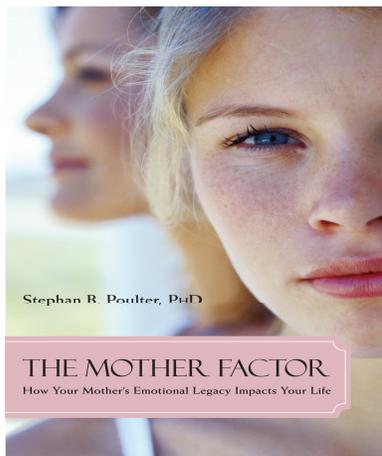




Excerpt: 'The Mother Factor'



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The following is an excerpt from "The Mother Factor: How Your Mother's Emotional Legacy Impacts Your Life" by Stephan Poulter

Our First Love Relationship

The first woman we ever loved was our mother! We may love many women later in life (girlfriends, lovers, sisters, friends, aunts, and daughters), but our mother was the first woman we've ever loved. This fact makes this relationship the most prominent factor in your emotional development. You were literally a part of your mother during her pregnancy. The wiring in your brain naturally makes you want to emotionally bond and connect with her. Babies want to be held, fed, and cared for by their mother. This initial bond becomes the seedbed and foundation from which all future emotional development, communication styles, personality types, and self-esteem formations evolve. No other relationship in your life has the potential to shape you like this one. The more you understand the emotional components of it, the more choices and opportunities will be available to you for relationship change and personal growth.

The mother-child bond can be likened to the sturdiness and operation of a car. You don't know what's really under the hood and how it will perform on the road until it leaves the factory--as when a child reaches adulthood and sets out on his own. The factory is the mother-child relationship that builds (develops) and installs the motor and all the necessary functioning parts. Knowing what's under the hood, your internal components, gives you the personal power and choices to further develop and create your own legacy. Whatever life circumstances you find yourself in require that you use your intelligence and emotional stability to properly navigate the conflicts and relationships on a personal, family, and professional level to create your own legacy.

It is your ability to emotionally function in different settings that becomes the strongest and most accurate indicator of your potential for personal, professional achievement--your legacy. Your ability to function in adult relationships, whether personal or professional, is directly connected to your mother factor legacy. The foundation of your emotional life, personality, and self-esteem started developing when you were a very young child.

It is the lack of bonding and unhealthy development that creates the early fractures (lack of trust, paranoia) in a person's psychological development and emotional foundation. These early fractures can be healed and resolved--but how? In order to heal and empower ourselves, we first must understand how our mother factor was constructed and formed. For all sons this is the first woman that we ever loved. For all daughters, this is also the first woman you ever loved and your first same-sex identification relationship. These naturally occurring bonds and early interactions create the powerful dynamic between a mother and son and mother and daughter. For a mother, the birth of her son or daughter arouses memories of her emotional connection with her own mother. As we move through these pages, we will repeatedly see how the power of this "first love relationship" has an enormous impact on our personal and professional life.

Some would think that the one thing that both mothers and children have in common--their time together from birth onward--would automatically create a positive emotional bond and a healthy, productive mother factor. Unfortunately, it doesn't always work out that way. The collective emotional experience of being in this relationship can create ripples and sometimes tidal waves in subsequent relationships that are felt for the duration of an adult child's life. It is this turmoil that can erupt in our emotional interactions and feelings, through our communication style and intimate relationships.

The wealth of literature on the power of our first love has been a topic of popular psychological mainstream discussion since Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Melanie Klein described the lifelong influence and power that mothers have on their children.² Since that time, it has become widely accepted that a child's emotional disposition is dramatically influenced, impacted, and shaped by the day-to-day interactions with his or her mother. The typical "blind spot" of this relationship is not understanding the legacy of these interactions where we assume that emotional stumbling blocks are random and inevitable. This type of narrow belief tends to be shortsighted and one of the biggest hurdles to fully comprehending the mother factor and using it productively. One of the primary goals here is to expand your understanding so that your mother factor legacy becomes a source of strength and power, both personally and professionally.

