



it's momplicated

Hope and healing
for imperfect daughters
of imperfect mothers

Debbie Alsdorf | Joan Edwards Kay, MA, LMFT

Praise for *It's Momplicated*

I'm not sure I've read a more helpful book on how we daughters are shaped by our mothers' love—or unlove—as well as what to do about it. What am I sure about? In these pages you will find hope as well.

ELISA MORGAN

Speaker and author of *The Prayer Coin* and *The Beauty of Broken*

If your relationship with your mother is complex, problematic, difficult, and full of twists and turns, don't miss this book! Debbie Alsdorf and Joan Edwards Kay have combined their stories and their wisdom to help you understand the past, identify thorny issues, and lead you to right choices that will bring understanding, healing, and a deeper connection with God. This is a must-read book and is an important resource for individuals, counselors, and Christian leaders. I highly recommend *It's Momplicated!*

CAROL KENT

Speaker and author of *He Holds My Hand*

“Shouldn't this be easier?” That is the big question when it comes to mother-daughter relationships. But being both a mother and a daughter, I've realized that maybe it should be easier, but it just isn't. *It's Momplicated* has given me not only keen new insight into my own unmet needs, but compassion for a loving mom who tried to

meet my spoken—and unspoken—needs. Another great benefit of reading Debbie and Joan’s excellent book is the insight it’s given me into understanding and connecting with my adult daughter in the ways that she needs a mom and always will. A healing and, most of all, freeing read. Highly recommended.

KATHI LIPP

Speaker and bestselling author of *The Husband Project* and *Clutter Free*

It’s Momplicated is a skillful, well-laid-out blend of the spiritual, emotional, and psychological aspects to understanding the influence of this primary relationship between moms and daughters. It provides a respectful, substantial structure for exploration of both the gifts and the pain of this relationship and charts an informed course for healing and celebration. As a mom and daughter, I found it personally and profoundly transformative in one reading, but I know I will revisit it time and time again. As a clinician, I can see this being a great therapeutic intervention for those struggling to have healthy relationships. This is not just a book for moms and daughters, but for anyone wanting to understand how our earliest relationships are impacting how we relate to others now, offering a way to remove the obstacles that often prevent relationships from being all they can be.

MARY JEAN WALTON, MA, LMFT

Executive director of the Christian Counseling Center, San Jose, California

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introduction

My Mother—My Heart

WHEN YOU HEAR THE WORD *MOTHER*, what happens? Do you get a rush of love or a flare of anger? A pleasant memory or a painful flashback? No matter how you respond, this book is for you.

Maybe you feel guilty for even picking up this book. After all, in a lot of ways your mother is great. But for some reason, when you hang up the phone after talking to her, you are tense and irritable, trying for the next hour to figure out what hit you. This book is for you, too!

The mother-daughter relationship is *momplicated*—one of the most complicated, yet sacred, bonds between two people. It is complex, rich, beautiful, and sometimes painful.

As coauthors—a lay person (Debbie) and a therapist (Joan)—we have been unraveling its effects on our own lives for years. We connected through mutual friends who knew we both had a passion for God and a heart for helping women. After becoming friends and sharing our experiences, we agreed that most women continue to be affected

by their relationships with their mothers. When I (Debbie) lead retreats and conferences for women, I have been surprised that the audience connects so deeply with my mother story. Many come up and tell me, “Your story is my story.” As a therapist, I (Joan) find that whether I am working with Christians, Muslims, or atheists, their current problems often have roots that go back to that first relationship.

Though a woman’s adult relationship with her mother may be good, there is still a little girl inside all of us who has been imprinted with things that may drive us in less-than-desirable ways today. In these pages, we will be coming from a faith-based perspective, pointing you to the truths that will leave “Godprints” in the places that have held hurt or false beliefs. We will do this through our stories and other women’s stories, looking for God’s grace in all of them.

You won’t find any mother-bashing in this book. We are mothers ourselves. We love our children, and although we have been imperfect in our mothering, we continue to make positive strides to be better. And you won’t see a formula on how to be a perfect mother because there is no such thing. What we hope you’ll discover is how much of you is shaped by your mother—good and bad—and how that valuable information can bring you healing and shed light on your relationship with your mother to make it less momplicated.

