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“Breathe Easy and Get A Good Night Sleep” : Exploring Parental Relationships in Hardship

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Abstract

This project explores parental relationships with a focus on mother-daughter relationships. I want to focus on the attachment between a parent and a child, and how mental illness and abuse from the other parent affect that relationship. This project derives from a deep love for my mother and the changes between us that I noticed as I grew older. I hope to create a choreographed work that explores our relationship with a hope of creating a stronger bond that suits our new relationship and who we are as people now. I want this dance to aid in our reconnection.

I will include academic research on parental relationships that gets integrated into the choreography, but I chose dance as the main method of exploration and research because a research paper alone will not do this topic justice. This topic has emotions, stories, and entire livelihoods involved, and dance is a great way to explore and portray these elements. This project will be an intersection of academic research and the ways choreography can be a medium to bring that research to life.
Introduction

This project explores parental relationships with a focus on mother-daughter relationships. I focus on the attachment between a parent and a child, and how mental illness and abuse from the other parent affects that relationship. It derives from a deep love for my mother and the changes between us that I noticed as I grew older. I suffer with OCD and my father was abusive, and both of these factors affected our relationship alongside the typical changes that happen with aging. My relationship with my mom is a very important one in my life, and I will use this project as a way to process the evolution of that relationship. I will then create a choreographed work that explores my relationship with my mom and tells our story.

I chose dance as the method of exploration and research. This topic has emotions, stories, and entire livelihoods involved, and dance is a great way to explore and portray these elements. Dance facilitates the ties between scientific research and the actual lived experience. The freedom and creativity in dance allows me to interact with my research in a real and embodied way.

In my research I focus on the effects abuse has on its victims and how mental illness affects family relationships. This research serves as validation for my lived experience as an abuse victim. This is important to this process as abuse victims are often gaslit by society into thinking that what we experienced had little effect on us and mental illness’s impacts on life are often ignored.

In the paper I will tie the research into my own lived experiences. I will compare and contrast the conclusions of the research with my life and my relationship with my mom. This will also reveal how expansive this topic is, especially if what I lived does not line up bar-for-bar with the research, and gives another reason why these topics should also be explored in other
ways to account for the diverse experiences since each lived experience is so unique which is where dance comes in. Dance can shed light on the complexity of research topics that scientific studies cannot.

The choreography will zoom in on my relationship with my mother and how I have navigated that the past few years. This will give me the opportunity to explore the research topics in detail and on a personal level. This will also be an opportunity to treat the topics like the living thing they are instead of a quantifiable experience that tends to happen with scientific studies. The choreography will be a reflection of the years of internal evaluation I have done on our relationship. This will tell a fraction of our story, and provide a deeper understanding of the research topics.

**Research**

I started the research with a focus on how abuse can affect the development of children. I looked up several studies on how abuse affects its victims and how that affect carries into later life. As most people would expect child abuse is correlated with depressive symptoms (Lingling Song et al., 2022). This is observed all the time in schools. Kids who are known to have hard home lives typically suffer mentally, and depressive symptoms are observable. My mom noticed this with me whenever I would return from a visit with my father. She said I was grumpier and would be quite irritable the day I came back home after being away the whole weekend.

The effects of abuse are not limited to depressive symptoms. Children who are abused, specifically physically and/or emotionally, were strongly associated with and at higher risk of developing depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, childhood behavioral and conduct disorders, suicidal behaviour, sexually transmitted infections, and smoking (Norman RE
et al., 2012). This shows how widespread the effect abuse has on victims. It not only creates mental distress that affects how they function, but affects physical health too as eating disorders, STI’s and smoking all affect people physically as well as mentally. This adds so much weight to an abuse victim’s shoulders as not only must they deal with the abuse itself, but have to learn to cope and treat all the side effects that they may develop as a result of the abuse. It drags down the victim and keeps them from moving past their experience with abuse quicker.

