

the

Myths

behind

Marriage and Motherhood

Understanding the Source
of Women's Anger

Judith Goodman, Ph.D.

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A Fairy Tale Beginning

Once Upon A Time...

In the early evening on a quiet little street, children are playing happily out in their front yards, husbands are bringing in the trash cans and wives are chatting with each other about the day's events. The peaceful moment however, is suddenly disrupted by the sound of a woman yelling at the top of her lungs. It is coming from inside one of the homes on the block. She is either screaming at her children for doing something they shouldn't have done or at her husband for not doing something he should have done. No one in the neighborhood seems particularly concerned. No one wonders if the family is in crisis. No one runs over to the house to intervene or races to the phone to call for help. After a moment's hesitation, the children go back to playing with their friends, the husbands finish with the trash cans and the wives continue with their stories.

No one is particularly surprised by the angry outburst. They have all heard women raging like this before. The men in the neighborhood recognize the angry tone in the woman's voice; their wives have yelled at them for not getting chores done or failing to finish a promised project. The women on the street understand how the woman feels; they have all felt that way too. And the children pretend to ignore the sounds; they are grateful that this time it is not directed at them.

All across America this dynamic plays itself out in other homes, in other neighborhoods and in other communities. Although rarely discussed, this is a common scene in many families, a familiar way for most women to vent their anger and frustration. No one likes this fact, least of all the women who rage at their husbands and children and no one realizes that it is part of a cycle that none are able to escape.

Why, women ask themselves, do I get so angry?

Why, men wonder, does she overreact to the smallest things I do?

Why, children want to know, is mom screaming at me over nothing?

Couples seldom acknowledge it, children accept it as a way of life, and counselors seldom think to ask about it. Nevertheless, women know that it is happening. They just do not know it is occurring on such a large scale or why it is happening. Women are afraid that they are the only ones to get so angry, the only ones to feel so frustrated and they worry that there is something wrong with them. They are often relieved to hear a friend "lose it" with her children or husband. Witnessing other women yelling, helps to validate their own reality about anger and how they express it. Somehow, another woman losing her temper with family members reassures them that

they are not crazy, not the only one raging.

But why do women rage in the first place? And if so many women are experiencing this much anger and frustration, why isn't anyone talking about it? Women who rage and those that watch them have no idea how the cycle starts or the underlying dynamics that drive women's behavior. This does not mean that no one is asking the questions. Although the issues are complicated and the factors involved are many, the place to start looking for the answers is ironically simple. The beginning seeds of women's anger can be found in the fairy tales women grow up on and it ends with the myths society adopts in response to those fantasy stories. What both the fairy tales and myths do is to set women up to play roles that are unrealistic and culturally-defined as inferior.

Growing Up On Fairy Tales

Women grow up listening to fairy tale stories with happily-ever-after endings. These stories share virtually no details on how married life really works. As little girls, women learn about romance and marriage from movies and books that focus exclusively on the courtship stage, while completely ignoring the realities of marital life and raising children. Popular movies for little girls like *Cinderella* or *The Little Mermaid* depict the drama and excitement of finding a new love. These movies present a sugar-coated image of relationships by reducing the interaction between couples to a one-dimensional search for the perfect love. These movies fail to show the truth behind what a real long-term committed relationship looks like or how couples work out conflicts and disagreements. They never demonstrate how women are treated as wives and mothers or how women feel about this treatment.

For the most part, television shows, movies and picture books support the concept that it is perfectly normal for women to fall in love shortly after meeting their “prince” without bothering to learn anything about him. Many of these stories describe how quickly men and women are willing to marry without getting to know each other and with no discussion on how marriage will change their lives. In the fairy tales, little girls are told the couple will live happily-ever-after without even a glimpse of how the man and woman negotiate where they are going to live, who will play what role in the marriage or how they will raise their children. This alone would not be a problem if the little girls knew it was all a fantasy. For many girls however, the fantasy often substitutes for reality because our entire culture supports this image of romantic love.

It could be argued that some of what girls learn about marriage comes from watching their own parents and so the fairy tales do little damage. Information about their parents' marriage is limited however, by the fact that the girls are really too young to understand the dynamics that exist between husbands and wives, and in particular, between their own mothers and fathers. Most girls are not privy to private discussions or angry outbursts. When they are, they fail to understand the underlying reasons for these arguments; they are simply too immature to perceive the world from an adult perspective. Children tend to see their families from their own self-centered, egocentric perspective. They believe themselves to be the center of the universe and have difficulty understanding a different point of view. As children, they are part of the drama of the marriage they are observing, and therefore it is difficult to view their parents objectively. They are more likely to compare the images they see at home with those depicted on the movie screen and conclude that their parents are an anomaly.

In some homes, children may gain some perspective on how marriage works when parents take the time to explain what is going on between them. In most homes however, there is little information provided. For example, in alcoholic families, there is virtually no chance of learning about how a healthy marriage is supposed to work. In abusive homes, drug-addicted families, or in marriages where one or both parents are mentally or physically ill, children never have the chance to see appropriate relationship skills in action. For these children, learning about marriage must happen outside the home and little girls must rely on school or the media for information.

Unfortunately, it is the rare high school that can step up to this challenge. Few schools offer marriage or parenting classes that realistically give girls all the information they need to be able to create healthy families of their own. For that matter, schools hardly give any information about dating and gender issues. To be fair, some schools attempt to teach young people what it is like to raise children by having them carry an egg or a bag of flour around to imitate life with a baby. This experience however, barely scratches the surface in teaching girls about the enormous demands that will be placed on them by small, dependent and needy children. This experiment can hardly duplicate the constant, unrelenting, time-consuming, labor-intensive schedule raising children entails. Nor can it possibly replicate the experience of sleep-deprived, hungry mothers who must continually choose to prioritize meeting their infants' needs over addressing their own. The luxury of sleeping in, eating when hungry, going to the bathroom in private or taking a shower in peace rarely exists for mothers with small children.

In recent years, computerized dolls have been created to look and sound like real babies, even crying when they are hungry or tired. This may make the experience more realistic as far as the physical chores of nurturing a baby is concerned. It certainly drives home how much their freedom will be curtailed and how many responsibilities they will have keeping a completely helpless and dependent little human being alive. Nevertheless, computerized dolls do not prepare teen girls for the years ahead when toddlers and young children cannot be dragged around as easily as the baby dolls used in class. It also fails to prepare them for all the parenting issues that occur in most healthy marriages. Class experiments like this fail to prepare girls for the fights that inevitably occur between exhausted parents who disagree about any number of concerns from what baby should eat or wear to where baby should sleep. Carrying around a doll for a week never even touches on the issues surrounding motherhood. In particular, girls never glimpse into the realities of what they'll face as wives and mothers, from how their husbands will relate to them to how society will treat them.

Hollywood's depiction of love and marriage also fails to prepare young girls for what really occurs in most families. In the "Cinderella" fairy tales, little girls are told that no matter what their lives may be like while they are single, their days will be filled with love, joy and excitement once Prince Charming arrives. No matter how hard they have to work or how much abuse they are forced to endure, girls know that everything will turn out all right when they are rescued by the handsome hero. The myths behind marriage are created out of these fairy tales.

Myths are powerful beliefs that are not questioned or evaluated by the society who follows them. They are internalized, understood to be the way things are, and are blindly followed as the "norm." Their power lies in the fact that they are taught to the next generation in fairy tales as part of the culture without being examined objectively. Rarely talked about directly, these myths are become familiar to the boys and girls who grow up on "once upon a time" stories.

- Myth #1: The goal of all little girls is to grow up and marry Prince Charming.
- Myth #2: Prince Charming is handsome, charming and brave.
- Myth #3: Prince Charming has no needs and wants of his own.
- Myth #4: Prince Charming is a hero and loves to rescue.
- Myth #5: Prince Charming is strong and unemotional (never a wimp).
- Myth #6: Prince Charming knows how to be romantic.
- Myth #7: Prince Charming is always successful and never fails.
- Myth #8: A woman's goal is to attract the best Prince Charming and hero.

This hero is never seen as a regular guy with his own needs, annoying habits, unusual idiosyncrasies and outside interests. This Prince Charming never gets hungry, tired or demanding. He never ignores Cinderella and he never ever fails to meet her needs. He never gets distracted with his own hobbies or interests. He never fails to show up in the nick of time because the football game is on. And he never misses an opportunity to be the knight in shining armor because his buddy dropped by for a beer. In these "once upon a time..." stories, the hero is inevitably portrayed as willing to give his whole, undivided attention to the damsel in distress. In fact, he rarely pays attention to anything else. It is certain that he would never focus on himself and he would never whine about not being able to watch television after a hard day's work. He would never complain that he is too tired to help the kids with their homework and he does not need to be nagged to pick up his dirty socks off the floor.

Prince Charming is never afraid and he never cries. He is not weak or emotional, needy or vulnerable, a wimp or a complainer. He does not feel pain. He is financially successful and provides well for his family. This hero always knows what to do; he is never insecure, never has doubts and never lacks confidence. He never appears foolish and he does not make mistakes. He is never bored with Cinderella and he never finds her irritating, demanding or annoying. He would never perceive her as a nag.

- Myth #9: Cinderella is beautiful, charming and grateful to be rescued.
- Myth #10: Cinderella is always happy with her perfect Prince Charming.
- Myth #11: Cinderella needs Prince Charming to rescue/take care of her.
- Myth #12: Cinderella has complete faith in her hero and trusts his judgment.
- Myth #13: Cinderella never finds fault with Prince Charming.
- Myth #14: Cinderella knows how to be ladylike.
- Myth #15: Cinderella has no needs Prince Charming cannot meet.
- Myth #16: A man's goal is to attract the best Cinderella or damsel.

The truth about human relationships is carefully concealed in Hollywood movies and children's storybooks. As a result, men's and women's notion of marital bliss is completely unrealistic and does not stand the test of time. Men's "damsels in distress" ideas distort what they expect from women as wives and mothers; women have their "heroic" expectations of men as husbands and fathers. Men see their "Cinderellas" as devoted wives, who will, with little effort, manage the household and care for the children without complaints, demands or outside ambitions. After all, she has obviously been working hard and enduring lots of abuse waiting for him to come along and rescue her.

On the other hand, women see their "Prince Charmings" as dedicated husbands, who will, with little effort, commit all their physical, emotional and financial resources to their wives to make their lives a perfect fantasy. After all, he has obviously been working hard and enduring lots of abuse while waiting to come along and rescue her.

In these fairy tales, men and women are not seen as deeply flawed human beings struggling to get their own needs met. They are not depicted as selfish, self-centered individuals with their own view of the world who, if truth be told, spend the majority of their time focused on their own needs and wants. In contrast, women are seen as one-dimensional, selfless, self-effacing individuals worthy of rescue and men are seen as one-dimensional, needless, "wantless" individuals worthy of adoration. These fantasies of women and men have created expectations of love, romance and marriage that do not have any chance of coming true. Nevertheless, couples hold onto these dreams, strive to act on them, react to them when the facade threatens to crumble and demand certain behaviors from each other based on them. These childhood fantasies become grown-up societal myths that guide the behavior of those who believe in them.

Growing up on fairy tales as the norm for relationships leave women (and men) completely unprepared for the truth behind marriage and raising children. The faith in a hero set women up to walk blindly into dating, courtship and marriage with unrealistic expectations of their husbands. This leads to disappointment, conflict, disillusionment, frustration, resentment, anger, and pain when they discover that their husbands are human. Women feel betrayed when their husbands do not live up to the ideal. Men feel betrayed when their wives do not live up to Hollywood's image. The fantasy played out in movies of the perfect home and well-behaved children with little or no effort from wives and mothers is completely unrealistic. Worse, the fantasy serves to demean the real work women do to run a household and it reinforces the low status "women's work" has in our society.

Women's work is invisible work, unnecessary, behind-the-scenes work that has no value or importance to society. Men's work is displayed in graphic detail on the big screen. He is slaying dragons, going on quests, winning a case in the courtroom or saving lives as an emergency room doctor. He is sweaty, dirty and tired, but he is viewed as a hero. Women on the other hand, are seen as beautiful victims waiting to be rescued. She is usually imprisoned, doing nothing, but waiting for something to happen. When a woman is seen doing the work of running a household, as in the movie *Cinderella*, it is work that she has to do *before* she gets married. Of course once she is queen, the children are told, Cinderella will be free of such drudgery.

