

CHAPTER 7

Appearance, Motherhood, Parenting and Family: The Perilous Pursuit of Perfection

Shared Vulnerability

What do appearance, motherhood, parenting and family share in common? As I spoke to women about these areas, I found that the shame felt around these issues most often stemmed from social-community expectations that are:

- Unattainable and pieced together from snapshots of perfection.
- Instilled in us from the time we are born.
- Tainted by the myth that working too hard for something diminishes its value.
- Potential sources of physical and emotional danger.

Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor.
—Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird* (1994)

Flashdance: Editing Perfection

I think I've seen the movie *Flashdance* at least 20 times. In the 1980s, I wanted more than anything to be Jennifer Beals' character, Alex, the tough construction worker by day and ambitious dancer by night. Of course, my favorite part of the movie is the dance scene where Alex auditions for the hoity-toity ballet school. I'm too embarrassed to tell you how many sweatshirts I ruined and how many leg warmers I bought in hopes of becoming Alex. Of course, I wasn't alone. Nothing

takes the mystique out of the secret *Flashdance* fantasy like showing up to meet friends for dinner and realizing that all six of us had permed hair, headbands and ripped sweat shirts.

We all wanted to be Alex in *Flashdance*. She was perfect. She made ripped clothing look sexy; being a welder look exciting; ballet look cool and break dancing look easy. But alas, the perfection was only an illusion. I was devastated to learn that the film director used four different people to create that audition sequence: Jennifer Beals' beautiful face, a professional dancer for the ballet scenes, a champion gymnast for the leaping and jumping and a male street performer for the break dancing. All those bad perms and all that money for leg-warmers...for what? To try and achieve some level of perfection that doesn't exist.

If most of us stopped to examine what we want to be when it comes to appearance, motherhood, parenting and family, we would discover that, like the scene in *Flashdance*, our concept of perfection is so unrealistic that it can't be embodied by any single individual, but is a combination of pieces or snippets of what's perceived as perfect. We don't just want to be good at what we do—we are aiming for perfection.

For example, when it comes to appearance, we don't want better versions of what we have. We want to have hair like Meg's, breasts like Susan's, a butt like Jennifer's and a flat stomach like Janet's. We want the clothes from this store and the shoes from that store. We have images of perfection for each part—skin, makeup, weight, nails and teeth. We also set ideals about the intangibles, like what kind of attitude we want to convey, how confident we want to look and how we want people to perceive our age and financial status.

The same holds true for parenthood, motherhood and family. We want to become a combination of the best snapshots and examples we've seen. And, once we've edited all those images into the perfect movie of who we want to be, we expect the movie to play forever. It's not good enough if we do a good job parenting our way through one temper-tantrum. We want the patience of a saint and we want it to

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stick. If our family's Thanksgiving is as good as any Thanksgiving on Walton's mountain, that's not good enough. There's no time to be thankful; we have to start worrying about the holidays right around the corner.

Where does "editing for perfection" come from? The shame web. If we look at all of the people in the shame web—family, partners, friends, self, colleagues, group members, etc.—most of us could very quickly identify the expectations these people have around appearance, motherhood, parenting and family. These expectations are not normally conveyed in a subtle manner. More often they are screamed and

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screamed at us. Complicating matters, we have the media which makes perfection appear attainable by inundating us with images that are, quite literally, edited for perfection.

On the Day That You Were Born

One reason the expectations around appearance, motherhood, parenting and family are so influential is related to how they are developed. On the day that we are born, expectations around these issues are also given life. There are immediate expectations that we will be cute and

attractive, we will grow up, get married, become mothers, have natural parenting skills and be loving members of a sane and well-balanced family. In some families, these expectations are spoken loud and clear. In other families, they are more latent. Regardless of how they are articulated at home, girls and women have these messages reinforced on a daily basis by what we see on television, the books we read, the toys we play with, the conversations we overhear and what we are taught by educators and peer groups.

The powerful effect of these expectations can easily be seen in the shame area of motherhood. While motherhood and parenting are certainly related, they emerged as two distinct shame areas. Mother-shame is about our identity as mothers or our identity as women who are not mothers. Parenting shame is focused on how we raise and interact with our children. Mother-shame is an overwhelming issue for women. Every single participant in a mother role identified mother-shame as an issue. And, because motherhood is an identity that is so closely tied to being a woman, it became clear that you don't have to be a mother for *motherhood* to be a shame issue. Women struggling with infertility and women who have chosen not to have children talked passionately about the mother-shame in their lives.

