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Own Your Own Crap

(What, Me? A Dark Side?)

TURNING THE FLASHLIGHT ON

*Things were looking pretty bad the last chapter, huh? If you were taking a good look around the Stepmother/Mother landscape hoping to find reasons to feel **better** about your situation, you might not be too excited about **this** chapter. That's because we're going to be lifting up rocks to take a peek at things that might be hiding underneath. We might even poke at a few things! And we daresay, by the **middle** of this section, you could even be feeling some mighty strong resistance.*

But resistance is good!

Resistance would mean we're getting somewhere.

Resistance means there's a block in the dam. What happens when you remove the log, the rock, the collection of trash?

Voila!

The river flows, the pond or lake is replenished, all the birds start singing and the sun comes out, and Bambi delicately makes his way to the brook for a silent little sip.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves . . .

A LOOK BACK FROM US

First, we're going to dredge up all of *our* yucky stuff. Okay, maybe not all, because that would require another book. But just so you know you're in good company, here's some of the gunk *we* used to live with on a daily basis.

Resentments

Carol: I resented the fact that Jennifer got so much of our money. There, I said it. It's always been a tough one for me, even before I started

making money with my art, because David and I were in a *partnership*. Plus, I was working so hard to get my art career off the ground all the time. It was *really* hard to see her make the financial decisions she did, when part of what she was using was the money we gave her *for the kids*. And then when she asked us for more, for camps or whatnot. Oh my god, that really got me.

Jennifer: I resented the fact that Carol got to stay home, while I had to raise both of the girls full time *and* work to support us. It was exhausting and stressful and sometimes even scary. I used to judge Carol as having it pretty easy, with a husband to support her and plenty of money, and not much else to do except take care of the house and piddle around with her art. It really grated on me that the child support was supposed to cover *everything* extra, when we were sometimes just barely scraping by. I sometimes blamed Carol for that.

Comments from friends and family

Carol: With anyone I met, the words “my husband’s ex-wife” generally produced a grunt, accompanied by a look of sympathetic understanding (that the ex is always a pain in the ass). That’s the expectation. If you think about it, most divorces probably aren’t the happiest of experiences, especially when kids are involved. And then throw money into the mix (child support and possibly alimony) and you’ve got a seriously volatile situation. No mom is going to be happy about the new wife-y when there are kids involved, so ex-wives usually equal trouble. I pretty much got that same reaction from all my friends, at least the few who were still willing to accept me after I married into such a crazy situation.

Jennifer: I got the same automatic, negative reactions. Friends and family were *more* than willing to be indignant with me about having to deal with a stepmom. Everyone I knew thought the same thing—a stepmother just tries to elbow her way into a situation where she doesn’t belong. Why should she be surprised if she meets with

resistance from the kids? I had lots of judgments about Carol's age (she was fourteen years younger) and her experience with life. In my mind, she was "playing house" with my children, and *they were not toys*.

How do I compare myself to thee?

Carol: Ways I compared myself to Jennifer? My boobs were smaller. My butt was bigger. Unfortunately, I got to hear all about the problems she and David had when they were married. I felt superior to her—I got to hear it all and she didn't have a clue about me. I also heard that she didn't like to do housework and that she rarely cooked. So I used to feel superior about that, too. If you've been to my house lately, you know why I don't anymore.

Jennifer: Carol always just seemed like such a domestic diva compared to me. It seemed as if she was always doing some cool art project with the kids or cooking interesting meals or whipping up beautiful hand-made holiday decorations. I sometimes felt so *old* next to her; her face is so fresh and unlined, she looks great even without makeup. She was intensely disciplined with her art, almost ruthlessly so, and I felt so unproductive compared to her. But whenever I figured out some of her insecurities, I would gloat.

Parenting wars

Carol: And then there was the parenting. I really judged Jennifer for that, I have to admit. I remember talking to her once on the phone and suggesting that she just lay down the law for misbehavior or impose consequences. And she just said, "But that just seems so *mean*." And I thought she was being such a weenie, and hurting the kids in the process.

And every time the youngest child was upset, which seemed to be a lot in the beginning, she would say, "I want my mommy!" over and over and over and over. It would make me feel so useless and so left out and so disliked. She said that until she was about eight.