Little girls are somewhat aware that there is work in a marriage because they see their mothers cook and clean. However, children often view the work their mothers do very differently from what Cinderella experienced. After all, children know their mothers love them and therefore, do not believe that the work their mothers do to care for them and the home would be considered drudgery. In the movie, Cinderella hated the work because she was forced to do it, she had to do it without help, and she was not appreciated for doing it. The work she did also prevented her from having fun; she did not have time to attend the ball. It is difficult for children and teens to understand that for many mothers, this is exactly how they feel about the work they do running the home and caring for children. For these women, Cinderella's work looks a lot like housework and how Cinderella was treated by her step-family feels all too familiar to them.

As the reality of what it takes to run a home and raise children comes to light, it forces many women to question how their marriage stands up against the fantasies they grew up with. The more

hardy individuals face the fact that the fairy tales were just stories with no basis in reality and struggle to make sense with what is true about their situation. The less resilient blame their spouses for the disillusionment and move on to create the fantasy once more with someone new. The most common reaction however, is for women to deny the truth and continue pretending that fairy tale endings do come true if only they play the role just right. However, the price women pay for trying to maintain the fantasy of "once upon a time..." is resentment and anger-- anger that eventually develops into the cycle of rage.

The Cycle of Women's Rage

The cycle of rage does not begin with women feeling anything as explosive as anger or rage. It starts with irritation over the little things that annoy them. Having to remind husbands for the *one hundredth time* to pay the telephone bill can be frustrating because of its boring, repetitive nature. Having to tell children to pick up their stuff off the floor for the *one hundred millionth time* undermines a woman's self-worth and takes up her time dealing with petty things. It places her in a role that is demeaning, belittling, and beneath her intellect. Telling family members over and over again to fulfill their responsibilities gets on women's nerves. As the irritation grows, it turns into frustration, then anger, and then resentment. Women question why they have to remind family members to do things that, at least to them, obviously need to get done. Cinderella never had to remind Prince Charming to pick up his socks. According to the popular fairy tales, the hero always knew what needed to be done and never hesitated to do the job.

"Why do I have to tell my 11 year old daughter to make her bed in the morning? After all these years, doesn't she know it needs to get made and that it is her job to do it?"

"It's the brushing the teeth at night that I hate. It's always the same routine. The boys never remember to brush their teeth! And they don't do it even when I do remind them to. It's not until I'm screaming at them that they finally go into the bathroom and brush their teeth. Why does it have to be the same routine every night?"

"My husband leaves the newspaper on the kitchen table every morning after he's read it. I tell him to throw it out when he's done, but he leaves it there just the same. He's long gone to work and I'm left to pick up all the sections, fold them up and throw them in the recycling bin. I can't use the table until it's cleared off and he's not there to do it. So every night when he comes home from work, I find myself nagging him about leaving one more thing for me to do. He complains that it's no big deal. That I'm making too much out of it. He has no idea that those 100 little "no big deal" jobs add up to no time to do what I need to do for myself."

Hollywood movies, children's storybooks and television sitcoms serve to reinforce the fairy tales children grow up on. The media portray couples in the throes of romantic love or as happily raising children with little effort or hardship. When some of the truth about raising children is depicted, it is usually done as a comedy. Movies and stories never prepare women for the sacrifices they will be expected to make or for the fact that running the household means doing many less than glamorous jobs. In most families, women are expected to forego time for themselves to take care of husbands and children. While husbands demand to play golf on the week-end, watch Monday Night Football, or hang out with their buddies after working hard all day, women consider themselves fortunate if they get in a few hours playing *Bunco* once a month with their female friends.

Women do the boring, repetitive jobs that need to be done to keep the household and family going. In reality, most of the work is not very fulfilling because it is constant, done behind the scenes and is often unappreciated. What infuriates most women is not the work itself, but how they are treated by family members and society for being the ones who do the work. "Women's work" as it is often referred to, is not considered prestigious. It certainly cannot be compared to the important jobs done by doctors and lawyers. Our society does not view changing diapers, cleaning bathrooms, fixing meals, and doing laundry valuable work. It is this attitude about the work women do and how women are treated for being the ones to do this work that leads to women feeling resentment and anger over doing menial tasks that no one seems to care about. Women snap at their husbands, yell at their children and get upset over what everyone else thinks are "no big deal" little things.

"Why is mom getting uptight about the house?" children whine. *"Doesn't she realize its a lot more fun playing with friends than cleaning our rooms?"* In fact, mothers are very aware that it is more fun to play than clean.

"Why do my children give me a hard time about keeping their rooms clean?" women complain. *"Don't they realize I'd rather be doing something fun instead of playing the taskmaster with them?"* In reality, children are seldom aware that their mothers do not enjoy cleaning the house any more than they do. It never occurs to children that mothers would rather be doing something else other than cleaning house and taking care of them.

Women get angry when husbands and children do not place much importance on the work they do. They get angry when family members disregard their work as meaningless, trivial or irrelevant. They get angry when husbands and children do not do their share of the work or when they add to the workload with little regard for who will be cleaning up after them. Worse still, many women feel taken advantage of when husbands and children have time for fun because someone else is putting in the hours cleaning up after them.

Women get angry at being isolated with needy, demanding children. They get angry when they need a break and do not get one. They get angry when they are in charge of defiant adolescents who expect them to drop everything and drive them to the mall. They get angry when they do not have time to play. And, they get angry because they are bored doing menial tasks, feel unappreciated for the sacrifices they make to meet the needs of loved ones, and are not treated with respect for the work they do. Eventually, that anger turns to rage.

Why Women Rage

Women rage because their fairy tales do not come true. The real roles women play in the home and family as wives and mothers set them up to experience frustration. Women are required to follow narrowly defined job descriptions, which often do not allow opportunities for women to get their own needs met. The tasks required to run a household and raise children are time-consuming, labor-intensive and provide few opportunities for outside interests. They run counter to the fantasies emphasizing lots of romance and attention from the hero, with absolutely no cleaning required that are regularly displayed in the movies.

The reality of women's work is that wives often do household tasks that are not very popular. No one is racing to clean the toilets, do the dishes or mop the floors. Cleaning up baby spit, changing diapers and wiping up food off of the walls is not glamorous work. The job is important and needs

to get done, but it does not usually bring accolades from the masses.

The second reason women rage is in response to how the myths and fairy tales perpetuated by society define female behavior. Society's stereotype of wives and mothers seldom describe real women and leave little room for behavior that does not match the culture's definition. In fact, women who act outside of society's expectations are often identified as deviant. There is a lot of pressure on women to enjoy the work of marriage and motherhood regardless of the reality; to perform this work in precisely the way our culture has established it should be done; and to glamorize what it looks like when women describe how they do this work. Women's magazine covers portray happy, well-dressed mothers playing with clean, well-mannered children. Movies depict the sweetness of youth and the neatness of homes, without showing the behind-the-scenes work necessary to achieve this illusion. When women admit that the work is not much fun or even worse, that they may not be able to stand doing it, they are criticized for not living up to the ideals of the perfect wife and mother.

Third, women rage because the myths perpetuate the belief that mothers are responsible for their children's behavior, even when they have little or no control over them. This is often seen when mothers interact with the schools. When homework is not done correctly, teachers blame the mothers for not getting the children to do the work. When children struggle academically, the school staff looks to the mother for the reasons behind the children's failure.

"When my daughter fell behind in reading, I felt like I was under the microscope," described one mother tearfully after the school contacted her for a conference. *"The school psychologist wanted to know if there was anything wrong at home and why I wasn't reading to her. I was reading to her every night, but the counselor just assumed I wasn't doing my job and that it was my fault my daughter wasn't doing well at school."*

Mothers are criticized for doing an inferior job based on how their children act. No one asks where the father is when kids come to school looking shabby or without their homework. Psychologists evaluate the mothers, but never the fathers, of girls with eating disorders. Teachers condemn the mothers of children who do not keep up academically. Women are often judged on how *they* mother by being compared to how *other* women mother. Fathers rarely experience the same pressure to conform as mothers do.

Women are also held responsible for the way their spouses act. Blaming women for their husbands' behavior can be seen in the extreme form when examining battering relationships and alcoholic marriages. Wives are often confronted for causing the violence in their homes and for enabling the drinking. The attention is frequently focused on what the women are doing wrong; what they are doing to drive their husbands to drink. In abusive homes, women are blamed both for making their husbands so angry they resort to violence, and then, for staying in the marriages and putting up with the abuse. Responsibility for the battering or the drinking is seldom placed on the husbands, where it actually belongs, but more often on the shoulders of their wives.

Fourth, women rage in reaction to not being honored or respected for the work that they do. Fairy tales depict such work as drudgery and demeaning. Cinderella is anxious to go to the ball; she does not want to stay home and clean out the fireplace. Her tasks are forced on her because she is considered inferior to her step-sisters. Her step-mother mistreats her and looks down on her. The story makes it clear that Cinderella is considered to be less than and therefore deserving of being assigned to do menial labor. Because of her second-class status in the family, she loses out on her

chance to have fun at the ball. She is expected to serve the family while they enjoy the ball.

In a similar light, mothers often feel that their children treat them with little dignity. Children, by virtue of being children, are focused on getting what they want and have little regard for how their needs and wants may affect their mothers. There are daily reminders for women that children, husbands, other family members, and the rest of society have little regard for the work they do. Husbands and children forget to wipe their feet when they walk in the door to a freshly mopped floor or they leave dirty dishes on the kitchen table instead of putting them in the dishwasher. Women feel they are taken for granted when family members fail to thank them for the chores they have done, and this neglect lets women know that their work is not considered worthy of notice. Like Cinderella, many women miss out on going to the ball and feel like second-class citizens resigned to doing menial labor.

Finally, women have few outlets for their anger and frustration. In our society, women are taught that it is unladylike to act on their feelings, especially if the feeling they want to express is anger. As a result, they have never been taught how to manage their anger or how to express it appropriately. Because there is no acceptable way for women to deal with their feelings, they pretend those feelings do not exist. The feelings do exist though, and the anger builds up until women express it as rage.

Understanding the Source of Women's Anger

Raging behavior acts as a safety valve and a coping mechanism. Most women are able to get away with having a "temper tantrum" over something that has upset them without really rocking the boat. The outburst is chalked up to PMS or hormonal mood swings. The lack of respect women experience, the reality of going without their needs being met, and the absence of any appreciation for the work they do is never seriously addressed. Women nevertheless, feel better after having let off a little steam. In this way, the emotional outburst serves as a coping mechanism that brings relief, but it fails to bring a permanent solution to the real problem.

Rage serves another purpose as well. People have a natural tendency to avoid getting too close to someone who is angry. Therefore, husbands and children tend to give angry wives and mothers a wide berth. In this way, raging works to establish a physical boundary around the angry woman-- a boundary that stops family members from making any more demands for attention and caretaking. As a result of the angry outburst, women are given a much needed break and family members may even do more work around the house in an effort to appease the angry mother.

Families wait until the coast is clear, hoping that with time the rage will pass. During this time, women get a reprieve from demanding family members, and subsequently, a "holiday" from their caretaking responsibilities. After this break, women usually bounce back and recover their strength and energy. In doing so, women become available to resume their caretaking role in the family once more. When the coast is clear, family members are free to blame the women for their "inappropriate" angry behavior and therefore, feeling justified to compensation, increase their demands for attention and caretaking. Unfortunately, this sets up the pattern for the cycle of rage to continue. To summarize, the stages of the rage cycle are:

- 1) Women become annoyed with boring household tasks and demanding caretaking responsibilities.

- 2) They get irritated with the way husbands/children/society treat them as wives and mothers.
- 3) They resent being held responsible for their children's behavior over which they have no control.
- 4) They hate being blamed for their husband's behavior over which they are powerless to change.
- 5) They become disillusioned when their husbands fail to live up to the Prince Charming fairy tale.
- 6) Women try harder to make the fairy tales come true by nagging husbands and children.
- 7) They deny that they feel like second-class citizens and hang on to the Cinderella fantasy.
- 8) Women deny their irritation over how they are treated and do not confront the behavior.
- 9) Women deny their growing ambivalent feelings about their roles as wives and mothers.
- 10) The ambivalence and irritation women feel turns into anger, resentment and then, finally rage.
- 11) Women rage over a specific issue rather than confront the bigger picture.
- 12) In reaction to the rage, family members temporarily decrease their demands for caretaking.
- 13) Women get a break from the demands of caretaking and begin to feel some relief.
- 14) After the relief of venting feelings, women are able to return to caretaking once more.
- 15) Once the women have returned to "normal", families react by blaming them for getting angry.
- 16) Women respond to the blame by feeling guilty and ashamed for getting so angry.
- 17) Women compensate by increasing their caretaking even more and denying how they feel.
- 18) Families focus on how the women raged, rather than why women got angry in the first place.
- 19) Families feel justified in demanding more caretaking to mitigate their pain over being raged at.
- 20) Women react to the demands by once more
 - a) Stuffing their irritation,
 - b) Increasing caretaking,
 - c) Failing to confront how family members are treating them, and
 - d) Thereby setting up the cycle to begin again.

