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Lost and Found: When Dad Gets Too Close

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Women storm the world of men, many are finding that part of the time-honored connection with the first man in her life has changed. While issues with fathers certainly also impact sons, they haven't been subject to a revolution. For much of a century, men were locked in the mold of provider and protector. They built sons; wives built daughters. The gender paradigms haven't just changed -- they've done a double back flip with a twist. In researching a new book on a new generation of daughters and their fathers, I have interviewed dozens of accomplished women in their 20s and 30s. In this series, I share their stories of staking out new common ground with dad -- and my observations.

When Dad Gets Too Close

For many, the new world of common interest between father and daughter creates a common platform for a better and closer relationship. But what happens when dad -- maybe because of changes in his own life -- wants to move from caring father to full-time buddy?

It has left many daughters asking themselves: when it comes to creating a closer relationship with dad, how close is too close? And how do you create space without creating distance?

Marsha, a 35-year old production design manager for a medical products company, said she bonded with her father when he started to drive her to school every day. "He kind of introduced me to the Beatles," she said. "I remember us singing Yellow Submarine so loudly one time, that people in the next car started to sing with us. It was great."

When he sent her cards, he signed them "love, your co-pilot. The bond deepened over sports. He worked with her and coached her in basketball and baseball throughout a successful high school career. He also, she quickly points out, wanted her to be feminine. "I remember him driving me all over Connecticut and into the city until I found the perfect prom dress."

But then his life changed, and so did hers.

Her parents are going through a divorce her father did not see coming. Especially hard on him, she said, is being forced to sell the family home he loves -- and helped build.

He is increasingly leaning on her for support and companionship. "We have always done a lot of things together," he said. "But we seem to be spending more and more time together. I feel like he needs me right now; like I am some kind of connection to a life he wants back. It's almost a role reversal. This guy who was always so strong now seems confused and vulnerable."

She still likes spending time with him, she explained. But it is taking away from the time she spends with her new fiancée, who - fortunately, she said - understands.

She finds herself closer to drawing a line, but finds it difficult. "He wanted me to go meet some friends for a night out," she said. "No big deal, but for some reason I hit a wall. I had to tell him that I wanted to be his daughter, not his bar buddy. I was afraid he would pull back. But I think it helped. I'm there for him. He knows that. But I think the lines are a little more clear now."

Others look back and realize that their relationship with their current father-daughter relationship has been complicated by the one they had growing up. Again, an issue or void in a father's life often contributes to the turbulence. Rachael is a hospital administrator and recovering alcoholic whose closeness to her father - then and now - centers on alcohol.

Growing up, her father's absences and blackouts - plus a wealthy but rootless international lifestyle -- made a relationship impossible. That is, until they started drinking together. "I think the first time I got drunk with my father was when I was 11," she said. "It went on for years. Sometimes we would get his driver and drink in a limo. He had a whole bar in there. It was a way to talk to him. But then after a while we wouldn't talk. We would just drink."

In AA and sober for six years, her relationship with her father now centers on helping him stop drinking. "I used to go from missing him to hating him," she said. "Now I feel sorry for him. I'd rather act like a daughter than a sponsor, but he needs me. He's only 62, but he looks 82. I feel like it's my job to save his life. So far, he's trying. If that stops though, I'm going to have to think about this train we're on, and where I get off."

For both these women, boundaries are critical. Daughter's can be part of their father's lives without being central to them. Setting limits is not a lack of love, or loyalty or concern. It's a matter of having your own life, and living it. It's not an issue of harming a father-daughter relationship; it's the importance of reconstructing it in ways that create more appropriate and constructive roles for both. The relationship will be stronger, healthier and less prone to blow-ups.