Jennifer: We had huge differences of opinion when it came to parenting. I saw Carol as being an unnecessary hard-ass, who expected submission and obedience just because she was the adult, not because her ideas were actually helpful or right. I saw her as coming from a place of fear and ego. But I was also jealous of her organized approach to parenting and discipline and felt inadequate, compared to all her charts and clear consequences for misbehavior. It took me a long time to see that the best approach was actually a *balance* of our two parenting styles: having the *structure* and the *nurturing*.

I was also jealous of her ability to actually work on various creative projects with the girls, because I never seemed to have the time or patience to do the same thing. And I sometimes felt smug, knowing that she was struggling, and the girls would always prefer me as their mother.

DISOWNING YOUR RELATIVES

How easy is it to transform a difficult situation if the problems are mostly “someone else’s fault”? Not very. And why is that?

Because you put all the control in the other person’s hands. In truth, though, you have just as much power as the other person does when it comes to shaping your own inner reality—if not way-y-y-y more. Here’s where you’re going to be ruthlessly honest about all the baggage *you’re* bringing to the table—your role in keeping the conflict and score-keeping going. We’re going to unzip your bags, dump everything out on the table, and examine what’s traditionally called our *shadow selves*.

Shadow, meaning the darker parts of you. Shadow, as in something lurking behind you, or just off to the side, not usually within your field of vision.

One very important thing about our shadow sides: They’re normally the parts of ourselves that we’ve disowned, like unwanted relatives. We don’t want to admit they exist. We’re ashamed of them; afraid, confused and befuddled, disgusted. We’d rather put our hand in a vat of acid and keep it there than put our arms around our shadows. But having the courage *and the curiosity* to face your shadows is the key to

all kinds of freedom, not only in an ex-wife/stepmother relationship, but in all areas of your life.

Humility's surprise

Good ol' Carl Jung, who originated the shadow concept, once said that our shadow self "is that which we think we are not." So what does it look like in action? Luckily, the answer to this is easy: you deal with it almost every day. All you have to do is think about the people that you interact with on a regular basis. Just look to others and how they live.

The coworker who prides herself on being so fair and non-gossipy, but in private, rips colleagues to shreds. The friend who absolutely cannot *stand* it when people act smug and superior, yet is doing the *exact same thing* when she dissects their behavior. The stepmother who *swears* she's doing everything she can to get along better with the stepchildren, while in actuality, she bristles around them because she's truly *annoyed* by them. Or perhaps the mother who dramatically claims to love and adore her children so much, but is always trying to pawn them off on you for an extra child-free weekend.

Ironically, being willing to make yourself *smaller* and more humble will actually help you become bigger (in the best possible way) . . . and *stronger*. In this chapter we'll gently help you take stock of the cobwebs in your corners in preparation for creating a nice, sparkling, shiny house.

Three tricky monkeys

As you've probably already figured out, one telling characteristic of our shadow self is blindness and denial. As much as we'd like to think we're aware of our good sides and "bad," there are still aspects of ourselves that we're woefully unaware of.

Think back to all the examples given above. Another thing they have in common is transparency. The people doing their shadow thing above think no one can see what they're doing. But we can.

The examples above also have *projection*, or mirroring, in common. We often home in on the one thing we cannot stand in ourselves in other people. Then we “catch” them doing it and nail them for it (even if only internally). Their behavior gets under our skin. We feel indignant, contemptuous, and unforgiving.

Unfortunately, no one is above living from this place in themselves. Not you. Not the writers of self-help books. Not the Pope or the Dalai Lama. Even today, you probably did something that you think you really didn't.

What's our motivation for living in such an unattractive and unproductive way? We're sure you can see this one coming too . . . *protection* (or the illusion of it). We're doing our best to protect ourselves from unsavory aspects we'd rather not see.

Enough hiding. While our shadow sides might seem as threatening as snakes, remember, they're *your* snakes! You raised them. You fed them. Don't be afraid. You're actually immune to their venom, once you bring them out into the light of day.

We'll be uncovering them *together*. And we'll be doing so because it's one of the main ways to resolve conflict, though at first glance it may seem weird and unpleasant.

When you hold up your bucketful of serpents at the end of this chapter and proudly proclaim, “These are *mine!*” you're on the way to happier times.

The importance of + and -

Before we dive in, let's create a bit of deeper meaning to carry with us along the way. Sometimes we forget why it even matters if you get along with the stepmom or ex-wife in your life. It's like thinking of exercising when you're lying in bed, all warm and cozy. It's cold and weirdly dark outside, and you just suffered through one of the worst bouts of insomnia of your life. Why try so hard? Who cares? What difference will it make to the world if you just stay in bed?

