

Mother Hunger

Kelly McDaniel LPC

Do you identify with any of the following?

- deep sense of isolation from your family
- a sharp awareness of death
- overall feeling of being “stuck” emotionally
- feel younger than your peers but sometimes act older
- inclined to look for nurturing from a partner who can’t meet your needs

This list is from Hope Edelman’s book *Motherless Daughters*. In her book, Edelman offers help for women who experience early maternal death. She writes, “at some very deep level, nobody wants to believe that motherless children exist.” She continues to explain how “...in our psyches ...mother represents *comfort and security* no matter what our age.” Edelman explains this phenomenon by saying, “The motherless child symbolizes a darker, less fortunate self. Her plight is everyone’s nightmare...to accept the magnitude of her loss, or the duration of her mourning, would mean to *acknowledge the same potential for oneself.*” (my italics)

Motherless Daughters

As a population, our cultural expectations of “mother” are high. Our need for a mother’s understanding and affection is great. Novels, fairy tales, television and movies fill our minds with images of “mother” that can be either fantastical or nightmarish. Frequently, women don’t want to examine the relationship with their mother, however, for women addicted to sex, love, and relationships, examining the maternal bond is not elective. Since our first relationship is with our mother, her love (or neglect, abuse, immaturity) sets the relational template for life.

Scientists have determined that the early relationship between the mother and child neurologically imprints on the infant’s nervous system, becoming a template for future emotional relationships.

For women struggling with sex and love addiction, examining maternal connection is critical to healing addictive patterns of relating to others. Avoiding this important process can delay recovery and mental wellness. Although examining the maternal bond is a cornerstone of successful recovery, the pace cannot be rushed. Each woman will come to terms with her “mother hunger” when her body/mind can support the close examination.

Science supports taking the maternal bond seriously. In mainstream Psychology Today, an article about mothers reads as follows:

By measuring parts of the brain, researchers such as Allan Schore at UCLA’s Department of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences, are learning that the brains of children lovingly nurtured in infancy look markedly different from the brains of children who have been starved for affection. In other words, emotional deprivation during the first two years of life will literally alter the functioning and chemistry of the brain—as well as the individual’s ability to cope with stress and emotional difficulties later in life.

This popular publication goes on to assert how a relationship with an abusive mother presents challenges that a difficult father does not. “While an abusive father is devastating, an abusive mother shakes the foundation for a sense of self.” (Jan/Feb, 2010) Science is proving what psychotherapists have been treating for decades: maternal attachment affects mental health.

Are you primarily avoidant, finding relationships tiring and suffocating? Or do you crave closeness, feeling hungry all the time? An abusive mother puts a daughter in a double bind: Love me/neglect you. Love you/neglect me. For sex and love addicts, most relationships follow a pattern: *You or me. Only one of us can be happy at a time.* To avoid this isolating, impossible arrangement, women avoid intimacy (pornography, trading sex, or social anorexia) or binge/purge (multiple partners and/or affairs that start fast and end badly).

Female sex and love addicts identify with symptoms that women who experience premature maternal death have. When “mom” is still alive, however, it can be almost impossible to explore maternal abandonment and abuse. The bond is too important, even if you don’t like your mother or she suffocated you. The grief of not having maternal comfort and protection is so profound for a daughter that it is often delayed (avoided), transferred (projected), or arrested (denied).

Delayed:

Research tells us that children often do not show symptoms of grief, neglect, or trauma until later in life. For this reason, grown women may not attribute psychological or behavioral difficulty to mother hunger. The following are a list of typical signs of mother loss that might be delayed until later in life:

- *Aggressive or disruptive behavior*
- *Social discomfort and avoidance*
- *Chronic relational disturbance*
- *Chronic depression*

Transferred:

A child cannot exist “emotionally” alone without significant cost to her brain development. When a mother is not safe and/or available to her daughter, her daughter is left in “condemned isolation.” She feels shameful (damaged, wrong). A daughter internalizes the lack of connection with her mother as her fault. She will go through amazing psychological gymnastics to avoid feeling shut off and alone. One way to avoid feeling isolated is to quickly and completely transfer normal feelings of dependency, needs, and expectations onto the nearest available person. This could be: father, sibling, friend, relative, teacher, neighbor, minister, or therapist. Oftentimes, children transfer the need for love to a pet. Transference can be helpful if the new attachment is healthy. However, transference serves to delay **identification** of the mother wound, leaving a woman looking for the original bond in every other relationship (or with excessive care and bonding with pets). She will be continually romantically and socially disappointed. Change occurs when mother hunger is identified, and the original mother wound is healed. Strategies of transferred grief may include:

- *Love addiction/sex addiction*
- *Hoarding/collecting excessive things or animals*
- *Substance abuse/disordered eating*
- *Troubled friendships*
- *Damaged bonds with children*

Arrested:

Without the socializing influence of a healthy mother (mental illness, addiction, death, depression, immaturity), you may have been forced to develop prematurely in some areas of life, taking responsibility for yourself, siblings, or another adult before your needs were adequately met. While your behavior seems adult, your emotional self feels young. Growing up seems like something that happens to other women, not you. *Arrested development* leaves you feeling younger than women your age, as if they received a rulebook that you didn't. Signs of arrested development include:

- *Trouble emotionally connecting with tasks and responsibilities normally associated with your chronological age*
- *Emotional immaturity/feeling or acting younger than your age*
- *Romantic hopes of finding someone who will take care of you*
- *Lack of healthy self-care*