Both of our mothers have been gone for years, but they are still part of us. And though they are not physically present, they are still part of our everyday lives. They are the blueprint from which our lives are built. They are woven

into the fabric of our hearts. We still find ourselves wanting to tell them when we have exciting news, wondering what they would think about our choices, and wishing we could call them—one more time.

This poem by an unknown author says it perfectly:

YOUR MOTHER

*Your mother is always with you . . .
she's the whisper of the leaves as you walk down the street;
she is the smell of bleach in your fresh laundered socks;
she's the cool hand on your brow when you're not well.
Your mother lives inside your laughter and
she's crystallized in every tear drop.
She's the place you come from, your first home
and she's the map you follow with every step you take.
She's your first love and your first heartbreak.
And nothing on earth can separate you.
Not time, not space, not death.*

Yes, our mothers are always with us. In a perfect world, our mothers would impart only good and beautiful messages to us. It would be ideal if our mothers always embodied the love of God toward us, but in a fallen world with real people, it just won't happen. Many of the beliefs, reactions, and habits formed within us have come from our responses to this primary and vitally important relationship. Our hope is to lead you to a place of understanding how a mother's imprint affects your life. No matter where you might be on

this journey of discovery regarding yourself and your mother, we hope you will find valuable information in these pages. We will address how painful aspects of the mother-daughter relationship may have impacted your sense of being precious, beautiful, safe, nurtured, and strong.

Integrating biblical truth with the latest in therapeutic practice, this book will lead you along a healing path to the safe place of knowing you are truly precious and loved. No matter how your past has affected you, God offers healing, a sense of value, belonging, and strength. Overcoming the painful legacy of your mother wounds is possible through God's restoring love. This book will encourage you to have compassion on yourself, offer forgiveness and compassion to your mother, and find hope in the restoring power of God.

If you are a mom, always remember that you are partnering with God in the shaping and raising of lives that were created for his purposes. You are leaving heartprints daily on your children's souls. Be careful, be prayerful, and be grateful for the calling of motherhood, quite possibly the highest calling of all. Receive your own healing from God, accept his love for you, and let God's heart beat through yours—to those precious ones who call you Mom. Who you are stays with them forever and is passed on to the next generation. It is never too late to love, never too late to heal, and never too late to trust God to turn the pain in your story into a redemption song.

introduction

We are praying for you and asking God to be present as
you read this book!

Debbie Alsdorf and Joan Edwards Kay



*Debbie, nearly three and a half,
and her mother.*



*Annie (left), six, with Aunt Betty, and
Joan (right), nine, with her mother.
Johnny is in the far background.*

how to use this book

THIS BOOK IS MEANT TO be a healing journey. It can be done individually, in a group setting, or one-on-one with a mentor, counselor, or therapist. As you read this book, please keep the following things in mind:

- *You can either read this book lightly for the concepts or do a deep dive and incorporate the exercises. Healing is like peeling an onion; it happens one layer at a time. Go to the depth you feel is appropriate for you.*
- *If you are a mother, you will read with dual awareness. You will not only have insights about your relationship with your mother, but you will also probably see ways you have been less than perfect with your own children. If your children are still young, this book can help you change old patterns and be a better mother. If your children are now adults, remember it is never too late to work toward healing.*

- *If you have been adopted or raised by someone other than your biological mother, you may find yourself thinking about more than one mother figure as you read. Include these people as you reflect on your story.*
- *If your mother is no longer living, consider whether there might still be healing to do within yourself.*
- *Even if you and your mother have a good adult relationship now, the imprinting you received as a child may still need attention. Childhood wounds sometimes linger until we are strong enough to deal with them and let them truly heal.*
- *Try to be aware of what is happening in your body and emotions as you read the stories in this book. Your reactions can be helpful clues.*

Every woman has her own story. The specific events and memories of your life are unique to you. The level of trauma in your life is unique to you. Nevertheless, it can be helpful to look at general patterns as they are illustrated in the lives of others. Though the stories we present in this book are different from yours, you may find strands of your story as you read.