Well, it all comes down to two little symbols: + and -.

Let's explain this with a chart:

(-)	(+)
misery repetition chaos	happiness peace contentment

In one corner, there's all that crap that usually attends these ex-/step relationships. On the other side is what it would feel like if both you and the other woman were actually nice to each other most of the time.

The sad thing here is, if you just settle for --- (that's a big dose of the negative, for emphasis), you'll never know how good + could be. For example, if perhaps you began to make amends and focus on the desires you have in common, like making it easier for the kids to go back and forth between houses. Or keep better track of details that are forever getting lost in the shuffle.

Still feeling resistant to the possibility?

Well then, let's just revel in some forbidden feelings first! Does this book have to be chock-full of boulders to be rolled uphill? Who are we kidding? That gets *old*.

Let's look instead at why we should let just the rocks roll back down the hill and take a well-deserved break. See if you can relate . . .

TOP TEN REASONS NOT TO EVEN BOTHER TRYING TO GET ALONG WITH THE STEPMOM OR EX-WIFE

Place a checkmark beside every statement that makes you nod your head in vigorous agreement.

- _____ 1. She already hates me, there's no changing her. I'm sure she's stabbing me in the back right now!
- _____ 2. If it weren't for her, I'd/we'd have a lot more money.

- _____ 3. She's such a terrible step/mother. Just look at the way she _____ . (fill in the blank)
- _____ 4. It's too hard, scary, weird, _____. (fill in the blank)
- _____ 5. She's such a control freak, meeting her halfway would be hopeless.
- _____ 6. She totally micromanages his relationship with his own kids!
- _____ 7. If I actually *tried* to get along with her, I'd just be letting her off the hook for everything she's done in the past.
- _____ 8. Don't I have enough on my plate without adding this to the list?
- _____ 9. You mean getting along is even *possible*? Are you out of your mind?
- _____ 10. Face it. This woman really *is* a bitch!

Feel better? You have to admit, there's a certain pleasure in just giving in to this stuff, isn't there? What's ironic here is that *both* mothers and stepmothers feel like the above statements are true for them. Both!

Okay, back to reality, but *pay attention*. This is where it gets juicy.

SHADOW SELF, UP CLOSE

Next, we'll be breaking down the specific ways our shadow sides manifest themselves.

Sitting all alone in the bullet list below, each aspect of your dark side might look harmless enough. But these traits have a powerful impact on your life, even though they seem easy enough to ignore. These types of behavior, and the thoughts and feelings that go along with them, are the fuel that feeds the fires of conflict. They're what keep us invested in being on the other side of the fence, in staying separate. They keep us locked in a perpetual struggle with others, even people we really care about.

We hope you'll be pleasantly surprised by how many of these elements actually fit you, instead of dismayed. Recognizing them in

yourself means you're that much closer to a breakthrough. Let's see if any these sound (uncomfortably) unfamiliar:

- Wanting to be right
- Wanting to “look good”
- Wanting to be superior
- Wanting to control others
- Playing the victim
- Giving in to insanity
- Shading the truth

Being right

Remember how good it feels to be right? To correctly predict someone's behavior, or its results? To watch someone else make a mistake that you wisely managed to avoid? To have just the right piece of obscure information that applies to a situation, magically fixing everything? A lot of us will go through amazing gymnastic contortions in order to be right . . . or at least *seem* right.

But when we look at this behavior from others' points of view—when we remember how it feels to have these things done to us—we find that it's annoying to be around people who are acting this way. When someone acts like a rigid know-it-all, we just can't stand it. But we also really like being right, don't we? Just about as much as we like looking good.

Wanting to “look good”

Most of us care about how we seem to others, especially family or close friends. But also people at work, our neighbors, casual acquaintances, even people we'll never see again at a store. We all have a built-in radar that monitors how we think we're coming across. We're used to a certain level of pride and a certain level of insecurity. If the levels dip down one way or fly up the other, we either consider ourselves to be having an “off” day or a great day. Basically, we know what we're used to.

But what happens when an enemy arrives on the scene? When we find a villain in our midst: someone who seems to be looking for cracks

in our armor, or running mascara, or mistakes that we'd rather keep to ourselves? It's hard to relax when you know someone is just *waiting* for you to mess up—when you know that person is talking about you, watching you, biding her time.

