices, you may feel more secure and have greater willingness to be open to feedback; you may be willing to think about Mom's comments and decide if there is any merit in them—you can listen without becoming highly defensive. This practice of defining yourself and then "using your voice" can help control your negative reactions to your mom.

The groundwork for some daughters is to take time and really think

about what they do think and feel. That was the case for Rhonda. We had numerous sessions in which all she would do was go on the attack about her mother. When I pushed her to stop complaining and tell me what she wanted to change and how that would look, she didn't know what to say. She had spent so much of her life being upset and lambasting her mom that she didn't have a clue what she actually wanted the relationship to be like.

Hey, That's Not What the Bible Says!

When my kids were little, one of my favorite books to read to them was a book entitled *Hey, That's Not What the Bible Says* by Bill Ross. The author takes a Bible story and then gives it a wrong ending. You read the incorrect ending and turn the page, and a bunch of kids are screaming, "Hey, that's not what the Bible says!" Then the author corrects the story's ending.

The reason I like this book so much is that it reminds me of life. We tend to make up our own endings to relationship problems. In our version, people are apologizing for wrong actions, being fair, addressing issues when they arise, and basically living in the epitome of mental health and applying their Christian faith flawlessly. Well, as we all know, life isn't like that. Instead, we have to cope with all the "incorrect endings." When we face denial, injustice, poor treatment, lack of validation, and so on, our work is to respond as Christ would respond. When we don't, we need to imagine God saying, "Hey, that's not what the Bible says."

Biblical relationship guidelines are healthy and foster communication. But they aren't usually our first instinctual response. However, the benefits of responding to others in a Christlike way are amazing. Not only will your relationships improve, but so will your mental health. We don't call Jesus the Great Physician for nothing!

When you are negatively triggered by something in the relationship with your mom, try not to react without thinking. Don't act impulsively or give vent to your frustrations. Unconsciously, we probably believe that Mom will take whatever we sling at her. Because of this trust, too often we tend to let loose rather than use self-control.

It's easy to take offense. Harder not to. Easy to react. Harder to respond in a godly, loving way. I speak from experience.

Personally, I've made it my goal to assess whether my actions and reactions line up with God's Word. Since the Bible directs us to respond in ways that often are counter to our human nature, we have to constantly check our reactions against the Word, admit when we've failed, and try again. It isn't easy. But hey, I figure that's the work of walking out my faith. No one said it would be easy!

So how do you stop being so defensive with Mom? Start reading the Bible and absorb what is said about being loving, kind, gentle, patient, longsuffering, self-controlled, faithful, and peaceful. This is the "fruit," or outcome, of what should be evidenced when we are one of His. It only comes when we have intimacy with God and put the Word in our hearts.¹

And then there is the wisdom of Scripture—the grandest Ann Landers of all time. If you just consider the wisdom offered in Proverbs alone (not to mention the rest of the Bible), it will keep you on your toes. Here is just a taste of that wisdom from Proverbs:

1. *"Incline your ear to wisdom, and apply your heart to understanding" (2:2 NKJV)*. When we try to understand the situation, the bigger picture, the heat of the moment, or whatever the circumstances of an emotional interaction, it helps us stay calmer. Understanding goes a long way in any relationship, because when we have understanding, we tend to be more tolerant and empathetic.
2. *"Don't talk too much, for it fosters sin. Be sensible and turn off the flow!" (10:19 NLT 1996)*. Okay, I admit this is a tough one for me, but one I keep working on. The point is, hold your tongue so you don't say things in haste that you may later regret.
3. *"A kindhearted woman gains respect, but ruthless men gain only wealth" (11:16)*. Do you think of yourself as kindhearted? Ready to give the benefit of the doubt and look for positives in your mom? If not, you may gain other

things such as wealth or material possessions but at a high cost. Is losing respect worth being ruthless? Or would you rather be kindhearted and gain her respect?

4. *“Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing”* (12:18). Back to our tongues again! The Bible has lots to say about this small part of our body that can do so much damage. The lesson here is, don’t be reckless in what you say—don’t lash out, hurt, wound, or say mean things because *you* feel hurt or wounded. Choose your words carefully so they can be part of healing and not hurting.
5. *“Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice”* (13:10). There are times our mother is right and we become defensive because we don’t want to hear it. The root of this is usually pride and pride breeds quarrels.
6. *“He who answers before listening—that is his folly and his shame”* (18:13). One of the problems of defensiveness is that you don’t hear what is being said. If all you are doing is planning what you will say and how you will defend yourself, you really can’t hear what your mom is trying to say. Listen first, *then* think about what you want to say.

