

Burned Bridges: What To Do When Your Daughter Shuts You Out of Her Life

I love it when a father takes time out of his day to write in response to something I've written. And because those messages touch me deeply, I am careful to take the time to respond in a way that lets each one know I care about his situation.

A recurring theme I hear in these emails is that of dads who are estranged from their daughters telling me they are a bit lost when it comes to figuring out what to do next. Their hearts are often breaking and they don't know where to turn. I can truly say that it is an honor to be trusted with their stories.

Serving to illustrate the pain inside a father's heart, here's what one dad wrote:

"Why is it hard for my daughter to want me in her life? I ache in my heart and feel a part of my life is missing. My sister and daughter are very close, and she says I need to release her to God's providence. I can't imagine my life without her. I need some wisdom. Thank you."

What would you write back to him if you were me? Could I ever write something that might come anywhere close to matching the intensity of his pain? I think not.

I often feel that any response I give will either be a disservice to the complexity of his situation or might negate the backstory of his daughter's decision to write her dad out of her life story.

Yet in each response I seek to put my heart on paper while encouraging him to never give up on his girl. I continually

share my hope that he will keep pursuing her heart—going after what he knows matters to her—while also honoring her requested need for space. Tough balance, to say the least.

One of my close friends has been recently going through this kind of agonizing distance with his daughter. For three years he has had very little contact with her. I've asked him to share more about the real underside of this kind of heartache from a dad's perspective. With his permission, he vulnerably lets us into his process.

Michelle: Have you understood her reasons for distancing from you or is that still a puzzle?

Dad: Yes, kind of. She has a lot of anxiety, and I cause her to be nervous. I was the “justice” parent, and she hates to displease me. Her perception is that she displeased me a lot as a child—that was not my perception. She was the apple of my eye. When she was 12, she began distancing herself from me. I thought it was normal teen angst—but I realize now that it was much deeper than that.

Michelle: What has been the hardest part of her being gone?

Dad: I miss her terribly. It's very frustrating not knowing what's going on in her life, and I want to help her, but I can't because I don't know what's happening.

Michelle: Is there anything you can share about what your thought process has been like in understanding/coming to terms with/being honest about the role you've played in her leaving home and not wanting contact with you?

Dad: I didn't realize how sensitive she was to even the slightest negative comment. I'm not a screamer—and I'm much more encouraging than my dad was to me. So I figured I was doing okay. I tried to say three times as many encouraging things as corrective things. But still her anxiety has made it hard for her to hear anything but condemnation.

Michelle: What would you tell other dads whose hearts are breaking as a result of their daughter closing the door and rejecting them? How do you really deal with it when you literally are helpless to reach her, change her mind or draw her back?

Dad: You have to get to the point where it's not about you. At first I used to think, "That little brat. She's so ungrateful." I thought about retaliating—to teach her a lesson. "If things get really bad for her, then she'll finally appreciate me." This is the stupid dialogue that went on in my head. But over time my anger cooled and I began to see the bigger picture: It doesn't matter who's right. What matters is the restoration of the relationship. So I gave up my right to be right and waited patiently for her to communicate with me. That started again a couple of months ago.

What powerful and healing words: "It doesn't matter who's right. What matters is the restoration of the relationship."

This dad came to terms with the fact that his daughter's heart mattered more than his own hurt. Taking a humble yet strong stand like this must start with you, Dad.

And never underestimate the power of prayer. She may not be okay with you talking to her today or tomorrow, but you can always talk to God today and tomorrow. Write out a list of things you will commit to praying for daily until you have answers from Abba Father God. Ask for miracles so that your daughter's heart (and yours) can heal.

Another key piece of the rebuilding process (if this is where you're at with your daughter) is to lay your weapons down. You can't approach her with defensiveness or in "attack mode" if you want to repair the bridge.

If you care more about her hurt and her heart than you do about your position and being right, then here are some guidelines for rebuilding the bridge to her heart:

1. Ask questions with a sincere desire to know the answer. “I know I hurt you with my words yesterday. When you came to me I didn’t listen well. You were right about that piece. I want to listen now. Can you please tell me again what you want?”

2. Ask forgiveness for specifics, not generalities. “Last night I was tired after work and took it out on you. I saw the look of hurt in your eyes when I got angry, yet I chose not to meet you in the way you needed me to. Will you please forgive me?”

3. Never mix amends with criticism (subtle or direct). (This is an example of what not to say) “I know I was harsh, but so were you. If you want to tell me now what you were saying last night, I will try to listen. But you need to meet me halfway and not be as emotional this time around.”

I’m sure it goes without saying that this last tactic will bomb. The key is to picture her heart in yours and proceed with caution.

Before we close, here is some of what I wrote back to the hurting father I told you about at the start of this blog. And in case you’re a dad today who is in a similar situation with your daughter, maybe this plan will creatively mobilize you to action as well:

One idea for you during this time of estrangement from your daughter is to buy a journal and write letters to her in it. You may or may not ever give it to her, but either way it can be a place to express the desires of your heart to her—wishes, dreams, ideas, prayers, truths of who she is as you see her and God sees her, verses you pray for her, and random or silly things that you wish you could say to her. This book will serve as a time capsule of sorts should you choose to give her the journal sometime down the road.

Whether you’re a dad who needs to rebuild the bridge to his daughter’s heart or you’re building the bridge in a proactive

way right now and things are good between the two of you, I'd suggest doing this journal idea. I cannot imagine a daughter alive who wouldn't treasure a gift like this from her father. You could write in it once a week for a year and then present it to her on her next birthday or on Father's Day as a surprise to switch it up and let her know how much you love being her dad.

No matter the method, no matter the cost, I trust you'll choose today to invest your time and energy to become an expert bridge-builder to your daughter's heart. {eo}

Dr. Michelle Watson has a clinical counseling practice in Portland, Oregon, and has served in that role for the past 17 years. She is founder of The Abba Project, a 9-month group forum that is designed to equip dads with daughters ages 13 to 30 to dial in with more intention and consistency, and has recently released her first book entitled, *Dad, Here's What I Really Need from You: A Guide for Connecting with Your Daughter's Heart*. She invites you to visit for more information and to sign up for her weekly Dad-Daughter Friday blogs, where she provides practical tools so that every dad in America can become the action hero they want to be and their daughters need them to be. You can also follow or send feedback on Facebook and Twitter.