

Mother-Son Bonding: Repairing the Relationship Breach

Jason Bradshaw grew up in a middle-class home. He was the oldest of three kids and was the only son. His parents loved each other. But when Jason was 12, tragedy struck their family. Jason's father was killed in a car accident. The family was devastated, and Jason's mother grieved for several years.

As Jason got older, his mother poured her life into him. He was the apple of her eye, and she often saw her husband in him as he got older. "He looks much like his father," she thought to herself. His mother doted on Jason, and sometimes Jason reacted to what felt smothering to him.

Jason's mother often prevented Jason from doing things that normal boys of his age do, for fear of him getting hurt or even losing Jason. Gradually, Jason began to feel controlled and manipulated by his mother. This developed into a love-hate relationship with his mom. On the one hand, he knew he was now the male head of the family and wanted to care for his mom, but he hated the control he felt.

Jason began to date girls as he got older and found that he sometimes masturbated to relieve the stress and pent-up desires he felt inside. He also found himself on the internet checking out pornographic pictures. He didn't know why he did this. He just thought it was normal for boys his age.

Jason went on to college and kept a distant relationship between him and his mom. He wanted to respect and care for her, but he wanted to keep his distance and gain his independence. Jason got engaged after college and things were great with his new wife. However, over the next several years he found that there was conflict in his relationship with his

wife.

Sometimes he felt the same feelings he felt when he was growing up with his mother. That feeling of control gave him a sick stomach. He often reacted to his wife when those feelings swelled up inside, "Stop trying to control me," he would say. His wife was surprised at these reactions as she was only trying to connect emotionally with Jason. She wanted to be a part of his life. Jason pulled away each time he felt these feelings.

When Jason and his wife visited his mom, his wife noticed that Jason's personality often changed when the three of them were together. Jason's wife felt like a third wheel. It almost felt like Jason was married to his mother instead of her. This caused arguments among them and Jason often demonstrated a very unloving spirit to his wife. Jason would always defend his treatment of his mother, often at the expense of his wife.

This pattern continued for many years into their marriage. Finally Jason's wife decided they needed professional help. Jason reacted negatively to the idea and felt the only problem they had was his wife kept trying to control him and she needed to stop. However, reluctantly, Jason agreed to go to counseling.

Jason, to his surprise, discovered in the counseling that the reason he reacted to his wife's "control and manipulation" as he perceived it, was due to something that happened in his childhood that related to his mother. The feelings he was feeling were the same feelings he felt when he was a teenager growing up. In essence, Jason was shocked to discover he was subconsciously viewing his wife as his mother. As the truth of his situation unfolded, Jason was able to recognize why he reacted to his wife this way.

Today Jason and his wife are happily married. However, many couples who have the same symptoms often result in divorce.

This same scenario happens when a father divorces a wife. The mother is often left emotionally bankrupt and she seeks to meet her emotional needs from her son. However, a son is not made to emotionally bond with his mother and the pain that is caused within him must be released through some form of sexual expression. That is one reason Jason turned to sex to relieve his emotional pain.

Compounded with this is the legitimate need for Jason to have an emotional connection with a female, but because of his negative perception of his wife, he often sought that emotional connection through women at his workplace or in other social settings. He was often seen as a flirt with women but Jason denied such behavior. This too is rooted in the mother-son bonding relationship.

There is a crisis in marriage today. Research reveals the Christian divorce rate is higher than non-believers. There are many reasons for this, but one of those reasons is rarely spoken about. It has to do with the inappropriate bonding between a mother and her son during his adolescent years.

Many men never emotionally bond to their wives because of the impact of being emotionally bonded to their mothers during their adolescent years. The reason many men are not able to bond with their wives is often due to mother-son bonding that takes place during adolescence.

Dr Paul Hegstrom explains in his book, *Broken Children, Grown Up Pain*, that "a husband without an emotional bond to his wife sees her as someone who sleeps with him, cleans the house, takes care of the children, and works—he doesn't see her as a real, living, emotional person." As a result, the husband is often distant emotionally to his wife, but he does not recognize this in himself. However, his wife definitely knows it. She tries to connect on an emotional level only to be perceived as trying to control him. This leads to conflicts in the relationship.