Abuse not only destroys its victims mentally, but it also destroys relationships. Often “[e]xperiences of maltreatment impede the child's ability to trust his or her caregiver (s), because the caregiver (s) have either committed the abuse or failed to protect the child from maltreatment” (Lingling Song et al., 2022). A lack of trust tears down relationships, and it's no surprise that a victim of abuse would stop trusting their abuser and slowly pull away from them in order to protect themselves. I did this with my father. Children are not unaware of when abuse happens; I realized around the age of 7 the kind of person he was, and I never trusted him, only enough to survive and be able to go back home. I knew he did not love me because his actions said otherwise, so why would I love and trust him in any capacity. As for my relationship with my mom, it was the opposite. I trusted her with my entire life cause I knew she loved me. Her actions matched her words, and I never once felt unsafe with her. These polar opposite examples of parents caused me to idolize my mom and see her as this perfect angel, since that is what she seemed to be compared to my father.

Besides a lack of trust from the child towards the abuser or possibly the non-abuser, abuse can affect the relationship between the non-abusive parent and the child through the concept of absent presence. In a study on survivors of domestic violence, absent presence is defined as the idea that the emotions, effects, and energy of an abuser remain with the victim,
and they hypothesized that women and children who experience domestic violence have the aspect of absent presence affect their current relationship even when the abuser is no longer in the picture (Thiara, R. K., and Humphreys, C., (2017)). The results of this study proved this hypothesis true. Often the absent presence manifests as undermining the relationship between the mother and child. This was typically through a lack of respect for the mother from the child due to manipulation from the abuser, a lack of confidence in parenting from the mother, or children would release their emotions on the mother, especially if they were still in contact with the abuser (Thiara, R. K., and Humphreys, C., (2017)). Destroying the relationship between the mother and child is a last ditch effort from the abuser to maintain power over them. The destruction of the mother-child relationship also makes it harder for these survivors to heal, especially since the person who understands them the most has been torn away from them. Luckily, this did not affect my relationship with my mom. Even though I had contact with my father every other weekend, the dynamic between my mother and I remained strong. Anything he said about her, I would dismiss because I knew who my mom truly was through her actions. I relied extremely heavily on my mom and what she said to get me through those weekend visits. I relied on her words so much that they became an impenetrable force to his words.

Lastly, the effects of abuse continue into later life. This is mostly through the relationship between the abuser and the survivor. Adults who experienced childhood abuse were less close with their abusive parent compared to those who weren't abused as kids (Kong, J., & Martire, L. M., (2019)). This is not surprising at all. Their relationship was already destroyed through a lack of trust, and their mental health has been wrecked due to the abuse. Most abuse victims, once free from their abuser, reclaim their power and go no contact. I did this with my father once I turned 18 and was no longer legally obligated to see him. He would call occasionally, but I
always refused to talk to him. I have maintained a pretty strong relationship with my mother, minus when my OCD caused a rough patch in the relationship.