The anxiety of wanting to look good lurks beneath a combative streak that can only be attributed to our next aspect of the shadow self.

Wanting to be superior

Whereas wanting to look good is all about having others approve of you, trying to win the dominance game is more about making others look *bad*. Feeling superior is pretty heady stuff. It can feel like you've finally made it to the top of the heap. You're the *man* (or the *woman*). You can survey your little kingdom up there amongst the clouds and gusts of wind, but . . . you can also fall down.

You're not too grounded when you're up there, feeling better than everyone else. Part of you knows that it's temporary, so you're compelled to constantly watch your back. Is anyone else attempting to clamber up your hill?

Which leads to your next shadow side, plotting and planning.

Wanting to be in control

This is you wanting to be in charge, playing your cards so that you're always coming from a strategically strong position. You do what you can to detect your opponent's weaknesses and insecurities. You play dead, if that works, or move forward quickly to throw someone off her balance. You manipulate details, events, and aspects of your life to try to gain the upper hand. You may find yourself playing out imaginary scenarios where you win and the other woman is humiliated, or finally and rightfully put in her place.

But as we all know too well, it's not nice for women to seem too power-hungry. We've got names for women like that (part of the title of this book, for one), so you may have to be sneaky. If being intense and hard-charging isn't your style, then the next aspect might be more appealing.

Power through victimhood

Cue the violins It's so hard when life is out to get you, isn't it? Some people just seem to have all the bad luck. And what makes it even worse is if you're *really trying*. You're a *good* person . . . and even when that "other woman" is coming after you like a dark figure on a horse, you still try to be nice. Fair. The sane, calm one. And where does it get you?

Screwed, that's what! Taken advantage of, left and right.

How's that for fairness?

Being the victim has its own kind of power, though. You get to be blameless. You're never the one doing anything "wrong." You're throwing up your hands and shaking your head when the broken lamp is discovered, essentially saying, "I didn't do it! And when have I *ever*?"

Remember the phrase "passive-aggressive"? It goes right along with being a victim. Passive-aggressive people have a conscious awareness of what they're doing when they, oops, "helplessly" arrange the situation so that the person in charge falls flat on his or her face. The victim ends up the victor or at least driving the more outwardly authoritarian person mad.

Which brings us to our next element.

Giving In to Insanity

There's a kind of crazy aggression that comes out when we feel severely threatened. We'll do things we never thought we would, such as break into someone's e-mail account "because we had to." We'll go to great lengths to set someone else up to fail and severely stress ourselves out in the process. We'll lash out in some way and scare even ourselves.

When you're operating from this place, you feel justified in wildly attacking because you think you're being wildly attacked. But you are also not really in control. And your outrageous, uncharacteristic behavior is only inflaming the situation and making it harder to think straight and calm down.

Thinking straighter would probably head off the next shadow side.

“Shading” the truth

It was only a little white lie, we think. Or maybe just something you kept to yourself that you should have revealed. There’s outright, planned deceit. And then there are the lies you twist around when you’re caught, so that everyone ends up confused.

However you do it, it’s just one more way to try to gain control, to try to make things go the way you want them to.

There’s only one problem with this. You’re working with faulty material. It’s like shooting bullets from a gun with a bent barrel.

Lies have a way of getting away from you, taking on a life of their own. It’s scary trying to keep track of lies, and sadly, they seem to have no expiration date. Plus, somewhere inside, you still feel guilty for lying (that’s your conscience, trying to help you).

It may be inconvenient as hell to tell the truth. And you may temporarily feel at a disadvantage doing so, but you’ll end up feeling more grounded and guilt-free.

Own your own shit!

So tell yourself the truth. Which shadow side traits have you dabbled in? What are some of your favorites? Which ones are making you think, hmmm, that might be interesting to try on for size? Put a check next to all that apply.

- _____ Wanting to be right
- _____ Wanting to “look good”
- _____ Wanting to be superior
- _____ Wanting to control others
- _____ Playing the victim
- _____ Giving in to insanity
- _____ Shading the truth

By now, hopefully, you’re starting to realize how much seemingly excusable, “perfectly understandable” behavior contributes to the problems you have with “the other woman.”

One of the keys to improving your relationship with her is owning your own shit. You've got to claim what's yours. You know, admitting to the parts of you that help keep things cantankerous and conflict-ridden. You took your first steps by checking off any of the traits above. Good for you!

