

# Your Relationship with a Spouse Depends on your Relationship with your Parent

By: Naomi Sternberg M.S., L.C.M.F.T

Dear CounterForce,

“My mom, whom I recall warmly and fondly, died when I was 12 years old and my dad raised me alone. I’ve always had close friends. Should I be concerned about forming a lasting relationship with a husband due to my intense loss.”?

CounterForce responds:

It appears that you have had a secure and positive relationship with your mother from childhood and with your peers during your adolescent years. You will undoubtedly be able to form a healthy and lasting relationship with a husband in marriage.

John Bowlby, a psychologist, theorized that “early attachment behaviors between caretaker and child were a precursor for developing relationships later on in life.” In other words, the type of relationship between a parent and a child sets the tone for that child’s future relationships with others. Children learn different “attachment behaviors,” or abilities to “attach themselves” to a potential spouse, based on their parent’s ability and success in “attaching themselves” to them and caring for them. Parents act as role models in their behaviors to their children. If parents attended to their child and cared for their child with consistency and continuity, their child would respond accordingly to others, such as a mate in marriage, when he/she get older. If the parents reacted to their child inconsistently and randomly, their child would respond similarly to others.

Since each child, even in the same family, has diverse needs, a parent would need to adjust her caring for each child to fit the needs of that child. The concept of parents modifying their behaviors to fit the needs of their child is a positive predictor of a secure attachment between parent and child. For all intents and purposes, that parent will be emotionally connected to that child.

Every person has an innate need and a longing for an emotional connection to someone. This is represented throughout a child’s life. Mom eventually knows how to distinguish her child’s cries and how to adapt to those cries. The child realizes mom’s response to him and will repeat his behavior in accordance with mom’s response to him. An emotional bond develops between the mother and child. Mom and child cue into each others’ behaviors. Over time, the child develops an “internal working model” in which he learns expectations about mom’s responsiveness. When a child forms a healthy attachment to his mother due to a positive relationship, he is then able to maintain that initial connection to his mother while remaining secure in his own individuality. When someone is ready to develop a new relationship through marriage, he/she is essentially reevaluating his/her relationship with his mother. His relationship with his mother will tell us how he will communicate with others and relate to others, and demonstrate

parenting skills. A healthy attachment promotes independence which is necessary to move from one stage of development to the next stage of development. When a parent is more responsive to the child, the child tends to maintain a strong mental presence of the parent when the parent is absent. As the child develops, he internalizes his parent's style of care giving.

The child, the parents, the environment, and other circumstances are just a few of the factors involved in effecting the outcome of a healthy parent-child connection. A child may have an assortment of health issues, sensory, learning disabilities, and ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder) issues that can affect a parent-child relationship. Parents themselves may have their own health issues, physical or emotional, as well as unhealthy coping mechanisms to deal with members in their own family. Parents' financial situation, lack of social support, and other traumatic events impact the ability of parents to respond properly to their child's needs. A child's attachment can emerge healthy or unhealthy, depending on how problematic these factors have contributed to their relationship. In the case with Miss A., it seems that she has recounted a secure base from her childhood, enabling her to establish a healthy bond with a future mate. In addition, she was able to form strong positive relationships with her peers during her adolescence. Her ability to "be close" with her peers and the ability to give and take are 2 key components to forming a healthy association as they promote trust. Through her social support she was able to acknowledge her problems and deal with them. If her mother would have died when she was a toddler and there was no secure figure to replace that parent, she would most probably have difficulty attaching to a partner.

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Dear CounterForce:

"My parents sustain a volatile marriage. My mother is angry and weak and my father is rigid and critical. My friendships are temporary and fleeting. Why can't I have a lasting relationship with anyone"?

CounterForce responds:

Based on your history, it seems that your mom provided minimal emotional care since she was immersed in her own insecure relationship with her husband. As a child, you were not able to form a close bond with your mother and you transferred this "unhealthy attachment" to your adolescent stage with your peers. You have admitted to not trusting your peers and you developed a pessimistic outlook about yourself and others. Your pessimistic outlook interfered with your ability to form healthy relationships. As a result of your expectations of failure and your feelings of social inadequacy, you have developed a fear of being rejected. You are trying to protect yourself while alienating your peers, and you are trying to avoid getting hurt. You have learned to deny your distress to avoid any conflict; hence, you cannot connect with anyone in a lasting and secure manner. Based on your prior history, you will need to learn how to attach in a healthy way in order to form a wholesome relationship.

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Dear CounterForce:

“I never had a great relationship with my mom. She was always involved with everyone else in the family. I always felt unimportant. I have some friends but they also disappoint me. Will I have the same problem when I marry.”?

CounterForce responds:

Your background history revealed how your mom’s caring was inconsistent and erratic due to difficult circumstances in her life. As a result, you focus on your distressing thoughts and feelings as a way of maintaining contact with her. It appears that you have difficulty with relationships and you are totally focused on yourself. You have developed a poor sense of self and of others, thereby hampering the quality of a relationship with others. You need to learn how to attach to someone in a secure manner in order to procure a spouse in marriage.

Given the numerous conditions one is exposed to, there are indeed many factors involved in determining a relationship. There are many reasons that can hinder relationships. The expectations that a child has in the early stages of his development will be consistent with his ability to form secure, or insecure, relationships.

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Counterforce, an affiliate of Torah Umesorah, was founded 36 years ago. From a network of 20 selected schools that received counseling services, Counterforce now provides in-school counseling to approximately 50 Yeshivas and Day Schools in the New York City Metropolitan area. A full range of in-school services include individual and group counseling, referral, teacher training, dropout prevention, trauma response, professional remediation, and consultation. Over the years, Counterforce has already helped tens of thousands of students experiencing emotional and learning problems and in need of special care and attention.

Counterforce also provides professional out-of-school services including family therapy, parent training, educational evaluations, psychological testing, professional remediation, one-to-one mentoring of at-risk adolescents, school placement, and step-parenting workshops. For further information, contact Counterforce at 718-787-4412.