Society views womanhood and motherhood as inextricably bound; therefore, our value as women is often evaluated by where we are in relation to our roles as potential mothers. In some communities, the expectation of motherhood has many layers including norms of what's too young, what's too old and what gender babies should be (as if mothers controlled this). Once women hit "the age" set by their community, they begin to feel the need to defend themselves against expectations of motherhood. Women are constantly asked why they haven't married or, if they're married, why they haven't had children. Even women who are married and have one child are often asked why they haven't had a second child.

Mother-shame seems to be a birth-right for girls and women. On top of the societal expectation that motherhood defines womanhood,

there are some very rigid expectations about what the good mother looks like. The variety of issues that comes up on the boxes in this section makes it clear that there are some very desirable qualities associated with motherhood, and that there are some characteristics that are universally unwanted. Interestingly, to be perceived as "trying too hard" was listed as an unwanted characteristic not only for motherhood but also for all the areas in this category. We want perfection, but we don't want to look like we're working for it.

Poof! There It Is

"You don't have the time or talent to look that messy." Even though I hear this every time I bring my stack of Meg Ryan pictures to my hair stylist, I still don't believe her. All I want is Meg Ryan hair. This last time I asked, "I want to look like I just rolled out of bed. How hard can that be?" She spit back, "It takes two hours and ten people to get that 'natural' look—get over it."

We want to be natural beauties, natural mothers, naturally good parents and we want to belong to naturally fabulous families. And we want to achieve this natural look...naturally. The research participants really exposed an interesting perfection paradox: imperfection brings shame and working too hard for perfection brings shame. In this age of instant gratification and celebrity for celebrity's sake, it is easy to understand how we've fallen for the idea that we can just want something bad enough and...Poof! There it is. How many of us have fallen prey to that saying, "It shouldn't be this much work," or "It just doesn't come naturally to me; it must not be my thing."

Yes, there are naturally talented people. But for most of us, including the celebrities and superstars, achievement is about hard work and dedication. 95% of the people who are in great shape and have healthy bodies work at it...a lot. I know several people who possess parenting skills that I really respect—they work at it. They talk about parenting as a skills-based job that requires training, practice and a significant time

investment. They read, they take classes, they practice and they evaluate their techniques and strategies. The same applies to family and motherhood. There is a direct correlation between input and output. The areas in this category are like other skills-based endeavors: if you have reasonable goals, the more you invest your time and resources and the more you practice, the more likely you are to reach those goals.

If we buy into the idea that working for something diminishes its value we potentially set ourselves up for shame. If we also buy into the expectation that perfection can be achieved and real perfection should be effortless, we simultaneously set ourselves up for shame and diminish the efforts of people who are working on the issues in this category; we become part of our own shame web and other women's shame webs. How many times have we dismissed someone's efforts because we have bought in to the expectation that "family" or "motherhood" shouldn't be that hard?

Defending Our Lives

When I spoke with women about the pressures of perfection, they were quick to explain that failing to look perfect, parent perfectly, have the perfect family and meet everyone's expectations of the perfect mother was only part of the problem. Of equal importance is the shame that stems from what we are willing to do to appear perfect or hide our imperfections. When perfection is the expectation and/or the goal, we are willing to put a lot on the line to maintain and protect our image.

On one hand, we are forced to cut a part of ourselves off from people we care about.

- Shame is being married for twenty years and never walking around naked in front of your husband—not even once.
- I lie to people all the time. I tell them that my father lives in New Jersey. He's been in prison for six years. I'm more ashamed of myself for lying than I am of my dad for being in jail. It's one thing

if your family is different because your parents are divorced or something. It's different if your dad is a felon.