Mother Factor Issues

Some common beliefs, concerns, experiences, frustrations, and comments that sons and daughters make about their mother factor are listed below. When the topic of mothers is raised, hardly anyone is without an opinion. (Saying that you have no opinion about your mother or feeling numb toward her are very serious anger issues that will be discussed later.) Consider the following questions and statements and how they relate to your mother-child relationship in the past and present:

- Why does my girlfriend get along fabulously with her mother and I can hardly stand to be in the same room with mine?
- I wish I was close to my mother.
- I am very irritable with people when they don't follow through on things for me. My mother is the same way with me.
- My mother always told me, "No one will ever be good enough for you." I have never had a relationship last longer than six months (a forty-nine-year-old son revealed).
- Every time I talk to my mother, why does the discussion always focus on her?
- I felt invisible to my mother while I was growing up. She still doesn't know what I do every day.
- I don't trust women (a daughter admits).
- I never get very close (emotionally) to my girlfriends (a son speaking).

- I have no close girlfriends; all my friends are men (a daughter confides).
 - My mother's opinions, emotions, and communication style are a huge problem in my marriage: my wife hates my mother.
 - My partner says I act just like my mother when I get angry or frustrated with people.
 - I yell at people when I get upset.
 - I have always felt insecure in relationships. I have this uneasy feeling that I am not good enough.
 - While growing up, I found it impossible to speak with my mother about my feelings or emotions. Now I rarely express my thoughts or feelings to anyone.
 - I avoid calling or talking to my mother, and she makes me feel guilty for not calling more (a son speaking).
 - While growing up I felt that all roads led to my mother. She was the emotional commander in our house. My father never spoke unless my mother asked him a question.
 - My mother always told me to never let anyone know when you were angry or upset. You are too vulnerable if you tell others your true feelings.
 - Caring for my mother has caused me to always focus on others first and myself second. This pattern has made me very dependent on others and their opinion of me.
 - I got along better with my father than with my mother, while growing up.
- I am forty-five-year-old woman and I still hear my mother's voice in my head whenever I go against her rules or beliefs. Her voice is very critical and angry.

The admissions listed above are just a few of the issues that underlie a son's and daughter's emotional legacy. It is clear from this short list of concerns expressed by both adult men and adult women that the mother-child emotional relationship is a force that has a lifelong, residual impact that is not easily measured or understood. The more you understand your mother-child relationship, however, regardless of your age or life circumstances, the more choices, options, and positive changes will be available to you.

It is important to mention that this entire investigation into your mother factor is for the sole purpose of your gaining new, valuable insight and clarity, which will open more options to your life. Too often this type of discussion can go in the direction of blame, resentment, and anger. We will discuss at length the need to move beyond blame and finger-pointing (removing your stumbling blocks) and instead to heal old wounds. There is an old saying in psychology: you can't let go of what you don't know you're holding. We are going to focus on your mother factor from many different angles and perspectives to give you a more complete view of your own legacy. Once you have these new and crucial insights, you will have the personal power to make different choices, to let go of old self-defeating patterns, to take new and positive action, and to have a deeper sense of fulfillment.

The Mother Factor--Transcends Time, Death, Gender, and Intimacy

A very common obstacle to appreciating the profound effect of the mother factor is to rationalize away its significance. For example:

- My mother has been dead for ten years: how could she still have an impact on my relationships or the way I act now?
- I'm a man, so it makes more sense that my father, rather than my mother, would affect my emotional choices and relationships.
- I was never particularly close to my mother. I don't think she has much of an impact on my personal life today.
- My mother was a 1950s-1960s stay-at-home mom and she never had a professional paying job. How can she influence my professional choices and feelings?
- I never respected my mother's handling of emotional issues or her psychological maturity. I am completely different.
- My mother allowed my father to make all the decisions in the family, and I learned to follow my dad's lead, not my mothers.

Let's look at why each of these rationalizations is a very common blind spot and potential stumbling block to your future.

