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Mother Hunger[®]
**The Legacy
of Missing Maternal Love**



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Mother Hunger

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Inadequate maternal nurturing, protection, or guidance leaves a hidden heartbreak where human connection should have been. As a result, millions of women suffer from harmful relationship patterns, compulsive food habits, substance misuse, and unmanageable moods that leave them feeling empty, ashamed, and alone.

Current treatments for these maladaptive coping skills are often ineffective, or the results are temporary. What's missing is a deep understanding of the root cause for these endemic problems: the lack of secure childhood attachment to a mother or primary caregiver. In adult women, I call this syndrome *Mother Hunger*.

I conceived the term *Mother Hunger* to distill complex psychological theories into a recognizable concept to help women do two things: name the source of their emotional pain (because if you name it, you tame it) and de-stigmatize addictive habits and mood disorders.

Mother Hunger names a corrosive, intolerable, hidden injury that sabotages well-being and craves a quick fix. The primitive yet essential nature of this wound creates an insatiable hunger for love or anything that feels like love. Women may relate to the concepts listed below:

1. *Mother Hunger* is an unconscious, ongoing search for safety and belonging.
2. *Mother Hunger* comes from inadequate nurturing, lack of protection, or missing guidance in childhood.
3. *Mother Hunger* is an emotional injury that emerges from bonding to a compromised mother. It is not a medical diagnosis or disorder.
4. *Mother Hunger* happens when self-development is sacrificed for self-preservation.
5. *Mother Hunger* is a symptom of systemic gender inequality that diminishes the critical role of mothering.

Since identifying *Mother Hunger*, I have witnessed what happens when the right name explains mystifying habits that make life tiresome and troubling. The look of surprise, the sigh of relief, the emotional thud that lands in the middle of the room: These are signs that a woman no longer feels like a bad girl; that an overactive amygdala can finally relax.

The term *Mother Hunger* highlights the tragedy that happens when there is an original, unrepaired break in the maternal bond, and our most primal needs for food, safety, and belonging are damaged.

The Essential Role of Mothering in Healthy Development

The human need for belonging is as important as breathing. We first learn how belonging feels or doesn't feel in our mother's arms. The tone of her voice, the quality of her eye contact, and the sensitivity of her responsiveness teach us whether or not we matter. Her care is our first experience of bonding. She is our first love.

Love is supposed to feel good, so what happens if Mom is unpredictable, unavailable, or frightening? We turn to something else for comfort. Something we can rely on to soothe our overactive nervous system. For children, food and masturbation are the most available substitutes for missing

maternal care, but later, alcohol, drugs, shopping, fantasy (from Netflix to porn) may be used to regulate anxiety and stress.

Maternal care involves three essential elements that little humans need: nurture, protection, and guidance. Research shows that children who have a safe, attuned primary caregiver can weather life's adversities with less risk of emotional trauma. Infants without nurturing and protection, however—particularly in the first 12 months—show brain differences from babies the same age who were well cared for.

Many of us are influenced by popular misconceptions that child development is something that happens naturally, or that babies have no memory. These fallacies are bolstered by minimizing the magnitude of infant care, and cultural/religious rules such as “honor thy mother and father” that blind us to childhood vulnerabilities. Implied in this doctrine is an unexamined belief that all parents behave honorably, but good people don't magically make good parents.

An encouraging trend is the momentum of Dr. Vincent Felitti's ACE study from 1997. With support from forward-thinking medical professionals like Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, the first and current surgeon general of California, much

needed information about toxic stress is reaching mainstream dialogue about parenting and childhood. In particular, see her [TED talk](#) and her book, *The Deepest Well: Healing the Long-Term Effects of Childhood Adversity*.

No one wants to think that parents manipulate, neglect, or abuse their children, but ignorance isn't serving us. As much as we want to believe all mothers and caregivers instinctively offer their little ones a caring, secure foundation for life, stressed-out mothers have stressed-out, insecure children. Levine and Heller (2014) report that approximately half of our population suffers from insecure attachment.

Additionally, systemic, generational neglect and disregard for women creates what sociologists and researchers call a mother wound. According to Dr. Oscar Serrallach, an Australian family practitioner, "The mother wound is both ancient and modern, entwined in Western patriarchy... a learned behavior passed subconsciously, subtly from mother to daughter" (Sellerach, n.d.).

As the mother wound passes through generations of mothers and daughters, women struggle to offer what they themselves never had—adequate nurturing,

protection, and guidance—creating what I call *Mother Hunger*.

