

Your Personal Coach

By

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

I haven't spoken to or seen my father in more than ten years even though I don't live very far from him. Last week, my sister told me that he has cancer and that it doesn't look good. My mother and sister want me to make up with him but I can tell you he doesn't really deserve it – he was a rotten father to me growing up. I can't tell you how many times he humiliated me in front of my friends or whipped me with a switch. I don't know what I should do.

Roger M.

Dear Roger,

It's hard to be angry and estranged from a family member, especially if that person is your mother or father.

We're born with innate expectations of ideal, archetypal parents. We expect our mothers to be warm, ever-protective, and nurturing.

Fathers (our father, at least) will be strong, and will help us reach for our dreams. He will hold us in his powerful arms and teach us to navigate by the stars.

Despite our expectations when we come into the world, our parents are real human beings -- not that much older than ourselves, and often wounded by poor parenting in their own childhoods. Like favorite recipes or the good china, these bad parenting models are passed down from family to family. We do so mostly unconsciously.

Parents raise their kids the way they were raised because it's what they know – regardless of how ineffective – and sometimes cruel-- those behaviors might be.

Your dilemma is made all the more difficult because, based on what your sister said, your father is now experiencing what seems to be a life-threatening illness. There may not be a lot of time to work through all your feelings.

Roger, you have every right to feel disappointed and angry that you didn't have the kind of father who expressed love and helped you grow up feeling safe and protected. But carrying anger around with you for all these years is not going to change the past, nor is it healthy or good for you now.

Don't get me wrong. Anger is a normal part of a process of grieving for what never was, and it can be the impetus to change — changing how you live and how you will be a father to your own children should you choose to have a family.

The natural outcome of working through anger is forgiveness. Forgiveness is a goal that lightens our load and allows us to move beyond even very painful histories.

If you feel stuck in your anger, I suggest talking with your priest, minister, rabbi or a good therapist who can help you better understand and express your feelings about your father.

You might want to ask yourself this question: “How will I feel if/when my father dies if I haven't tried to heal our relationship?”

If you will feel guilty or sad then it makes sense to take steps to reach out to him now. This does not mean forgetting the past, but it does mean resolving your anger and moving toward forgiveness. Remember that you are an adult now and your father no longer has the power to punish you. Perhaps he's changed or mellowed over the years that you have been out of contact, but he may not know how to reach out to you.

Forgiveness carries with it a release of many pent-up emotions and is good for the psyche and the soul. I know that forgiving is not easy when you've been hurt badly but it is possible and you'll feel better for it. As author C.S. Lewis pointed out, “Everyone says that forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive.”

Good luck to you.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com, call 473-4004, or direction questions to the Outer Banks Sentinel, P.O. Box 546, Nags Head, NC 27949

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