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Lost and Found: When Dad is Damaged

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In researching my book on the changing relationships between a new generation of daughters and their fathers, I have encountered many women who have come to realize that the man growing up falls well short of the man (not the man they believed him to be) they see through the eyes of an adult.

While that is painful, they struggled with the loss of their idealized image of their father throughout their lives. Fathers who were distant or departed caused one kind of longing.

Women with dads who are damaged often expressed intense anger and feelings of depression. The anger and depression directed at these fathers was the focus on dad every day along with the unfulfilled hope he would change. Fathers who were once at the center of their young daughters lives changed. Because of mental illness, substance abuse or emotional problems, dad might be there physically, but compared to the bond they had while she was growing up, he has gone to an unreachable place.

There is a deep sadness that comes with seeing a parent in pain. For most, it is also a jarring reversal of roles. Suddenly it is the daughter who had to be the rock, the protector, the fixer of bad things. They felt an acute responsibility to make things better -- when better was often well beyond their control.

Alexandra, a real estate developer, remembers a father who was warm, funny, unconditionally supportive, and a very big part of her life. He coached her in sports, and never missed a school event. She, her mother and a brother were the center of his life. Then, when she was 12, things began to change.

"His father died suddenly," she said. "And that triggered a steep slide into a deep depression. If there were signs before that, I didn't see them. Maybe I was too young. Maybe he was able to hide them. He had a complete break down. He spent two years in a bathrobe, just walking around the house smoking cigarettes and crying."

She said she constantly looked for any signs that he was getting better. Instead, things got worse. Hopelessness and weeping evolved to rage and verbal abuse. "That was hard," she said. "I felt like I was always special to him, and I should be the one to help him, get him out of the house, cheer him up -- anything to reconnect. But it was like living in a mine field. We spent all our time trying not to step on one another. You never knew what would set him off."

She says his depression triggered hers. "I was sleeping a lot," she said. "That was one way not to have to deal with anything. I was sad, but I functioned. I got through college. But most of my memories are about being unhappy."

She said she knows women who lost a father to illness or to divorce. But she believes this is worse.

"Something was taken from us. It's nobody's fault. But I can't help feeling that it's his fault. Why did he get sick? Why couldn't he get better? I can't help thinking about having a relationship now that is like the one we had growing up. I imagine calling him and making plans to have lunch. I think about him doing the things that dads do for their daughters - helping me buy a first car. Putting up shelves in my first apartment. The hard part is that I know - somewhere in there - that is exactly the kind of father he is."

So she has not given up.

It's difficult to see him," she said. "Sometimes I feel that it won't accomplish anything. He still gets angry over nothing. But my only other choice is simply to walk away. But if I do that, I'm saying that this is the way things will be forever. I'm not prepared to do that."

*The data I compiled and the patterns I've observed for this series are presented as collective experiences. I have honored promises of confidentiality by changing names and disguising identities