Family members blame women for losing their tempers. Women in turn, feel guilty for getting so angry. The real issues do not get addressed and there is little chance for the women's anger to be used as a tool for change. In fact, the break from caretaking and the subsequent blaming of women for getting angry serves to reinforce the cycle of rage as a coping mechanism for releasing pent up emotion. It fails to create change in the family dynamics. It certainly does not confront society's myths about marriage and motherhood. It does not occur to anyone in the family to examine the fairy tales they grew up on or to evaluate how their beliefs about marriage and motherhood were

shaped by those fairy tales. After all, everyone knows that children's stories, romantic movies, soap operas and television shows are created for entertainment value exclusively, and are not expected to be training for real life.

Failing to recognize the power of these fairy tales in shaping expectations, women do not understand why they feel so disillusioned with their husbands. Rather than seeing the bigger picture, women tend to heap their disappointment onto their individual husbands and narrow their focus onto their own marriages. In response, husbands feel betrayed that their wives no longer view them as heroes. And society perpetuates the cycle of rage by developing myths that serve to reinforce the status quo, thereby eliminating any chance for changing belief systems and behaviors. Nevertheless, the women's rage does serve a purpose. It allows women to continue functioning under the current system.

In A More Perfect World

On Being Female

In our society, there are specific ideas and expectations that influence our perceptions of what it means to be female. These perceptions have been passed along to women through the fairy tales they have heard as children and are reinforced by the television sitcoms and movies they have seen as adults. Men and women watching these fantasies played out on the big screen form ideas on how women (and men) are supposed to act. These ideas lead to rules women are expected to follow in their roles as daughters, wives and mothers in order for them to be considered "normal" females.

Expectations of how women are supposed to behave as wives and mothers are supported by the fairy tales little girls grow up on, and these expectations continue to be reinforced in adulthood by the myths society has created to explain female behavior. For some women, the images described in fairy tales and myths about marriage and motherhood fit in perfectly with their own fantasy of how they want their families to look. Their desire to find "Mr. Right" and their sense of who they are as wives and mothers match with the images portrayed in storybooks. In general, these women have little difficulty molding themselves according to the "norm" perpetuated by society. It feels natural to them and they enjoy their roles as wives and mothers as defined by the mainstream public. Conflict does not occur until some event intrudes on their fantasy. A husband's affair, alcoholism, domestic violence, financial difficulties, a mental health issue, unemployment, or a major medical problem may be the crisis that shakes the woman's foundation of trust and security in the way things are supposed to be. For this group of women, their vision of a happy home and family would not have been shattered if it were not for an event, or series of events, over which they had no control invading their happy homes.

"I was so happy after the wedding. I loved picking out the house and working together to decorate it. It was our first home and we were proud that we bought it on our own. John started at the company with a boss he liked and work he enjoyed doing. There were times when he was later than he expected to be, but it wasn't very often and I was able to adjust easily. I enjoyed cooking elaborate meals and worked hard on keeping the house looking nice. I didn't notice at first how much pressure John was under to perform well at work. He began putting in more hours and drinking more with business associates. It took a long time, but eventually his drinking got out of control. He'd come home drunk, barely able to make it in the front door. I couldn't imagine how he got home. I didn't want to face the fact that he was drinking and driving, especially when I supported MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Drivers).

‘We started spending less time together and fighting more when we did see each other. It got so that I dreaded hearing his footsteps on the front porch. It usually meant having to deal with something unpleasant. I made demands, I pleaded, I criticized. I began calling at all hours to check up on him. I gave him the third degree about how much he was drinking. I tried to control him, his drinking, even my response. Nothing worked. My world was being torn apart. The dreams I had were being drowned in his drinking. He was no longer the man I married, and I no longer resembled the woman I once was.’

A second group of women is confronted by reality in a different way. Their desire to find “Mr. Right” is just as strong as the first group, but they do not experience the same sense of satisfaction when they achieve their goals. They are confused when their prince Charming fails to take the garbage out, make enough money to pay the bills, or spend enough time attending to their emotional needs. Marital spats occur all too frequently and the ever-increasing conflicts lead to disillusionment, frustration and resentment. These women move fairly quickly into the cycle of rage by initiating communication through nagging, complaining, and criticizing. For this group, the profound sense of loss in the fantasy affects their marriages and mothering. They are confronted with the truth about marriage and motherhood and feel betrayed by the promise of the “happily ever after” fairy tale.

“I couldn’t believe it. All I ever wanted as a little girl was to grow up, get married, and have children of my own. I never took school seriously, never had any ambition for a career, never thought about being out on my own. I worked because I had to support myself until I found a husband. I even met Dave on the job. Of course, I quit as soon as we got married. He was perfect. He made good money, he was handsome and he was smart. But I wasn’t happy. It wasn’t how I pictured it. He wasn’t very romantic and he spent a lot of time on the computer. I wanted him to pay attention to me, but he wanted to play basketball with his buddies. He never helped me with the kids and rarely picked up after himself around the house. The kids were demanding and I felt like the walls were caving in on me. I started fantasizing about one of the dads in my daughter’s playgroup. It was the same kind of fantasy I once had about Dave. That was when I realized that all I wanted was the fantasy. I didn’t like these men once I got to know them.”

“I would rush home every day after work to watch my favorite soap opera. I was so involved in the lives of the main characters. I couldn’t stand to miss a day even though now I can admit it took weeks for anything to ever happen on that show. I wanted to find a husband just like the lead character on my soap opera. Nobody ever measured up to him though and I just got lonelier and lonelier. I finally went to counseling because I would meet someone and after a few dates, they were gone. I’d say something, make a demand, put them down and then wonder why they left. I finally got obsessed with Harry, a total loser, but he talked just like the guy on the soap opera. I knew I needed help when he started hitting me.”

For a third group of women, the expectations that come out of fairy tale stories do not accurately match their vision of what it is to be female. Many of these women feel trapped in roles that do not seem to match their self-image. They don’t have a desire to find prince Charming. They don’t want to be rescued and they certainly are not going to wait around for something to happen. They want adventure, action and independence. Forced to act in ways that do not feel comfortable to them just to fit in or to feel like they belong, they struggle to make sense of who they are in response to how society perceives them. For these women, there is a conflict between how they see themselves and how they are supposed to behave. They do their best to follow societal expectations, but they do so at a price.

This conflict between the woman's self-image and society's expectations of how she should feel and behave can lead to physical problems like headaches and stomachaches, or psychological illnesses such as depression. Some women develop drinking problems that can range anywhere from dependency to alcoholism. Others begin abusing prescription medication or other drugs, which can lead to addiction. Eating disorders may develop in an attempt to stuff feelings of frustration, loneliness and alienation. For many women, these problems develop as a way to deal with their anger, anxiety, fear, and in particular, their rage over the conflict between what feels right to them and what is *supposed* to be, according to society's standards for female behavior, right for them. Although various women may express these feelings differently, they share a similar experience of trying to reconcile the truth about themselves with what society tells them should be true for them.

“I got married young and had my girls early on in the marriage. I didn’t really think about whether I wanted to get married and have a family. It was what was expected of me. My dad was so excited to walk me down the aisle. I just went through the motions. It wasn’t long before I started binging and purging. Every time I threw up in that toilet, I felt relief. I know it sounds strange now, but I felt real when I was throwing up. All the other times, I felt like I was the walking dead. It’s not like I don’t love my kids, I do. I just don’t think I wanted to be a mother. At least, I wish I had waited. I know for sure I didn’t want to marry my husband. My whole life has been about taking care of him and the house. We’ve been married twenty-three years and they’re all a blur to me. I’m so bored with my life. I just never wanted to do the whole housewife and mother thing.”

The fourth group of women has no desire to play the roles society lays out for them. They do not buy into the Cinderella fantasy and rebel against this image of what women are expected to be. They choose to remain single and not have children, to have children on their own, or to get married and not become mothers. Many of these women are very ambitious and pursue careers that were once considered primarily the male domain.

“When I got together with Jim, I told him I didn’t want to get married and have kids. I’m just not the mother type. I was willing to have a partner, but I wanted my independence. I spend a lot of my time on my career and I didn’t want to have to answer to anyone. I don’t like having to take care of anyone either. Jim and I both love to cook and so we do it together. Neither one of us likes to clean house, we’re not very domesticated, so we just let things go until they get really bad. Sometimes, we hire help. I don’t have any regrets. I think I would have made a lousy mom. The hardest part has been dealing with other women. They act like I’m missing out on something. They keep asking me when Jim and I are getting married. They keep bringing up my biological clock. I hate to tell them this, but my biological clock stopped ticking long ago.”

What all these groups have in common is that they are each influenced by the fairy tales about romantic love that dominate society. Women experience the roles of wife and mother according to the images they see portrayed in books, movies, plays, and television. These images have a profound impact on how they view themselves and what they think of other women. In turn, this view of themselves and other women influences the way they structure their lives and how they judge the way others live. Because society has rules on how these roles are expected to be carried out, these rules control many of the options available to women in their careers, marriages and relationships with children. Even when women do not marry or have children, these roles dominate how society perceives them and therefore, how society treats them. Women, who have no desire to mother, can be pressured by family and friends to have children in spite of how they feel about having a baby. They are told that there is something wrong with them for not complying with these

expectations and are warned that they will not feel "complete" until they get pregnant. Women describe feeling "less than" because they do not share the same biological urge they hear other women feel. They begin questioning their own femininity based on the messages they receive that they are strange for being different.

The woman who attempts to escape the stereotypes associated with being female challenges the status quo. This challenge often leads to major consequences. One example can be found in the corporate world. Women who are seen as assertive and ambitious at work are often rejected by colleagues as "bitches" because they fall short of the stereotype that depicts them as nurturers. There is some difficulty in seeing dynamic business-women as both ambitious and nurturing. Many women are ostracized by those who are unsure of how to approach women who step outside of what is considered the "norm" for female behavior.

The roles of wife and mother are supported by a set of beliefs or myths that serve as guidelines for what is considered normal in our society. "Normal" wives take care of the household tasks. They are expected to enjoy these tasks and take great pride in their homes. "Normal" mothers love to take care of their children. They are supposed to thrive doing it regardless of the circumstances or how they are treated by their children. These myths are so common that they are taken for granted. They tend to go undisputed until some woman rejects them. When a woman refuses to play the role expected of her, the situation can become a comedy of errors as those around her scramble to understand what is going on. Misunderstandings are bound to occur.

A Typical Day in the Neighborhood

A mishap of this sort occurred on the first day of school at an elementary school. Dan, a father unknown to any of the mothers watching their children play before school was to start, approached one of the women with a request that she watch his son until the bell rang and help the boy find his classroom. "I have to get to work," he explained to Anna, the woman he was planning to leave his son with, and without waiting for a response, he turned to say good-bye to the boy. Dan asked Anna to do this after only a brief introduction that he was the boy's father, a few instructions that included the name of his son's teacher and without confirmation that she would do it before he turned to leave. He did not wait for Anna to respond, nor did he ask her if she was capable of carrying out his request because he assumed that, as a woman, Anna would be perfectly willing to play out the role of mother, even with someone else's child.

Anna however, was new to the area and barely knew her way around the school. She did not know Dan, his son, or his son's teacher and she was taken aback by his request. She was there for her own child's sake and she was not prepared to take on this task. Anna immediately refused to take any responsibility for this stranger's child. Dan was undeterred; he repeated his request believing that Anna's refusal stemmed from not understanding the instructions and not from a lack of desire to fulfill his request. After explaining once more what he wanted, he attempted to leave again without confirmation from Anna. Dan told his, by now, frightened son to stay with a woman he did not know and to expect her help in finding his classroom. Dan's attitude and demeanor sent the message to Anna that he expected her to take charge of his son and sent the message to his son that he expected him to be satisfied with this woman's help. Apparently, Dan did not need any further evidence of Anna's qualifications other than she was someone's mother, before leaving his young son in her care.