All stories in this book, unless otherwise noted, are composites. Names and details have been changed to protect confidentiality.



part one

momplications

*The important people in our lives leave
imprints. They may stay or go in the
physical realm, but they are always there
in your heart, because they helped form
your heart. There's no getting over that.*

RACHEL COHN AND DAVID LEVITHAN,

Dash and Lily's Book of Dares

every woman has a story

Owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing that we will ever do.

BRENÉ BROWN

“DEBRA, STOP WHINING OR I’ll give you something to whine about. You aren’t sick; you’re just hungry.”

“No, Mama, I’m not hungry. My tummy feels like it’s stabbing me.”

The arguments over my stomach pain went on for months. Even though I made frequent trips to the school nurse, my mom wasn’t convinced that something could actually be physically wrong with me. She brushed it off as my need for attention.

Finally, she relented and took me to the doctor. Tests confirmed that I wasn’t suffering from mere hunger pangs or trying to get my mom to notice me. It wasn’t something I imagined in my head. In fourth grade, I was diagnosed with ulcers.

For my mother, this wasn't acceptable.

"You are sick all the time just like your daddy! If you weren't so nervous, your tummy would be fine. Why are you so afraid? What's wrong with you? You are dramatic and making yourself sick!"

What does a ten-year-old say to that?

I didn't know why I was sick. I didn't want to be cooped up in the office with the school nurse instead of playing outside at recess with my friends. Mom accused me of being weak because I had stomach issues. She didn't do weak, and she prided herself on being healthy and strong. She ruled our roost. As the saying goes, if Mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy.



When I think of growing up with my mother, there are three words that come to mind—*distant*, *cold*, and *angry*. And a fourth: *longing*. I longed for her love. Although she was well liked by her coworkers and friends, her daily criticisms of me—from the way I looked to how I acted—became the way I learned to view myself. She worked the night shift and slept during school hours, but in the short daily moments we were together, she seemed irritated, distant, and uninterested. I grew up thinking I was a nuisance.

As soon as my mother heard the doctor's diagnosis, she seemed to start picking me apart about everything. It began with the ulcers, then landed on a recent portrait of me that a family friend had taken.

"What's wrong with you in this picture?"

I hesitated, frozen by her disapproving tone.

Finally I said, "I guess I'm ugly?"

My dad usually didn't get involved when my mom was mean to me, but this time he jumped in. "You are always criticizing her. Can you lay off? Just give the kid a break! She looks fine in that picture."

As much as I appreciated my dad's attempt to be my advocate, it was like adding gasoline to a fire. Mom's ranting escalated until I couldn't take it any longer. I ran out of the room, holding my hands over my ears to muffle her yells.

"Go ahead and get out of here. Your father always makes excuses for you. Why don't you just go play on the freeway!"

It wasn't the first time I had heard that last flippant remark. We lived in a tiny two-bedroom house in a beach town close to Los Angeles. There were freeways nearby, so in my little-girl mind I translated my mom's directive as "Just get lost or get hit by a car."

I had no idea what I had done to enrage my mom. I just knew I must be bad, wrong, weak, ugly, and a bother. As my parents continued to argue, I tried to make myself as small as possible on my bed in my room, hugging my knees to my chest.

When things quieted down, I snuck out without them noticing, crossed the busy four-lane street we lived on, and sat on the bench at the bus stop located across from our house. The sound of the passing cars gave me relief. I watched as people drove by and found myself thinking, *What would it be like to have a mom who liked me and didn't yell at me so much? A mom who held me when I was sick and told me I was pretty?*

I didn't have money to take the bus anywhere, but I wished that someone could take me away to a place where I would feel wanted. My stomach was churning and the tears fell freely as I kept thinking, *What is so wrong with me that even my mom and dad fight about me?*

I wish this weren't my story. These kinds of life-shaping wounds go deep. My mother left her imprint on me, and it shaped me. And though it wasn't all bad, I have spent years understanding the impact and unraveling the pain. But despite the pain, the mother-daughter relationship is deep in loyalty, even in the midst of confusing signals. My mom, the only mother I will ever have, the woman whose aloofness and criticisms hurt me, was still the woman I loved and longed for. She wasn't perfect, but she was mine.