If the father and mother are not bonded to one another, the mother will often bond to the oldest son. This can happen as a result of an absent father, either physically or emotionally. If a wife is not getting her emotional needs met through her husband, she may attempt to draw this from her son. If the parenting style is weak in emotional validation, giving words of love, or shaming of the child, these combinations will eventually surface through problems in the marital relationship in adulthood.

Resolving an Inner Conflict

When mothers bond with sons during adolescence, the son rebels against this bonding because he is not wired to bond with any female once they get into adolescence without some form of sexual expression. When they should be growing independent from their mother during this time, they find themselves in bondage to their mother's emotional control. This all happens subconsciously.

Gordon Dalbey, author of *Healing the Masculine Soul*, explains that "beyond the basic fact of initial physical dependence upon the mother, the quality of that bonding experience also influences the son's later relationships with women. If the boy's maternal bond was painful (perhaps his mother didn't want to conceive and thus rejected him) or inappropriate (perhaps she was seductive toward him), the boy may later associate physical bonding to a woman with pain and anxiety.

He then may become compulsive about sex—either as the freewheeling playboy who is incapable of commitment, or the demanding husband who fears being emotionally vulnerable to his wife. Given the biological and emotional intensity of the mother-son bond, only someone whose intrinsic identity with the boy exceeds that of the mother can draw him away into individuality and adult responsibility. Clearly, only the father meets such a requirement."

If unresolved, the young male will seek to rebel against this

bonding and control they feel subconsciously. They will have a love-hate relationship toward their mothers during late adolescence. This can lead young males to masturbate or get into pornography or have premarital sex in their adolescent years as a means of dealing with the emotional pain of that bonding from the mother. The male will eventually pull away from the mother as a result of seeking to become independent from her. This can be traumatic for the mother.

These feelings are often felt subconsciously as the son grows into adulthood. Often an unconscious vow is made to themselves: "I will never be controlled by a woman again." This personal vow can go with them into future dating and marital relationships. The wife will often feel like their legitimate input is being viewed as criticism by the husband and he is resistant to talking with her at an emotional level. The husband will often shut down or rebel against his wife's input.

Dalbey explains that "when a boy reaches puberty, filled with the powerful physical stirrings of his emerging manhood, the father's role becomes critical. If at this point Dad doesn't call the boy out and away from the mother to bond with his masculine roots among men, those stirrings are overtaken by his natural bond with the mother, becoming bound up in her and thus unavailable later to the woman he loves.

"Without the earthly father to call the son out into manhood, the boy grows up seeking manly identity in women—whose voices seem to call him to manhood through sexual conquest. Masculinity grows not out of conquering the woman, but only out of conquering the man—and not another man, as in war, but oneself."

Dalbey explains how this can further affect the man's identity: "Enmeshed with his mother, he may find that his heart is unavailable to another woman to walk with him later as a wife in his life calling (Gen. 2:24). Unable to bond with

either a woman in marriage or a man in healthy friendship, he then may fall prey to homosexual impulses.”

This is why moral failure can happen even among the most mature Christian men. Despite a commitment to a disciplined Christian life, they have never resolved their inner toil rooted in mother-son bonding and he eventually loses the battle. This is actually God’s grace designed to take the male back to the source of his pain to become healed.

Fear of Dependency

Paul Olsen, declares in his book, *Sons and Mothers*, “What a man is frightened of, more than anything else in the vast possibilities of living experience, is dependency, regression to a state in which he becomes an infant in the care of his mother—a mother later unconsciously symbolized by almost all women with whom he comes in contact.”

If the son has had any male to male sexual exposure in his childhood, this issue is compounded. Subconsciously he will seek to prove his heterosexuality by bonding to other women outside the marriage. When a dad abandons a son emotionally and physically, he is left to gain that validation elsewhere, often through a female or even another man. If the boy has any male-to-male sexual exposure he will grow into adulthood leaning toward homosexuality or he will have to prove his heterosexuality to himself by getting his validation from women.

