



## The Awareness Center, Inc.

P.O. Box 65273, Baltimore, MD 20209

[www.theawarenesscenter.org](http://www.theawarenesscenter.org)

(443) 857-5560

### Mother's Day

© (2006) By Vicki Polin, MA, LCPC and Na'ama Yehuda, MSC, SLP, TSHH

We have all been taught from a very early age to honor our mothers and fathers. This lesson can be extremely complicated for survivors of childhood emotional, physical, and sexual abuse.

Each year when "Mother's Day" comes around, certain expectations come along with it. All of us whose mothers are still alive are called to honor and reaffirm our love and appreciation for an individual who brought us into this world; a person who made numerous selfless sacrifices in her own life to raise happy and healthy children and support them through their path to adulthood. Unfortunately for survivors of childhood abuse, this day can be extremely difficult and confusing: for how does one spend a day steeped in honoring someone who had failed to live up to the very archetype of unconditional protection that the day celebrates and who at times may have been the very person responsible for the abuse?

#### Jonathan, a survivor, wrote us:

"Growing up my brothers and I would buy our mother presents. It was expected that our family would spend the day together and come evening my father would take us all out to dinner. Once I became an adult and started dealing with my abuse issues, it became difficult for me to attend family functions, especially this family function.

How was I to honor the very woman who was my offender? It's taken me years to be able to say 'I am a survivor of Mother-Son incest.' To this day my mother has never apologized for sexually assaulting me...and so I struggle honoring the kind of mother she is. This makes Mother's day a difficult day for me."

#### Nancy wrote:

"My mother was always very abusive to me as I was growing up. She even blamed me for her boyfriend raping me when I was eight-years-old! From that time on I'd tried being the perfect little girl; hoping that one day she'd forgive me... Every year as Mother's Day approached I'd go to our local card store and spend hours searching for the perfect card that will tell my mother how much she meant to me. I guess I figured that if I could find the right card she would start to love me again...

When I turned eighteen I moved out on my own. This was also the year when I first entered therapy. It got to be very difficult for me to buy my mom a Mother's Day card... For a few years I just got cards that were funny, but then it didn't feel right to do that anymore, either. Because you see, even the funny cards ended up saying stuff like 'what a great mom you were'... Finally I found a recovery bookstore that sold greeting cards and believe it or not they had cards that specialized in dealing with the very 'card-issues' those of us from 'dysfunctional families'

have! I now send her cards that acknowledges the fact she gave birth to me, spent money raising me, and so forth; but don't go on to say how great a parent she was."

With the messages of picture-perfect mothering practically everywhere, Mother's Day is a time of year when it is NOT uncommon for survivors to have painful memories reemerge. When this happens a survivor may find it safer to retreat than to participate in family functions (especially if the abuse wasn't acknowledge along with the complicated feelings that being hurt or unprotected by someone you love and depended on can bring up). It is important that survivors find what works best for them in order to stay emotionally healthy. While one survivor may find shunning Mother's Day altogether the safest, another may find that they do want to spend some time with their family, but set some boundaries as to how long they stay or where they spend this time. Other survivors may find it easier to make a phone call than to see their mother in person. Others yet may want to spend the day with friends or mentors. Some survivors have made Mother's day an opportunity for giving--they volunteer in orphanages and children's homes, call their local nursing home to find if there are residents without families who may appreciate a visitor on a day when other residents have family come, or spend time with an elderly or lonely neighbor. What is most important is that each person be kind to themselves, no matter what they decided. If you have a survivor in your family--you can help support them by respecting their decision, especially if they decide not to participate.

#### Marleen said:

"Every year when 'Mother's Day' approaches I get together with a group of my friends who are all survivors and we honor each other for helping ourselves re-parent ourselves."

#### Lou shared:

"Mother's Day has always been a very difficult day for me. My mother was not my offender, but I know she was more than aware of the physical violence that went on in our home. She'd be sitting there watching TV as my father chased me around the room and then beat me with his belt. I cannot honor my mother. However, I do celebrate Mother's Day with my wife and children--my wife is a wonderful woman and mother. I don't know where I'd be today if it weren't for having such a kind and loving life-partner."

If you know someone who is a survivor of childhood abuse, it may be a good idea to check on them a few times on Mother's Day and let them know you understand.

If you are a survivor, maybe find a friend who is free and spend time with them. Remember, YOU ARE NOT ALONE!

Mother's Day can be difficult not only because of its topic. Sometimes the day itself carries memories of pain. Holidays are a time when families tend to get together and routines are changed. There's often added stress of traveling, cleaning, and preparing meals. In healthy families this stress translates mostly as excitement and anticipation. Unfortunately, however, dysfunctional parents who are already inclined to use their children as an outlet for emotions and urges, are often even more likely to do so when under increased stress and anxiety. Many survivors of childhood abuse report that their abuse intensified around and during holidays, including Mother's Day.

Symptoms of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) can at times intensify around holidays, or get temporarily triggered even after periods of relative remission. If you experience an increase in disturbing thoughts, nightmares and flashbacks, try to remind yourself that these intrusions are about the past, that the abuse is over, and that the most important thing you can do for yourself is to be kind and gentle with yourself. If you find yourself beset by thoughts of self-harm or even suicide--reach out. Call a friend, a therapist, a hotline. You don't need to manage these overwhelming feelings alone.

Whatever you decided to do, remember that this is your life to live and that things can change with time--you may never want to have anything to do with your family or the holiday ever again, or you may find that several years down the road you are ready to make new or partial plans. You are not wrong or bad for having second and third and fourth thoughts about if and how to celebrate holidays--any holiday! Look into yourself and identify what it is you need, then do your best to do it. Be kind to yourself as you make the adjustments you need to make.

And...most importantly...Todah Rabah for Surviving!