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Mother love is often seen as sacred, but for many children the relationship is a painful struggle. Using the newest research on human attachment and brain development, Terri Apter, an internationally acclaimed psychologist and writer, unlocks the mysteries of this complicated bond. She showcases the five different types of difficult mother—the angry mother, the controlling mother, the narcissistic mother, the envious mother, and the emotionally neglectful mother—and explains the patterns of behavior seen in each type. Apter also explores the dilemma at the heart of a difficult relationship: why a mother has such a powerful impact on us and why we continue to care about her responses long after we have outgrown our dependence. She then shows how we can conduct an “emotional audit” on ourselves to overcome the power of the complex feelings a difficult mother inflicts. In the end this book celebrates the great resilience of sons and daughters of difficult mothers as well as acknowledging their special challenges.

Difficult Mothers: Understanding and Overcoming Their Power Details

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Rosemarie says

This is a great book on a very difficult topic. Apter distinguishes very clearly between "good enough" mothers - who are not perfect - but no mother is - on the one hand, and mother/child relationships that cross over into the "difficult" category and why they do.

Her definition is the best I've ever heard. "A difficult mother is someone who presents her child with the dilemma: 'Either develop complex and constricting coping mechanisms to maintain a relationship with me on my own terms, or suffer ridicule, disapproval, or rejection.' "

If you've ever wondered if your relationship with your mom is normal or harmful, and what you can do about it so it doesn't destroy the rest of your life, this book will be a great help and comfort.

Crystal says

I don't feel like the categories were fully developed. I have a mother who was neglectful because of her narcissism. Few of the behaviors described were exhibited, she was just waiting till I was old enough to be kicked out so she could marry a rich man and relive her youth. This book was not helpful at understanding her, teaching how to move past the damaging effects or how to facilitate change in our relationship.

Veronica says

If only this book had been around 25 years ago...I think I'll be reading and re-reading this one.

Travel Writing says

Insightful and encouraging book.

It was very informative and had a lot of examples, but a little thin on the 'how' to overcome the difficult mother. I understand that the author was laying out that if you have the knowledge to understand a difficult mother, then you basically can overcome the difficult mother.

Some quotes I liked. They came at the very end of the book.

"...our mother's approval is not worth what we have to give up in exchange."

"Ultimately, the challenge is not to resolve matters between you and your mother, but between you and the habitual fear-based thought processes that come between you and your capacity to thrive on your own terms."

"The greatest release comes with the acceptance that it is not our mother who retains control over the fears, doubts, and dissatisfactions that we may have learned in the cauldron of our relationship with her. Release comes from relinquishing the urge to fight one more battle with her to gain recognition or acceptance or admiration. It is the enlightenment that our battles no longer between ourselves and a mother but between the history that formed us and our better possible selves."

Ginger says

While I certainly did not have a difficult mother, we all have loved ones and acquaintances that have. This book focuses on parental issues but is not necessarily limited to only that. Extremely eye-opening and insightful as to how and why life issues are dealt with by all people, whether they be mothers, fathers, grandparents, bosses, co-workers, children, or even yourself. Great read and relevant for anyone that doesn't live in complete isolation.

Triecia Gibney says

I read this book to see if it could be useful for some of my patients. The book is very easy to read with no jargon and psychological concepts are clearly explained in layperson language. The book starts with an introductory chapter on some of the different presentations of difficult mothers. This is followed by a chapter summarising in basic terms the science related to mothering, e.g., infant development, the fight or flight response, mentalization and mirroring, before a chapter dedicated to each of the difficult mother presentations, the angry mother, the controlling mother, the narcissistic mother, the envious mother and the emotionally unavailable mother. I found the book quite ambitious in what it aimed to achieve, for instance there are entire books written on narcissistic parenting, so to cover this in one chapter means that the content is quite simplistic. However I think the author did this well and the simplicity is also its strength in that it maintains accessibility for the lay reader. I thought the second last chapter "Am I a difficult mother?" was a particularly important part of this book; this is a fear commonly expressed by my patients that they will unwittingly perpetuate the pattern of parenting done to them onto their own children. This chapter provides hope for mothers that the ghosts of the nursery can indeed be put to rest by gaining an understanding of one's own experience and developing new patterns of parenting. The book is clearly aimed at the self help market rather than a professional text book and I feel it is a worthy addition to this genre.