Part of you may still be saying, *surely*, this current state of affairs is *all her fault!* Are you starting to realize the possibilities for change if they're not?

Quiz: The Joy of Being Judgmental

We invite you to take a close-up look at the "hamster wheel" in your brain that's constantly churning out unhelpful thoughts. Circle a number of each phrase. Be ruthlessly honest.

Rating Scale

- 1) No, I swear.
- 2) Maybe a smidgeon.
- 3) Okay, fine, yes.
- 4) Most definitely.
- 5) Dear God, I can barely stand how I feel.

1 2 3 4 5

I find myself critiquing her clothes.

1 2 3 4 5

I find myself critiquing her job (or lack of it).

1 2 3 4 5

I find myself critiquing her intelligence or education (or lack of it).

1 2 3 4 5

I find myself critiquing her personality (or lack of it) and mannerisms.

1 2 3 4 5

I find myself critiquing her friends, family, and social status.

1 2 3 4 5

I find myself critiquing her looks.

1 2 3 4 5

I find myself critiquing her taste in music, movies, books, cultural knowledge.

1 2 3 4 5

I find myself critiquing her housekeeping skills (or lack thereof).

1 2 3 4 5

I find myself critiquing her parenting skills (or again, lack thereof).

1 2 3 4 5

I find myself critiquing the way she handles money.

1 2 3 4 5

I find myself critiquing her current and past romantic relationships.

1 2 3 4 5

Her emotional blind spots are, like, so obvious to me!

Interpreting your score

- If you scored between 1–25 points: Congratulations, you're a saint! Please write to us and help us. We need you.
- If you scored between 26–50 points: Welcome to the human race! You're not doing so-o-o badly, but please keep reading.
- If you scored between 51–70 points: It's hot down here, isn't it? Use this book to fan yourself, then please, by all means, keep reading.

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What do you think about your results?

What would you like to change?

Compassion: the shadow is your friend!

It's best to try to approach your psychological explorations with compassion for yourself, instead of a critical eye, which is how we're used to approaching potentially difficult emotions. While it may not be comfortable looking at these issues, understanding *what* you're doing, *how* you're doing it—and *why*—is the key to moving closer to a sense of partnership between all of the adults.

Sure, we realize you're probably reading a lot of these paragraphs and going, "See? I knew that woman was up to no good. And now I can prove it!"

But we hope you're also reading and going "Hmmm . . . do I ever do this? Does this sound familiar, not only because *she* does it but because *I* do too?"

If you find yourself constantly answering a quick and vehement "no" to that question, go back and reread the part about projection.

What are you willing to own here?

To accept as yours, no matter how unflattering?

You're the only person reading this book right now; no one else is listening to the dialogue in your head. If you can't be honest with yourself now, when can you ever be?

The point here is not to feel even worse because of what you're doing, or even angrier and more offended about the other woman's actions.

The point here is education, learning, *change*.

WHAT ABOUT THE MAN?

Is the husband/ex-husband feeding into any drama, or helping it heal? There are loaded concerns that both sides have in common, and concerns that are particular to just one “team.” Let’s break these into two camps for greater clarity.

Dynamics of the stepmother/ex-husband relationship

It’s hard for the stepmom to start off with a “clean slate” with the mom. They almost always begin as adversaries because of the conflict involved in the divorce. Gossip and “processing” between the husband and wife can contribute to ongoing drama and create new conflict. They may have an agreed-upon story about why: he got a divorce and what was his fault—or where he was blameless; what kind of woman the ex-wife is; how things are probably going to go from here on out. He may be keeping different parts of his version of history alive, such as the victim, wronged party, better parent, etc., and a lot of negative feelings probably go along with that negative interpretation.

The husband may not want his wife to know or see the truth about some of the problems he had before with his ex-wife. He may secretly worry that these same issues will be a factor later on in his current marriage.

His unresolved baggage with his ex-wife can create communication problems between not only himself and his ex-wife but between all the adults too. There may be a lack of cooperation and inflexibility, power struggles, and one-upmanship.

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Stepmoms: What’s your repeating loop of a “story” for your husband (victim, wronged party, better parent, etc.) that helps keep your negative emotions alive?

In your opinion, what's his?

Do they match up? If not, how are they different?