If your mother has died, that doesn't mean that the feelings from that relationship are dead too. Your unresolved feelings about your mother may be dormant or buried. Your mother's passing doesn't imply that the value or influence of her is at all diminished. Many of the most important relationships we will have in our lifetime are timeless and not confined to a particular stage of our life. We carry the residual impact of these relationships in our minds, emotions, and hearts for the duration of our existence. When women and men of all ages talk to me about the death of their mothers, even those who maintain that they didn't have a close relationship with their mom say they were surprised by how much they were affected by her death. People routinely use terms such as feeling "devastated" and "overwhelming loss" to describe their reaction. It is not unusual for daughters and sons to suffer from depression and hopelessness and/or to begin to question their life's meaning and purpose after their mother's death.

Years later, this death/loss still has tremendous power and influence. When some consider leaving a relationship or a business partnership, long after their mother has passed away, a number of them note that they can hear their mother's voice in their head, "I didn't raise my children to be quitters," and they heed that voice. When others decide to make a significant relationship or personal change, they often explain it by saying, "I didn't want to end up dying like my mom did, never having had the chance to do what I really wanted to do." Therefore, don't underestimate the impact of your mother on your personal life and relationships. If your mother is dead, recall the enormity of your feelings for her at the time of her death. If she's alive, talk to a trusted friend whose mother has passed away and ask him whether his personal life is affected by the memory of his mother. The meaning and power of your mother factor is in how you have incorporated her legacy into your everyday life. That impact transcends time, place, and death.

Many men--in fact, some women--believe that their father had more of an influence than their mother did over their personality and communication and relationship style. No one (particularly me--I wrote *The Father Factor!*) would argue the commonsense logic that fathers are invaluable to their children's development.³ In fact, in the world of stay-at-home mothers and emotionally and physically absent fathers (in which many of us were raised), mothers had the greatest daily impact on our lives, simply because they were there, dealing with us day-to-day. Regardless of who made the financial decisions in the house, your mother was an emotional force in your life.

Mothers, by virtue of their position in the home as the emotional caretaker, were and are the role models for their children and their interpersonal relationships. This primary relationship becomes the template for a child's adult emotional life. And because of the typical emotionally distant relationship between fathers and daughters/sons, a wound develops between father and child that often becomes the focal point of a child's life. Typically, mothers are mistakenly discounted in terms of importance and long-term emotional influence.

Adults tend to focus on the "problem parent," which in many cases is the absent, distant, or passive father. In such cases, mothers tend to get lost in the other parent's neglect, abandonment, or irresponsibility. If your relationship with your father was problematic, it is essential to understand the role that your mother had in your life. Mothers many times play the peacekeeper role between children and their fathers. This is the woman who taught you valuable skills; you were taught diplomatic methods and emotional intelligence (how to understand people's actions and raise questions without alienating them) by watching your mother manage family ("personnel") conflicts. You learned an incredible amount about relationship skills from your mother by observing her function every day.

Despite all of this, most of you from the baby boom generation were probably raised with a man as the primary breadwinner in your family. In the prototypical nuclear family or some variation of it, mothers were responsible for the everyday functioning of the family. This role hasn't been viewed--implicitly or explicitly--until very recently as being nearly as valuable as that of the

primary breadwinner role. Unfortunately, mothering for some time has been considered a second-class position within the family. This perspective about mothering, which only recently has become outdated as women's rights and roles have expanded, is problematic and very misleading. The value of mothers can't be limited to their economic contribution, but rather should be based on the bigger picture of their emotional contribution, despite the fact that some women today earn more than their husbands. The influence on an abstract emotional level rather than a monetary one is where a mother's full influence on her son or daughter can be properly understood. It is imperative to look at your mother from a symbolic perspective, not a monetary one. Your emotional life and personality were shaped by this relationship, not your mother's yearly income or credit rating.

It is an all-too-common mistake to minimize your mother's influence if she didn't work outside the home or provide the entire economic support for the family. Even if your mother worked in the stereotypical helping professions (teacher, nurse, social worker), it is a blind spot to consider her influence on your current relationships, professionally and personally, as minimal. Most of our mothers were given the nonverbal social and family message that the then masculine professions (lawyer, doctor, business executive) weren't the proper place for a woman. Assessing her influence by the male model yardstick of position, title, and wealth will tend to yield very little information or new insight. Your mother's impact on your life and career functioning supersedes these artificial walls of separation based on finances and power.