Although Anna continued to insist (loudly) that she would not be responsible for a boy she did not know, the father had difficulty comprehending that she was saying "No." His reaction demonstrated to her that he never expected her to refuse. In fact, he had only framed his need in the form of a question to be polite. He fully expected her to comply with his request. When he finally realized that she was refusing to do his bidding, he looked surprised, then confused, then flustered and finally irritated. At this point, Anna realized she could only get out of this conflict by redirecting Dan to another woman.

Anna guided both Dan and his son over to a group of teachers and asked the boy if he recognized any of them as his own teacher. With relief, the boy picked his teacher out of the crowd and ran off to her. Without thanking Anna for her assistance or even saying good-bye, Dan headed off to work. He did not seem to realize the awkward position he had placed Anna in because of his own expectations of who he thought she should be.

Dan was understandably preoccupied with getting to work on time, but he was also acting on a set of beliefs or myths that allowed him to impose on a woman he had never met. He had assumed that the woman, by virtue of being female and a mother of "someone's" child, would naturally rise to the occasion and take over the parental duties of his child. He also believed that he had a right to make this demand on her because he was a hard-working father, who had other more important responsibilities, and she was, after all, a mother.

The absurdity of this unfolding drama would have been more obvious if the players had been reversed - a working mother rushing to the office and a stay-at-home father on the school playground. It is hard to imagine any mother walking up to a group of men she did not know to ask one of them to find her daughter's classroom so she would not be late for work. No mother would feel comfortable leaving her child with a male stranger and few women would feel right in asking a man, even one who is a father, to take over their parental duties.

The myths about how women are supposed to act are so pervasive in our society that women are often called upon to play a maternal role, whether they have children or not. This is frequently seen between stay-at-home mothers and their working counterparts. A number of stay-at-home mothers have reported that women who work outside the home assume that the at-home mothers are available at any time to help them with childcare they cannot do because they are at the office. Working mothers tend to rely on at-home moms to watch out for their children walking home from school or to help them in the event of an emergency. This is especially apparent when children are too sick to attend school.

"Can you take care of Billy? He has a fever and the school is sending him home. I have to get back to the office, so can I just drop him off with you for a few hours? He just needs to sleep so he won't be much trouble," working women ask their friends (or more accurately beg their friends).

Friends respond by helping out even if they do not want to. *"How can I say No?"* they ask. *"My friend would be forced to leave him home alone if I didn't take care of him. She can't miss work."*

Yet, the truth is that friends already have their hands full with their own children. *"I can't handle one more thing, but I don't dare say "No." What kind of friend would I be if I didn't help her when she needs me?"*

Even childless women describe how friends with children assume they are available to play the role of surrogate mother when the need arises. It does not occur to these women that they are responding to a set of myths about women that may not be true about their friends.

“My friend is a single parent with a ten-year-old son. She’s constantly asking me to take him so she can get a break or go out with her friends. It doesn’t seem to matter to her that I might have plans of my own. She tells me to take him along. I’m thinking, ‘Why don’t you just take him along?’ One night, I was meeting some friends for a bonfire on the beach. I told my friend there would only be women there and that we’d all be talking about female stuff. That didn’t faze her. She wanted me to take Jason with me. She told me he could sit off by himself on the beach and entertain himself. I’m thinking to myself, ‘I don’t want to leave this boy alone, at night, unsupervised, on the beach and bored to tears waiting for me to take him home.’ I planned to be late and I planned to be listening to the other women talking. It wouldn’t be much fun for him. It wouldn’t be much fun for me! But no matter how many times I said no, my friend kept coming up with ways to make it work. Eventually, I gave up the friendship, just to get out of watching her son.”

Friends often feel uncomfortable admitting that they do not want to be asked to provide childcare. Those that are able to tell the truth have difficulty getting heard. Women who are desperate for help are often unable to hear the truth and the myths speak louder than words. Unfortunately, expectations on how women should behave place many of them at risk for a variety of physical and psychological problems because they are forced to act in ways that are not consistent with their own self-image. Unable to say "No," to set boundaries others will respect, or tell the truth about how they feel make women vulnerable to abusive relationships, to act out addictive behaviors in an effort to self-medicate, and to suffer from mental illness. Some of the myths associated with the roles of wife and mother, especially when carried to the extreme, tend to isolate women, take their power away, and reduce their options for social support. Most importantly, society’s myths about women allow others to treat women as inferior.

Characteristics of a Healthy Adult

When Brenda’s daughter was born, Brenda was unceremoniously thrust into the culture of motherhood she had never known existed. It was a culture where along the way she went from being a well-respected professional woman with an adult status to being a sleep-deprived, exhausted, disrespected nurturing mother with an inferior status. She was sure that others were unaware that they were treating her differently. She did not believe they gave it much thought. However, it was obvious to her. The year before the birth of her daughter, the mechanic spent time explaining the inner workings of her car and what needed to be done to fix it; the next year he was asking to speak to her husband. The once friendly, talkative clerk at the grocery store was now irritated with Brenda when she couldn’t reach around the baby to get to her wallet.

People talked down to her, ignored her or complained to her about the baby’s crying. Perfect strangers thought nothing about giving her free advice on how to care for her daughter and they were quick to criticize almost anything she did with the baby. Without hesitation, people shared their own parenting stories and many took advantage of her overloaded bundles to cut in front of her in line. Over the years, strangers touched her daughter without consent, offered her candy without permission and scolded her without discussing it with Brenda first.

Brenda was particularly offended when the pediatrician treated her like she had fallen into what

she called “the black hole of stupidity.” Instead of talking directly to Brenda, the doctor talked to the baby, “Now we need to let mommy know....” he started to explain. How, Brenda wondered at the time, could a highly educated, medical expert not think it absurd to carry on a conversation with a mother through her non-verbal six-month-old baby.

It didn’t seem to matter who Brenda was as a person, she was now defined as a mother. As a result, people definitely saw and treated her differently. Where once she had been a highly respected and admired professional woman accustomed to being held in high regard, now she was someone who didn’t warrant direct eye contact or adult dialogue. Instead of being respected for the hard work she was doing and the sacrifices she was making on behalf of her daughter, Brenda was facing a world that obviously didn’t think much of the job she was doing, regardless of how well she did it and was not willing to treat her like an adult.

In the well-known Broverman Study (Sanford & Donovan, 1984) seventy-nine mental health professionals were asked to list the characteristics of a healthy adult, a healthy man and a healthy woman. It is one of the best examples of how even professionals have difficulty viewing women as adults. The exercise also illustrated the no-win situation many women find themselves stuck in when they are trying to choose whether to respond to society's expectations of them as women or rebel against the myths. The example below of this exercise was done with a group of men and women attending a relationship workshop and it demonstrates how pervasive these beliefs are, regardless of who is being asked.

Healthy Man	Healthy Adult	Healthy Female
independent	independent	dependent on men
takes care of self	takes care of self	takes care of others
intelligent	intelligent	emotional
rational	rational	irrational
interested in world	interested in world	interested in family
focus on work	focus on work/family	focus on men, children
leader	leader	follower
risk-taker	risk-taker	needs security
thinker	thinker	feeler
strong	strong	weak
ambitious for self	ambitious	nurturing others
assertive	assertive	passive

The description of a healthy man and a healthy adult are basically the same. Men are free to pursue masculine traits without losing their adult status. In fact, they are seen as adults by virtue of their manhood. It is therefore easy for men to be identified as both "male" and "adult" because the description for both is similar. On the other hand, the list of healthy female behavior does not correspond with those of a healthy adult. Women, in order to conform to society’s expectations, are required to behave in ways that do not match the traits commonly associated with being a healthy adult. They can be either female or a mature adult, but not both.

The Broverman study did much to demonstrate that women cannot be viewed as healthy adults and healthy women at the same time. Female characteristics, by definition, are not linked to adult

behavior and therefore, the female role is not considered a mature one in our society. Perceived as immature in our culture, many women are treated much like children and the work they do in their roles as wives and mothers is given less value because of this perception. This is not a problem for their male counterparts who manage to be considered healthy and mature by exhibiting what society believes are purely male attributes.

Dealing with this contradiction, women are face with a dilemma. While women are not expected to be healthy mature adults or valued in their roles as wives and mother, they are expected to behave in ways that are considered female or risk being labeled dysfunctional. The choice women have therefore is to behave in ways that are considered inferior, but appropriately female, or act in ways that are considered maladjusted for women, but at least mature as far as being seen as an adult. Neither choice places women in a position to be honored or respected. Women are required to play the female role or be labeled deviant. Yet, when they play the female role, they are not respected as adults. They are viewed as immature and they are often treated like a child.

“When my husband and I took our four-year-old daughter to the dentist, I was shocked to hear how the dental hygienist was talking to my daughter while she cleaned her teeth. ‘Your mommy needs to brush these back teeth better,’ the woman instructed my daughter, whose mouth was so full of dental equipment she was in no position to tell me anything. I was furious. She was talking to me through my daughter as if I didn’t exist. She was telling my daughter that I wasn’t doing a good job while completely ignoring me. It was amazing that she could act like I wasn’t there, and yet still hold me responsible for the condition of my daughter’s teeth. Not only was I sitting right there beside my daughter holding her hand, but this hygienist assumed that I was the one who brushed my daughter’s teeth. It never occurred to this woman that it might be my husband’s responsibility.

“You know, I’m sitting right here,” I told her through gritted teeth.

“The woman glared back at me. ‘I was telling your daughter that you need to do a better job of brushing her back teeth’ she muttered under her breath to me.

“That is my husband’s job,” I informed her.

“What?” she sputtered back.

“You said that you were telling my daughter that I need to do a better job of brushing her back teeth. I’m telling you that it is my husband who brushes her teeth, not me. He is in charge of the teeth department,” I explained to her. The woman just stared at me. It didn’t seem to matter to her that my husband was sitting right next to me. He waved at her and smiled sheepishly.

“I have a hard time with the back teeth because she moves around so much,” he told her. ‘Do you have any suggestions?’

“She stared in disbelief for a few moments and then proceeded to give him ideas on how to reach those difficult back teeth. She looked right at him, talked in full sentences and treated him like an adult. Something she wasn’t willing to do with me. What was really interesting was the fact that my daughter had no cavities. So much for those back teeth. The dentist assured us that our daughter’s teeth looked great.”

To be female in our society is to be treated like a child, like someone who does not deserve respect, like someone who is incompetent. Women are held to a standard that leaves them vulnerable to criticism, being judged, and to experiencing low self-esteem. Wives are judged on the basis of how well their homes look. Mothers are criticized on the basis of how well their children behave. When children fail at school, mothers are blamed. When husbands have affairs, wives are blamed. Women experience the consequences and responsibilities that their roles as wives and mothers entail. They do not however, experience the prestige and honors their roles should entail because the roles are

viewed as inferior.

Society expects all women, regardless of who they are, how they feel, or what they want, to disregard the way they are treated and to focus on being concerned about others. Women are required to be sensitive, nurturing, gentle, and available to loved ones. They are supposed to be intuitive to what others are feeling, to care deeply about maintaining their relationships with others, and to provide basic care without being asked. Yet society, as a whole, fails to recognize these skills as a sign of maturity, adult status or worthy of respect.

Women's ability to develop relationships with male partners and female friends, who are willing and able to share the responsibility of raising children with them, has provided a safety net for survival. It is an evolutionary truth that the human species has survived and reproduced because of women's willingness to put aside their own needs for the sake of their offspring. Women's skill in attaching themselves to men who were able to protect and provide for them increased the likelihood of their children's survival. Developing a partnership with others ensured the perpetuation of the human race. Children of women, who had a number of resources in the group, had a greater chance of making it to adulthood and having children of their own. For women to form such attachments to children, other women and men, they had to make sacrifices to preserve this connection. Most importantly, they had to be willing to consider the relationship above all else even when that meant ignoring their own needs and denying how others treated them.

Society has failed to recognize the sacrifices women have made and relationship skills they use to raise the next generation as admirable, healthy, appropriate adult behavior necessary for the survival of our species. A woman's focus on relationships has often been misconstrued as weak, as a sign of immaturity and as evidence that women are needy. It gives support to the 1950's image of the happy homemaker and stay-at-home mother who never asks for anything but a chance to serve her family. In reality, there is a distinct difference between getting emotional needs met in positive relationships with children, spouses and other family members and enduring household chores, daily childcare tasks and long hours of isolation with small children in the name of biological destiny.