Dynamics of the ex-wife/ex-husband relationship

The ex-wife may feel like the other side is teaming up against her, two-to-one. She probably feels like the stepmother knows all her dirty laundry, but not, unfortunately, vice versa. She lacks someone to give *her* the inside scoop about the other woman, so she's in the dark.

There's a very good chance that she's got plenty of her own unresolved baggage with her ex-husband too, such as guilt, regret, sadness,

and anger. And just like with her ex-husband, that leftover baggage makes it hard to communicate clearly, work together from a place of mutual support and cooperation, and move forward.

She may have lots to say when it comes to the flaws and shortcomings of her previous partner. But she's well aware that the other woman either does not see these (yet) or isn't bothered by them.

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Moms: What's your repeating loop of a "story" (victim, wronged party, better parent, etc.) that keeps your negative emotions alive?

In your opinion, what's your ex-husband's?

How are they different? How do they fuel each other?

Now let's take an even *closer* look at some of these issues.

Holding a grudge

We all have our treasured stories, our old war wounds; the ones we repeat over and over inside our heads, bitterly listing the ways we've been done wrong. Every time you regurgitate your tale of woe about your ex-husband, or you egg your husband on about *her* offenses, you get a little hit of self-righteousness, a flash of indignation, and the pot starts to simmer all over again. Keeping your resentments alive can feel really good, though people are loathe to admit it.

What's even better is when a new juicy event takes place and now you *know* the other person has been proven to be a real jerk. You get to feel superior, to pull up the warm blanket of victimhood around your neck (or help your husband do it) and hunker down.

But think about it: How is doing this *really* helping you? How does harboring long-standing grievances and resentments ever get you anywhere? You're the one who's suffering.

For moms: What grudges are you still holding? How does this continued spite affect you? What would you like to do differently?

For stepmoms: What negative version of your husband's story are you helping to keep alive? How does this continued spite affect you? What would you like to do differently?

Trying to win the Better Parent award

For moms, you do whatever you can to set your ex-husband up to fail. Maybe you withhold information from him, like for sporting events or the children’s playdates. Maybe you don’t tell him about birthday parties or school events until the last minute so he can’t come (and looks like he doesn’t care, whereas, obviously, you *so* do). Worst of all, you may find yourself making little digs out loud with your own children. “Well, you were ready to go, it’s your father who’s late. As usual . . .”

For stepmoms, you find yourself jumping through hoops trying to show your husband that you’re a better mother figure than the children’s mother. You’re all too aware of her shortcomings after getting an earful from him. And you bend over backward doing things you’re normally not that inclined to do, like arts and crafts or baking three-layer cakes, or fixing a bicycle or shooting hoops. It’s a strain on you, doing these things, but you feel driven so that you can finally get those magical words of acknowledgment, “Wow, I wish I’d married you from the beginning.”

For moms: Do you put a lot of effort into making your ex-husband look bad and yourself look better? Do you sometimes feel like you’re screwing yourself with your schemes and intrigues?

For stepmoms: Do you put a lot of effort into getting your husband to notice what a better mother figure you are? Do you sometimes feel like you're screwing yourself with your schemes and intrigues?

Being at the mercy of core issues

Sure, everyone loves talking about sex, but the second most important volatile issue has got to be money. Money gets us where it counts: in that core place of fear connected to matters of survival and our sense of power in the world. If you're keeping the fires of conflict stoked over issues of money, it actually might not be worth it. Can you attach a dollar figure to your angst?

When a family dissolves and becomes two separate units, one side is almost always going to have less. Unfortunately, given the way our culture works, that side is usually the ex-wife's.

Let's say every summer you argue with your ex-husband over whether he'll chip in some extra money for summer activities for your children, and he balks. You end up mad at him for months afterward, getting a few headaches here and there, snapping at the kids, dreading having to interact with him over the phone. Maybe it ruins a few evenings or weekends.

Or perhaps you and your husband go round and round about something expensive he wants to buy for the stepkids that he bought without asking you. You want to save money for *your* family, you want to make decisions *together*. You think he's acting out of guilt or is letting himself be manipulated by the kids, and you can't think about the whole thing without steam coming out of your ears.

For stepmoms: Put that cumulative stress into a bucket and ask yourself: Is all of this worth an argument over \$_____ (insert dollar amount here)? What are your thoughts on this?

