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When your mother's a narcissist[Julia McKinnell](#). [Maclean's](#). Toronto: [Nov 3, 2008](#). Vol. 121, Iss. 43; pg. 68, 1 pgs**Abstract (Summary)**

"If I called my mother and told her I was feeling fat, she'd go, 'Oh my God, talk about feeling fat!' " confides 44-year-old Chantal, a Toronto artist and single mother of a teenage son. Questions No. 1 and No. 2: "When you discuss your life issues with your mother, does she divert the conversation to talk about herself?" "When you discuss your feelings with your mother, does she try to top the feelings with her own?" Maternal **narcissism** is a far more widespread, devastating disorder than most people realize, says McBride, who confesses that she, too, felt "unmothered" growing up and looked but could never find a book that dealt with mothers who are not maternal, or a daughter's feelings of frustration, even hatred.

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Recovery, says this psychotherapist, is not about changing mom: that's a lost cause

"If I called my mother and told her I was feeling fat, she'd go, 'Oh my God, talk about feeling fat!' " confides 44-year-old Chantal, a Toronto artist and single mother of a teenage son. Chantal says it's pointless trying to have a heart-to-heart with her self-absorbed mother. "She can't hear you. With a narcissistic parent, everything is about them. If I said I'm on a diet, she'd say 'I'm on a diet,' then go on and on about how fat she is. She'll tell you how she's eliminated sugar almost, but not hear anything I was saying."

When psychotherapist Dr. Karyl McBride counsels the daughters of narcissistic mothers, she starts by giving them a questionnaire. Questions No. 1 and No. 2: "When you discuss your life issues with your mother, does she divert the conversation to talk about herself?" "When you discuss your feelings with your mother, does she try to top the feelings with her own?"

Maternal narcissism is a far more widespread, devastating disorder than most people realize, says McBride, who confesses that she, too, felt "unmothered" growing up and looked but could never find a book that dealt with mothers who are not maternal, or a daughter's feelings of frustration, even hatred.

"It's very rare for a woman to come into therapy and say, 'Hello, I'm the daughter of a narcissist.' Usually, they come in with depression or low self-esteem or [are] exhausted from trying to achieve, achieve, achieve," says McBride. "Good girls aren't supposed to hate their mothers so they don't

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talk about their feelings." Still, after 17 years of specializing in treating daughters of narcissists, McBride easily spots the symptoms: "oversensitivity, self-consciousness, indecisiveness, inability to succeed in relationships."

In her new self-help book, *Healing the Daughters of Narcissistic Mothers: Will I Ever Be Good Enough?*, McBride stresses that "recovery is not about changing mom. It's about your own internal work." Chantal's Toronto therapist warned her not to confront or accuse her mother of being a narcissist. "I was told she wouldn't get it. No, I've never tried to talk to her about it." McBride agrees: "If mother is a full-blown narcissist, it's not going to do any good to confront her."

Accepting that your mother isn't going to change is the first and most difficult step, she says. She gives the example of her 32-year-old client, Sandy, who said: "I always wanted a normal mom. One who doesn't dress like a hooker, who doesn't flirt with your boyfriends, who doesn't compete with me and isn't threatened by me and is proud of my achievements. Do I have to give up on all this?" Yes, says McBride. "Accepting that mom may not have the full capacity for empathy and love is the hardest thing for daughters. They keep going back and hoping and wishing for it to be different."

Some daughters try to drag their moms into therapy with them, but "the more traits your mother has that fit the disorder, the less likely she is a candidate for successful treatment. This means you can't fix her and shouldn't be attempting to," writes McBride. "Since she's not going to change, you may then ask whether or not you should continue to have contact with her." In many situations, says McBride, "daughters have to make the choice to disconnect completely from their mothers." Part two of recovery is grieving and crying over the mother you never had, writes McBride. Find a quiet room and cry until you "can't stand yourself anymore," she suggests. During the grief process, it may be helpful "if the therapist is a mother or grandmother. The kind of transference where the daughter can feel like the therapist is a nurturing mother can be very helpful for this process."

Another part of a daughter's healing is "treating her own narcissistic traits and refusing to pass on the legacy to your own children," says McBride. "You definitely inherit narcissistic tendencies," says Chantal. When her 14-year-old son gets upset with her, he says, "Mom, what about me? You don't pay enough attention to me and you never have. You never played with me when I was little. You just took me to the park and you'd read a book and leave me on my own."

"Well, I'm honest with him about it," says Chantal. "I say, 'I didn't get any attention . . . and I'm really sorry I'm repeating that.' I tell him, 'Make sure if you have something to tell me that I'm paying attention.' I tell him, 'It's not you. It's my problem. It's my shortcoming and I wUl try harder.'

[Sidebar]

PART OF RECOVERY is grieving the mother you never had. Cry until you 'can't stand yourself anymore,' says the author of a new book.

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