EVERY STORY IS UNIQUE

Every daughter's story with her mother is unique. As I (Joan) read Debbie's story, I find myself comparing—noticing all the ways my mother was different from hers. I don't remember my mom criticizing or yelling at me. I wasn't afraid of her. She never told me to go play on the freeway.

No, my story with my mother is not the same as Debbie's. When I think of my mother, my stomach clenches and my throat closes. I'm aware of sadness, anger, longing, regret—a whole jumble of emotions. And there is guilt. How can I have these feelings about my mom? She did so much for me. How can I be so ungrateful?

I quickly search for positive memories to prove that I do love and appreciate my mother, and they are easy to find. My mother was a 1950s housewife. She loved to cook and prepared a delicious, balanced dinner every night. Every week she did my laundry and placed neatly folded clothes on the stairs that led to my room. We lived modestly in our 1,500-square-foot suburban home in the Midwest, but it felt abundant. I freely roamed the neighborhood to visit friends and rode my bicycle to the park. If I fell and scraped my knee or was frightened by a dog, I could run home and my mother would comfort me.

When my mother wasn't busy with a project—creating a new watercolor, planting flowers along our garage, or refinishing an old chest of drawers—she would gravitate to her favorite chair, where she sat reading for hours. During the summer, my mother took my sister, my brother, and me to the library every week so we could each get a fresh stack of books to read.

The neighborhood kids often gathered at our house because my mother allowed us to spread out and make a mess. We could turn the large room at the back of our house into a school for our dolls. We could pile the patio furniture on the lawn to build a fort. Lake Michigan was a mile away, and my mother regularly took us to the beach. In the early days, my mother seemed happy, and I felt the same way—until the year I turned nine.



It was March 22, 1961. It seemed like any other school day as I came downstairs to make myself a bowl of cereal. My

grandmother was standing at the kitchen sink. She had been with us a lot recently so our mother could visit our dad in the hospital. He was there, our mother had told us, because he had an “ulcer.”

My grandmother inhaled sharply when she saw me. Her usually kind face looked strained and exhausted. “Your mommy wants to see you.”

I walked down the short hall to my parents’ bedroom. On the bed, my mother looked disheveled in a crumpled, sleeveless nightgown, her short brown hair sticking up from the back of her head. My six-year-old sister, Annie, and four-year-old brother, Johnny, were on the bed with her, but I focused on my mother’s red eyes.

“Joanie,” she said, “come here. There’s something I have to tell you.” I warily approached and sat down.

“Last night Daddy died.”

She blurted out the words, hid her face in a wad of Kleenex, and sobbed.

I went numb. *Daddy died*. I mentally repeated the words, trying to make sense of them. My dad—his warm hugs, his prickly whiskers, his twinkling eyes and half smile when he teased me—what did that mean, he had died?

I looked at my mother, hoping for understanding or comfort, but she offered nothing. She looked at me with wide, pleading eyes as if I could somehow help her. I had never seen her like this, and it was terrifying. Johnny was crying now too, and Annie’s face was frozen, expressionless. I felt completely alone.

During the days that followed, I wandered, dazed, through the rubble that remained of my life. Everything was different. Our grandmother became our mom, cooking and doing laundry and making sure we got on the school bus. People continually came to our front door, where my grandmother or aunt would graciously thank them for the card or the food they had brought and tell them my mother was “sleeping.” My friends were kind, but they wanted to play, not realizing that I couldn’t turn away from the never-ending, screaming pain inside me. On the school playground, groups of kids huddled, whispering and looking at me. I felt achingly alone. It seemed that no one could enter my world—no one could understand. My sister and brother were too little, my aunt and grandmother were busy, my father was gone, and my mother was a stranger sitting in a green armchair, staring out the window, smoking cigarettes.

