

What lies within

coaching and the legacy
of trauma between
mothers and daughters



Julia Vaughan Smith explores the relationship between daughters and their mothers, and the role that coaching can play in helping women disentangle themselves from the knots that bind them to the past

Many daughters have fraught and challenging relationships with their mothers. When the topic comes up among groups of women, those present often roll their eyes in recognition. The extent of tension in the mother-daughter relationship can range from mild annoyance to feeling tied by duty or responsibility, and being continually criticised or ignored by mother, despite trying to respond to her needs. The daughter feels she is caught in a tangled web, which just gets tighter.

The knots in this web are the legacies of emotional trauma (sometimes called attachment or development trauma): that of the daughter, the mother, and – since all mothers are daughters too – the grandmother. We are like Russian dolls, aspects of ourselves embedded in each other. Trauma is passed on through the generations; we carry that legacy within us together with that from our own life experience.^{1,2} In childhood, we are vulnerable to the behaviour of adults around and towards us; we do all we can to adapt to stay attached. In painful adult relationships, the ‘there and then’ runs the relationship in the ‘here and now’.³

We may think this is the territory of counselling and therapy; however, such relationships and the trauma they carry often come into coaching. The question is, as coaches, how do we respond?

What’s going on?

Catherine is presenting two entangled relationships here: the one with her mother and the other with her employer. Any relationship can become entangled as we try to get our unmet

Catherine’s story

Catherine, a woman in her mid-40s, tells me about how she hangs onto jobs and relationships for longer than is good for her. In her current employment, Catherine describes how she ‘gives a lot’ but never feels recognised or valued by her boss. Catherine is exploring how she wants to live the next phase of her life and what her next career move will be. This could involve moving further away from her mother. She experiences her mother as indifferent towards her and wonders if her mother wanted to have children at all.

In one session, Catherine arrives full of frustration and rage from a phone call with her mother. She describes herself as a dutiful daughter, who feels responsible for her mother’s unhappiness. She explains that her mother never considers her or asks about her or her life, and she experiences her as narcissistic. Catherine repeatedly feels hurt and deep resentment.

Part of Catherine longs to move hundreds of miles away but another part is fearful that that her mother wouldn’t cope without her and that she would spend every weekend driving back and forth on the motorway. This, together with her anxiety at leaving her current employment, are key elements in Catherine exploring what she wants for herself.

needs from the past met in the present.¹ Such relationships are rarely satisfying and often carry resentment, hurt and anger.

In Catherine’s case, her entanglement patterns involve giving her time and energy trying to please, to be noticed and valued by both her mother and her employer. It is likely that this pattern developed in childhood in a desperate attempt to have any kind of contact she could with her mother. Her needs are dismissed by her mother, and now also by herself. These are deeply rooted patterns linked to fears of abandonment and feelings of not being loved. Entangled patterns include rescuing others and clinging on to a hope that if we do enough for them, then we will be loved and seen. They carry injunctions such as *I must, I have to, I can’t*.

Continuing these behaviour patterns increases suffering for daughters as they can never find in the present what they need to fill the void left from the past.

Many different factors in childhood affect a daughter’s (and son’s) relationship with their mother, leaving lasting trauma legacy.^{1,3,4} High stress in the mother during and after pregnancy; the pregnancy being unwanted; poor attunement by the mother; parenting styles; violence and abuse in the family (including from the mother); and the legacy of trauma in the mother that is enacted in her child rearing all play their part. It is also possible that some mothers carry unrecognised neurodiversity that has affected their mothering.⁵

Catherine shared with me her feeling that her mother didn’t want children, so perhaps it is hard for Catherine to feel wanted for herself. Mothers are daughters too and while we don’t know anything about Catherine’s mother’s early experience, we can imagine that she suffered as a child and this is how she has survived.

Why does Catherine, and other daughters in entangled relationships, keep going back for more? Some of the key factors include the fear of abandonment and the hope that, one day, if she tries hard enough, her mother will treat her lovingly and see her fully. It is a form of distorted love; there is love (maybe), but it can’t be given or received other than through this survival attachment. The more we repeat the pattern, the more the daughter’s suffering increases. Examples of entangled daughter/mother relationships include:⁵

- The daughter who becomes the parent to a mother;
- The dutiful daughter;
- The daughter as rescuer to mother (and often to others);
- The daughter who feels a weight of responsibility towards her mother (and others);
- The daughter who feels smothered by her mother and whom she feels she has to appease;
- The daughter who is repeatedly hurt by her mother’s criticism;
- The daughter who is self-sacrificing, maybe playing down her intelligence or life achievements so as not to out-do her mother;
- The daughter who finds her mother’s distancing unbearable and who keeps trying to get closer to her.

Catherine may fit into several of these categories.

In all entangled relationships, including those not listed here, the daughter is caught in a web. She denies her own needs

and keeps silent about how she is hurt or feels abused. She feels angry, and then guilty about being angry. She feels a burning resentment and responsibility for her mother's wellbeing; she may take this sense of being responsible into many other areas of her life. She is likely to carry thoughts about not being good enough.

