

CHERI FULLER & ALI PLUM

MOTHER DAUGHTER
Duet

Getting to the Relationship You Want
with Your Adult Daughter



Praise for
Mother-Daughter Duet

“The special bond between mothers and daughters doesn’t have to vanish as our daughters leave the nest. Written with honesty, insight, and love, Cheri Fuller and Ali Plum take turns giving inspiring advice and practical tips on how mothers and daughters can forge an alliance that offers meaningful gifts to each other. This sweet book will be a wonderful bridge between mothers and their adult daughters.”

—SHARON HERSH, author of *The Last Addiction* and
Bravehearts

“Got conflict? Cheri Fuller and Ali Plum have a book that will help you understand the challenges and transitions of the mother-daughter relationship. With meticulous research, personal vulnerability, and ‘right-on’ wisdom, they reveal tools that bring resolution, understanding, and transformation to complicated relationships. Don’t be surprised if you recognize a version of your own story in this not-to-be-missed book. You’ll find answers that produce positive results.”

—CAROL KENT, speaker and author of *When I Lay My
Isaac Down*

“*Mother-Daughter Duet* is a wonderful book, a story told from the heart, full of ideas on how to connect in loving, healthy ways with our daughters and even our daughters-in-law.”

—JENNIFER ROTHSCHILD, speaker and author of *Lessons I
Learned in the Dark*

“We shared *Mother-Daughter Duet* around our office, and we all gained help and hope for relationships with daughters, daughters-in-law, and our own mothers! Thanks for a very honest practical read.”

—PAM FARREL, relationship specialist, international speaker,
and author of more than thirty books

“Disarmingly honest and inspiring, this amazing book will become your trusted guide through the mysterious waters in your own mother-daughter relationship. If you’ve ever been tempted to drive four hundred miles to take your sad daughter to lunch, or felt the need to escape your mom’s presence abruptly, or hide dark emotions from an overly concerned mom, you’ll love the honest insights in the section, ‘A Daughter’s Perspective.’ This book will bring hope for now and help for the uncharted relational territory to come.”

—LESLIE PARROTT, founder of Realrelationships.com and
author of *You Matter More Than You Think*.

“*Mother-Daughter Duet* is a helpful and wise resource for those struggling with mother-daughter relationship issues. I gleaned some great tips that will help me be a better friend to my adult daughter.”

—LESLIE VERNICK, licensed counselor, speaker, and author
of *Lord, I Just Want to be Happy* and *The Emotionally
Destructive Relationship*

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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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FROM CHERI

*To my sisters, the best gifts Mama and Papa left us:
Diana, Martha (who's graduated to heaven),
Georgia, and Marilyn, and brother George.
I'm grateful for you all and love you.*



FROM ALI

*For my mom, who taught me by example how to be a lifelong learner.
Thank you for showing me the joy of writing,
patiently reading every word from kindergarten to cowriting.
We have journeyed together and weathered many storms.
You have been the best traveling companion a daughter
could ever have. Thank you for showing me how to travel so well.*

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Introduction

AN INTRICATE DUET

We all hope to feel our mother's arm around our shoulders when we're worried, to feel it gently let go when life calms down. It's an intricate duet that moms and daughters dance—one backing off when the other needs space, moving up close when the unfamiliar threatens.

—CATHIE KRYCZKA, WWW.TODAYSPARENT.COM

 One late afternoon seven years ago, I took care of my daughter's baby and toddler boys while she went to the doctor. I walked around the house, holding four-month-old Luke in my arms, patting his little back and singing to him to help his colic. Today he's a healthy seven-year-old, but those were stressful months—and long nights of Ali being up with night-owl baby Luke. My daughter's young family lived with us at the time, so I helped whenever I could.

“Hungry, Nandy! Nuggets! Cheerios!” twenty-month-old Noah implored. Holding Luke, I raced around the kitchen, popping chicken nuggets on a cookie sheet and into the oven, then handing him a cup of Cheerios to stave off his hunger. I turned on a Barney video to entertain Noah while the chicken nuggets baked and kept patting and rocking Luke. Needless to say, after two hours this grandma was pooped!

When Ali walked in, she took Luke from me and gave him a kiss. I offered her a glass of iced tea and a muffin, and we sat down in the family room. I was hoping we could talk since Luke had simmered down a bit.

“How’d your doctor’s appointment go?”

After her brief answer I said, “You know, honey, I read this week that when a nursing mom consumes citrus fruits, dairy, and even caffeine, it can cause gas in the baby. Cutting those out might help Luke cry less. What do you think?”

In seconds I knew I’d said the wrong thing.

“With Luke awake all night, how do you think I could get through the day without several cups of coffee? I can’t cut out caffeine!”

Then I started trying to explain that the article had suggested she could drink black or green tea instead. Mistake number two. That just made her madder.

“You just don’t understand, and you’re so annoying,” she said, grabbing her diaper bag. She took Noah’s hand and headed for the door. “I’m going for a ride.”

I was sorry to have irritated her, and I believed I was only trying to help by offering a little suggestion. No chat, no thank-yous for caring for the boys; just biting my head off and leaving.