Every family and every culture has unspoken rules. My relatives approached hardship with a “stiff upper lip.” The rules were “Don’t talk about your pain. Don’t talk about your feelings. Don’t touch. Be strong and go on with life.” No one held me or sat and talked with me. No one invited me to pour out my pain. It was as if I were supposed to pretend I didn’t remember or care that my dad ever existed.



As spring became summer and then fall, life took on a new normal routine. My aunt went back to New York, and my grandmother returned to her house in a nearby town. However, part of our new normal was a growing awareness

that Johnny was sick. I have flashes of memories—his chubby cheeks from the cortisone treatment, his wheelchair, the nose-bleed that wouldn't stop—but no one said the words *cancer* or *leukemia*. I was oblivious. Annie and I were immersed in school, piano lessons, ballet classes, and friends.

By December, my mother was at the hospital with Johnny most of the time, and my grandmother came to stay with Annie and me. She made sure my sister had a birthday party when she turned seven, but Annie grieved that our mother wasn't there.

On January 29, ten months after my father's death, I got off the school bus and immediately knew something terrible had happened. There were cars in the driveway, and through the front windows I could see people in the living room. My mother met me at the door.

"Joanie, Johnny died today." The way she blurted it out reminded me of when she had told me about my father. A cold, icy rage gripped me. Anger at her, anger at the situation, anger at all those people in the living room.

As an adult, I am horrified by all my mother had to bear—losing a husband while having a terminally ill son—and I have compassion for her. But as a ten-year-old, I didn't understand. Why couldn't she make things better? I held her responsible for allowing this chaos and pain to enter my life.

I felt abandoned by her. I hadn't understood why she focused so much time and attention on Johnny in the months after our father died, but not on me and my sister. Johnny was sick, but weren't we hurting too? It makes sense to me now; what mother wouldn't spend every possible moment at

the hospital with her dying son? But at the time I believed she didn't care about me, and it hurt. And over the top of that hurt, there was anger.

I punished her by pushing her away, even when she tried to be more present to me after Johnny died. The more I rejected her, the more ingratiating she became to try to win back my love, like a puppy begging to be petted. When she groveled, I rebuffed her more. I became the "alpha" in the relationship, and I hated it. I wanted her to be stronger than I was and to stop me from hurting her.

Writing about my mother is hard, yet I know there is value in honestly looking at how she continues to influence me today. She left me with countless gifts. My early years gave me a strong foundation. I was given core beliefs that I am lovable, valuable, and capable. Through her I learned the love of art and books and gardening. But she also left me with wounds.

Her emotional abandonment imprinted me with a way of approaching life and relationships that says, "You are on your own. You have only yourself to rely on. Let people get close, but not too close. Don't ever give anyone the power to hurt you by abandoning you." These messages are getting fainter and God's voice is getting louder as I walk the path of healing, but the imprint is deep in my being.

YESTERDAY'S IMPRINTS IMPACT TODAY

All of us have a story, a path, and a process that have led us to this point. Some women are very aware that their early

relationships shaped them, while others are in denial about the way the messages of their past impact them today. You may not have experienced anything as traumatic with your mother as we did with ours. But if you are honest with yourself, we think you might admit there may be complicated issues. And though we are not to live blaming our “stuff” on our mothers or on our pasts, it does serve us well to be open enough to look to the past, identifying patterns of behavior and attitude that may have been formed there.

The goal is to be able to move beyond our pasts into the future that God has designed for us. He is writing our stories. His signature is on your life and ours. Ask him to give you wisdom about why you get reactive or get stuck in ruts that are hard to get out of.

For the two of us, the path to healing has been fragmented and has come in seasons. There was never one explosive aha moment to healing and change. This healing journey with the Lord is a beautiful path to freedom that happens as he unravels it layer by layer. We are sure we will still be growing until the day that we take our last breath on earth.

As we look at our lives now, we realize that God has been shaping us since day one. He was with us in our less-than-ideal moments and in our pain. Once we could grasp that truth, it became much easier to give the pain to Jesus for healing.