Women have been defined for thousands of years by how they functioned at home. Now women are not only being defined in the home but by their profession and career. Still, the home has been women's sanctuary and place of nurturing and healing for generations. It is impossible to minimize the impact that your "mother's home" had on your entire development and personality. Your home was the place where you learned how "life" worked. School, friendships, and work were and are the places that the home lessons were applied and used, and still are to this day. It is counterintuitive and a mistake to think that your home life with your mother didn't erect a cornerstone in your life.

For thousands of years, a child's development was the sole responsibility of the mother. This was based in part on the fact that men/fathers had to leave the house, children, and wife to find food, work, and later a career. Now these very entrenched social roles are becoming more adaptable to change and the needs of each individual family (blended families, second marriages, adoption, and other limitless combinations). The role that mothers play in their adult children's everyday choices--mate selection, professional relationships, emotional fulfillment, parenting style, sexuality, and communication--cannot be overstated.

Whether their mother was a homemaker or a college professor, many people dismiss the magnitude of their mother's influence on their life because the relationship was strained, emotionally painful, distant, or highly conflicted. They should consider these two vignettes:

Christina's story, thirty-seven years old: When I was growing up, my mother was an alcoholic who went to work everyday as a bookkeeper for a car dealership in town. When I was fifteen years old, I moved out of the house because I couldn't stand my mother. We didn't talk for seven years. I realized one day while driving that I spent most of my time consciously or unconsciously trying to prove my mother wrong and prove myself right. I realized that in this way I was really just as close to her as when I lived with her. I just didn't talk to her for seven years. Once I stopped fighting my mother in my head, I began to understand her much better. Now we get along better too and I appreciate her and her ability to focus at work everyday. I thought my anger was what kept me away from my mother, but it really kept me right next to her. I was completely shocked to realize how emotionally close I was to her, when I thought we were really very distant. Her drinking was her way of dealing with life and my anger was my way of dealing with her.

Danny's story, twenty-eight years old: I will never forget the day I heard about my mother's death. All my disappointments and frustration with her vanished in a second. I couldn't believe how my

feelings immediately changed toward my mom and have never gone backwards. I always told people that we weren't close or anything alike. Now, five years after her death, I am more like my mother than I ever suspected or thought was possible. I wasn't aware growing up how much she shaped my attitudes, my personality, my emotional reactions, my parenting, my marriage, and my life. I feel bad that I spent so many years and precious time fighting with her about ridiculous stuff.

Now I hear myself talking and know it is still my mother's voice in my head and heart. Christina's and Danny's stories are far more the rule than the exception in regard to the emotional legacy of mothers. It is impossible for a child with as highly a conflicted relationship as Christina and Danny had with their mothers not to be emotionally bonded with their mother. On the surface it may appear that you and your mother have nothing in common. Usually it is quite the opposite, and the truth is you have many things in common with your mother. The problem is that the extensive and murky overlap of thoughts and feelings between you and your mother may be unclear, and you need to sort these out. Remember, you are creating your own emotional legacy for the people in your life.

Finally, your mother may not have been the career role model, relationship model, or parenting model, or even the type of person you care to emulate. Given that, the slippery slope of anger, resentment, and bitterness may build to the point that many daughters and sons, regardless of age, fall into the trap of desperately trying to become the person their mother never was. This relationship approach is an understandable reaction to the family trauma that many children experienced growing up. There is often an edge of aggressiveness and cold-heartedness to adults who have never resolved or come to terms with who and what their mother was. In addition, they may never reconcile themselves with what happened positively and negatively in the relationship.

The driving force in these sons' and daughters' lives is the complete rejection of who and what their mother was as a parent. The challenge for these adult children is overcoming the painful disappointment and disillusionment of their memories of their mother. The ability to trust others and form meaningful long-term relationships are difficult tasks for adults who have had this type of mother-child relationship.

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