I often had no idea what kind of mood my daughter would be in—angry or euphoric, depressed or pleasant. Occasionally we had some great moments together, but those were becoming few and far between. Many times when we were around each other, I felt I couldn’t do anything right. Whenever I opened my mouth, whatever I did, no matter how loving my intention—it would irritate her. She’d be exasperated and say, “Oh Mom!” or say nothing at all.

Her resentment hurt. I felt her disdain and judgment and didn’t know where it was coming from or what I’d done to deserve it. I could

see she was trying to separate and be her own person, and I was trying to give her the space she needed. I was also aware of our differences, but they didn't explain her attitude toward me or the distance between us.

Time after time I was driven to God and prayer—not as a last resort but because he told us to cast our cares, concerns, and worries on him (1 Peter 5:7)—and I definitely had some concerns for my relationship with my daughter. I asked for strength and wisdom to know how to be a support to her in this transition time. I knew prayer was the greatest influence in my children's lives—especially now that they were gone from home—and I'd prayed countless prayers for her over the months and years. But nothing seemed to change in our relationship.

I just wanted my daughter back, the daughter I'd carried for nine months and held until she crawled and then learned to walk—the much-anticipated only daughter whose birth was surrounded with so much joy it was like Christmas Day although it was November. I wanted the daughter back who'd giggled as I pushed her in the swing at the park, smiled with her shining blue eyes in pictures, and loved for us to hop on our bikes and ride to Braum's for an ice cream cone. And who, after winter school days, even in her preteen and early teenage years, asked me to stop for hot cocoa and talk. I just wanted us to get along like we used to.

I loved my daughter immensely and didn't understand why as a young adult she was so angry with me and why she kept pushing me away. I gave her—and our relationship—to God so many times I can't count, yet the rift in our relationship lasted through most of her twenties.

Though I held fast to my faith during those years, I sometimes wondered, *Will we ever have harmony between us or will her attitude toward me always be laced with hostility? Is our connection forever lost? Is she always going to be annoyed with me? Will we ever enjoy each other again?* I didn't know.

THE MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP: A DUET OF SHADE AND LIGHT

We aren't the only mother and daughter pair who've struggled or had tension in their relationship. It's common for a mother and daughter's interaction to be rocky during the transition from adolescence and the twenties and even through adulthood. The mom-daughter connection is an intricate, close relationship that is static and changing at the same time. It's static because of the strong bond we've had since our children's birth, and it's changing because we're human and our daughters are going through different stages of life, as we are as well. Even as our relationship spans the decades and seasons, it's a paradox, and that's why it's complicated.

Think of all the history you have with your daughter, all the bonding and good times. First birthday and first day of school. First stitches and ballet shoes. School programs, Brownie Scout meetings, and inevitable skinned knees. First pierced earrings, lipstick, heels, and dates. Graduation and all the years and laughter and tears—and arguments—in between.

The closeness of the mother-daughter bond holds much potential for conflict. Usually the conflict starts in the teenage years, if not before. When your daughter was little, she may have clip-clopped around in your red high heels and said, "Mommy, I want to be just like you when I grow up!" Yet when she arrived at adolescence, she started rolling her eyes at your advice and letting you know that she didn't want to be *anything* like you.

Sound familiar? You're not alone, but there is hope. I too found my daughter's separating-transitioning-individuating times difficult, and often baffling, as you'll read about in the pages ahead.

Yet today, about twelve years later, Ali and I have the friendship—

the mother-daughter duet—I'd hoped for. We understand each other more, accept each other, and even appreciate our differences. We have forgiven each other for many hurts and made peace with the past. Most of the time we truly enjoy each other's company and friendship. But it was not a quick process. It took a lot of work to get here. For a long while it seemed that when we were together, we clashed like a junior high school band more than we harmonized like a skilled orchestra—and there was no way we were going to sing a duet. We had no idea what a long journey it would be, but it's definitely been worth the effort.

Along the way toward figuring out why things were strained between us and getting to a healthier, more enjoyable relationship, we discovered principles you'll find woven through the stories and chapters ahead—like letting go, respecting and believing in your daughter, listening and taking care of yourself—and the powerful effect of forgiveness. All of these have helped turn our relationship around.

CONVERSATIONS WITH MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS

Every mother and daughter has a unique story of their relationship and life. That's why Ali and I share our story as well as those of other moms and daughters of different ages and from different places. Over a period of many months, we interviewed many women. When I went to speak at a women's event in Dallas, Texas, or a rural area of Kansas, the Washington DC area, or California, I sat down and talked with women about their mother-daughter relationships: *What was the hot button or issue that brought conflict between you? What's the best way you've found to connect? What are the communication barriers—things you say that your daughter reacts to?*

If it was daughters I was talking with, I asked: *What does your mom say that makes you want to stop the conversation? What do you need from*

your mom? What can your mom do to help your relationship? To moms we asked: What's different about your daughter's and your generations? What was your relationship with your own mother like? What's a story you could tell me that shows how a turnaround happened in your mom-daughter relationship?

