

# Advice from the Trenches: Dad is Getting Weird

**Dear C and Dr. B:**

I saw your column on my dad's computer, and I am hoping maybe you can answer my question.

I am 15. Last summer, my parents separated and now my mom lives someplace else even though both my parents still work at the restaurant they own. My mom has started a new life and doesn't seem too unhappy. Her new apartment is small but much newer and nicer than our old one, but my little sister's school is right across the street here so we stay with dad most of the time, especially during the week.

Our problem is that dad is acting weird and we don't understand it. He won't sleep in his bed anymore but he won't let anyone else sleep in it either, even when a guest visits and I have to stay in my sister's room so the guest can stay in mine. When dad does go to bed, he sleeps on the couch. When we ask why no one can sleep in his bed, he won't tell us, he just changes the subject.

Why is he doing that? I don't think my mom knows. Should we tell her?

- George

**Dr. B. says:**

I have no idea what's going on with your dad, but yes - you should tell your mom. It's part of your mom's job to assess the living conditions you are exposed to at your dad's.

Because your loved one's mental health affects your own well-being, you need to speak up. Unconditional positive regard can only be truly present between a person and their dog. You are not betraying dad by asking for help.

It is good to get used to asking for help. Everyone needs it.

**C says:**

This is not a normal time for any of you, so it is not unusual for your dad to be acting a little weird. Divorce is very difficult and he probably has a lot of painful feelings inside. I've gone through 2 divorces and seen many friends go through them too, and I have never seen anyone deal with it by acting like life is business as usual. Your dad shared his bed for many years with your mom and it probably reminds him of unhappy things. No wonder he doesn't want to sleep in it.

It would be a big mistake to report this to your mom and I'll explain why. In real life, when parents go through a divorce they sometimes get into legal struggles with each other over stuff like custody of the children, and they look for "ammunition" to use against each other in court. When this happens, each parent will have their own lawyer whose job is to gather evidence to fight against the other parent. A lawyer will try to use any excuse they can find to make a parent look "unfit" to the judge, and a really crafty lawyer can twist something like your dad and the bed into looking like a form of mental illness.

Why would anyone do that? Well, I don't want to bring up stuff that you are too young to process, but sometimes parents have secretly done things to betray each other and they can get really mean and vindictive when they split up. There might be a truth here that you don't know about.

If your dad was coming home drunk, staying out all night and leaving you alone, or if he was abusive in any way, I would advise you to tell someone immediately, for your own protection. But aside from not wanting to sleep in his bed, he is not endangering anyone and he's not hurting anyone. So unless it means that you and your sister are forced to sleep on the floor, I'd leave it alone.

Right now your mom is taking care of her own life. It is not her job anymore to take care of your dad, and I am sure she already knows he is unhappy. This news about the bed will probably not be a surprise and besides - there really isn't anything she can do about it.

In the meantime, you should take care of the stuff that you can and just accept that some things aren't going to be normal for a while. When parents break up, it's not just hard for them, it's hard on everyone. If you feel sad, or scared, your sister does too. You are the big brother, so an important thing you can do is make sure you are there for each other. Grandparents and other family members can be very helpful and understanding too.

Divorce is never something that families process in an orderly, neat manner. But eventually, new routines will form and after a while, it will all be your new normal.

It is important to understand something - divorce and other big changes are seldom things that families process in a neat, orderly fashion, but there is a big difference between people who get a little weird when they have problems and people who fall apart and hurt themselves or others when they have problems. Your dad is not falling apart or hurting anyone. He's just acting a little weird. I'm pretty sure he'll get over it in time...and so will you.