For moms: Put that cumulative stress into a bucket and ask yourself: Is all of this worth an argument over \$_____ (insert dollar amount here)? What are your thoughts on this?

Denying the what-if fantasies

As we mentioned before, if one person is not completely “done” with the relationship, it adds a whole new combustible element to the situation. Even if the ex-wife is complete with the end of her marriage, it may still feel odd to see another woman in her “role.”

We think these kind of lingering feelings are perfectly normal, and yet, they’re squirmy for even *us* to talk about, perhaps *especially* for us to talk about! Despite whatever negativity you might feel toward your ex, there’s always the chance that a strong attachment to him is still lurking *somewhere* in your energetic field. After all, you had children together! You shared your lives in the most intimate of ways.

Jennifer: I remember several years after we'd split up, being occasionally haunted by dreams where my ex and I were still together, perhaps exploring a new house we were soon to move into, or taking a family trip to strange environs. Waking up from those dreams always left me disoriented and slightly embarrassed: Now what was THAT all about? Did this mean I still wanted to be with him? Or that we were somehow meant to be? Even now that he was remarried, and I was dating someone else? I would always come back to the same answer: This is the life we have now, and he and I seem happier . . .

These types of dreams and mental wanderings are perfectly natural; not only that, they are commonplace. What's the old saying? The more you struggle to be free of something, the more you're reinforcing the fact that there's still a need to struggle? If you've got some hallucinatory misfits bumping around in your psyche, just know you're not alone. Perhaps a lot of these feelings are biologically motivated; a part of you simply wants to put the two halves of a circle back together. If you find yourself actively trying to undermine your ex's new marriage, or having difficulty creating new relationships, get some professional help. Otherwise, these feelings will likely fade with time.

For moms: Have you ever submerged any what-ifs? If you are aware of these feelings inside of you, are you okay with them, or struggling?

For stepmoms: Do you worry that your husband might still have feelings for his ex-wife? If you are aware of these feelings inside of you, are you okay with them, or struggling?

DUDE, WHERE'S MY TROPHY?

Are you waiting for that arbitrary moment in time when all the chips will be tallied and a winner will be declared in the Worthiness and Goodness of Being a Human Being contest?

We don't know why this is, but human beings often live in an odd state of limbo, lives subtly on hold. It's like we're still little kids waiting for an authority figure in the guise of someone we look up to, or an internalized version of God, to finally give us that one, all-important stamp of approval, showing once and for all that not only are we just fine but, fingers crossed, we're actually superior. We're waiting for that big day when we get a ribbon pinned to our shirts or a trophy handed to us onstage to thunderous applause, or perhaps just to be lauded by countless glowing articles in major newspapers around the country.

Probably ain't gonna happen.

The only thing to do if you recognize this dynamic in yourself is to just give up. Decide to stop waiting. Not. One. More. Day. You do this by accepting complete responsibility for creating your own life (more on this later in Chapter Four), which, at the moment, may sound about as appealing as carrying an extra bag of sand over the mountain. But there's a good reason to take on that extra weight. Read on.

EMOTIONAL MATH: PAYOFFS VS. COSTS

Managing you

So how does this all balance out with our dark side? Can't we just live this way and get away with it? Isn't this what most of us are doing anyway? Especially in these ex-wife/stepmother situations, where there's so much awkwardness, so much anger, so much miscommunication. How are you supposed to fix all that when you have no control over the other person?

Well, right now, we're not talking about controlling *her*; we're talking about you managing . . . *you*.

One concept that might motivate you to make some changes is to consider the costs and payoffs, or benefits, for your behavior. When you unconsciously act from your dark side, it takes something away from your life. You think it's worth it, but we beg to differ.

The payoffs always *seem* so big when you're right in the middle of this stuff, but the costs are usually *huge*. And we don't usually attribute the costs directly to our behavior. We find some type of circular reasoning to weasel our way out of a direct connection.

Benefits

Here are some typical payoffs, or strokes for our all sneakiness, our resentments, our manipulations and judgments. We:

- Feel superior, smarter
- Feel self-righteous
- Get sympathy from others
- Feel like we're getting a good look inside the other person—we can wisely see what she can't
- Feel like we're gaining a strategic advantage
- Feel innocent and "good"
- Get to relax—there's nothing for us to do or change because it's not our fault!
- Get to feel in control of our life by comparing someone else's obviously "unconscious," blind actions to ours
- Get validating anger and indignation from others

Some additional benefits to feeling like a victim (the ones above still apply):

- We're wronged, the injured party.
- We feel entitled to compensation of some kind.
- We get reinforcement of our crappy self-image (the comfort and safety of the known environment, even if it's lousy).
- The "safety" of not having failed.
- The safety of not having been proven a "loser" through your own actions—someone else's actions are at fault.