Though when we started Ali intended to interview the daughters and I the moms, she ended up interviewing some insightful mothers and I learned so much from talking with daughters. In coffee shops, restaurants, and airports, in our neighborhood, church, and other cities, via e-mail and Facebook, Ali and I talked with daughters from college age to forty-something and with moms from their late thirties to their seventies. We heard what they love about each other and what hurts and annoys them, what they like to do together and how they reconciled after a period of distance—and we share many of their stories in the chapters ahead.

IS THIS BOOK FOR YOU?

Looking into the past to process what had happened in our relationship is the hardest thing either of us has ever done. But we were willing to go there because we know what it's like to come out of the struggle and conflict to relate as equals and adult friends and how enormously satisfying that is. Because of our experience, we want to provide hope for discouraged moms who think their daughters are too far gone, or for the mom who simply doesn't understand her daughter or just longs for a closer, more connected relationship.

We've heard so many women talk about their struggles and hopes in relationship to their moms or daughters. They spoke with candor and angst when it came to past and present experiences. Ali's section, "A Daughter's Perspective," is a portal to help moms better understand what their daughters might be feeling in order to gain more effective ways to

relate to them. In this part of each chapter, you'll hear what your daughter might be thinking or has been trying to tell you for a long time. It's our hope that it may even produce an "aha!" moment that can empower and encourage you.

Maybe as you read our story, you'll think the issues facing you and your daughter are quite different than ours. Perhaps you get into shouting matches or exist in a cold war of silence because so many subjects are taboo, thus avoiding the issues that keep you apart. Your daughter is a woman now and thinks you're still mothering her, so she pushes you away. Or maybe your daughter knows exactly how to push your buttons and relishes doing so. Or you raised her in a good church and now she'll have nothing to do with your "religion." Perhaps your daughter has moved across the country or across the world, and you wonder if the distance in miles reflects the disconnection between you.

Whatever the specifics of your situation, maybe you are thinking, *I'm so discouraged with my adult daughter. I don't know what's wrong, but we just don't get along. We surely don't have the relationship I'd longed for.* Or perhaps, *Our connection is good but I want it to grow. And sometimes I worry about the choices she's making...* This book can help.

Regardless of your past, present, or impending future, you and your daughter can be reunited; your relationship can be more satisfying. It's never too late to find the strength that comes from forgiveness and acceptance, the peace received from understanding and empathy. We hope that through the pages ahead you'll find ways to step into your daughter's shoes, or to reflect on your relationship with your own mother, or perhaps discover glimpses of hope and encouragement if your daughter is in crisis or estranged from you.

You'll read some things we moms often unknowingly do and say that can either undermine or build the relationship. We've also tucked in countless ways to help you connect or reconnect with your adult daughter,

as well as some building blocks for a lifelong friendship. Discussion Questions are added for you to gather some moms and have your own conversations about the issues in the book. There are questions for each chapter, ideal for discussion in a small group, book club, or for individual reflection.

Ali and I haven't arrived. We are two very different, imperfect women who have worked on our relationship and learned to get along and enjoy and accept each other, but not without struggle along the way. We encourage each other and often make each other laugh. Yet we still have days when we are relating in an "off-key" way. We sometimes agree and other times disagree. But we've discovered an enduring bond—a mother-daughter duet—that enriches both of our lives.

You and your daughter can too.

It starts with you, Mom, even if it seems your daughter is unwilling. You can make the first move. You can change your approach and find new ways to relate to her. And a new relationship can grow through all the seasons that are ahead for both of you.



LETTING GO



It was hard when you went away—
for how was I to know
The serendipity of letting go
would be seeing you come home again
and meeting in a new way
woman to woman—
friend to friend.

—MARILEE ZDENEK, *SPLINTERS IN MY PRIDE*¹



The college and career years are a transitional time, whether your daughter takes a conventional route to a four-year university a state away, attends a community college, settles into a job and her own apartment, or pursues an entirely different path such as joining the Peace Corps or moving to New York for culinary school, or maybe she has a baby right out of high school or moves in with her boyfriend. For daughters, it's a journey toward individuation—that is, being able to live independently from parents. For moms, it may be a time of angst, worry (*Can she make it without me?*), and even a sense of loss (*Where did my baby go?*).

In the midst of these changes, a daughter needs three major components in order to live independently and become a purposeful and

confident adult: a sense of belonging, a feeling of being loved and worthwhile, and a sense of being capable. You provided the first two—a feeling of belonging and being worthwhile—the best you knew how as you raised her. By providing her with nurture and care from infancy throughout her growing-up years, you built the foundation for her growing sense of value and worth. Not a perfect foundation because none of us do the challenging job of raising kids flawlessly. There are no perfect parents.

But a young woman also needs the vital “capability component.” She needs to become independent and see herself as a *separate entity* who has the ability to cope with life on her own and build her own relationships, career, and family *apart from her parents*. In other words, she needs a *clear sense of separation with attachment*, which means being able to feel good as a separate person while staying in relationship with her mother.

Sometimes we unwittingly derail a daughter’s separation and capability component by clinging and controlling rather than letting go. Although we want her to find her true self and her purpose, some of the things we moms say and do are counterproductive to that very process.