In fact, the strong beliefs that women are by nature nurturers and should therefore, be the ones to stay home and raise the children, contradicts what women really need out of relationships (not to mention shortchanges men). Healthy and successful relationships can be accomplished just as easily by mothers working outside of the home as for mothers who work exclusively inside the home. Women need to feel loved, cared about, valued and important (as do children). No woman is experiencing large doses of self-esteem washing dishes, doing laundry or cooking meals for a family who takes it for granted that it is her job to do so and believe that they do not need to appreciate and respect her for doing the work. Although caring for a home is necessary for the well-being of all families, it is unfair to assume it is always women's sole responsibility to do the work.

It is crucial to note that women's self-esteem thrives when the quality of important relationships are good. Adult status is a critical component to increasing a woman's self-esteem and her chances of developing successful relationships. When the female role precludes this adult status, it seriously undermines women's ability to achieve satisfying relationships and threatens their emotional well-being. A woman's sense of self is influenced by how valued, loved and respected she is by her significant other, her own children, her friendships, her co-workers, and by how society views females as a group. Most important however, is how women feel about themselves. Women must be able to love, nurture and respect themselves. This is hard for women to do when the world is treating them as if they do not exist, as if they possess little value and as if their needs do not matter.

Women are expected to follow specific rules on how to be a wife and mother, whether these rules apply to them or not, or whether they are good for them or not. Following these rules does not necessarily guarantee women good mental health or years of wedded bliss. Unfortunately, the expectations that go with being female prevent many women from developing healthy relationships. As noted earlier, the inability to ever achieve adult status in their female roles severely impacts women's self-esteem and therefore, their chances of attracting healthy mates.

In addition, the rules associated with how to be a healthy woman, a loving wife and a good mother can increase the woman's risk factors for becoming involved in abusive and alcoholic relationships, dysfunctional behavioral patterns and for experiencing what is becoming known as "women's rage." On the other hand, women who reject society's expectations on what it means to be female are often no better off than their more accommodating sisters. These women are frequently ostracized, stigmatized and labeled as mentally ill. They are also condemned for expressing their anger and rage in response to being stereotyped.

There is a growing conflict for many women between how they view themselves and what society expects of them; between the negative consequences that sometimes occur when abiding by society's expectations and the rejection experienced by those who rebel against these expectations. These conflicts have a lot of women scrambling like laboratory mice trying to avoid an electric shock in a scientific experiment. Many of these women are angry about the rigid rules associated with being wives and females and the lack of rewards that go with them. They are angry that there is little freedom in changing these rules when the myths do not apply to them or when they have experienced negative consequences for abiding by them.

Women also get angry when they try to identify this conflict as a societal issue and are told that the problem is unique to them. Women feel trapped when they experience consequences for following society's myths or for not abiding by them. Frustrated, exhausted and angry, women have no place to go with their feelings. One of the rules about being female is that women have historically, not been permitted to openly express anger. As a result, this anger grows until the woman explodes, without warning, by raging at the very people she loves and cares for.

3

A World Full of Myths

The Myth of the Perfect Woman

A myth is based on an idea or value shared by a group of people. The group acts as if the myth is based on fact and therefore, true for everyone, at all times, and under every circumstance. Myths are created for a number of reasons and serve a variety of purposes. Myths are needed when individuals are trying to explain certain behavior that exists for no apparent reason or for reasons no one wants to admit are true. This is seen in the myth about battered women staying with their abusers because they liked the abuse and didn't see it as that bad. Eventually, studies were done that uncovered a multitude of reasons why women stay with their batterers that have nothing to do with liking the abuse. These included financial dependency, fear of losing custody of their children to the batterers and the need for more battered women shelters to help those who tried to leave. The truth was far more complicated than the myth.

Another reason for creating myths is to encourage an ideal that a particular culture finds acceptable. Myths serve to teach individuals what is expected of them and how they should behave. A good example is the myth that "good girls don't..." Most parents do not want their daughters to be sexually active. Therefore, a myth created by society that discourages sexual activity is enthusiastically supported by parents. The majority of people agree with this myth because they want girls to behave accordingly. Although myths often have a grain of truth to them, most express an ideal for things to be a certain way. They are not necessarily based on fact. They are also not guaranteed to be functional, healthy or true for everyone.

What myths have in common is that they are well known and can be recited by a majority of the population in the society. Similar in nature to television commercials, individuals exposed to myths over time are able to repeat them from memory. This shared knowledge of a myth lends it credibility to the people who are familiar with it. Like the myth "where there's smoke, there's fire," people assume that a myth is accurate because a large group of people believe that the myth is true. However, just like there are a lot of other reasons for smoke besides a forest fire (a barbecue, fireplace or campfire), there can be different explanations for behavior other than what the myth is perpetuating. In addition, many myths can become outdated. They may have been based on reality years ago, but no longer serve to explain behavior in modern times. This can be said to be true for the smoke/fire myth. There was a time in human history when smoke only came from fires.

When a myth exists, people tend to decide how to behave and how to judge others' behavior according to the standards of that myth. This is what makes a myth so powerful. It can, by its very

existence, become the measuring stick for encouraging or discouraging certain behaviors. Myths are generally experienced by society as an all or nothing, black or white issue. Individuals can either act within the parameters of the myth or outside of it. In other words, individuals can either act in a way that supports the myth or they can behave in a way that challenges the myth. With myths, there is a right way to act and a wrong way to act. Society tends to reinforce this thinking by using peer pressure to get individuals to conform to its myths and by creating negative consequences for those who do not conform.

An example of this dynamic can be seen with the myth that "mothers should stay home to take care of their children." Although it has now become the norm for women to work outside the home, women were once depicted as "good" mothers because they stayed home with their children. Women who worked outside the home were criticized for abandoning their children for long hours in daycare. Several studies have been devoted to measuring the language skills, social skills and attachment issues of children who spend their days in daycare versus those spending the same number of hours at home with their mothers. The fact that these studies exist is testimony that women, and society at large, have been grappling with the myth that children are better off at home with mothers who do not have jobs outside the home.

The reality of women's lives however, is no longer well reflected in this myth. Few women neatly fit into either staying at home full-time or working outside of the home exclusively. Most women spend various amounts of time at home *and* at work. They do this by taking advantage of part-time work, job-sharing with co-workers, working in home offices, splitting the day's schedule with their husbands, sharing childcare with family members and taking children to the office. Nevertheless, women are still defined and judged according to the myth of the stay-at-home mother. Society will determine if, what the woman is doing, qualifies her as a stay-at-home mom according to the standards of the myth. If the hours with her children fall short of the social norm, she will be categorized as a mother who works outside the home. Once that judgment has been made, the woman will have difficulty changing society's perceptions of her. And, she will either be rewarded for her adherence to the myth or criticized for failing to comply with it.

There is usually a high level of compliance to myths that are comfortable to the majority of the people the myth serves. Individuals enjoy being rewarded for following society's expectations and they seldom question the logic behind the myth. However, as noted earlier, not all myths are based on facts and they don't always fit perfectly for every person, every time and under every circumstance. When myths do not fit the reality of the people they are supposed to represent, a crisis can occur. The crisis can be experienced by both the individuals the myth is meant to describe and by the people who depend on the myth to explain how the world is supposed to work. For women, this crisis occurs when they experience a conflict between how they see themselves and how society expects them to behave.

The biggest crisis for most women occurs when they evaluate the rules women are required to follow in their roles as wives and mothers only to find that these rules are rigid and contradictory. Women learn that the work they do is important in that it is necessary for survival, but it is not important enough to be valued by society. Women find that to be considered a mature female, they have to give up any chance for an identity as a mature adult. They are trapped into ignoring their own needs while being required to care for the needs of the rest of the family. They are expected not to get angry while they are being treated with disrespect. They are expected to acquire self-esteem from work that often goes unappreciated. Many of the rules on how to be a healthy female would be considered dysfunctional for a healthy adult. The rules are unrealistic and unhealthy. Some of the

most outrageous rules for being a female, a loving wife and a good mother include the following (Sanford & Donovan, 1984; Lush, 1987; Swigart, 1998; Rosewater, 1993; Walker, 1979; Chira, 1998):

Myth #1: Women do not have needs of their own.

Women do not have and are not supposed to have emotional, physical, intellectual or sexual needs that interfere with their ability to take care of others. Women are expected to forego eating, sleeping, showering, exercising, bathroom breaks, hobbies, friendships, sexual desires, quiet time, career goals, any vocational ambitions, social events, and other interests at a moment's notice. Few women get much emotional or physical support for sleep deprivation during the baby years.

"I have two boys. One is 22 months old, the other is a newborn. I've had to hold the baby in my lap and put my older son on the floor in front of me with his toys, just to go to the bathroom. I don't know about other moms, but I have to bring everyone into the bathroom with me when I need to go or listen to them screaming on the other side of the door if I lock them out."

"It's getting a chance to eat that I have a hard time with. The baby is always crying or demanding attention. Every time I sit down to eat, she needs something. I try to put her down but my husband gets mad because she's screaming. I ask him to hold her but he wants to sit in front of the television and relax after a rough day at work. I try to get her to take a nap when my husband gets home for dinner but she won't go to sleep. Even if she does, it means she's up too late at night. It's just easier to hold her while he eats. Then I snack all night. I've given up on meals. I eat on the run or with her in my arms."

"Sleep? What's that? They say he's supposed to sleep through the night by now. Well, he's never read the book 'cause he never sleeps through the night. They say to just let him cry and he'll get tired and go to sleep. Doesn't work. My husband has to work in the mornings and gets mad if I don't keep the baby quiet."

Children's needs don't diminish as they grow older. Siblings fight, children require supervision, and help with homework is needed. There are baths to take, teeth to brush and toys to be put away. Add in the occasional late-night bad dreams, sick kids and deadlines for school projects on top of an already hectic schedule and many moms feel overwhelmed with all that needs to be done.

"I don't have time for friends! I don't have hobbies or outside interests. There aren't enough hours in the day to get everything done as it is. I'm certainly not going to find time to fit in another thing. I'd feel guilty taking time out of the day for myself."

Myth #2: The only need women have is the need to care for others.

Women are supposed to love and enjoy every minute of caring for loved ones because it fulfills them. Women are not seen as having lives or interests of their own that extend beyond their husbands and children. When women do have hobbies, they are usually associated with the home or the children. They knit, crochet or sew clothes for the family, blankets for the house or gifts for loved ones; they scrapbook baby albums or bake cakes and desserts for their families. When women

do have hobbies outside of the home, they are usually done with their husbands.

"I took up skiing with my husband. I love it but it would never occur to me to go without him. He goes fishing on his own, plays golf with his friends or goes to a football game without me, but I stay home and watch the girls. Who would take care of them if I went skiing on my own? When we go to the mountains, we go as a family."

"My husband and kids take me for granted. They whine and complain about getting time for their hobbies and activities. They never worry about my hobbies or activities."

"I want to spend more time with my friends, but there just aren't enough hours in the day. I have to get the kids to school, go to work, run errands, drive my kids to classes after school, make dinner, and get the kids to bed. Even on weekends, there's always a long list of things to do, and then there's the things we do as a family. My husband doesn't want to take the kids on his own. He wants me there too."

Myth #3: All women are biologically wired to be nurturers.

According to this myth, all women, regardless of who they are, are biologically wired to be nurturers and therefore, naturally driven to meet the needs of others over their own. Society, family, husbands and children believe they are not asking women to do anything other than follow their biological destiny. The fact that women whine, complain and get irritated over taking care of others does nothing to dispel this myth. The complaining is seen as a problem with women's attitude around accepting their female roles. The fact that no one else seems terribly interested in performing these tasks is irrelevant. The public will not accept that women might feel the same way men do about doing menial labor.

"I'm the only saleswoman in the office, so I'm the one who makes the coffee every morning. No one thanks me for it, but they sure expect me to do it. No one comes right out and asks me to do it. But if it's not done, they blame it on me and tell me to hurry up and get it done. I don't understand why they can't do it. What would they do if I wasn't there? I'm one of the top sellers in the office, but here I am wasting time on coffee. I know I'm expected to make the coffee. I know they think I'm supposed to make it because I'm the woman."

