

# How to strengthen your relationship with your mom

If you and your mom have drifted apart, it's well worth the effort to reconnect and strengthen your relationship.

By Barbara Righton



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I know many women who have nurturing, supportive relationships with their moms. They can't wait to share good (or bad) news with them, or love going to the movies or brunch together on the weekends – as adults they've become good friends.

But not all of us feel like that. We get it, of course. No one is more important than Mom. Really, if it weren't for her, we wouldn't even be here. It's just that, sometimes, life steps in and our relationships change. Before you know it, you grow up and begin to carve out your own life – and you can start to drift apart.

But we can miss the closeness and want to close the gap. "It's hard to avoid the longing we have for a special relationship with our mothers," says Lori Yusishen, a family therapist in Winnipeg.

So how do you [renew the connection](#)? We talked to three daughters – and a son – who used honesty, love and a new approach to forge stronger ties with their moms – in one case, going so far as to make a connection with a birth mother.

## **The truth will bring you closer**

Marion Jonatin's story is not only about growing up, it's about a shift in culture. Marion, a writer and editor, is one of four children born to a religious family. Her mother, Rose, "was not a huggy-feely type," Marion says. "She fed us and clothed us, but she worked hard. She didn't have time to be taking us to extracurricular activities – we weren't the Brady Bunch."

After Marion left home, her horizons expanded while Rose's got smaller. Marion developed a new social network, joined a [book club](#) (her mother isn't a reader) and started travelling to places, including a small island in Central America that Rose had never even heard of. "We had less and less to talk about," Marion remembers. "She didn't like some of my friends and we would end up arguing sometimes, so I started glossing over things and leaving out details." Eventually the weather became the number 1 topic of conversation.

When Marion's [marriage failed](#), she was afraid that Rose would be upset and ashamed, and that their relationship would become even more remote. "But when I finally told her," Marion says, "she became one of my biggest supporters – to my amazement." Rose offered her money for a divorce lawyer, volunteered to babysit whenever Marion needed help, and started calling Marion every night.

"Sometimes it would be a minute-long conversation," Marion says. "Other times I would end up bawling on the phone. And what happened is that I began to tell her more and more about my life and my feelings, about how stressed I felt and how bad I was feeling." And Rose started opening up to Marion, as well, telling her details about her life that she

had never shared before, including some disappointments that Marion had no idea about. "We still start our phone conversations talking about the weather – but now we move on to everything from her recipes for my favourite childhood foods to my online dating adventures," says Marion.

### **Put yourself in your mom's shoes**

One of my best friends in high school, Cynthia Knox, had what I thought was an enviable relationship with her mom, Edith, a single mother who worked hard to raise Cynthia and her brother. As a teen, I remember that their lovely home was always filled with the smells of something good baking in the oven and an extra place setting for me. But looking back, "We weren't always close," says Cynthia. "I was a child of the '60s – I loved the makeup, the miniskirts and the arts. My mother referred to that as all fluff. She called me a birdbrain and told me to study typing."

Criticism from our mothers is hard to accept, but as she got older, Cynthia started to look at things from her mother's point of view. "After a lot of conversations, I began to appreciate that she really just wanted my life to be stable so I would be happy, and that's where it was coming from," Cynthia says. "Once I started to respect her, I got the same in return." She remembers the turning point. "We were **bickering** one day and she said to me, 'Please, Cindy, I don't want to do this anymore. I'm an old lady now and I just don't have the energy.'

"Something in her tone struck a chord in me and I heard her plea loud and clear," Cynthia says. "She was right. I had never looked at her from that perspective before. She wouldn't be around forever, and I wanted to do something for her – after all, this was someone I loved, who loved me."

As her mom's **health failed**, Cynthia became her lifeline, running errands for her, visiting her often and buying her new outfits to wear. Edith would repeatedly thank her for her help, Cynthia recalls. "One time she said, 'How can I ever repay you?' And I said, 'Oh I don't know, Mom. How about a trip to Hawaii?' That got us both laughing." The tone of their conversations changed and became more open, and they started to relate to each other as women.

### **Men making an effort**

**Closeness** between sons and their mothers is still frowned upon in society. Writing in a blog post tied to her book, *Hold Me Tight* (Little Brown and Company, 2008) (about emotionally focused therapy), Sue Johnson, a professor of clinical psychology at the University of Ottawa, says boys are still treated differently by society, trained to ignore their feelings at an early age and become independent from their mothers. "Men must 'separate' from mom or be seen as a wimp," she says.

But Colin McMurray thinks that is changing. He happily admits he's a mama's boy. The Toronto talent agency owner moved away from his parents' home in Moncton, N.B., 30 years ago, but he surmounts the distance with constant attention. He calls his parents, Pearl and Pat, every Saturday, and on birthdays and holidays he flies home to spend time with them. And when he's there, he does what his dad has always done – he treats Pearl

[like a queen](#). He makes an effort to spend time with her and make her feel good – he fixes her hair and does her makeup. "It gives us a chance to chat," he says.

It was because of Pearl's unconditional love that he grew into a man who is not afraid to nurture deep ties, Colin says. His mom, he adds, always accepted his choices in life. And he credits his dad with providing a good example. "A lot of the way we relate to our mothers has to do with what we see around the house growing up," he says.

### **Forging a new connection**

For Dina Barazza, the love of her adoptive mother made her strong enough to seek out a relationship with her birth mom. Dina, a human resources training consultant, grew up in Mississauga, Ont., in a home full of love. Her mother, Elda, fed all the neighbourhood children and listened to their stories. And she was honest. When Dina was in Grade 3, Elda and Bruno, her dad, told her that she was [adopted](#). At 18, her parents gave her the adoption papers so she could begin a search if she chose to. Dina thought about finding her birth mother for years, but it wasn't until she was 35 – five years after Elda died – that she acted. "I had to grieve first to be healthy," she says. "I wasn't looking for a replacement mother."

Dina reads newspaper obituaries; one day while she was scanning the names, she recognized her own birth surname, Sutman, and decided to go to the funeral home to see her birth family. "I was shaking, but I knew my birth mother was in there," she says. She left a note for her birth mother, giving her own birth date. Two days later, Brenda called.

It was the beginning of a good friendship – with some unexpected coincidences. "We both love [art](#) and animals, plus we both collect shoes," laughs Dina. "Although she wasn't there for the first 35 years, she can look at my face or hear my tone and know what I'm going through," Dina says.

The newfound relationship has given her a whole [new history](#). "I know that I have all these aunts and uncles and cousins. And I know my bloodline." Dina and Brenda now talk all the time, but it was the support that Dina got from Elda that enabled her to confidently seek out this new connection. "My positive outlook is ingrained," says Dina.

### **Building a better relationship with your mom**

- Learn to see your mom as a person, says Lori Yusishen, a family therapist in Winnipeg. Ask her personal, reflective questions, such as, When you were my age, what were your hopes and goals and dreams?
- Don't lie to your mom because you don't want to worry, upset or anger her. When you aren't honest, you start to deal with each other on a superficial level. To broach a difficult subject, Yusishen suggests rehearsing conversations before you have them, instead of wasting time obsessing about how she is going to react.
- Don't ask yes or no questions. Ask open-ended ones that encourage her to answer with detail.

- Make the time to create **special moments**. Just before my own mom, Ruth, passed away, I got an assignment to write a piece about the St. Lawrence Seaway and how it flooded the area around Cornwall, Ont., where she grew up. A local historian lent me a box of clippings. For three days, Mom, who always mourned the loss of her early haunts, and I, who had never known them, sat on her living room floor and read each scrap of paper. I'll never forget that time we spent together.