The Bible is full of instructions and wisdom concerning our responses to relationship difficulties. The point is to use the Bible as a guide for *your responses* to Mom rather than as a club to judge and criticize her. When you line up your thoughts and actions with biblical teachings, you won’t be operating out of defensiveness but out of a sense of God-given love and self-control.

LEARN TO PROBLEM-SOLVE

When you find yourself in a heated moment with your mom, try problem-solving. Here are the basic steps to take when a problem comes your way.

1. Define the problem. Define a clear and specific behavior; then in a nonaccusatory way, describe what is happening. By clearly targeting the problem, you both will know you aren't working with some nebulous thing. For example, instead of saying, "Mom, you are such an avoider," be concrete. Say, "Mom, when I try to talk about your health, you change the subject." First define the problem; focus on the behavior so you'll know what needs to change.

For years I taught a parenting course. In that course, I taught parents how to define behavior problems with their children. To help them learn this skill I followed this procedure: I asked each parent to give me his or her recipe for meat loaf. Some made it with bread crumbs and eggs; others used barbecue sauce. All kinds of ingredients showed up in the recipes; they differed from parent to parent. So when I would talk about *meat loaf*, all the parents had their own ideas about what that meant depending on their personal recipe. When we communicate with our mother about a problem in our relationship, we need to avoid the meat loaf approach. Instead, we need to define the ingredients so Mom knows exactly what we are talking about.

2. How often or how long is it happening? Measure the number of times the problem occurs or the length of time it goes on. This way you will have an accurate count or duration of the problem. This is important because you need to be able to measure change as it happens. Too many of us don't recognize small changes in the right direction when they occur. For example, the daughter in the previous example might say, "The last three times I tried to bring up the subject of your health, you changed the subject."

3. Do something. When it's time to intervene, instead of reacting the way you always do, or in a way that doesn't promote change, try a new strategy. For example, instead of getting upset and walking away, try being firm and saying, "Mom, I really want to talk about your health. Can we do that now?" Stop doing whatever wasn't working and try a new tactic. You can experiment until you find something that works. In this example, the daughter didn't allow her mom's avoidance to upset

her to the point of walking away and dropping the subject. She took a deep breath, stayed involved in the situation, and gently pushed for a response. And as suggested earlier, it helps to rehearse your new response ahead of time.

4. Evaluate how well things are going. After you have a clear idea of the problem, measure how much of a problem it is, and then act differently, you can evaluate whether the situation is improving. If your mom willingly talks about her health one time in the next two times you bring it up, you've made progress. Remember, change is usually a step-by-step process that takes time.

5. If what you're doing doesn't work, try another tactic. The secret here is not to panic or give up. You tried something, and it didn't work. Try something else. Talk to other people, a counselor, or family members, and get input if you need it. Be careful not to bring others into the fray; just get some new ideas about what might work. Just because you don't see a solution, doesn't mean there isn't one. There is always a way. Remember, this is also a promise from God. He makes a way where there is no way, so don't panic or give up.

Practice problem-solving. It will boost your confidence and reduce your feelings of defensiveness. Next time you feel yourself becoming defensive, tell yourself, *I can deal with this. It's just a matter of finding the right solution. God, help me to find a better way.*

More Ways to Respond to Triggers

Lighten Up

When you are triggered by an emotional issue with your mom, one of your best responses is to use humor. When used appropriately, humor can diffuse tension and lighten the moment. It allows both parties to laugh and gain a fresh perspective for the moment. Of course, you don't want to use humor to laugh off problems or avoid dealing with an issue.

Here's an example of how I used humor one summer when my

parents came for a visit and tension between my mom and me was rising over a particular issue. One of my triggers had to do with my mom telling me when she thought I needed to go to bed. At about 10 p.m., my mom would say, "Linda, don't you think it's about time you go to bed?"

At this point in my life, I had been married a number of years, had no children, and worked a full-time therapy job. Because of the distance, I only saw my parents a few times a year. I used to wonder if Mom had forgotten that I was a grown-up.

In the past, when my mom would do this, I would get angry. This time, I decided to use humor instead. It really was pretty funny that my mom thought she had to tell her 30-year-old daughter when to go to bed!

Of course, my take on the matter was that my mom was trying to control me and tell me what I needed to do. I was a grown woman and didn't need her to do this. Her take was that it's tough to ever stop being a mother. She was just concerned that I get the rest I needed and that I didn't feel obliged to stay up late with her and Dad. But because none of this was ever verbalized, we reacted to our own separate thoughts.