“Do you want to create an adult baby? Then hang on to your daughter,” said Marie Chapiro in *Mothers and Daughters*, by reminding her you’re the only one who truly loves and understands her, telling her often how you don’t know how to make it without her. “Do your best to keep her needy and dependent,” Chapiro adds. “Put your own life on hold, and remind her regularly you don’t know where she’d be without you.”²

Like many other challenges in life, letting go of our kids is easier said than done. While dads may feel sad when they have to say good-bye to their children, moms normally experience the pain of letting go more intensely, especially with daughters.

As I shared in my book *When Mothers Pray*, releasing our children is perhaps the hardest work of motherhood, and that’s why we resist it. Our “monster mother thing,” the Mama Bear heart, is like those little creatures

in cereal boxes that grow and grow when you put them in water. Our mother heart emerges when we're expecting and causes us to nurture and protect and care for our child. It's also what fuels a mom to lift a heavy car off her child in an accident or a single mother to work three jobs to send her daughter to a good college so she can reach her dreams. That natural protectiveness also motivates us to put a megafilter on our teenager's computer to shield her from online predators.

But along with this mother role come worry, anxiety, and fear—and the struggle to let go of the active mothering role we've had for so long. It doesn't happen overnight. Usually the releasing process happens in stages, much like letting a kite out. A little string was let out when she took her Princess Barbie lunch box and walked into the kindergarten room, more was let out when she went away to summer camp for two weeks, and that kite string went *way out* when she got the car keys and started driving. You've probably already discovered that letting go isn't a one-time event; it continues to be important throughout our daughters' lives and ours.

But when your beloved daughter piles her flip-flops, iPod, high heels, designer jeans, and earthly belongings in her car, flashes you a smile that cost over \$3,000, and leaves home to go to college or to move into an apartment of her own, it's a defining moment. Later, a wedding may call for a deeper letting go. But for now, a page is turned, this chapter is over. The structure of your day changes, especially if this is the last child to leave. Many mothers wonder if they are now irrelevant, what their role will be, or if life will ever be as much fun again. Even if the day-to-day interaction with your daughter involved arguments or power struggles, you still miss her!

EQUIPMENT FOR THE LETTING-GO JOURNEY

Just as you need some basic equipment when you go on a hiking trip, you'll need some things to let your daughter go in a healthy and grace-filled way.

First, *a new set of glasses* with which to see her is in order. We tend to see our child in the same way we did when she was young, but now she's an adult. When she comes home for a visit, it's time to see her in a brand-new light—*as she is now* and not as she was at twelve or seventeen. I know women in their forties who say their mothers still see and treat them as if they were children. Nothing rankles them more.

Change is inevitable, so it helps tremendously to have a positive perspective about our daughters' departure. A recent study of more than three hundred moms and dads whose children were leaving home found that parents who *focused on being proud of their child's growing independence coped best*. "They were able to step back from daily parenting tasks and look at their kids as being adults, even peers," says Christine Proulx, assistant professor of human development and family studies at the University of Missouri, where the study was done. Instead of focusing on what you've lost, Proulx suggested to consider what you're gaining: more time for hobbies and relationships.³

Next, you'll need *an open heart plus willingness to see your own part in any rift or misunderstanding with your daughter, and the courage to admit it*. We go into this subject more in chapter 13, "The Power of Forgiveness." An open mind may come in handy if your daughter has different political views or lifestyle choices or chooses a boyfriend you'd *never* have chosen for her.

The letting-go process will also be advanced if you are selfless enough to consider her needs instead of being preoccupied with how you're feeling. If she makes mistakes or her life is tumultuous for a while, don't blame yourself. It's easy to take on guilt and compare our daughters to all the women we know who are living stellar lives, but it doesn't help either of you.

Add a large measure of supportiveness, not just tolerance of your daughter's growing independence. For example, Leslie's daughter Mandy went to

college to get a degree in social work. After the second year, she came home and said, “I can’t stand this field or these people.”

Instead of telling her daughter that if she dropped out of college now it would be a failure or a waste of her parents’ money, Leslie responded, “It’s good you know this now. It’s part of discovering who you are and what you want to do.” After some discussion with her parents, Mandy told them she wanted to go to California and be a nanny. She’d thought about it for a long time.

“It was hard to let her go,” Leslie said, “but that was her choice, and I wanted to support her growing independence. She was twenty-one and had very good reasons to go.” Though she had no job set up, Mandy quickly got a nanny job and an apartment and is happy. “She always manages to land on her feet, and it’s built a lot of confidence,” her mom said. Letting your daughter be herself is part of building a friendship.

Lastly, you’ll need *a large dose of faith* to believe that although you love your daughter immensely, God loves her even more. You can trust him to love and care for her even when you aren’t around. It reminds me of an old description of faith: “Genuine faith puts its letter in the mailbox and lets go. Distrust, however, holds on to a corner of the envelope and then wonders why the answer never arrives.”

I’ve found by talking to many women that it’s easier to let go when everything’s going well with our daughters—when they’re making choices we approve of and being responsible and honest with us. However, if our daughters are experiencing problems—whether it’s an illness, addiction, eating disorders, financial irresponsibility, consequences from poor choices—or if our family is dysfunctional or in crisis, it complicates the letting-go process. Our daughters may leave us physically, but emotionally and mentally we may still hang on—or they do.

Such was our experience.