The popular comedy TV sitcom series *Everybody Loves Raymond* is a classic portrayal of two sons who have been doted on by their mother and conflict consistently arises between the loyalty of the sons at the expense of their wives. The father is emotionally bankrupt and emotionally abuses the mother. The mother seeks to get her emotional needs met from Raymond, the favored son. Many of the situations are quite humorous, but sadly, are portrayed very accurately as to the depth of the

problem.

Ken Nair, author of *Discovering the Mind of a Woman*, cited a perfect example of this when counseling a couple and the husband was reacting to his wife's treatment of his wife. "I'm thinking of a situation where a wife said, 'On Mother's Day, you made sure that your mother got to sit at the head of the table and was waited on first.' He retaliated, 'Well, it was Mother's Day!' His wife defensively said, 'I'm a mother! In fact, I'm the mother of your children. But that doesn't seem to carry any weight with you!' He illustrated his deafness to her spirit by saying, 'I'm not going to stop loving my mother just to make you happy!'"

This man always gave deference to his mother's needs at the expense of his wife's. The husband was never emotionally bonded to his, but was still bonded to his mother. When this happens the husband will pull away from his wife because he subconsciously views her as his mother who he believes is trying to control him. Whenever a son's behavior changes in the presence of the mother and the wife feels like a third wheel, you can be confident there is a mother-son bonding issue that exists.

This usually results in the son bonding to other women outside the marriage in a subconscious attempt to deal with the pain of the mother-son bonding. He is often a flirt with other women usually unknowingly. Subconsciously he is meeting an emotional need in himself to prove his manhood through other women.

John Eldredge shares a very personal account of his discovery of similar deep rooted issues he described in his book, *Wild at Heart*. He discovered what happens when a man cannot offer himself emotionally to his wife. "If the man refuses to offer himself, then his wife will remain empty and barren. A violent man destroys with his words; a silent man starves his wife. 'She's wilting,' a friend confessed to me about his new bride.

‘If she’s wilting then you’re withholding something,’ I said. Actually, it was several things—his words, his touch, but mostly his delight. There are so many other ways this plays out in life. A man who leaves his wife with the children and the bills to go and find another, easier life has denied them his strength. He has sacrificed them when he should have sacrificed his strength for them.”

The Father Wound

Another reason that we are seeing more moral failure today is due to the fatherless generation that was ushered in through the baby boomer generation. Since the 1960s we have seen a steady increase in divorce and fatherless families. This has created an open wound in both men and women today.

Bill Clinton’s sexual indiscretions with Monica Lewinsky in the White House brought shame to him, his family, and the nation. To make matters worse, he tried to cover it up by lying to the American people on national television, and later explained it away as “not being sex.” Clinton will forever be remembered in the history books for his indiscretions. Dalbey explains:

“The shame from moral failure in men urges men into a variety of compulsive/addictive behaviors—from drugs and pornography to workaholism and religious legalism. In hiding his wound, the man eventually fulfills the awful impact of the Malachi 4:6 curse upon the land, from abortions and sexually transmitted diseases to crime and domestic violence. He’s left fearful of women, distrusting of other men, shortsighted in his view of God and, therefore, cut off from his destiny.

“In a classic example, during the shameful exposure of former President Clinton’s sexual sins, few political commentators noted that his father had died when Clinton was in his mother’s womb, and that his several step-fathers were alcoholic and/or abusive. With such a deep wound in his

masculine soul and the constant negative models at hand to fill it, the boy could only grow up looking for security in the one constant relationship, namely, his mother. He thereby learned to seek confirmation of his manhood from women. But since no woman is capable of doing that, and if he never goes to Father God with his wound, he's condemned to the eternally fruitless exercise of going from one woman to another seeking his manhood.

"The nation has paid dearly for this with a skepticism and even scorn for his leadership and authority. Certainly Clinton must be held accountable for his choices and eventually suffer their consequences. But—as destructive as the father-wound is—there's not enough brick and mortar to build enough prisons to hold the men who are acting it out. It's a deadly epidemic among us, which hides in the shadow of shame."