As mentioned earlier, abuse causes a lot of mental health issues and those encompass most aspects of life for those suffering with them. Whether it caused my OCD is not really known to me, but my OCD did affect my relationship with my mom. There are several studies about how mental illness affects familial relationships. For starters, when a family member suffers from mental illness it becomes a source of stress for other family members (Avison, W.R. and Comeau, J., (2013)). This stress can be applied to any family dynamic, parent-child, parent-parent, aunt-niece, etc. This stress is typically caused by not understanding the illness, financial stress from treatment, or not feeling like they can help (Richardson, M., et al., 2013). This especially applies to parent-child relationships. Parents have to sit and watch as their child suffers with an illness they don't understand. Since they don't understand the illness, they can't help and that frustrates the parent because they don't want to watch their child in pain. I definitely experienced this. In highschool, I turned to my mother when my OCD got bad, hoping she could help, but since she doesn't understand OCD she was not able to help to the extent I needed, and it created distance between us. I used to rely on her for everything, and once I couldn't rely on her for this, the first time I couldn't go to her for an issue, I definitely did not feel as close to her as I had used to. Once I was in college and my OCD had become less intense, that is when I realized that it was ok if she didn’t understand. I don’t have to rely on her for everything. I also realized how stressed and hurt she must have been as well during that time since she couldn't help me and all she could do was watch, put me in therapy, and hope that that worked.
Another aspect of mental illness affecting relationships includes family members grieving
the healthy version of their mentally ill family member. Parents tended to grieve who their child
used to be before the onset of mental illness or who they could be without it (Richardson, M., et
al., 2013). It's understandable that a parent would feel this way. All they want is for their kid to
be happy and healthy. They focus on what could be instead of what is. This creates a disconnect
between the parent and the child. The parent focuses on the idea of their child in their mind
instead of who their child is now. This keeps them from focusing on reality and spending energy
on finding a solution for their child. Even if they are trying to help their kid while grieving, they
aren't giving their 100% focus to reality as they still have energy going to their ideal version of
their child. The best way to help their child is to accept things as they are, and do their best to
find a solution with all of their energy. I remember that my mother felt this way slightly. I did not
notice it in the depths of my OCD, but when I got better she made a comment on my
improvement. She said to me, “It’s been such a long time since I’ve seen you smile.” The look
on her face was happiness and relief. She just wanted me to feel better, and was so grateful that I
finally was.

**Choreographic Process**

The start of this work actually began two years ago. I was scrolling through social media
and came across a video that used the song “Winner Takes It All” from the musical Mamma Mia.
It immediately reminded me of my mother, especially back during my childhood as that movie
was a core memory that I shared with my mom. After listening to that song, I was inspired to
create a piece about the evolution of the relationship with my mom since it was and still is such a
prevalent topic in my life.
It originally began as a vision of a large group piece with several sections. Instead I decided to change the work into a duet between me and one other dancer who played my mom. I made this choice since the topic is so personal and a large group piece would take away from that intimacy. The duet was able to put the focus on just my mom and I, and focus the energy on the most current part of the relationship. I wanted to dance in the work so I could embody all the emotions and experiences going into the choreography. Embedding my emotions and experiences into the choreography reads better as a duet as the relationship can be more easily visualized. This would also allow my mom to connect better since she could see things from my perspective and see herself in the other dancer. She could easily see us in the work and visualize our relationship through the dance. The duet also allowed space for the scientific research since it was easier to incorporate into a duet than a group piece. The scientific research helped me to see our relationship through my mom’s perspective, and it aided me in choreographing her experiences into the dance through my perspective. This helped me create a more meaningful presentation for my mother.

This duet had two sections. The first section was to the song “Slipping Through My Fingers” from Mamma Mia. I wanted to keep with the musical theatre theme as that genre of music is so significant to my mom and I, and it plays a large role in our lives. This section would focus on high school through the present where I played myself and another dancer played my mom. It starts with us in a hug, rocking back and forth, to represent our closeness but also the idolization as an effect of abuse. I then trail off and the dancer playing my mom stays downstage center. As I dance around her, my movements become repetitive and sharp, to represent OCD. I chose sharp and repetitive movements since they reflected the repetitive, scary, and painful intrusive thoughts that come with OCD. They can feel like being stabbed, so the sharp stabbing
motions reflect that. The dancer playing my mom stays in one small area of the stage, and when she moves to express her stress with small contained movements, she stops and resets, as if to push her pain away or pack it away for later.

We then regroup and do a phrase together, but we don't look at each other, representing shared struggle but never truly seeing one another’s struggle. I then showed some of the OCD movement motifs to the dancer playing my mom as if we were in a conversation and I was trying to explain to her what I was going through. The other dancer then indicated that she cared but couldn’t understand my struggle, and I dance away frustrated. As I dance away from the other dancer, she watches and continues to try to understand, but just cannot. We then repeat the struggle phrase from earlier, but this time back to back, showing the distance growing between us.

We then break apart to opposite ends of the stage and the dancer playing my mom enters into a solo where I stand and watch, and for the first time I see the other dancer, her movement, and her struggle, and this is a light bulb moment for my character. This represents when I finally saw my mom as an imperfect person with her own stresses and traumas. When she is finished, I walk over to her and rest my hand on her shoulder, signifying to her that I see her.