Charity says

I kind of skimmed this book in order to get it off the shelf before my mother visited, so maybe I missed this part, but I don't understand why the focus is restricted to the maternal relationship. Why doesn't Apter address the role of non-mother primary caregivers in a child's life?

The descriptions of the different types of difficult relationships people have with their mothers seem overly narrow and rigid (although perhaps I only think this because my own relationship challenges aren't described here).

Although Apter cautions readers not to assume that our disappointment in our mother's responses is necessarily her fault, it seems to absolve grown children of the responsibility to interact with their mothers as though their mothers are adults.

This seems like a fine book, but it didn't do it for me. Eventually I'll learn that self-help books are always going to leave me wanting.

Susan says

This was a well-written book with a great deal of good information about difficult mothers. However, the subtitle is somewhat misleading. If you are looking to 'understand' difficult mothers, this is a great choice. If, on the other hand, you are looking to 'overcome the power' of a difficult mother you will find very little of substance here.

I suspect the author believes she has accomplished both goals, but that is based on her claims that 'once you have full understanding of a difficult mother and your responses to her, then you can change your thought patterns accordingly'. She then notes that everyone has their own situations and responses therefore must come up with their own ways of learning how to get from understanding to healing - tada! Now you know how to overcome the power your difficult mother has over you.

Interestingly, one of the reasons I enjoyed a similar type of book - *If You Had Controlling Parents* - was that the author refrained from presenting a 'one size fits all solution' to the readers. He did, however, present a number of choices that worked for him and/or clients and that the reader might find useful in moving forward. He was clear that some suggestions would work for some people and some for others, but he did at least suggest a number of 'tools' that might be useful in fixing the problem.

Apter takes a different approach. Imagine that you are trying to improve your core strength. Apter's approach would be to describe all of the core muscles in great detail then say 'there you go, now do exercises to strengthen them. I do not know which exercises you enjoy or do not enjoy, but you will figure it out. Done!'. She fails acknowledge that if you have never tried this type of strengthening, especially if you were raised in a home that was set-up against you even attempting such a thing, you likely have no idea of the types of exercises or options that are available to help you in your journey (though ironically she does cite examples of many individuals who have a very rich and detailed understanding of their difficult mothers' influence over them but who remain 'trapped' under their mothers' power).

I gave the book three stars because I was looking for understanding more about difficult mothers. If I had chosen the book because I was also seeking to 'overcome their power' I would have given a much lower rating.

Sally B says

Finally someone who understands my mother. Someone put into writing my life. I am grateful to have been adopted as a baby by two people who could take good care of me, but at the same time my mother was distant and scrutinizing my every move and word. This book helped me understand her better, but it has been difficult to implement her strategies because my mother catches on. I have definitely been able to put my foot down however as a result of the knowledge and wisdom the author provides.

Georgia says

Interesting but did not offer any profound insight into forming a better relationship with a difficult mother.

Rachal says

Frighteningly accurate and also very helpful in shedding light onto the strange dynamics a mother child relationship can take on.

Kirsten says

I didn't pick this book because I felt I had a particularly difficult mother, but because I imagine that I would be a difficult mother myself- "NO. WIRE. HANGERS!" seems pretty reasonable to me :)

Anyway, this book is an insightful look into the mysterious workings of the baby brain, and is great for anyone who is curious about the developmental roots of their own unique personalities. Whether we had a good childhood with great parents or otherwise, this book offers a peek at how those formative first years formed the foundation of our sense of self. The author demonstrates how the "self" is really an evolving pattern of responses born from experiences largely inaccessible to one's working memory. Although we may not remember our infancy or childhood in any great detail, parts of those experiences are reenacted in our adulthood constantly. What becomes the familiar, multifaceted, adult personality that we each come to love and loathe can be traced back, branch by branch, to the original "conversations" between mother (or main caretaker) and child.