Tiger Woods

In December 2009 Tiger Woods' world went from a polished, protected family-friendly persona to a womanizer, shamed and gossiped about throughout the tabloid media due to moral failure and infidelity in his marriage. One of the questions that can often come up when someone like Tiger Woods, who seemingly had the world by the tail (pardon the pun), is "How could he ever want to go look outside his marriage with such a beautiful wife?"

Tiger fits the profile of a man deeply affected by mother-son bonding. Tiger is an only son. His parents divorced after he was an adult, but most likely the marriage had been weak for many years before the final divorce. It was well known that Earl Woods was not faithful to his wife.

Dina Parr, Tiger Woods' high school sweetheart, said in an interview that Tiger would call her crying, upset about his father Earl Woods' infidelity. Parr said Tiger would call her and say, "'My dad is with another woman' ... He would be so

upset, so I just tried to be there for him and listen to him.'” Parr went on to say that Tiger loved his father, but he never really got over the unfaithfulness and that it’s interesting that Tiger is now doing the same thing.

We often saw Tiger and his mother together and the bond between them must have been very strong. This would have meant Tiger may never have really bonded with his wife Elin, and probably never dealt with the emotional pain from the bonding of his mother. This ultimately would have to lead to resolving the inner conflict in inappropriate ways sexually as he got older. Chances are that because Tiger never really bonded with his wife Elin during the marriage he sought to bond with women outside the marriage through sex.

Symptoms of a Nurturing Void

If a son grows up in a family that fails to nurture him in his early years with appropriate touch, cuddling and affection, that child will grow into an adult with a greater sexual appetite in the marriage. He will associate sex with being loved by his spouse because he was never touched growing up. He will want to be touched and cuddled in the bedroom but will not want to be touched outside intimate times.

He will find it difficult to give hugs, hold hands or give healthy affection to his spouse. Sometimes a spouse may wrongly conclude her husband has a sexual addiction because of his desire for sex. If there is no pattern of pornography, he does not have a sexual addiction in his life. He has a love and nurturing problem that he never got as a child. Consequently, he will seek to have that need met through his spouse. However, she can never adequately satisfy his need. That’s because it’s a love need that requires healing from his heavenly Father. Until that is met in him he will continue to place pressure upon his wife to meet his sexual needs.

How Men and Women Deal With Pain

When there are emotional unmet needs in a relationship it can lead to a breach in the marital relationship and the husband and wife learn to cope in two different ways. Larry Crabb has summarized how both male and female use unique strategies to avoid the deep pain when a failure in trust happens.

All of us are trapped by addiction to a desire for something less than God. For many women, that something less is relational control. "I will not be hurt again and I will not let people I love be hurt. I'll see to it that what I fear never happens again." They therefore live in terror of vulnerably presenting themselves to anyone and instead become determined managers of people. Their true femininity remains safely tucked away behind the walls of relational control.

More common in men is an addiction to non-relational control. "I will experience deep and consuming satisfaction without ever having to relate meaningfully with anyone." They keep things shallow and safe with family and friends and feel driven to experience a joy they never feel, a joy that only deep relating can provide. Their commitment is twofold: to never risk revealing inadequacy by drawing close to people and, without breaking that commitment, to feel powerful and alive. Power in business and illicit sex are favorite strategies for reaching that goal.

What You Cover, God Uncovers

When Tiger tried to cover up his sin, he only made the humiliation factor grow in his situation. If he had been forthright by repenting in the beginning the level of humiliation would have been less severe.

If you are a believer and you live in compromise, you lose confidence in the faith dimension of your life. The Bible says we are to confess our sins one to another. The very act of bringing your struggle into the light brings healing. My friend Ford Taylor often says "What we cover, God uncovers."

What we uncover, God 'covers.'" If we try to hide our sin Satan has a legal right to humiliate us and will do so publicly. The more public a figure you are, the greater the humiliation. If you choose humility by initiating repentance, God will cover you by His grace and your restoration will be quicker.

Why Won't He Talk to Me?

If the mother-son bonding remains unresolved, the negative behavior becomes a part of his personality at a subconscious level as he grows older. Until he is conscious that his behavior is abnormal he lives in a world of independence, denial and conflict until he understands there is a problem. The wife struggles with thoughts and feelings like, "Why won't he talk to me? Why is he so defensive to my input?"