Costs

And what are the costs? They can affect almost every area of your life. From your general level of happiness and stress, to your marriage, your health, and your relationship with your kids (especially your relationship with your kids!). Here's what's happening when you keep playing this stuff out over and over in your head:

- We feel stressed.
- We're unhappy.
- We feel an overall sense of not being able to relax, to be at peace.
- We snap at others or get easily irritated.
- Our hearts feel hardened, even when we want them to soften up.
- We feel overwhelmed by our mental self-talk and don't know how to make it stop.
- We get headaches, stomachaches, and maybe get colds more frequently.
- We pay less direct attention to our children.
- We have less energy to play with them or a reduced ability to connect with them.
- We bore our friends and family with all our complaints and gossip and need to "vent" and process our broken-record feelings.

- We feel sad and don't know why.
- Our innards feel hard with anger and resentment.
- We cannot forgive others as easily as we wish we could, or know we should, in moments of clarity.
- We miss opportunities to make things better.

We could go on. But we think you get the idea.

What benefits or payoffs for negative emotions can you relate to?

How are these benefits costing you? What are the consequences in your life?

Do the benefits seem worth it to you?

Given what you've learned from looking at this, how, specifically, are you going to act and think differently?

EXTRA REASSURANCE

But wait!, you say. *She's* still the reason I'm so unhappy—it's what *she's* doing, not me! If I didn't have her in my life, I'd be just fine. The only reason I'm stressed and miserable and can't stand her is because of *her* actions, not mine. Why make *me* do all the work here? Why should I have to suffer *even more*, doing all this self-analysis and self-improvement while she's doing such lousy crap already and getting away with it?

Why? Well, put it this way

If you were stuck in a prison in a foreign country for ten years and no one knew where you were and there was no chance of getting out until much, much later, but you had a little window and a tiny cot and the chance to move around inside your little cell and were relatively unscathed, all things considered . . . you'd *find* a way to create happiness. You'd have no other choice but to work on your thoughts and emotions, and you'd do your best to craft some sense of purpose and meaning and order for your days.

Lucky for you, you only have to deal with a pesky (or granted, perhaps worse at times) ex-wife or stepmother, not a 6x6 prison cell with a dirt floor. So make the best of it and work with what you have, which is mainly *you* in this situation.

As Buddha once said, "Let us rise up and be thankful, for if we didn't learn a lot today, at least we learned a little, and if we didn't learn

a little, at least we didn't get sick, and if we got sick, at least we didn't die; so, let us be thankful."

We never met the guy, but we bet Buddha would have loved crayons. Maybe you do too. That's why this chapter goes out with a bang!

MY VERY OWN CRAPTACULAR COLORABLE PIE CHART

This is all for you, just you! For each slice of the pie, color where you are in intensity with this particular shadow aspect. The closer you are to the inside of the pie, the less that this aspect is a problem for you.



If it makes you feel too exposed, then duplicate this circle on a separate piece of paper and either hide it, burn it, or throw it away. As long as you do the exercise in earnest, this information will be stored in your brain somewhere, and the next time you bump up against one of these feelings in real life, you'll know it.

RESOURCES TO EXPLORE

Books

- *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*, by Eckhart Tolle
- *Thank You for Being Such a Pain: Spiritual Guidance for Dealing with Difficult People*, by Mark Rosen
- *Quiet Your Mind*, by John Selby

Web sites

- Interlude Retreat (www.interluderetreat.com)
- 32 Keys (www.32keys.com)
- Steve Pavlina's Personal Development for Smart People (www.stevepavlina.com)

AS WE LEAVE THE CHAPTER

Phew! You're done with one of the most difficult chapters in the book! Way to go!

If reading this section was like shoveling horse poop from a swimming pool then hosing it down afterward (isn't everything?), then you're primed and ready for the next section, which involves unicorns and rainbows.

Not really.

But we will be moving onward and upward into dreams, fantasies, and pleasant, reverie-like what-ifs. It's darkest before the dawn. If you're ready for some lightness for a change, then read on.