

Mommy Dearest: Mother's Day isn't always so nice

I'd argue that there are three words that cause turmoil in a lot of individuals. It's not "I hate you" or even "I love you," but simply, "Happy Mother's Day." Mother's Day is a holiday that carries weight.

From social media posts that clog up timelines about how great some mothers are to the pressure to buy your mom the perfect gift or make sure her day is above and beyond the normal — it's a lot. And it carries a stigma that I feel not a lot of us are aware of. Mother's Day currently sees an increase in suicide attempts, making it one of the highest-risk holidays, following New Years Day, Labor Day, and Memorial Day.

This holiday makes us examine our relationships, not only with our parent, but also with many around us who may be struggling to navigate the holiday.

A History

Mother's Day started with feminist roots. Suffragist Julia Ward Howe wrote the "Mother's Day Proclamation" in 1870 as a way of calling for mothers to unite for world peace. However, what we now know as Mother's Day didn't come until the start of the early 20th century, when another woman, Anna Jarvis, wanted to honor her late mother and the sacrifices that women make for their children. In 1914, Woodrow Wilson made Mother's Day a national holiday - always the second Sunday in May. Now, this is where Mother's Day became controversial. Despite all of her work, Jarvis was denouncing Mother's Day by 1920. She felt it had become commercialized, and she actively campaigned against the holiday she helped create. Still, Mother's Day persisted and has grown to be a conglomerate of merchandise that you cannot escape, but little attention is paid to the difficulty of the day.

Mother's Day and Miscarriage or Infertility

Another topic that makes Mother's Day difficult for a substantial number of people is infertility and miscarriage. Currently it's estimated by the Mayo Clinic that between 10% and 20% of all pregnancies end in miscarriage, or, broken down by SANDS (an organization dedicated to miscarriage, stillbirth and newborn death support) pregnancies that end in miscarriage typically are one in four.

While many miscarriages may not involve a hospital stay, a number do, and at its core, it's a loss. The same goes for infertility, or those who cannot get pregnant. It's said that 12% of women ages 15 to 44 have difficulty getting pregnant or carrying that pregnancy to term.

Women who suffer a miscarriage tend to report a substantial amount of guilt and grief, with the feeling that their body is the reason that they cannot have a child. There are numerous support groups for this topic alone.

Child loss doesn't come just from miscarriage, but from tragic circumstances. There are many women who have to face Mother's Day every year knowing that their child has passed.

Toxic Family Relationships

There are also many family relationships that aren't the stereotype of a Hallmark commercial and they struggle with their relationship with their parents. Not every mother is a good mother, and it falls on the child to decide how to navigate that relationship. Support groups are rapidly popping up online, such as Daughters of Narcissistic Mothers, books with similar titles and websites dedicated to helping adult children with painful relationships. While I'm certain I could write a doctoral-level thesis on how these relationships are managed, what I want to say is simple: If someone identifies a difficult relationship with their parent, it's their choice what they do with that. That being said, that's looking at adults who may not want to celebrate Mother's Day because of a strained or non-existent relationship. There's also something crucial to be said about the experiences of children.

According to JAMA pediatrics, 14% of children experienced maltreatment from a caregiver, with 4% experiencing physical abuse. Critical studies have been coming out that address trauma in childhood and how it affects us as adults. You may have heard of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES), which, overly simplified, means that the more trauma that you experience as a child, the more likely there are to be adverse repercussions in adulthood.

The CDC currently reports that limiting or eliminating childhood trauma (the ACES) could prevent up to 21 million cases of depression, 1.9 million cases of heart disease, and up to 2.5 million cases of obesity. High levels of childhood trauma have also shown links to cancer, autoimmune issues and chronic pain, as well as higher levels of unemployment and risky behaviors such as smoking or chronic drinking. Abusive childhoods are not good for us, and many adults made the decision to cut ties due to the need to take care of themselves.

Additionally, there are some adult children whose parents have cut them out because they don't agree with their child's lifestyle. Parental rejection is common among the LGBTQ+ community. It is a parent saying, "I don't approve of you and your choices, and I won't support you." Sometimes the parent cuts off all ties and abandons the child (typically a teenager or an adult). Studies have now shown that this population is 8.4 times more likely to attempt suicide due to parental rejection, and there is a sense of abandonment within the community.

Non-Traditional Families

For some, Mother's Day can be awkward. Blended families, in which a child lives with a biological parent and a stepparent, currently make up 50% of family situations for children under the age of 13. Many stepmothers attest to the pain of Mother's Day with the whole "I'm not their mom, but I do a lot for them..." type of thinking. And I'm sure that the initial retort is that "Well, stepmoms get their own day too..." Well, kind of. Stepparents' day is September 16. Stepparents are lumped together into one day, while biological parents get a mother's and a father's day, and please tell me the last time you saw a card for that holiday. Mother's Day for blended families leads to a lot of feelings that can be complex, hard, and above all: messy.

Stepparents aren't the only type of non-traditional family that can struggle with Mother's Day. Consider adopted children who have never met their biological mother. Adopted children tend to feel more guilt and shame surrounding their identity, with focus on the idea of, "Why did my parent do this?" or "Am I not good enough?" Currently 135,000 adoptions per year happen in the US, the majority of which come from the foster system.

Loss of a Parent

Many face Mother's Day without their parent, and that grief comes flooding back each Mother's Day simply because many people who have lost their parent find that Mother's Day excludes them. No longer is it about a relationship that someone had, but about one they can never have again.

Relationships are complicated. And although may have the best relationship possible with your parent, remember that the weight of Mother's Day may be affecting others. So before you post on social media about your mom being your best friend, bragging about how your children did something for you, or talking about how wonderful the day is, remember some are fighting a silent battle that you may not be aware of.

And to those of you fighting that battle: I see you. And you can get through this.