Audrey Custer says

Every chapter in this book won't apply to everyone. It should be apparent within a couple of pages of the "Difficult mother types" chapters if that one applies to your mother or someone you know.

First, the book explains what difficult mothers are - a mother that YOU experience as difficult. A sibling who grew up in the same home often may not feel the same way about the parent that you do.

The book is careful to mention that this "difficult" label can be used to describe either parent - or a caregiver, whomever that may be.

According to the author, there are 5 different types of mothers, which are each given their own chapter:

1. The Angry Mother - a mother who uses anger to manipulate or control her offspring.
2. The Controlling Mother - A mother who wants total control over the life of her offspring, dictating where they may go, who they may associate with, etc.
3. The Narcissistic Mother - A mother who uses her children to prop up her poor sense of self, or to frantically avoid shame.
4. The Envious Mother - a mother who envies her child's accomplishments, and will show disappointment when they succeed, rather than pleasure.
5. The Emotionally Unavailable Mother - Exactly what it sounds like. Often mentally ill or substance abusers, these mothers aren't necessarily neglectful, they just don't forge an emotional bond with their

children.

I confess - I didn't read the whole of the eighth chapter, titled "Am I a Difficult Mother?" because I'm not a mother - it doesn't really apply to my situation. I read enough to know that I probably would have been one if I had wanted children in the first place, but I don't, so - that's that.

The last chapter, "Resilience: Overcoming a Difficult Mother's Power" is about strengthening your sense of self and worthiness in the aftermath of a damaging childhood - or an ongoing relationship with the difficult parent. Compassion - understanding what the parent is feeling and why they may feel that way - is key to helping yourself. Telling your story, either to yourself or to others can be therapeutic and the way you tell stories can be an insight into whether you'll achieve a measure of resilience (read the book to find out!). The chapter ends with an "Emotional Audit" - homework, per se - to identify the areas that you may need to work on.

The book ends with a chapter by chapter list of notes (for those of you who have read my reviews before, you may know that I love citations!).

This book is a book with homework - not what I was really expecting when I picked it up - in fact, I don't know what I was expecting. Dealing with a difficult parent takes a lot of work on your part, because you know in your heart of hearts that your difficult parent won't meet you half-way. It didn't hold my attention as much as I'd hoped - but it is written in a format where you can skip one of the difficult mother types chapters if it doesn't apply to you and not miss anything.

In conclusion, if you think you have a difficult mother and want to identify strategies on how to deal with her, instead of work on YOU - this may not be the book you're looking for. Although, keep this in mind: she's been playing the game much longer than you have. She's probably better than you at it, and she'll never tire. I like the conclusion of this book - that the best way to deal with a difficult mother is to use compassion, set boundaries, and work on your own emotional resilience.

Kerry Lewis says

When you are a victim of emotional abuse by a parent, you find it hard to understand how and why, and are you, as they love to say, living in a fantasy world for actually mentioning it. This book, for me, opened my eyes to the fact that yes, it was abuse and no, I wasn't alone and I could get past it. Allowed me to see I don't have to feel like I'm going mad and some parents ARE like that.

Greta says

If there's one thing I appreciate, it's someone putting my experiences into perspective and letting me know that I am not alone in my perceptions. This book addresses the types of mothers who are not all loving, giving, affectionate, soothing, compassionate and perfect. The author does a fine job of describing the behavior of the angry, controlling, narcissistic, envious, and emotionally unavailable (i.e., difficult) mother and the impact she can have on a child's life from the very beginning. She also discusses ways one can try to assess the impact such a mother's behavior might be having on the adult child. Reading this book sheds light on a subject that is generally not easily discussed or understood. We all complain about our mothers, but this author brings to light the painful struggle many of us have in playing the hand we're dealt at birth. We all would like to be able to love our mothers, but many mothers act in ways that make themselves difficult to love. Now I can clearly see why that is, and just understanding that makes a big difference in how I will be able to move forward in my relationship with my own mother. This book might change your life as well.