THE BROKENNESS OF ADDICTION

When our three children were growing up, we were a loving, healthy family for almost twenty years. My husband, Holmes, and I were devoted parents and loved the adventure of life and family. We gave parenting and our children all we had. And the five of us had great fun together. We were not a perfect family but a little flock who loved God and one another—and had the potential to continue being a functional, connected family.

Until a horrible, cunning invader entered our lives when our oldest son was in college, the next was a senior in high school, and Ali was a sophomore. This invader—the disease of alcoholism—was not invited yet wreaked havoc on our family. As in most families this disease invades, it brought patterns of fear, shame, denial, hiding, and secrecy, which hurt our relationships.

A look at the reality of how many families are devastated by this intruder got me out of the illusion that we're alone. According to Sharon Hersh, licensed therapist and author of *The Last Addiction: Why Self-Help Is Not Enough*, "Addiction has left countless individuals and families broken into a million little pieces."⁴ It certainly did ours.

She references Robert R. Perkinson's comprehensive report on drug and alcohol addiction released in 2004 that showed "there is not a family in America that has not been impacted by addiction"⁵—whether that's an addiction to substances, gambling, pornography, shopping, or food.

And it's not just the person struggling with addiction whose life is damaged. As Hersh says, "Often family members suffer equally, if not more. The family members' sense of shame highlights the last addiction—the addiction to ourselves—because family and friends of the addict often erroneously believe, "I should have done something. I should be able to

stop this. If *I* just knew what to do, what to say, how to be, the addict would get better.”⁶ That is exactly what I felt.

Hersh’s explanation describes our family to a tee, and her definition of the codependent was on target as well: “the tendency to immerse myself in the lives of people I care about while forgetting to look at myself.”⁷ Oh, how I immersed myself in taking care of my children and husband and trying to deal with any obstacles to their well-being. To a fault. Alcoholism runs in my family, so to protect my kids from this disease, I became a teetotaler and encouraged Holmes to do the same so they wouldn’t grow up around alcohol. Plus I gave them lots of information on the dangers of alcohol and on our family’s genetic makeup so they would avoid it. Yet, with all my efforts, my sweet husband from a proper family, despairing of life when his business crashed, started secretly drinking. I felt I’d failed.

Because I wanted to be a good mother, this failure was very hard to face. It was easier to try to improve my husband and blame him when he didn’t cooperate, which I did for a long time. I also grew lonely, angry at him, and hurt that God would let this happen...and very, very sad.

One of the characteristics of this disease is the addict’s emotional absence. My husband and I loved each other and were loyal and committed, but alcoholism caused disconnectedness and brokenness in our marriage and family. Since Ali adored her dad, she felt emotionally abandoned by him at a crucial time of her life. And she was frustrated at me for staying in what looked like a miserable marriage. It was miserable at certain points, which is not uncommon.

As Sharon Hersh says, when there is addiction in a family, it “immerses you in a world that you would have never chosen. It takes up all the air in the room, leaving you gasping for breath. When you are in a relationship with someone who is struggling with an addiction, you are always scrambling for a solution to the problem and ‘waiting for the other shoe to drop’

at the same time, which leaves very little energy for self-care.”⁸ It also means you are distracted from meeting the emotional needs of your child.

I kept living in denial because alcoholism was so terrifying, and my husband kept hiding it because it was so shameful.

Don't get me wrong, when I saw him drink too much at a wedding once or twice a year, I did the good ol' codependent routine—try to get him to stop! Surely another lecture or a really motivating pep talk about all the reasons he shouldn't drink more than two beers at any event would help. I convinced him to go to counseling when we could afford it. Yet while trying to solve this baffling problem, I became more isolated from friends and felt increasingly depressed and guilty that I couldn't solve this problem.

When one person has an addiction, it affects each person in the family in individual and often profound ways. Sadly, this invader not only deepened my husband's chronic depression, it hurt our marriage and his career and wrecked our finances. It also impacted our relationships with our kids and particularly mine with Ali. For many families that have a person struggling with a drinking problem, everyone walks on eggshells, tries to meet his or her needs and makes sure this person is not upset. In the meantime, other family members' needs fall by the wayside, causing resentment, sadness, anger, and low self-esteem. That was especially true of Ali, because she was the youngest. In the midst of the family problems, she had become depressed.

I was concerned about Ali's depression and wanted to “fix her”; she was concerned about my overload and depletion. We worried about each other in codependent, unhealthy ways. She was always giving me advice about how I should fix my life, and I dispensed my share of advice back to her. She felt sorry for me but angry too because she didn't feel she could vent that on her dad, feeling he was too fragile.

Two years ago my husband and I embarked on the lifelong journey of recovery with the gracious help of the Jim Riley Outreach

(www.jimrileyoutreach.org) of Edmond, Oklahoma. Ali had begun her own journey of recovery a year before. Our marriage is happier than it's been in years, though we still face uncertainties and challenges. And we love grandparenting together. We do believe and have experienced that when we stay committed to Christ and our spouse, God can put a family back together. I deeply respect the courage it took for both Ali and Holmes to enter recovery. They've inspired me, and I am truly thankful for how far we've come.