Essential Element #1: Nurturing

Research like Dr. Harry Harlow's experiments with infant monkeys has taught us that nurturing touch is as important to babies as food. Babies need skin to skin contact to thrive. In the first months of life, a mother's physical proximity and sensitive touch extends the womb-like environment and regulates her baby's nervous system

Children need nurturing specifically from their *primary* caregiver in order to develop the necessary brain circuits for healthy relationships in life. A mother's sensitive attunement imprints the felt sense that connection with others will be enjoyable and safe. Through thousands of daily interactions, mothers are brain architects for their children, wordlessly building an inner love map, an imprint for all future relationships.

Without adequate nurturing, deprived children become hungry teens and adults starved for affection and care, unconsciously craving the maternal love they did not receive.

Essential Element #2: Protection

Stress about the next paycheck or an angry partner makes it hard to be attentive to babies or children. When a mother is unsafe in her environment or living with high levels of anxiety, she signals danger to her little one. Cortisol and adrenaline—the fight and flight hormones—are released into the baby’s body to prepare for danger. These life-saving neurochemicals are essential in a crisis, but toxic for optimum infant development when they regularly flood the system.

Ideally, a mother protects her child from environmental threats. Without protection, a child uses energy for self-preservation instead of brain development. A frightened baby who is rigid and hard to soothe becomes an anxious child who has trouble concentrating, sleeping, or playing. New situations are frightening for children who don’t have a safe refuge with their mothers; some agitated children become quiet and withdrawn, while others grow loud and domineering.

Essential Element #3: Guidance

The need for guidance emerges after the more primitive needs for nurturing and protection are established. Guidance begins with things like regular bedtimes and

healthy hygiene. But as a girl reaches puberty, she needs her mother’s support in even more ways. In a world that diminishes female sexuality, power, and potential, she needs a mother who can guide her toward womanhood with confidence and courage. Sadly, generations of patriarchal double standards pollute the water between mothers and daughters. Teaching more from example than words, mothers pass along survival tools like dieting or secret keeping that may not help their daughters.

Sometimes, a mother’s way of guiding her daughter is based in fear and rigid rules, which creates a lonely chasm between them. Or a mother unconsciously grasps friendship and security from her daughter, creating a psychological union that stunts relational development for both. A daughter who must mother her mother becomes a tired and resentful adult.

Identifying missing maternal guidance is complicated, because many adult women feel confused or guilty if they speak about their mothers in unfavorable ways, even in psychotherapy. These daughters long for a mother to admire, one who will champion their dreams, but have boarded up their vulnerabilities and learned to navigate life alone.

A Note About Blame

Mother Hunger examines lost maternal care but is not an invitation to blame mothers. Every mother is first a daughter carrying her own emotional wounds into motherhood.

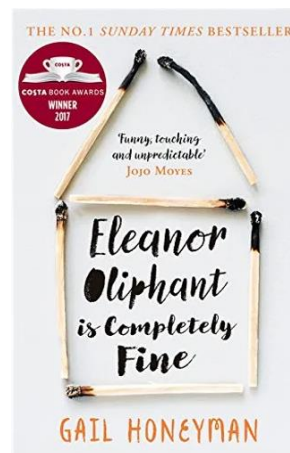
Blame is a normal reaction to the grief that is part of *Mother Hunger* but it can become a cycle that is hard to exit, and it is not an effective remedy for emotional pain.

To avoid getting stuck, it is essential to find healthy replacements for unmet nurturing, protection, and guidance. While no one can replace a mother's love, missing maternal elements can be restored.



Not Completely Fine

In her book *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine*, Gail Honeyman delivers a brilliant portrayal of the isolation that I call *Mother Hunger*. She takes us into the mind of a deprived daughter, letting us experience firsthand the burning need for fantasy, denial, and vodka that emerges from early heartbreak. Eleanor is a woman pretending to have weekly phone calls with her abusive, deceased mother.



Book Cover: “*Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine*,”
by Gail Honeyman

One morning, Eleanor wakes with a hangover after ending a long-standing obsession with an unknown musician. As she notices her row of empty vodka bottles, she thinks “I ought to feel ashamed that someone will find [them] but I feel nothing.” Instead of feelings, Eleanor has thoughts. Like many women who learn to shut off their emotions to endure maternal criticism or rejection, Eleanor's cognition is sharp but her self-concept is distorted and dark. She reflects how “it is incomprehensible to me now that I could ever have thought that anyone would love this ambulant bag of blood and bones” (Honeyman, G. 2017).

Eleanor never knew her mother's love, and lives an adult life void of human connection. Her isolation is every woman's nightmare; part of Eleanor exists in every woman with *Mother Hunger*.