"My girlfriend is always calling me, or actually begging me, to watch her girls. I don't even have children of my own. My husband and I don't want any children. That's why I haven't had any. That doesn't stop her from calling me. She's a single mom and doesn't get any time to herself. She wants to go out with friends or out on a date. She's not calling to go out with me because she doesn't have childcare, but she can use me to watch her girls while she goes out with other friends. Then I'm stuck at home alone while she's out with her friends and my husband goes out to get away from the kids. Here I am, not wanting to be tied down with children, but unable to go out with my husband because I'm tied down with someone else's children."

Myth #4: All women are socially trained to be nurturers.

It is believed that women are socially trained, and therefore well suited to caring for others. No one

questions whether they enjoy taking care of parents, husbands or children, or if they were raised with all the information needed to know how to nurture. Husbands often expect their wives to know what to do when the baby arrives. They believe their wives were taught by their mothers on how to look after an infant. Although many women are taught to cook, clean and care for children, this does not mean they are naturally inclined to do it. Other women grow up in homes where there is little information about domestic chores and, therefore have no idea what needs to be done.

"I can't cook! Yet, every time we get together with friends for a party, I'm always expected to make something. My friends crack jokes about how I run down to the Deli and pick something up for the dinner, but it doesn't stop them from asking me to make something. I get tired of the snide comments and sarcastic jokes."

"My mom was a working woman and so there was no one home to show me how to do things. I had to figure it out for myself or it just didn't get done. I've always felt less than when I am with other women because we're supposed to learn this stuff from our moms, but mine never taught me anything. She was working full-time just to put food on the table for us kids."

"My mom was a drunk. I never learned anything from her."

Myth #5: All mothers are devoted mothers willing to sacrifice everything.

The icon of the good mother is a woman who places her children above all else. She is not interested in a career or hobby outside of the home. If she works, it is because she has to, not because she wants to. She is the epitome of self-sacrifice; she stays home with her children to nurture them rather than pursue her own ambitions. She has no career aspirations and her only concern is with her children. She takes great pride in being someone's mother and has no desire for her own identity.

The myth in our society is that women are truly happy completely devoting their entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being to their children. Mothers are expected to feel joy and contentment in caring for their husbands and offspring rather than feel depressed for losing themselves in a role that leaves little room for their own ambitions or goals. It is understood that women, by their very nature, can not fathom pursuing their own selfish needs but are willing to sacrifice anything and everything for the sake of their children.

"When I had my baby, I couldn't stand it at home. The household tasks were so boring and I was lonely. I tried joining some "mommy and me" playgroups but there weren't very many of them and the day was filled with long, empty hours with no one to talk to. Even at the playgroups, all they talked about was baby spit, baby poop and baby food. I thought I was going crazy. I didn't dare say anything. I was afraid it meant there was something wrong with me; that I wasn't a good mother."

"I loved my daughter but I missed my work. I stayed home because I was supposed to, not because I wanted to. I wanted to go back to work full-time but everyone said it was best for my daughter that I stayed with her. To be honest, I don't know what was so good about it. I'd end up screaming at her or zoning out in front of the television because I thought I would go crazy. I just wanted the time to go by faster and I could hardly wait for her to go to school. If I were to do it over again, I'd work part-time. That way I wouldn't have resented her so much."

Myth #6: Women's caretaking is easy and therefore of little value.

In our society there is little value placed on the caretaking women do for elderly parents, husbands and children. It is considered "women's work" as if that justifies paying little attention to it. There is no corresponding "men's work." When a task needs to be done that is considered belonging to a man's domain, it is called a *job*. Nurturing and caretaking are considered to be a woman's domain because it is seen as an extension of the female role. It is not seen as a job. Women's lack of adult status places their work in the chore domain. Most of the work women do is seen as easy, requiring very little skill and no education. Therefore, the work is not given much respect.

"I would faint dead away if my husband was willing to take the girls so I could have time with friends. I would be shocked if he offered on his own to do it. He would never think of it. It's as if I don't need that sort of thing. He tells me he works hard all day at his job and needs a break when he gets home. I tell him I work hard all day too. He just laughs. He thinks I watch soap operas all day and eat Bonbons. But if I told him I wouldn't watch the kids while he went golfing, there would be a huge fight. He doesn't even ask to go out or if it's okay if he leaves me with the girls. He just tells me he's going. He figures I'll take care of the girls. I do it every day."

Myth #7: All men will financially support women who take care of them.

Myth #8: Women will only work outside the home out of dire necessity.

Myth #9: Only mothers are responsible for the welfare of their children.

As the only ones capable of nurturing children, women are expected to forego careers in order to stay home to raise their children. By staying home however, women are unable to work, and so, must rely on men to financially support them. The male myth that men are expected to be the major breadwinners in the family supports the female myth that women can expect to be financially supported as long as they are the nurturers. In addition there is also the myth that women should only work outside of the home because they have to, not because they want or choose to.

News stories of missing children abducted from the parks, molested children in child care centers and abused children bullied on the streets, remind women that the world is a dangerous place. Their concerns for their children's safety, coupled with the belief that they are the only ones capable of providing the care children need to grow up healthy and happy, reinforce women's belief that they should be the ones that stay at home.

Myth #10: Women are responsible for the behavior of loved ones.

Myth #11: Women are blamed for problems loved ones have.

Myth #12: Women are responsible for fixing the problem behavior.

Women are held accountable for the smooth functioning of their relationships. It is their fault if their relationships fail, especially in the case of divorce. Regardless of how their husbands act, wives feel responsible for the behavior. If the husband drinks too much, it's because his wife nags him. If a husband hits his wife, it is because she asks for it. If he has an affair, it is because she was not sexually available to him and he was forced to get his needs met somewhere else. Women are told that the negative behavior of their husbands and children stems from the women's failure to

meet their needs.

"The school called me for a conference with my daughter's teacher about why she was falling behind in reading. Before I went in for the meeting, they wanted what they called a complete family history, but it was mostly about me and how I took care of her. They asked me questions about when she was a baby and what I did with her. They asked me about the pregnancy and about her early years. I felt like they were looking for where I screwed up as a mom rather than what had happened at the school. I felt like I was on trial!"

This over-exaggerated sense of responsibility for the way others behave places women in a position to caretake well beyond what is needed, necessary, or even healthy. Many women find themselves picking up after children who are perfectly capable of doing it for themselves. The belief system that mom is responsible allows children to take advantage of the situation and do less while demanding more. Children "forget" to pick up their dirty dishes from the table and walk them over to the sink. They "don't see" the laundry that needs folding, the bed that should be made, or the toys lying on the floor. They "don't know how" to fix a meal, mop the floor or give the dog a bath. The understanding in many families is that it is mom's job and in most cases, children are not expected to do their share.

"My 17-year-old daughter does not know how to cook a meal, do her laundry or run a vacuum cleaner. I do everything for her. I don't know how she'll survive when she leaves for college next year--if she leaves, that is."

"My teenage son still expects me to do his laundry for him. I've shown him how to use the machines, how to divide up the clothes, and how much soap to use. He says he forgets how to do it or that he doesn't have time. I know he just doesn't want to do it. It's work. It's boring. It's time-consuming. Doesn't he realize I feel the same way? I don't want to do it either."

Myth #13: Marriage and motherhood are always fulfilling and rewarding.

Myth #14: There is a narrowly prescribed way to mother correctly.

Myth #15: Women love each and every moment of mothering.

Myth #16: If they don't, there is something wrong with them.

Women have been raised to believe that marriage and motherhood are the answer to all of life's ills. It says so in all the fairy tales. Whether they are suffering from boredom, anxiety, loneliness or fear, women have been told that everything will be all right once they are married and have children. It does not occur to many women that they may suffer from the same boredom, anxiety, loneliness or fear after they are married. In fact, these feelings may multiply and include guilt, frustration, anger, resentment, and stress.

"I feel so guilty when I get mad at the boys. I don't understand how I can be so angry at them. I love my kids. I would die if anything ever happened to them. Yet, here I am yelling at them, screaming my head off like I don't even care about them. Sometimes I don't even like them. They drive me crazy. But then I think there must be something wrong with me. How can you not like your own kids? I must be a terrible mother. I must be abnormal."

"Sometimes I'm so overwhelmed with everything I need to do. It's not how I imagined it would

be.”

“All I ever wanted to be was a wife and mother. But there are times when I ask myself why I wanted it so much.”

“The other day, my husband asked me to try not to yell at the kids so much. I couldn’t believe the nerve of him. He goes to work every day. He gets to leave! I’m with these kids all day long. They don’t listen to me until I yell at them. Why doesn’t he tell the kids to listen to me? No, he tells me not to yell at them!”

In our society, there is a strong consensus that there is only one perfect way to mother. Unfortunately, no one has been able to define, with any success, what that one way is, at least not to everyone's satisfaction. Nevertheless, the myth holds that there is a narrowly defined way to mother correctly and women find themselves subject to scrutiny, their every move questioned and criticized against some impossible standard of motherhood. Women spend a great deal of their time debating, arguing and defending their positions on the perfect way to mother. They chastise themselves when they believe they have failed to live up to that perfect ideal.

Women are told that the perfect mother is filled with effortless love for her children and can look forward to many blissful moments with them. The negative aspect of mothering is never addressed and many women are shocked to discover that motherhood is not always charming and sweet. When women do not enjoy every minute of their time with their children, they are told it has something to do with them. It should not be considered a societal issue or a result of the way women are expected to mother in our society.

Myths #17, 18, 19, and 20 are about women and anger.

The myths about women and anger are simple. Women do not get angry. At least they are not supposed to get angry and if they do, everyone agrees that it is best just to blame the individual woman’s anger as an aberration. According to these myths, women have no reason to be angry and so, they have no opportunity to express it. The myths about women and anger are:

#17: Women are not expected to have feelings about not getting their needs met because they are not supposed to have any real needs in the first place.

#18: Women definitely do not *feel* anger or resentment over these unmet needs since women are perceived as "needless and wantless."

#19: Women are not to *express* anger because they have nothing to be angry about since they cannot openly admit that they have needs that they are not getting met.

#20: Women who do express anger are punished for breaking this taboo because their anger is threatening to the status quo and to those who rely on the women to take care of their needs.

Because women are seen as having no reason to get angry, they are not taught how to express this anger appropriately. They are socialized to whine, complain, cry, and suffer from depression.

Women are trained to act passively; they are rarely taught how to deal with their anger directly. Women therefore, have little experience in dealing with their anger in a functional manner. They lack the skills to deal with this anger before it comes out in raging behavior.

On the one hand, the myths that describe marriage and motherhood set women up to be viewed as second-class citizens because they can never be healthy adults and healthy females at the same time. As a result, their roles as wives and mothers are given little value, appreciation or respect. On the other hand, the fact that the work women do as wives and mothers is crucial for the continued survival of our species, women are under a great deal of pressure to do it perfectly. Society holds women accountable for the consequences when children act badly at school or fail academically. Women are blamed for the failure of their marriages regardless of the man's part. If a husband has an affair, it must have been because the woman did not fulfill his needs. It never occurs to family and friends that the woman may not have gotten her needs met either.

When women act in accordance with the myths, they are shocked to discover that they experience negative consequences in their lives, their marriages and in their relationships with their children. Women find themselves powerless over, yet responsible for, their loved ones' behavior. Women are blamed for abusive marriages, alcoholic husbands and children's dysfunctional behavior. This greater sense of responsibility for behavior that is outside their control place women at a greater risk for suffering from depression, anxiety, alcoholism, addictions with food or drugs, a loss of self-esteem and rage.

The rules associated with being a loving wife and good mother are contradictory and dysfunctional. They prevent women from getting their own needs met. Society is not tolerant of women having needs separate from their husbands and children. Women find that following the rules does not guarantee them a secure marriage or a loving relationship with children. Their husbands may divorce them and their children may resent them. Yet, women who do not act according to the rules are not guaranteed to be safe from depression, anxiety, alcoholism, addictions with food or drugs, or a loss of self-esteem. It is painfully apparent that both following the myths, and rebelling against societal expectations, can have negative consequences. Not realizing that this conflict exists, women fear that there is something wrong with them when they don't fit in, that they are crazy for confronting society's standards, and that they are the only ones struggling with this issue. To escape from this trap, women must come to terms with why the myths exist in the first place, and to take that information and use it to challenge the myths in a way that results in permanent change.