He knows our hot buttons and the things that trigger our insecurity, shame, and fear. While we came from different families, we both learned dysfunctional patterns when we were young. These unhealthy patterns led to people-pleasing,

compulsive overachieving, and running to food and other distractions to numb our pain. When we could look honestly at those behaviors and realize that Jesus understands every bit of dysfunction and desires to make us whole, we were able to begin our journeys to freedom from negative imprints. There has been much healing since, and there will be much more to come.

YOUR STORY

We've told you part of our stories; what about you? Take a moment to think about your mother. What comes to mind as you think about your relationship with her? What memories surface? What desires, concerns, or regrets? How do you think your relationship with your mother shaped you? It never ceases to amaze us how helpful it can be for women to address their mother relationships.

Staci wanted to meet to talk about life, spiritual growth, and mentoring, but the conversation turned to the subject of her mom. Though they had a loving relationship, Staci admitted it was strained. She had no idea how deep her daughter pain actually went until she was asked to do a presentation for her mother's sixtieth birthday. She tried to write something that would be honoring and tell the story of an amazing mom. After all, wasn't she amazing? Everyone else seemed to think so.

But Staci couldn't pen sincere words no matter how hard she tried. As she sat with her open journal in our counseling session, tears rolled down her cheeks. She went home, and when she began writing, she filled the blank pages with words that revealed all the hurt in their relationship.

The truth was that her mother had been a constant source of pain, confusion, and hurt—for years. Her mother was cold and unaffectionate. The critical spirit in which she approached everything about Staci had deeply wounded Staci's self-confidence. Naturally these cathartic realizations were not spoken at her mother's birthday party, but they were used by God as Staci began to journal, for the first time, about the effects of their relationship.

Rather than making her angry and bitter at her mom, the more Staci wrote, the more pain was released, and the healing between the two of them began. Staci became clear on what she needed to ask God for—healing from the effects of her mother's criticisms.

When we approach God with the details of our lives and stories, he meets us right there at the crossroads of the story line. He desires truth in our inward parts, and being able to face the truth brings a healing we might not have realized we needed. Staci is a very functional and successful adult. She is talented, and most people would think she was confident. But under her exterior confidence was a wound that had her

secretly dwelling in insecurity and fear. She had lived her entire adult life doubting herself and letting others walk all over her.

When Staci realized how deeply her mother's criticisms had affected her, it was a game changer. She honored her mother at the party but kept it short and sweet, focusing on the many things her mother had done to help other people. After Staci sat down and exchanged smiles with her mother, she knew God was doing something powerful within her. It all began with remembering her mother-daughter story. Now that Staci was an adult, it was no longer about blaming her mother. It was now about bringing the past pain to God, who had the power to heal her in the deepest part of her soul. This allowed her to honor her mother at the celebration while receiving peace directly from God in the process.



Explore Your Story

1. Take some time and write out a rough first draft of your mother story. What incidents and memories first appear in your mind? What are the defining moments? Don't filter or edit or try to put them in any order at this point; just write them as they come—the good and the bad. Don't worry about anyone seeing it; this is just for you and your own personal discovery and healing. Keep in mind that this may be difficult, and it may hurt more than you

expect, so be kind to yourself. Before you dive in, you may want to prepare in a way that will honor this process—go somewhere beautiful or make yourself a cup of tea.

2. What physically happens in your body and what emotions immediately surface when you think of your mother? What is your “gut level” reaction?
3. Come up with three words that describe your mother's positive qualities (for example, *nurturing*, *smart*, *creative*) and three words that describe her negative qualities (for example, *cold*, *controlling*, *preoccupied*).
4. How did your mother comfort you (or not) when you were hurting—physically or emotionally?

Connect with God

Lord, as I begin this journey, I ask you to be with me as I process my memories and pain from the past. Take the blinders off my eyes and help me to see clearly. I do not want to linger in any toxic emotions, but if they surface, please help me remember to bring those ugly feelings to you. Grant me courage, grace, and strength as I look to you for healing. Help me seek your truth as I examine the messages received by my little-girl heart that have followed me into my big-girl life and relationships. I trust you. Amen.