It can feel as if there is no way out, no other relationship being possible, as the tangled web is tightly woven around us. At the core is emotional trauma; Catherine's from her childhood and her mother's trauma from her own. Possibly, her mother developed a narcissistic approach as a way to survive her own childhood. She took this into her mothering, and Catherine as a baby, infant and child, was the vulnerable, dependent recipient. Whatever her experience, the legacy is now in Catherine for her to deal with. This isn't about Catherine: it is about her mother's way of surviving. Catherine can't make up for the losses and pain of her mother's childhood. It can help as part of the process of disentanglement, to become more aware of the mother's, and grandmother's, history and what legacy they carry, to see her as a full person and maybe find compassion for her experience.

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It didn't start with us, nor did it start with our mother

There is often a temptation to blame the mother or for the daughter to blame herself, but this is part of the entanglement. It rarely leads to change, just deepens the hurt and resentment. As we go back into the generations, we find behaviour and life events that resulted in the trauma responses. No generation is free from these deep challenges and traumatising conditions. We can't change our past; we can only change our relation to it in the present.

Let go of blame, instead focus on what we need for ourselves

We carry these trauma dynamics until we feel safe enough to explore them, and while this is often carried out within a therapeutic space, coaching can also be valuable in the presence of trauma.⁶

Any successful coaching contribution comes through an understanding of the impact of trauma on the psyche and on the body. We are often coaching in the presence of trauma, even if it is not a presenting factor.⁶

We can only change in the present, which is the territory of coaching.

First, we have to decide whether to step into a change process or not. If changing patterns were easy, we wouldn't get stuck in them.

We can't change our mother, we can only change our responses to her

Disentangling ourselves from the ties that bind has several steps, which rarely follow a straight line, and we often slip back into the old patterns. The starting point is awareness, bringing unconscious patterns into conscious awareness where we can explore them and make choices about them. It is important to do this with compassion and without judgment, recognising we developed them with the intention of protecting ourselves. In respecting the patterns, we can engage curiosity and creativity to explore what keeps them in place and what triggers them. We may recognise some of our hopes and beliefs, for example, if I do enough she will look at me with love. Our mother's behaviour, although often painful to us, isn't about us, it is about how she has survived within close relationships. We can then explore the difference between an entangled relationship and a healthy caring one, where we take our own wellbeing seriously, refuse to be spoken to in an undermining way and decide if, how and to what extent we wish to take on a caretaker role.⁵ We may decide that doing therapeutic work may be helpful to us so that we can get to the roots of the entanglement.

What does this mean for the coaching with Catherine?

Coaching in the presence of trauma requires the coach to be able to be fully grounded, attuned to the client and present. We need to have somatic awareness, and recognise when judgment or collusion arises, or when we move away from being attuned to the client. This contributes to a sense of safety for the client and ourselves. This sounds easy, but often it isn't; we need to keep enhancing our capacity to be fully present.²

Once we understand the dynamics, and how we coaches might also be caught up in them, there are no new special skills needed, unless the coach is interested in training in internal family systems,⁷ which offers other ways of facilitating change with trauma symptoms. This approach uses the idea of the psyche having 'parts'; bundles of feelings, thoughts and sensations, that carry the burdens of trauma, and working with those in particular ways. In Catherine's case, it is likely she has a part that feels responsible, a part that is focused on pleasing others. This approach emphasises how important it is to respect and welcome all parts of ourselves; unless this happens, we can't soften, space can't open up around us and change isn't possible. It challenges other approaches that may suggest 'getting rid of' parts we don't like; for example, an angry and resentful part. Instead, all parts are to be welcomed, explored and befriended as they all have positive intentions for us and served us well as children.

Within coaching we have many interventions that contribute to this exploration. Powerful questions – those that start with *how?*, *what?*, *when?*, that are brief and intended to prompt thinking and insight by the client⁸ – are aimed at the healthy part of the client's psyche, that which can be curious, self-compassionate and creative. In using such questions, we are inviting the healthy resources or parts of the client to communicate with the feelings and behaviour that keep the destructive patterns in place.

We could also invite Catherine to notice when she says 'yes' to something, but carries inside her an unspoken 'no'. This may



give rise to some of the beliefs and feelings that lie behind her responding in this way. We could ask Catherine: 'What are you saying no to that you would like to say yes to in your own life?'⁹

We could also invite Catherine to set out what happens with her mother: what her mother says and how Catherine responds, what her thoughts are, what she feels, and how she responds over a typical phone call or visit. We can validate and honour her responses.

Finally, we can offer an element of psycho-education about these types of relationships, and how we can get caught up in them and how they carry shadows of the past. Not everyone understands how great the link is between past experience and what is happening in the present.

It shouldn't be an aim of coaching, or therapy, that the client is able to forgive her mother or to feel compassion for her.¹⁰ It is important we have self-compassion and forgive ourselves for feeling angry or hurt or vindictive. There is often pressure to 'forgive' the one who hurt us from a belief that this is healing. We can be compassionate towards the other for what they endured as a child and be compassionate for our own suffering. Maybe in so doing we can let go of our anger, resentment and what has bound us and experience the release in doing so. Having done work on ourselves and explored our mother's history of her childhood, we can see that it was never about us, always about how she had learnt to survive. If we can get to that place, it takes the burden of responsibility away from us.

Coaching in the presence of trauma focuses on involving the healthy resources within the client so that they can explore the patterns they wish to change, while at the same time honouring and respecting those patterns. Within our coaching competences, we can support our client to hold the past in mind, while engaging with the legacy in the present. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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