We share our story and this book, praying that the One who redeems tragic or seemingly devastating situations will take what we've learned and allow you to use it in a way that would help you understand your daughter, a friend, or family member—if not right now, perhaps in years ahead.

Your family situation may not resemble ours; what brought distance between Ali and me may not be an issue for you. But each family has its own problems, its own dysfunctions that affect relationships. Perhaps with three daughters, one felt you favored the others, and that brought a rift between you. Or your husband left you, and as a single mom you were overloaded and your daughter targeted you to receive her angry feelings. You were the safe place to vent. If one of your kids had a chronic, serious illness that took most of your attention, or if your daughter made choices that catapulted her life into destruction during the teen years, it can bring distance or tension in the mother-daughter relationship. Maybe something else has resulted in a lack of closeness you wish you had with your adult daughter. Whatever the causes, you can rebuild your relationship; you can reconnect in new ways.

DESPERATE TO DO SOMETHING

When Ali graduated from high school, I *thought* I was releasing her. Saying good-bye as my child packed up to leave wasn't a new experience; I'd

already done it twice when our sons went to college. When she lived in another city for two years doing youth work and began to experience tough times, she'd occasionally call me and share a problem. I became burdened for her and poured out my heart to God and filled my journal with prayers for Ali. I gave her back to God again countless times and prayed some more...and some more. But nothing seemed to change.

One day when she called sounding very depressed, a friend and I got in my car to take her to lunch. We're *not* talking about picking her up across town for a quick bite—but driving *four hundred miles* to take my daughter to a restaurant. Perhaps that demonstrates the degree of concern and codependency. I wanted to rescue her out of her pain, to see if there was anything I could do to help and be a support.

I operated in a solution-oriented, how-to kind of thinking. I so wanted to fix her and help her be happier. The codependent part of our relationship made me think, *If only Ali gets happy and things go better for her, if she gets going in a positive direction and is less depressed, then not only will she be happier — I'll be happier too.* It was breaking my heart to see her so unhappy, and I wanted to *do something*.

I truly didn't know there was an option to admit that I was powerless over places, things, and people—including my daughter and her circumstances. I didn't know I could find my own happiness in the midst of that season and live my own life. After all, one of my roles in my family of origin and throughout life had been to be perpetually positive (no bad moods allowed), cheer people up, solve problems.

Even with the most loving intentions when I was “just trying to help,” my codependent, enmeshed thinking and behavior didn't help anyone. It certainly didn't contribute to Ali's well-being. One of the most valuable discoveries I've made is that if we base our happiness on people, situations, places, or especially *someone we love changing*, then we are putting off our own joy. And we aren't really letting go.

THE GIFT OF LETTING GO

As hard as it may be, we must let go if our daughter is going to have the confidence to be her own person as a complete, equal adult who builds a successful life as who she's created to be. It's a wonderful gift we give her—the gift of independence and acceptance *at whatever stage of life she is in*.

Sometimes it's a daughter who leans too heavily on her mother, wanting Mom to fix every serial, crazy situation. If that's your situation, it's in her best interest to stop bailing your daughter out if she gets in trouble. If she goes to college and ends up with credit card debt, for example, let go of the compulsion to rescue. That sends a powerful—and ultimately more helpful—message that your daughter is grown up, that she can work things out herself. We can support and advise if asked, but we should not solve everything for our daughters.

The reality is, if a mom keeps fixing and rescuing, her daughter has less of a chance to practice solving problems and overcome adversity. If mom doesn't let go, a daughter can't come back on her own free will to *choose connection*. The relationship with her mother will be obligatory. If we don't acknowledge with our words *and* our actions that our daughter is now an adult who can handle life without our interference, then we undermine her growth and set the stage for a tumultuous relationship.

For example, if you meet her fiancé and advise her that he's not good enough, or you manage her finances even though she's working and living in her own apartment, or on a visit to her home you rearrange her kitchen without being asked, it's a good sign you haven't let go.

When we don't let go, our daughters hear *control* in everything we do and say—even if we're “just trying to help.” The result is a growing hostility. Letting go is the first step toward repairing the breach and a huge step toward meaningful connection.

SEPARATION WITH CONNECTION

As we've shared, our daughters *need* separation—to leave home and grow up—but no matter what their age, daughters *also need* connection to their moms. They especially need to know we're okay with changes in the relationship and that we're willing to give them space when they need it. In chapter 7, we'll share ways to stay connected and yet not be enmeshed or smothering.

Anna, a friend who is in her thirties, has one of the healthiest and most peaceful relationships I've ever seen between a mother and daughter. Her mom, Tracy, knew she'd miss her when she left home, but she made some choices early on that helped the letting-go process take place as it needed to. Tracy had decided to observe her kids and pick up on cues of when they needed autonomy. Anna wanted autonomy right out of high school. She wanted to work and live on her own and ultimately become an artist.

Anna moved out of state and worked to put herself through college a little bit at a time. She pursued the life of an artist and took some unconventional steps of getting there, including working part time in an after-school art program and setting up her own art shows at friends' businesses. She tried things, and if they didn't work, she would try something different. She worked hard and grew resilient. She was innovative and full of self-assurance because of her mom's confidence in her—not to do everything perfectly but to try new things and pick herself up if she faltered.