So, instead of my usual "Oh, Mother!" and stomping off while mumbling under my breath, I decided to take the humorous approach. One night at ten o'clock when my mother reminded me of bedtime, instead of getting mad, I humorously said, "Oh, Mom, thanks for telling me. What would I have done if you hadn't been here? Maybe I would never go to bed. I'd be up all night. Good thing I have you here to help me." And I started to laugh. So did she. We both saw how crazy we were acting—me to get so worked up over something so inane, which could easily have been handled had I simply asked why she did this. She was feeling the need to take care of me. She saw my pressured life and wanted to help.

As we laughed, she said, "I guess you never stop being a mother and caring for your kids. It's hard to make the transition." And I was reminded how much she really did care about me and how often she had helped me as a child. I realized she was motivated by love and not control.

Taking Time-Outs

One of the most effective parenting strategies for kids who react

defensively to a situation is giving them a time-out. The purpose of a time-out is to stop the observed inappropriate behavior and give the child time to cool down and think about what he or she did.

Adults need to employ this strategy as well. Use it with your mom when an interaction heats up and you feel you're losing it. Simply say, "I'm getting too worked up to be sane. I need a few minutes of time-out." Then walk away and cool down. Take a few deep breaths, pray, count to ten, and *think*. Define the problem and consider what you are reacting to. You've been triggered—now how do you want to respond?

Wait until you have calmed down, then go back to the problem and deal with it. Don't wait a week or months. Get back to it as soon as you feel able to be calmer in the relationship. Most of the time, a 20-minute cooling-off period will be enough.

Drop the Rope

As we grow in maturity with our mom, we eventually learn to accept her faults versus resent them. It seems we have fewer tensions because we begin to see our mom as an individual woman and not just as a parent.

The more you can tell your mom you care about her, the better. Show gratitude for what she has done and the sacrifices she has made. This goes a long way to cutting through defenses. No one likes to be criticized all the time, even if it is justified. Praise and acts of affection go a long way to create an atmosphere in which problems can be raised and addressed.

If being around your mom for any period of time is difficult, then plan your visits to be short and structured. This is often the advice I give daughters who come from abusive or addicted homes who want to maintain a tie with their mom but don't want to put themselves in a position to be hurt again. In those cases, it may even be appropriate to stay in a hotel so you have a place to which you can retreat and compose yourself. Explain this to your mom by saying, "I want to see you, but I feel it's best if I have my own space while I'm here." Then visit Mom on your terms, leaving if you find her in a physically altered state (by drugs or alcohol, for instance) or abusive. Tell her ahead of time

(when she is thinking clearly) that if she is altered by her addiction or becomes abusive you will need to leave.

In less-dangerous situations, there are mother-daughter issues that sometimes *can't* be resolved. In those cases, therapist Betty Carter tells us to metaphorically let go of the rope. In other words, you may want to drop the issue to make peace. When you encounter extreme resistance and your mom is unwilling to relent, the best strategy may be to agree to disagree and build the relationship around other relationship points.

For example, one adult daughter I worked with couldn't stand the second husband her mom married. She felt as though this man was a gold digger and using her mom for her money. She tried to talk to her mom about him, but her mom refused to even consider her daughter's ideas. Mom made it clear that she was married to this man, and the marriage was not negotiable. If she had made a mistake, she'd live with it, and she didn't want her daughter intruding. She appreciated her daughter's concern but didn't want her help in this area. Mother and daughter agreed to avoid the topic of the new second husband. And while this put some strain in the relationship, the daughter concentrated on staying connected to Mom despite Mom's new status. She agreed to drop the rope.

The second-husband issue could have been an ongoing battle, but the daughter decided to make peace with Mom. Her mom knew where her daughter stood concerning the second husband, and the daughter knew Mom was a grown-up and had to make her own love life decisions. In this case, the daughter agreed to drop the rope regarding a specific issue that could potentially block her mother-daughter relationship. She didn't *avoid* the problem because she told her mother how she felt, but she did recognize that this was an issue from which her mother would not budge. Her mother had made that clear: She was unwilling to entertain her daughter's views on this topic.

Sort Through the Laundry of Guilt

Could there ever be a book about mothers and daughters that doesn't talk about guilt when it comes to defensive reactions? If you

are a daughter, you have guilt over something! Guilt is like laundry. It just seems to pile up. To keep it from taking over the laundry room—or your relationship with your mom—you have to sort through it.

On the one hand, guilt is a good thing. It prevents us from continuing to misbehave or act out. We train our children to feel guilty when they've been disobedient. Ideally, guilt leads to confession of wrongdoing and repentance. True guilt should lead to change.