This moves into the second movement of the piece which is to “Bring Him Home” from Les Miserables. I still wanted this song in the dance as a gift to her, and I wanted to end the dance on a sentimental note. We start in an embrace again after I rested my head on her shoulder after removing my hand. We then move to center stage where we begin reconnecting through my evolved view of her. We revisit my OCD, where I show the OCD movement motifs again, and she still does not understand, but she shares snippets of her pain with me, her stress movement motifs from the start of the dance. I accept that she won’t understand is just a human like
everyone else; she doesn't need to understand for us to connect and to strengthen our bond. I grab her hand and let her know that.

We then dance together through our struggles; movement from the earlier struggle phrase is expanded upon and worked through to show our growth. We travel all across the stage and remain connected the whole time, either through energy or slight partner work. We end again in an embrace, but in a new spot on stage, to represent our reconnection, and the new spot represents our growth.

This was performed once for just my mom and aunt and once for my sponsor. The private performance for my mom was to provide her with a comfortable space to watch this dance. It allowed her to emote freely and focus on the work instead of what others thought. The research also reminded me of how intimate of a subject this is, and how deeply the long lasting effects of abuse and mental illness affect people. This also drove me to have a private performance for my mom so she can experience this performance regarding these sensitive subjects in a comfortable environment. I also felt more comfortable since I could just focus on performing for her and connecting to her through my dancing. It felt like a conversation without words. My mom is very close with my aunt, so my mom did not feel like she was an extra judgemental eye.

**Reflection**

This project was the hardest thing I have ever done in my undergraduate career. The workload definitely overwhelmed me and that was a challenge that I had to work through throughout the process. The timeline had to change several times in order to complete the
project. Researching was difficult so I ended up taking much more time on that than was needed. I eventually found a rhythm and was able to take what I needed and left what I didn’t.

As mentioned earlier, the dance was supposed to be a group piece, but instead it turned into an intimate duet. I think that changing it to the duet was a change for the better. It allowed me as a choreographer to zoom in on a specific moment in my relationship with my mom, so the dance ended up being richer and the movement could hold more meaning rather than try to squish an entire lifetime into a singular moment and end up weakening the artistry. It created a stronger piece in the end, and it is something I am proud to have made.

As for performing, The performance for my mother held true to the proposal; the audience was specially curated for her comfort. It was just her and my aunt. It was the first performance and it was very intimate. I am glad it worked out that way though so I could share this work with just them first and have a special moment just between family. It felt like giving a gift to my mom, and when she told me she liked it, that really boosted my confidence in this project and made me proud of it. I was slightly wary of how she would react, but she ended up loving the dance and that calmed me down and made me proud of my work. We had a conversation after the performance, and after I explained to her what it was about, she said she liked how it can serve that purpose and also be interpreted for other relationships and serve as a work about growing up in general. That also gave me confidence to eventually show it to others outside of my family. When I showed it to my sponsor I allowed others to watch the performance as well. The performance for the larger group felt less intimate and less like a conversation. I noticed that as I was dancing I preferred the intimate setting of just my mom and my aunt as I felt there was more energy exchange between me and my mom, and I felt a deep connection to her during and after the performance, something I did not feel with the larger group.
Conclusion

Overall, this was a challenging process, but I am proud that I completed a project of this scope. I was able to connect the research to my lived experience, and was present in the choreographed work. The choreographed work is something I am proud to have made both for my mother and myself. It shows both of our growth, and I am so lucky I got to utilize and test my choreographic skills in a way that can deepen a relationship. It was a gift for her, especially the second section to her favorite song from her favorite musical, and seeing her tear up when the performance concluded is when I knew I did my job right. I am grateful to have been able to make this work on such an important person and share it with her. This is a treasure we will hold onto for years.
References


Link to performance:

https://youtu.be/fRBoCo8jST8