4

Understanding the Myths

The History of Our Myths

Myths are created for a number of reasons; to explain society's expectations to the next generation, to pressure individuals into behaving according to the "norm" set by that society, and to easily identify individuals who do not conform to what that society values. Myths can teach rules about acceptable behavior, set parameters about what is considered normal, and be used to discourage deviant behavior. The familiar myth that men are supposed to be the breadwinners in the family describes what society believes is the proper way males should behave, socializes the next generation of boys to play this role, and helps prepare them for a lifetime of work. It also discourages men from choosing other behaviors that don't include bringing home a paycheck. Men are less likely to express a desire to stay home with their children when they know all men, including themselves, are expected to be financially responsible for their families.

Individuals may be comfortable with a myth because it is well-known and therefore, familiar. They may depend on myths to help them make decisions or solve problems. Based on the breadwinner myth, a young man may decide to go on to college after high school to get a degree that will lead to a better paying job. A couple arguing about who is going to put their career on hold to care for their new baby may agree more readily to the woman staying home. Myths are rarely analyzed or questioned. They are usually accepted as "normal" and parents pass on the myths to the next generation through stories, television, movies and fairy tales without thinking much about it. However, myths about marriage and motherhood have undergone dramatic changes over the last twenty years. These changes have created confusion, anxiety and conflict in many families.

Myths about female behavior, marriage, family life and mothering have been created over the years in response to the needs inherent in raising children. As the situation in which couples marry changes, some myths become outdated and other myths are created to deal with society's new definition of family life. In previous generations, when women did not have sole responsibility for raising their children and extended family members were available to help, the myths reflected the importance of grandparents. The industrial revolution restructured family relationships to exclude living with grandparents, and the myths adapted by stressing the importance of the nuclear family over the extended one. When World War II changed the needs of society by requiring men to fight for their country and women to take over the jobs the men left behind, the myths stressed the importance of national security. And when those men returned after the war and needed their jobs back, the myths stressed the importance of mothering over working outside of the home.

Historically, myths have defined how men and women are expected to form relationships and cope with the long term needs of raising dependent children. Because children take years to mature, mothers have rarely managed this task on their own regardless of the type of society they lived in; whether they lived in hunting and gathering, agricultural, or industrial societies. Nevertheless, how women managed to raise their children successfully differed in each of these groups. In hunting and gathering societies, extended family, friends and neighbors helped with the caretaking of children. In these societies, men typically hunted while women tended to do the gathering. Needless to say, hunting took men further away from the village and placed them in dangerous situations. Successful hunters were admired for their bravery and the food they brought back to the village.

Gathering was more conducive to staying close to home and watching over children in the relative safety of the village. Babies strapped to women's backs and small children following behind could keep up with women while they gathered nuts and berries for food. The other work women did, such as preparing the food, making baskets, sewing clothes and cleaning the home, placed them in close proximity of each other and their children. Extended family, the elderly, other women in the village and older girls were always around to watch over children. In these societies, families believed that "it took a village to raise a child." Children were supervised, fed, and cared for by a variety of group members. Women were respected for the food they prepared and the work they did to clothe and feed their family.

In most agricultural societies, wives and husbands worked together to maintain the farm. Children often grew up in large, extended households with lots of siblings and with grandparents who lived and contributed to the family. Farm life was hard work and it took many hands to get everything done. Children worked alongside their parents in the kitchen or out in the field. Although there was a division of labor between the sexes; girls and women worked in the farm house and boys and men worked the land, it was not rigid. Women were expected out in the fields when needed to help with the harvest and men were required to clean the equipment and tools needed to run the farm. In these communities, there was usually more than one pair of eyes watching the children. However, community members were less involved in the day-to-day care of the town's children. Families tended to take care of their own children and were good neighbors only when the need arose. It no longer took a village to raise a child, but it still took a family.

Regardless of how each individual family worked out the details, the work on the farm did not separate men and women from their children. When a separation was necessary, either because it was a bad crop that year or the family needed more money than the farm could provide, it was the man who left to find other work. The family understood that the separation was temporary and that the father would soon return to the farm. In the meantime, the women stayed home with the children and kept the farm going.

Shopkeepers, doctors and the other trade jobs performed to keep the farming communities functioning were done by families who lived in back of the shop or near their work. Family life was valued and both men and women worked hard to support their children. Although it was somewhat segregated, with girls staying with their mothers and boys following their fathers out to the fields, both parents were involved in their children's lives. Communities were also smaller and adults felt more responsible for the children of their particular town.

The industrial revolution on the other hand, with its rise in machinery, manufacturing, and factories, provided new employment opportunities away from the home. These opportunities forever changed the face and structure of family life. Men left home to work in factories and women

stayed home to care for the children. Factory life separated fathers and mothers with long hours away from the home. Extended family members were also affected by the mass migration to cities with people moving to take advantage of these new jobs. The loss of large, extended families forced women to suddenly become responsible for the exclusive care of their own children for the first time in history. Sheila Kitzinger, a social anthropologist who has studied mothers around the world in places like Jamaica, Africa, Israel, Eastern Europe, Russia, Fiji, and New Zealand, found that the idea that women should be exclusively responsible for their children is unique to Western cultures (Chira, 1998). In other societies, women are not so isolated and there are always many other people available to help with children.

This trend of isolating women and making them primarily responsible for their children continued until World War II. For that brief period of time, women were suddenly needed to fill the jobs left behind by the men fighting in the war. As a result, myths about motherhood quickly changed to adapt to the new social crisis. Women were told to leave their children so that they could work in the factories. The myths about mothers changed to meet the demands of a nation at war. Their country needed them to work in the factories and women were assured that their children would be safe in daycare while they did their civic duty.

However once the war ended, women were then encouraged to return home for the sake of their children (Chira, 1998). Once the need for more factory workers was gone, the old myths were reinstated and mothers were told that they belonged at home *because* their children needed them. The myths about motherhood changed again in response to the changes in society. After the war, women were told that it was their biological destiny to stay home with their children. It became a common belief that children could not attach properly without their mothers' constant physical presence. The myths were created to make room for the returning soldiers who would need the jobs the women had performed during the war. The men needed to go back to the factories; the women needed to go back home.

By the 1950's, relationships were defined along gender lines. Men needed women to take care of them, their homes and their children so that they could put their time and energy into work. In exchange, women needed men to provide the financial resources to pay for the home, food, medical care, clothing and other expenses necessary to support the household so that they could stay home and raise the children (Ullman, 1995). Men have been expected to provide financial security; women have been expected to provide the physical and emotional nurturing ever since. In a similar vein, women have not expected to be financially responsible for themselves, their children or their husbands. Husbands have not been expected to do the caretaking of wives and children. In simple terms, men and women's partnerships have been based on each other's ability to provide the goods or services their partners needed in exchange for the goods or services they needed. The division of labor that was created out of this contract became gender-related and part of what made men and women, male and female.

This exchange of goods and services has occurred between men and women for centuries and is known as the "biological imperative vs. acquisition of goods" (Ullman, 1995). Females providing emotional, physical and sexual caretaking in exchange for males providing goods either through physical or financial means has taken place in one form or another throughout history and in many types of cultures. At first, this arrangement of one partner working outside the home to provide the financial support and one partner working inside the home to raise the children seems ideal. Children need a great deal of care, especially in the early years and the type of care children need in a modern world often prevents a parent from pursuing other goals. The family unit succeeds

because both parents are working together for the benefit of the children. However, the ideal is often very different from reality.

Human beings, being somewhat imperfect, tend to act far from the ideal when individual personalities are taken into account. There are always men who take advantage of the power they wield from controlling the finances. There are always women who manipulate the children for their own selfish needs. Some men are better providers than others. Some women are better nurturers than others. Over time, women became dissatisfied with the realities of raising children on their own and men got tired of the burden of being financially responsible for so many mouths to feed. The women's movement attempted to address these issues by fighting for employment opportunities and financial parity. As a result, women have been able to escape being dependent on men for their survival and men have experienced relief from being the sole provider.

In response to the women's movement, more myths were created about women that now included their ability to provide financially for their families. These new myths confronted the older ones about the need for women to be the sole caretakers of their children. In fact, women were now being told that children were better off in daycare because they learned social skills and benefited from the group dynamics day care centers provided. The new myths suggested that children were happier and healthier spending more time with other children than at home alone with mothers. Myths were now being created to describe the social changes women were experiencing. Myths that were eerily reminiscent of the ones created for World War II.

Myth #21: Women can have it all, both a career and children.

Myth #22: Children are more intellectually stimulated in day care.

Myth #23: Children are better socialized in day care.

Myth #24: Children are happier with mothers who are fulfilled.

Myth #25: Women do not need husbands to raise children.

The Mommy Wars

The myths that came out of the women's movement created conflict between women who responded to the earlier myths, and women who happily embraced the newer ones. While the women's movement succeeded in creating more options for women, it failed in raising the status of motherhood. Women now had access to financial independence, the freedom to pursue careers, and the right to share the burden of childcare. However, those women who stayed home with their children were still denied an adult status and were rarely treated with respect for the work they were doing raising their children. In fact, society's way of coming to terms with the two sets of myths has created a division between stay-at-home mothers and mothers who work outside the home.

“As a professional woman in private practice, I had the flexibility to juggle my schedule so that my husband and I could both share in staying home with the baby after she was born. That meant I could join the many ‘mommy and me’ playgroups that were scattered around town. At the first playgroup I attended, I was surprised that the first question the group of women wanted to ask me was whether I was a stay-at-home mother or a working mother. ‘Which one are you?’ they asked me. Knowing how I defined myself seemed to be more important to them than any other piece of

information I could give. They didn't ask me if I was married or if this was my first child. They didn't ask me what kind of work I did or how long I'd lived in the neighborhood. What they wanted to know was which one was I, which camp did I belong to.

"When I told them I was a working mother, they challenged my definition. 'How can you be here in the middle of the day?' one of the women confronted me.

"I told her that I had cut back my hours so I could be home with my baby during the day and that my husband was with her the nights I worked. 'Then, you're not a real working mother,' chimed in another woman.

"Before I had a chance to defend myself, another woman jumped into the debate. 'She's not a real stay-at-home mom because she has a career,' she pointed out to the group.

"I have a career but I quit work to stay home with my baby,' confronted another woman, 'so I'm a stay-at-home mother now.'

"Several more women got into the discussion. 'I'm a working mother. I don't have a career, but I work. I have to go back to the store in three more weeks,' the woman's voice was getting louder as she explained her situation. 'If she works, she's a working mother,' she concluded.

"The discussion got more heated as more women joined the argument. 'She works fewer hours than I do so she can't be a working mother,' argued one woman 'because I'm not a working mother. I only go in on Saturdays when my husband is home with the kids. We need the money so I have to work. But I don't have to put my kids in day care.'

"Do you put your baby in day care?' the mother who had started this discussion in the first place wanted to know.

"Before I could answer, another woman jumped in with her own ideas. 'It doesn't matter if she puts her baby in day care. I put my son in day care so I can exercise at the gym and I'm a stay-at-home mom. I don't work at all.'

"Yes, but if she has to put her child in day care to work, then she's a working mother,' pointed out another mother.

"I had come to the playgroup for a chance to talk to other mothers, exchange stories and escape the isolation of being home alone with my baby. I had no idea I would be drilled on what kind of mother I was. Yet, I knew that how I answered this question was extremely important to this group of strangers. My answer would determine my acceptability to this group. Was I a working mother, who stayed at home, or a stay-at-home mother, who worked? The answer to that question had the potential to trigger an identity crisis in every other woman in that group. Depending on how they resolved this issue about me, these women would define who I was.

"In the end, the women in the mother's group let me stay. They never did agree on how to define me and the issue came up regularly whenever these women voiced their opinions about working mothers. They always prefaced these discussions with a 'we're not talking about you' and they always avoided any interest in my career."

The early myths created the image of the stay-at-home mother. The myths that evolved out of the women's movement depicted the mother who worked outside the home. None of the myths, regardless of the period in which they were developed, ever dealt with women as unique individuals. These myths were created as a way to understand mothers as a group. They were used as a guide to teach women about the role of motherhood and what was expected of them as mothers. However the dark side to all of these myths is apparent in the way they are used to hide some of the ugly truths about motherhood; in particular, the hard work involved in raising children. They also prevented women from being treated with the respect and dignity every mother deserves in doing one of the hardest jobs in the country.