Tracy had decided she wouldn't interfere or give advice after her daughter left home unless Anna asked for it. It was her life to live and navigate. Anna considered this to be her mom's greatest strength—letting her daughter be herself. She didn't compare Anna to her sisters or brother, she didn't impose her own wishes on her or live vicariously through her,

and she definitely didn't rescue her. She was available for phone calls and would offer her thoughts when asked, but other than that, she let Anna do life knowing her mom believed in her.

As I talked with Tracy, she said that what kept her buoyed about her daughter during those years was learning how to launch out and do new things herself and being grateful for the moments she and Anna had together. The occasional phone chat over coffee, even though they weren't across from each other at a table. Or exchanging e-mails here and there to check in. The more Tracy lowered her expectations of their evolving relationship, the better it became and the more Anna wanted her to interact in her life.

PROCESSING OUR FEELINGS

While it's essential that we let go of our daughters, no one ever said it would be easy. Since they were born, we've been highly involved in their lives—from diaper changing and feeding to first steps and first dance classes, throughout school, sports, friends, curfews, and everything in between. We've spent years watching out for them. We've loved nurturing and caring for their needs, praying for them, providing for them, and often dispensing *lots of advice* and instruction about everything from homework to appropriate clothing to proper nutrition.

Even as we're excited about her senior prom and graduation, we know it's coming: that bittersweet experience when a daughter leaves home. It's a loss we need to grieve, so it's normal and appropriate that we should feel sad. Not that we don't have anything to do after our daughter leaves. Our job, volunteer commitments, relationship with a husband if we have one may keep us busy. Maybe it's that we miss her presence at the dinner table every night, shopping together, or late-night chats. We might even miss her loud music and messy room!

Stuffing or denying all those emotions isn't helpful. Instead, it's important to be honest and share them with a trusted girlfriend or spouse. *Don't dump those emotions on your daughter*; it will only make her feel guilty about leaving, and she doesn't need that on her first flight out of the nest or any other time. We can say we miss her and at the same time validate the excitement she feels at being on her own. When we acknowledge our feelings, we get over our sadness sooner and are more likely to adjust to the transition instead of descending into depression.

Having sad or lonely feelings is entirely normal when a child leaves home. A mother may feel listless or a little blue. She may drag around and be unmotivated the first few weeks, or cry or feel nostalgic as she looks in her daughter's room. The house feels too quiet and empty without her laughter and friends around. Even though it's normal, most moms grieve when a child moves out because we know we can't go back and relive the fun and feel the pride.

When a daughter leaves, some moms begin to regret their shortcomings and realize that now there are no do-overs. If this is the case, the best thing we can do for our daughters and our relationships is to talk about it and not wallow in the guilt. If we don't, it's easy to become an overfunctioning mother, and later, grandmother, as we try to make up for lost time. Instead, we can acknowledge our misplaced priorities and release ourselves from guilt so that we can intentionally enjoy the moments we do have with our daughters in the present.

If sadness doesn't diminish as the weeks go by or you have difficulty with "getting a life" apart from your child, then it's time to get some professional help from a licensed counselor. One thing we've heard over and over is that when daughters leave, whether for college, marriage, or a job across the country, they want to know their moms are okay and are taking care of themselves so they don't have to worry about

them. Self-care is a gift you give yourself *and your daughter*, and we'll look at ways to do that in chapter 12.

Keep in mind that your daughter will be back. Perhaps she'll return at holiday time or for summer vacation, even though that "coming home" will have challenges all its own. And don't forget, if grandchildren come along down the road, your house will again be filled with the laughter and mess that kids generate.



LETTING GO

Practically speaking, here's what letting go looks like:

To let go doesn't mean to stop caring.

To let go isn't to enable but allow your daughter to learn from natural consequences.

To let go means to admit powerlessness and realize the outcome isn't in my hands.

To let go is not to fix but be supportive.

To let go isn't to protect your daughter from reality but allow her to face it.

To let go is not to nag, scold, or argue but discover your own shortcomings and correct them.⁹

SEEING HER POINT OF VIEW

It sometimes helps to see this transition and new season of your daughter's life from *her point of view*. To do this, think back to how you felt when the doors flew open and you left for the university for your freshman year or

for a job in another city. During the first few weeks, were you excited? happy? nervous? confident? homesick?

Maybe you felt a little like I did when my parents dropped me and my stuff at the dorm at Baylor University an hour and a half south of Dallas: *Hooray! I'm going to be on my own! I'm starting college!* I'd always loved school, so I was enthusiastic about this new academic challenge. I'd looked forward to being on campus for months. I couldn't wait to find the suite my roommates and I were sharing and decorate it with our matching Kmart orange corduroy bedspreads and set up the stereo.

Maybe instead of college, you set out to be a flight attendant or missionary, or you moved to another city and went to work. *How did you feel* when you embarked on your adventures out of the nest? Then think about how your daughter might feel. This is wonderful fodder for discussions with your friends who have also said farewell to a child.

• A Daughter's Perspective •

Part of being a daughter is the desire to be let go. Increasingly through the years, I've wanted my mom to trust me and believe that I am a grown woman now, capable of making my own decisions and living life well.