The way out of this is to come to the knowledge of the truth for the husband. The scripture says that the truth shall make you free. Men need God to heal their hearts of the pain in their lives that has been caused by this bonding and repent of the pain they caused their mates through their behavior. God will often force us into a crisis in our marriages to deal with the issue. The husband must deal with both the root and his behavior. He must acknowledge his failure to love his wife because the spirit behind this issue is an unloving spirit rooted in the mother-son bonding. He must actually tell himself "She is not my mother, she is my wife!"

Most men will not begin to change until they can understand the problem. It is not enough to complain to your partner that something is wrong. Until the man understands the reason for the problem and the way to fix it, he will not have the motivation to change. This is important because if our heart is not healed we will try to solve the problem through performance in order to relieve the pressure, but the root issue will never be healed. And the temptation for men is to get their validation as men from their wives or other women

instead of God.

There is another factor at play here as well. If a son grows up under a mother who is volatile and angry he will grow up fearing a woman's anger. The father often withdraws from his wife's outbursts, often abandoning the son to her emotional fits. The son grows up fearing confronting any woman for fear of conflict and possible outbursts, and fears the woman will leave him. By succumbing to these fears the boy grows up to be a man who abdicates his strength to the woman. This can open the door to a "Jezebel Spirit" in the marriage. "Ahab" yields leadership to the woman in the home.

The solution to this is for the man to exercise his true manly strength through servant leadership. Usually the woman will resist his new strength at first because she will perceive it to threaten her control over the man. A godly woman must come to a place of recognition that she actually needs his strength and will ultimately desire more of this. An ungodly woman, who has simply replaced his mother in this scenario, will leave him.

A Word to Mothers

If you are a mother and want to know how to avoid falling into the trap of mother-son bonding, the key is to ask yourself a question as it relates to the way you relate to your son. "Am I trying to get an emotional need met for myself by how I relate to my son, or am I trying to help my son grow up into a mature man?"

Often you will discover whether your relationship is healthy or not by simply asking this question. A mother must help her son enter into manhood. She must find ways that he can interact with other men who can help him develop into a healthy man. The Jewish bar mitzvah is a way the Jewish culture helps a young man recognize his manhood by his father. It is a rite of passage every young man needs.

The mother must let go of her son emotionally and encourage the separation to take place as he enters into his late teen years. If you do this, you will find your son will develop into an emotionally healthy male. Healthy relationships with other male figures are needed in the boy's life to invite him into manhood.

A Word to Adult Sons

If you are a husband/adult son and recognize that you have been impacted by mother-son bonding you must make some immediate changes. You have never effectively "leaved and cleaved" to your wife emotionally. You may or may not have to speak with your mother about this issue. However, you must begin to:

Set boundaries with your mother. She must know that your wife is first priority in your life. This can be a difficult transition for many men because it will feel like you are betraying your mother, but you are not. You are cutting one unhealthy bond so you can love and emotionally bond to your wife.

Ask your wife to help you. Ask your wife for input. Tell her to let you know when she is feeling like a third wheel when in her and your presence. Your vulnerability will prove to your wife you are serious about changing.

Invite input from your wife. Mother-son bonding creates a "feeling" of being controlled by your wife when she may simply be trying to connect emotionally. You will have to consciously say out loud to yourself when you have internal feelings that you feel controlled, "She is my wife, not my mother." Eventually those feelings will dissipate as you love your wife emotionally.

A Final Word to Men

The enormous increased level of dysfunction in our society due

to absent fathers and broken marriages has ushered in a generation of adults who carry a lot of brokenness and pain. Men, it is important to recognize the subtle lie the enemy of our soul tells us. That lie is "I cannot live without her." We have elevated a woman's sexuality to the point of idolatry in our culture.

The more you have been impacted by the mother-son bonding, the more you are prone to buy into this lie. Our source of strength cannot be the fair-haired woman; this can only be met by God if we are going to be Godly men. Healthy marriage can meet legitimate needs of both partners, but God must be our source for both spouses.

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