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Fathers: An Instruction Manual -- For You and Dad, Opportunity Is What You Make It

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Like mother like daughter; like father like son. Throughout much of history, mothers were the center of a daughter's universe. But as young women join the world their fathers know, and often follow the same paths, the potential role for dad in a daughter's life has expanded. It is a leap to a whole new age of possibility in the dimensions of a daughter-father relationship, unconstrained by assumption, expectation or myth.

Easier for some than others:

Many women have gladly rushed through the gateway to a new kind of relationship that has been opened with the end of constraints on female choice and achievement. For others, getting to this new connection takes some adjustment.

For all women who have broken out of the molds of what defined the relationships of the past, moving to a new one -- same love, new equality -- can lead to issues and even conflicts that were absent, or at least well-hidden, when good girls did what dad said.

One of the trickiest turns in the journey to a better relationship is thinking (without thinking) that the relationship is just fine as it is: "He's my dad. I'm his daughter. I know how this works."

Many women simply take their relationship with their father for granted -- it is what it is. Others may be desperate to change it, but don't know where to start.

The first step to a new relationship with dad is to see beyond your assumptions and society's myths to connect with the man behind the title.

That means thinking about the relationship you have, versus the one you want versus the one you never thought could be.

It means accepting that, unlike sitcoms, life's episodes do not always end in a hug.

There are no perfect dads:.

All there is, if you're lucky, is your dad. What you make of that is up to you.

Connecting across generations is complicated:

Many daughters have the good fortune to encounter a new, upgraded, kind of dad -- who has studied a whole new handbook. For others, fathers -- possibly because of what they saw in their own homes -- may be stuck in the past roles of provider, protector and enforcer.

He may have trouble opening up to anybody, let alone a daughter. If the relationship is slow to develop, it's important to give it the time -- and determination -- it needs.

It is the time you spend alone with your father that helps separate the father from the figure.

The path to a deeper relationship with your father may be sports. The reliable all-purpose social bridge for men may also work for daughters.

What about mom?:

As daughters have increasingly moved out into the playing fields and the world of work, they find themselves increasingly in their father's orbit. While many women rely on their mothers for emotional support, many feel their lives, pressures and issues have little in common. In their lives, women may fear, mom is being downsized.

The new gravitational pull between fathers and daughters can be a source of anxiety for mothers, who see fathers and daughters sharing a world that they only know from the outside looking in.

The question: how can women share their father's world, yet make sure they don't leave their mother's world behind. While some women -- Michelle Obama being one -- making mothers a working part of their lives is seamless. Others find it to be a tricky balance.

Many daughters struggle to fight feeling disdain for the lives their mothers chose - or were chosen for them. A number have trouble reconciling the organized and intelligent woman they know to be their mother with the woman who chose to spend her life as a homemaker.

The connection between new daughters and their fathers is complex, personal and not given to easy summaries.

Parting thoughts ...

- Do you really know your father?
- Are you really happy with your relationship? Or do you simply accept what you have?
- If you're not happy with it, have you ever thought about trying to change it?
- How would you change it if you could?
- If he weren't your father, would he be your friend?
- How has your relationship with your father affected your relationship with the other men in your personal life and your work life?
- Would you ask him for help with a work problem? With a life problem?
- If you could ask him one thing that you've never asked him - something that is really important to you - what would it be? What do you think he would say?
- Have you ever tried to be a bigger part of his life - to learn about what he cares about?
- If you could draw up a list of people you would go to if you really needed help - where would he rank?