Symptoms of Mother Hunger

To infants and little girls, the absence of maternal comfort is unbearable, so as soon as possible, most find substitutes. Thumb sucking replaces comfort. Fantasy soothes despair. Food replaces love. While these comforting strategies are resourceful, as ongoing surrogates for maternal comfort, they're devastating. "The lack of an attuned mother is a shattering injury to a limbic mammal brain," (Lewis, T. 2000) because her quality of care impacts physical, emotional, and relational brain structures that lay the foundation for *Mother Hunger* to grow.

Physical Symptoms

Since early brain development begins in utero and experiences its most dynamic growth in the first 18–24 months of life, it is essential to recognize the biological processes happening between mother and baby. A mother's body is an infant's first home. In this environment, a baby's body grows in connection with her mother's heartbeat, the sound of her voice, and the rhythm of her breathing.

Attachment specialists call the tender time following childbirth *the fourth trimester*, to emphasize the importance of maintaining proximity between mother and

baby. A baby removed from her biological home too often or for long periods of time misses the critical support she needs from her mother's nervous system, which is the compass for her own. For this reason, babies separated from their mothers at birth due to medical emergency, adoption, or surrogacy may carry an embodied sense of abandonment throughout their life span.

Ongoing, unrepaired fear in infancy and early childhood changes brain architecture. Scientists find shrinkage in the hippocampus, a brain region connected to memory, in children who are neglected. The amygdala, the brain's smoke detector, is enlarged creating a hypersensitivity to stress. Cortisol, the hormone released to respond to danger, damages cellular structures in the body, and over time builds inflammation in the body that decreases immunity and contributes to problems like asthma, metabolic imbalance, chronic pain, and cancer.

Unsafe human connection also damages the receptor sites for essential hormones like dopamine and serotonin, which are meant for focus and well-being. Weakened hormonal distribution leaves a brain vulnerable to addictive substances or processes that mimic the effects of happiness and peace.

Children without safety and comfort will show signs of physical distress.

Children may experience:

1. Frequent headaches
2. Stomach aches
3. Digestive problems
4. Regular nightmares

In teenage years, symptoms of *Mother Hunger* may include:

1. Intense menstrual pain
2. Concentration challenges
3. Compulsive exercise
4. Disordered eating
5. Sleeping difficulty

In adulthood, these symptoms intensify to include things like:

1. Constant fatigue
2. Chronic pain
3. Social anxiety
4. Auto-immune diseases
5. Ongoing depressive symptoms

Emotional Symptoms

Unaware of their own emotional vulnerability, women struggle to build meaningful, mutual connections with others, because early structures necessary for self-awareness don't develop without maternal care. Women with *Mother Hunger* are strangers to themselves, so while they desire closeness, they struggle in close proximity to others.

Anger covers hurt as they rage through school or family obligations. Some simmer silently, hurting themselves with excessive exercise, disordered eating, risky behaviors,

or excessive caretaking. As adults, independent and accomplished women regularly report feeling younger than their age.

In close relationships, confusion is a constant companion for women with *Mother Hunger* as they try to find an emotional place to call home.

Relational Symptoms

When early adversity damages the primary, maternal bond, the need for touch and connection gets distorted. Little girls adapt to painful touch (physical abuse), icky touch (sexual abuse), or touch deprivation by withdrawing deep within themselves for refuge, sometimes creating imaginary friends or spacing out into another world. As adults, affection or sexual intimacy bring on confusing, automatic reactions. Unconscious adaptations to relational trauma include:

1. Avoidance: proximity to other people is too dysregulating
2. Anxiety: freeze creates chronic muscle pain and tension and digestive issues
3. Addiction: substance use facilitates dissociation so one can be physically present but emotionally absent
4. Attraction: involvement with individuals who are familiar but unsafe in an unconscious attempt to reconcile early attachment pain

Early traumatic relationships make friendships and romantic connections hard. Love and affection bring craving, fear, or

disgust. Some women describe feeling “allergic” to love so I have come to think of these reactions as *Intimacy Intolerance*.

Signs of *Intimacy Intolerance* can include:

1. Boredom in relationships with friends
2. Disgust with a partner’s or friend’s immaturity or lack of success
3. Attraction to intimidating, abusive partners
4. Aversion to warmth and affection from others, even while craving it
5. Difficulty processing positive emotions
6. Misuse of alcohol and/or drugs to cope with fear and loneliness
7. Difficulty with empathy in close relationships
8. Tendency to repeat one’s abuse (emotional, verbal, sexual, or physical) with children
9. Trouble with impulsivity and control

Third-Degree Mother Hunger

When all three essential human needs for nurturing, protection, and guidance are missing, children experience toxic levels of stress and may develop complex posttraumatic stress disorder (cPTSD). Maltreatment harms a child’s ability to cope with life’s demands, halting healthy development of the orbital frontal cortex (the brain’s right hemisphere), where emotions are processed.