As a daughter, being let go feels like healthy freedom. It feels like we're free to be who we were created to be without needing to explain or apologize to our mothers. When you let us go, it helps us know you're going to be okay and have a life outside of us. It tells us you trust us to use the tools you gave us. It gives us a sense that we can leave your house and come back on occasion—mistakes and all—for a hug or hot meal and then go out again like we're supposed to because we're adults.

Since I was the third child, my brothers had already broken my mom

in for the whole leaving/letting-go drill. So in some ways, I found that it was startlingly easy for my mom to see me graduate and leave that first year. Later on I realized what was hardest for her was to know I was unhappy. I endured a breakup, financial troubles, and other typical twenty-something maladjusted behaviors. What I wanted most from my mom was to get a pep talk and then a big confidence booster like: “Nothing can bring you down; you can do this; you can get through this; you’re a strong woman...”

Instead, I felt that I was causing so much worry by my instability and mood swings that I began shutting down. Ultimately, the one person I wanted to confide in was the one person I deliberately shut out. I sensed that my unhappiness too easily became hers; it felt awful to know that my choices, moods, and experiences had such a profound effect on my mom. I knew she had her own major stressors, so I decided to keep mine from her. Thus, our pattern of relating got more and more out of sync.

While Mom let me go physically, with grace and seeming ease, emotionally she couldn’t let go. I sensed her worry through her language, facial expressions, her mention of “Ali and prayer” in the same sentence a few times a day. I felt that I needed to be happy and conversational around my mother. Something in me said, “No! I want my bad moods if I want them. I want that angst if I want it! Give me my pain!”

You could say I was having twenty-something toddler moments. The angst of life was my comfort blanket, and I didn’t want to give it up. I didn’t want my mom to try to cheer me up or worry about me. Deep down what I really needed and wanted was for Mom to be okay with my sadness. Believe me, I’m not proud to admit this stuff, but it helps to be aware that we all go through chemically, hormonally, out-of-whack times. If any of this gives you insight into your own daughter’s ill or dark moods, then it wasn’t all for naught.

Plus, now I know that this sometimes crazy pattern of relating actually has a name: codependency. I'm defining codependency as not being able to let go of someone emotionally, spiritually, or physically.

It's difficult. I get that now; I'm beginning the process with my own kids. But I'm choosing to let go even when it's hard and stings—those heart pangs—because I know that releasing leads to peace. And the more peace, the more the relationship can air out and grow. We daughters need and want to know you can let go of us without your life falling apart, without causing a huge upheaval. We want to know it's okay to go live our adult lives and to feel your blessing for the distance. As my mom has let go more and more, she's learned to trust and believe that I'm a capable adult who is launching out in new adventures with the good foundation she and my dad gave me. This feels so freeing and has instilled confidence in me, especially as it relates to my parenting. Every time she's stepped back and let me do my own thing, the way I want to do it, my respect for her grows immensely, and I want to include her more in the “figuring-out process” in my various stages of life.

Since going back to school recently, I've sought more advice and input from my mom because we've grown less and less codependent in the past two years. When I wonder how I'm going to keep juggling college, kids, and work and stay sane, she responds with an air of confidence in me that I might not have at that stressful moment. She says something like, “Oh, it's just a busy phase, but it's exciting and I know you can do it. Do you want me to watch the boys tonight so you can study?” She's practical and empowering when I have my “moody moments.”

Because she learned to let go, my mom's peace of mind concerning my choices and ups and downs no longer changes. We just have new ways of dealing with the stress—like movie night and other fun ways to connect, which we'll talk more about later on.

• Two-Part Harmony •

There are benefits and blessings to embracing the new seasons of our daughters' lives—for both them and for us moms.

What if your daughter's out-of-the-nest years are stormy or she criticizes everything you do? Once I (Cheri) talked with a wise counselor who raised four children into adulthood and counseled hundreds of families throughout her career. She told me that mothers often came to her tearfully describing how mean their teenage son or daughter treats them, how they curse at her and are disrespectful.

“What have I done to deserve this? What have I done wrong?” they ask her. She tells them that this behavior shows how close that child feels to mom. So close in fact that to separate enough to stand on their own two feet, they have to push her away because part of them really wants to curl up in her lap as they did when they were younger. Though that explanation doesn't take away the hurt you may feel if your daughter separated in a negative, rebellious way, we hope it helps bring some understanding and comfort about the process that's going on.

If your daughter's life is a mess right now, see her life as an unfinished work that God can handle. During certain phases of your daughter's life, she may need some distance from you. That's okay. Detaching, letting go, can give you those new glasses with which to see the real woman she is becoming. As your “eyesight” gets better, your heart will grow, and you'll see new characteristics, perhaps surprising changes and healthy growth.

Regardless of how difficult the process, the upside of letting go is how it enables you to change your view of your daughter and to allow a mutually satisfying friendship to develop between you. Another benefit is when she leaves the nest, you'll also have time to pursue dreams you

once put aside. As you are willing to loosen the reins, your daughter will be that much freer to become herself *and* come back to you, woman to woman, with respect and appreciation for letting her go—which ultimately builds a strong and satisfying bond for both of you.

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