- My husband had an affair last year. I haven't even told my best friend. Everyone loves my husband and thinks we are a great couple. I know if I told her she would think less of both of us—not just him.
- I just tell people my parents travel a lot. Last year I was the only freshman in my dorm whose parents didn't come up for parent's weekend. I didn't invite them. They are racist and hateful and they think the whole world is out to get them. My dad thinks everybody owes him. When I was growing up I was always embarrassed for anyone to come to my house. It's like they're from a different planet.
- I filter everything I tell my parents. They don't know I'm gay and they don't know I have a partner. There's a lot of pressure in the gay and lesbian community to "come out." I know it's important, but you have to be prepared for your parents to walk out of your life. Not many people have to face that reality.

On the other hand, we are also more willing to use shame, fear and judgment with people who threaten our pursuit for perfection. We can feel threatened when people challenge or criticize us, or we can feel threatened simply because someone is making different choices than we would make. Parenting is a very complex issue because we base our level of perfection on both how we are perceived as parents and how our children are perceived. As the examples throughout the book—and certainly several of the ones below—demonstrate, we are very susceptible to using shame, fear and judgment against our children when they engage in behaviors that damage the "parenting" image we are trying to create.

- When my husband and I told my parents that we decided not to have children they fell apart. They kept asking, "What's wrong with you?" and "How could you do this to us?" My mom actually said,

"It's a disgrace to the family—everyone will think something's wrong." I knew it would be hard, but it was far worse than I imagined.

- My friend's husband is a plastic surgeon. She's always having this lifted and that tucked. She used to give me a hard time for not having my eyes done. I finally told her that I don't give her a hard time so she should stop pressuring me. She told me, "If you won't do it for yourself, you should do it for your husband."
- My partner's dad was on one of his regular tirades yelling at her about being lesbian. He was calling her "a butch" and telling her she was an embarrassment to their "well-respected" family. Then, right in front of me he says, "And of all things, you have to be a butch with a colored girlfriend." I remember just standing there thinking, "He did not just say that?" We're not talking about Archie Bunker here; we're talking about a 50-year-old, over-educated oil and gas executive. Shame really causes people to act crazy.

In more extreme cases, our inability to expose imperfections can mean putting ourselves and/or the people we care about in real danger:

- When I was pregnant all my girlfriends said, "Oh, just wait, just wait, you're going to feel a love that you've never felt before, it's amazing," they'd go on and on and after my first child was born, my son, I got really depressed and I actually didn't feel anything toward him. I just felt sad and overwhelmed and really wanted to go back in my life to a time before I was even pregnant. To feel like that when you look at your new baby, I was so ashamed, I thought, "My God, I'm going to be one of those mothers that you know...my son's going to turn out to be a crazy person and I'm a crazy person." My husband was so freaked out. I think he thought he was married to a monster. I don't think he knew what to say and my mother-in-law just kept saying, "Something is wrong, she's not normal, something is wrong, she's not normal." For two months my life was a living hell. I wouldn't go to the doctor because I was too

ashamed. Finally, when it got so bad I could barely function and I was afraid my family was going to put me away, I forced myself to go to the doctor. The doctor explained that some women experience depression after having a baby and it could be based on my hormones. She said it could happen to me even if I'm normally a loving person. I got on medication, which that's pretty bad itself, but it's not as bad as feeling nothing toward your child. Within two months, I felt normal again. I just look back at that time and know that was the darkest place I've ever been.

- I'm ashamed at how much I absolutely hate my body. I mean I hate my body sometimes so much that I wish I'd get sick, I mean really sick. So sick that I lose thirty or forty pounds. I don't want to die, but if I could just be sick enough, I don't even care how miserable I'd be, but if I could be sick enough to lose thirty or forty pounds and then be well, it'd be worth it. I mean can you imagine hating your body that much? It's like I'm ashamed of my body and I'm ashamed of how much I hate it.
- My daughter is on drugs and my son in junior high is failing school. When your only job is raising your kids and they're both failures, then you're a failure. My friends keep telling me I need to get help for my daughter, but I don't know what to do. I can't tell my husband, he'd go nuts. I know she drinks and drives, but if I take her car away, he'd want to know why.
- At some point I realized that refusing to see a doctor because I was ashamed of my body and being overweight was tantamount to suicide. It had to get that bad before I could force myself to go to the doctor.
- Sometimes I have unprotected sex. I know it's stupid, but it's such a turn-off to guys. It's hard enough being 30 and single; I don't want to be the safe-sex police on top of that. If I ask and they pretend like they don't hear or say they don't want to—I'm not comfortable making it an issue.