If you feel guilty because you've done something to hurt your mom, good. Go make it right. Don't just stare at your navel and feel guilty. Take action.

Jennifer had to do this. She felt extremely guilty for lying to her mom about a recent financial situation. A multitude of bad choices had left Jennifer in overwhelming debt. She was advised by an attorney to declare bankruptcy and was embarrassed to tell her mother. The guilt was getting to her. Every time she spoke to her mom, she felt she had to cover her lie. Her dishonesty was changing their relationship in a negative way. The solution was easy, though humbling. Jennifer had to go to her mom and tell her the truth. Then she asked for forgiveness. When she did, her mom was disappointed and felt betrayed by Jennifer's dishonesty. Mom forgave Jennifer but it took time to trust Jennifer again. However, Jennifer no longer carried around the heavy load of guilt.

On the other hand, guilt can be misplaced and unhealthy when we hang on to it and it isn't due to sin or misbehaving but rather is due to a failure to accept our limitations. Daughters often feel guilty over not being perfect daughters.

You may be holding on to unrealistic expectations, a topic we'll discuss in chapter 5. You can't be and do everything perfect as a daughter. You will and probably have made mistakes. That's okay, as long as you admit those mistakes, ask for forgiveness, and move on. Once you have sorted through the laundry, put it in the machine and let it get clean. You do this by confessing, repenting, and changing.

Jesus paid the price to cleanse you. When you ask Him to take away your sin, He does it—and doesn't remember it anymore. It's gone, clean, forgiven, over, done, in the past, and never to be remembered.

You may also need to work on changing your expectations. For example, can you really call your mom every single day? Is that healthy? Or do you need some separation? Can you always be there for her every need? Should you be? Perhaps your father, brother, or sister should pitch in to help. Will you always act in ways that she approves? Probably not, because you are two different people. Do you have guilt over her not accepting every part of you?

These questions are important to ask because so much guilt comes from not living up to a certain standard determined either by you or by your mom. In reality, we have only One to please: God. If you live your life according to His directives, He will honor you and be pleased. If it's at all possible, find out your mother's expectations of you by asking her what they are. Then try to negotiate if you feel they are unrealistic. Talk about what you realistically can do in the relationship.

I remember treating a young woman whose mother was upset with her because she wasn't sexually active. It sounds bizarre, but the mother was divorced and sleeping around. Mom's guilt was lessened by trying to bring the daughter into her lifestyle. Fortunately, the daughter saw this as crazy and refused to join her mother. Still, she struggled with guilt when her mom called her a prude. But the guilt was only momentary as she grounded herself in Scripture and confirmed that she was acting according to her beliefs. It's ironic but true: Taking a stance against your mom, even when your mom acts crazy, can still induce guilt.

If your mom tries to throw your past in your face, simply tell her to stop. You've dealt with the past, and she needs to stop bringing up what was already forgiven or reconciled. If *you* keep bringing up the past, you aren't playing fair either. The past, once resolved, needs to stay in the past.

While intellectually we can say, "Yes, God forgives me," living that out can be hard to do. Inappropriate guilt keeps us stuck, unable to move forward in the things God has for today and the future. God wants you free from guilt and shame—not so you can sin and exercise a form of cheap grace but so the true power of the cross can be revealed in your life. Embrace guilt when it leads to true repentance. Say goodbye to it when it leads to emotional captivity.

How do you stop feeling guilty? By releasing it to God. There is no magic formula here. Letting go of guilt happens when you recognize that the cross was sufficient for all your sins and you confess them. Hanging on to guilt is like saying Christ's sacrifice wasn't enough for you. Don't be misled. He died for *all* your sins. Confession, as the saying goes, is good for the soul because it gives you a fresh start. It is His amazing love that keeps us from condemnation.

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The more you can practice moving out of defensive communication with your mom, the more your relationship will improve. And even if she never changes, you will have the satisfaction and practice of using more supportive communication. This is beneficial to all your relationships. You will also be rewarded for your attempts to be like Christ in all you do. That road is never easy but it is the right way to proceed. Ask God to empower you to be more like Him in all you do.

Thought Points

1. What style do you tend to embrace when you become defensive with your mother?
2. What triggers send you into a defensive posture?
3. What do you want and expect from your mother-daughter relationship?
4. Study James 3 and consider how you can live out the principles shared there in your relationship with your mother.
5. Choose an issue that has caused conflict with your mother and try to problem-solve it.
6. Is there an issue in which you need to “drop the rope”?
7. Evaluate your relationship with your mother. Do you feel guilty about anything? If so, consider whether that guilt is healthy or unhealthy. If it's unhealthy, take steps to release it.