Under the immense challenges of parenting, even loving, well-meaning mothers make mistakes. But a mother can be so compromised that she offers no comfort or safety whatsoever. Daughters always long

for their mothers’ approval and love. But when a mother cannot see or repair the distress she causes—or worse, blames her daughter for it—the daughter is likely to experience trauma reactions such as nightmares, hypervigilance, trust problems, and dissociative traits. I call this constellation of symptoms *Third-Degree Mother Hunger*, a relational burn that comes from two dominant yet conflicting drives: the need both to attach to the mother and flee from her.

Without a resolution to this double bind, children become experts at dissociation, psychologically separating from intolerable reality but maintaining a pseudo connection with their mothers. Dissociation inhibits development of an integrated, inner self, and over time, a woman matures physically but without the ability to regulate her moods, fulfill her dreams, or form lasting relationships. Women with *Third-Degree Mother Hunger* need nurturing, protection, and guidance from trauma-informed care providers as they wrestle with addictions, mood disorders, and suicidality.

Healing the Legacy of Mother Hunger

Women easily feel discouraged, even defeated, while repairing *Mother Hunger*

because it's an invisible wound. The general population cannot see the suffering and offer support. In fact, part of *Mother Hunger* is blindness to one's own emotional woundedness. Emotional blinders compassionately hide the early loss of nurturing, protection, or guidance so that life is bearable. These blinders won't come off all at once—it's their job to hide what is too painful to know.

For this reason, it is essential to find a guide who can help thaw the frozen feelings that get buried during childhood fear states. *Mother Hunger* only heals within relationships with safe people who model what soothing repair looks and feels like. Sometimes, finding this sort of relational first aid happens in churches or 12-step communities.

For deeper emotional repair, a trauma-focused professional is generally best, but finding the right support can feel like learning a foreign language. Having adapted to unsafe caregivers, women with *Mother Hunger* have no reason to trust experts. Asking for help feels terrifying or even impossible.

A trauma-informed therapist who knows how to use *Attachment-Focused* EMDR and understands addiction is a good place to start. Additionally, trauma-informed

body workers can soothe the touch deprivation that comes with inadequate early nurturing.

Many women will be relieved to learn that healing *Mother Hunger* isn't about reconciliation with one's mother, although it might be. Rather, it's an invitation to resource *missing maternal elements*. The restoration of nurturing, protection, and guidance builds hope and rewires the brain. Women report new physical and emotional well-being as their lives improve.



Healing *Mother Hunger* is an invitation to dance with a deep source of wisdom: the pain from early heartbreak. When a woman can face her loneliness and make an ally of despair, she begins to re-mother herself. Bit by bit, she attunes to the pain she's been avoiding and gently releases the coping mechanisms hiding her pain.

With effort and support, the brave journey inward leads to less rage, anxiety, and confusion. Foggy decisions become clear, and the cage of isolation no longer feels locked. Solitude becomes a refuge as lost parts of the psyche emerge from their hiding places.

Healing *Mother Hunger* begins with a name. Directly naming this injury takes away the mystery and shame that comes with this wound, clearing the path for recovery to begin. Humans are wired to rebound from adversity, and with nurturing, protection, and guidance from trusted allies, women can build a life of dignity and peace.



Resources for Healing Mother Hunger

I have designed one-on-one Mother Hunger® Intensives to address the aftermath of early attachment pain and adversity.

An Intensive provides a custom, curated healing experience. Learn more at <http://www.kellymcdanieltherapy.com/>.

Additional Guidance

Dr. Peter Levine and Somatic Experiencing—practitioners who have trained with him and his certified clinical trainers: <http://sepractitioner.membergrove.com/index.php>

Pat Ogden's Sensorimotor Psychotherapy and clinicians trained in the practice: <https://www.sensorimotorpsychotherapy.org/>

Laurel Parnell, originator of Attachment-Focused EMDR: <http://parnellemdr.com/>

International Institute for Trauma and Addiction Professionals (IITAP), started by Dr. Patrick Carnes. Certified therapists understand the cycle of addiction: <https://iitap.com>

International Society for Study of Trauma & Dissociation (ISSTD): <https://www.isst-d.org>

International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (ISTSS): <https://istss.org/home>

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