Myths about women prevent wives and mothers from being seen as fully-functioning adults, from being admired for the enormous amount of work they do and from being recognized for the sacrifices they make to raise the next generation. Instead, the myths keep women trapped into arguing, fretting, worrying, and engaging in pointless discussions over what kind of mothers they are. Once they have decided what determines a good mother, women keep themselves busy judging and criticizing the way other mothers parent their children.

“She’s being way too overprotective with her son. She doesn’t even let him walk to school on his own. How’s he ever going to learn to take care of himself?”

“I can’t believe she lets her kid go to the park on her own. She’s too little. Doesn’t she care that her daughter is out on the streets alone? What if she got hurt on the swings? What if something happened to her?”

“Can you believe she drops those girls off the moment the school opens? She’s always rushing off to work. She doesn’t have 5 minutes to talk to the teacher. She should pay more attention.”

“Did you hear how her son is falling behind at school? She never reads to him or helps him with his homework. It’s no wonder he can’t keep up with the other kids. I don’t know what she does all day, but she sure isn’t doing anything with him.”

Regardless of how a woman mothers, she can count on another mother disapproving of the choices she makes. In doing so, women help the general public keep the myths alive while missing out on any opportunity to confront how society should treat women who, as a group, frequently set aside their own needs to fulfill the needs of loved ones. To add insult to injury, women are required to identify themselves as stay-at-home mothers or working mothers, and in so doing, abandon any hope of being acknowledged as unique individuals. Rather than being seen as human beings with their own personal experiences, mothers are viewed through the stereotypes associated with the two separate camps of motherhood. And while women are busying themselves with such nonsense as to which camp they belong, they are distracted from the fact that no matter which side of the issue they stand on, they are still the ones held responsible for raising the children. They are distracted from recognizing what is true for all mothers; that they must choose to define themselves according to society’s standards and then once they have chosen, they will be required to use what precious little time they have condemning women from the other side for not being “real” mothers.

Described in the media as the “mommy wars,” women are required to choose sides against each other and then embrace, without question, the myths and beliefs of whichever camp they belong. And in doing so, they perpetuate society’s treatment of them as second-class citizens. While women are busy fighting over what kind of mothers they are and defending the choices they have made, they fail to recognize that this keeps them from confronting the truth about how society treats mothers as a whole. Whether a woman is a stay-at-home mother or a working one is irrelevant. (If you doubt that, ask your child’s father when was the last time he was asked if he was a stay-at-home father or a working one.) The fact is, wives and mothers, regardless of their own experiences as women, are often treated with disrespect for being JUST mothers. In contrast to being depicted as experts in their field, and in particular over the welfare of their own children, mothers are treated like children, criticized no matter how they parent, corrected over many of the decisions they make, and blamed for the end result. They can be confronted for being either overprotective or for not being protective enough, for smothering their children or for not loving them enough, for being too involved or for not paying attention at all. Women are rarely encouraged by our society, or praised

for the job they are doing, or reassured that their work as mothers is good enough.

The rules about motherhood place the sole burden of raising children onto women. Instead of the village raising a child; instead of the extended family picking up the slack, instead of the immediate family working as a team, women became the last line of defense. According to the women's movement, they no longer even needed their husbands anymore. In the late 1900's, with the divorce rate soaring, women began to do the work of raising children as single parents. The women's movement inadvertently reinforced the one myth it was trying to confront - that women are ultimately responsible for their children.

Mothers have come a long way from sharing the caretaking of their children with a huge social network of helpers to coping entirely on their own. Even women who are married spend long hours alone caring for children. The slow process of making women entirely responsible for the welfare of their children has taken place in response to the changes that have occurred in society and subsequently, family life. The myths that now exist serve to guarantee that at least someone will take responsibility for raising the children, even though that someone means only one person - the mother. If women stop doing it, what will happen to the children?

When Myths Conflict

The truth behind the myths is that they were created to solve the problems that arose with a changing society. Although adaptive, myths are not always realistic or particularly sensible. It takes time to create new myths and time for a generation to accept them as their own. The biggest problem with myths is that they are often based on stereotypes and therefore, can be very limiting. The myths about motherhood can be viewed as opposite points on a continuum. On one end of the line, the myths require women to sacrifice what they need in exchange for a lifetime of caring for others. In contrast, the other end of the line demands that women give up their home and children to pursue a career. Even so, while the myths express extremes in human behavior, they are not necessarily based entirely on fiction. For example the myths about children in daycare and about those who stay home with their mothers can appear to describe extreme viewpoints. However, the truth is that there are some children who do better in daycare while others do better at home with their mothers. Both statements can also be true for the same child at different times in his or her life.

Myths that describe absolutes or extreme viewpoints miss the subtleties of human behavior and lock individuals into roles that may not fit well for them personally. Eventually, when there are enough people willing to confront the myth, change is possible. Nevertheless, myths serve a purpose and society is often reluctant to give them up. They explain how things are, how things are supposed to be, or how things are changing. They explain how to solve problems and how to negotiate relationships. Myths become outdated when they no longer fit society's needs, prove to be inaccurate, or fail to solve the problems they were originally created to address. When this occurs, it takes time to develop new myths, time for them to become common knowledge and time for them to be so ingrained in society that they are passed onto the next generation without hesitation. This is what is currently happening to the myths about women.

The women's movement was successful in creating new options for women outside of the home by confronting the myths about women's role in society. However, the movement failed miserably in finding more options for women inside the home because it did not confront the myths about women's worth or status in society as wives and mothers. Women were told they could have it all, (whether they wanted it or not), and that they would be happy with both a career and children. The

goal was to free them from the drudgery of “women’s work” and to help them gain financial independence. Women’s rights and the new myths that evolved with these rights made it possible for women to escape abusive husbands, pursue careers outside the home and have more control over their lives. The theory was that women would be able to attain adult status if they had more power financially, direct access to resources, and more control over their own destinies.

Magazine covers displayed women with a frying pan in one hand and a briefcase in the other. What these magazines failed to show was what the fathers of these children were doing. The women's movement did not take into account why the myths about women existed in the first place. It did not recognize that there were corresponding male myths that supported the status quo. For the myths to change about women, the myths about men would have to be changed as well. Unfortunately, men were not prepared for the changes coming their way. It takes time to create new myths and it takes a consensus. The women's movement did not take into account that myths often contain a grain of truth. There were many women who loved being home with their children and many men who loved pursuing their careers. These couples did not necessarily want to change their roles in the family or the myths that supported them. This fact led to conflict.

Although many women (and men) embraced the new myths about relationships, gender roles and financial responsibility, there were just as many women (and men) who held onto the old ones about division of labor, mother-child attachment and women's roles in society. The contradictions between the two sets of myths have created huge conflicts between men and women, the repercussions of which continue to be felt today. Some men find that they are still operating from old beliefs. They continue to think that the only responsibility they have to wives and children is to provide financial support. These men see no reason to change the dynamics between the sexes. They are perfectly happy with the present arrangement. They love their careers and they love having their wives take care of their homes and children. They describe their wives as their best friends; they feel little pressure to be more emotionally available to them.

In a similar vein, there are women who are comfortable as stay-at-home mothers. They do not suffer consequences for being financial dependent on their husbands. They expect their husbands to bring home the bigger paychecks even when some wives may supplement what the family needs with money earned at part-time jobs. These women find that they are well-suited for their roles as the primary caregiver of the family and they are not interested in pursuing careers. They see their work as classrooms volunteers, PTA members, bible study teachers and Girl Scout leaders as important contributions to their families and society. Although the myths about women affect them, they are not aware of the connection between how they feel about what they do and how others see and treat them.

At the same time, there are men and women who have realized that they need to be more flexible about the roles they play in their marriages. Couples are learning how to negotiate about who is going to take which responsibilities or jobs in the home and with the children. Men are getting used to the idea of sharing household chores and the job of raising children. These men are learning how to respond to the emotional needs of their wives. Women are growing accustomed to sharing the affection of their children with husbands and to becoming more financially responsible for the family.

Even so, men and women are not always sure about how things need to change. For some men, it seems that women are sending them mixed messages. On the one hand, women are saying they want sensitive, emotionally available men who are willing to participate in the household and the

family. On the other hand, there are women who have been reluctant to give up their roles as mothers with exclusive responsibility for their children and complete authority over how their children are to be cared for. Another reason for the slow progress and resistance by some men to change is that many of them believe women continue to be attracted to the strong, silent type. One man at a workshop on these issues described how he continually lost women, who said they appreciated his softer, gentler side, to men he saw as the John Wayne type. They wanted to be friends with him, but they were having sex with the other guys. From his perspective, the women's sexual activity with men who did not share emotions with them was a powerful reinforcer for him to stop sharing his emotions.

In similar fashion, women feel men are sending them mixed messages. On the one hand, men do want the financial support women are contributing to the home. On the other hand, men also want their homes cleaned, the supper on the table when they get home and their children taken care of. Women resist change when they see men demanding more household work from them, rather than less. They dislike the way men expect them to pay their own way but still want the caretaking their fathers enjoyed. Many women also hate having to financially support men who make less than they do. At a workshop about finances, women complained about being with men who were "not making enough money." In some of the cases, the men were not working at all and had no desire to find employment. This idea horrified the women and a lively debate followed.

Women and men have been struggling to understand the changing roles of women in society, and therefore, the corresponding changes in the roles of men. For example, giving up an exclusive relationship with their children is threatening for many women. Taking care of children creates a unique intimacy that fulfills some of women's emotional needs. As a result, many women are not always able to let men become part of their children's lives without controlling what it looks like. In response, men want to decide on the kind of relationship they have with their children. They do not always like being told that the mother's way of doing things is the only correct way of doing things.

Women also fear losing their children's love to fathers who have become more involved in the children's lives. It's hard to share a child's affection with others. Once the exclusive domain of mothers, fathers are now getting more hugs and kisses during the time spent in caring for their children. Although it may feel good to mothers to see their children doing activities with their fathers, women are sometimes surprised to find that they feel excluded or jealous of their husbands' relationship with the children; something only men used to complain about. In the case of divorce, women are terrified of losing custody to newly involved fathers who have decided to remain a part of their children's lives.

Men and women are also struggling with some of the myths associated with what it means to be a man in our society. The roles men are expected to play as husbands and fathers require them to be the strong, stoic and unemotional one in the family. They are expected to protect women and children from a dangerous world. Although women want men to become more emotionally expressive, many women find that men's feelings make them uncomfortable and they frequently do not know how to respond when their husbands do share their feelings (Kingma, 1993). Some women are scared when they see their men cry, express fear or get depressed. Women find themselves judging their husbands against the old male standard (Kingma, 1993). They are concerned that their husbands will stop being real men, fall apart and not be there to protect them when they get too emotional.

The confusion that currently exists between the old myths of the 1950's and the new myths of the women's movement has meant that families are not always sure which set of myths they should be operating from. As a result, couples are often in conflict over which myth is the correct one to follow.

"Is it okay for mom to pursue a career or does that make her a bad mother?"

"Who stays home with the children? Is it normal for dad to want to be home with them?"

"Is it okay to marry a man who makes less money?"

Our society is in transition about what family relationships look like and how to deal with the modern challenges of raising children. As a result, the current myths that exist about women, men, marriage, and family need to be revised. In order to create healthier myths, it is important to evaluate what does and does not work with the ones that are currently in place. By examining the truth behind the myths that are presently being passed along to the next generation, it becomes possible to change them for the future. In doing so, we are taking the first step in addressing the rage women are feeling when they try to comply with myths that do not describe them accurately.

The Reality behind the Myths

The Realities of Being Female

The myths associated with being a healthy female encourage women to focus their energy on looking good, act unimportant in relationships, appear child-like, and to feel useful when they are in the service of others. Women are taught to be "needless and wantless," sensitive to the feelings of others and passive around asking for anything in return. The myths associated with being a loving wife require women to focus on their husbands as the important one in the partnership. Women are taught to believe that they are nothing without their men. They learn to defer to their husbands' needs above all others. They are also expected to take responsibility for their men's behaviors, even when the men act dysfunctional. Women are taught to blame themselves for their husbands' problems, be accountable for the men's disappointments in the relationship and to do the emotional work in their marriages.

The myths associated with being a good mother describe how women are responsible for the exclusive care of their children, the children's behavior when they act inappropriately as well as any maladies their children may suffer from. The myths instruct women on how they are not allowed to get angry when they become exhausted from taking care of helpless and needy little people. Women are not supposed to react to the boredom, frustration, isolation, and loneliness of caring for young children twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Women are not expected to react when teenage children treat them with disrespect, belittle the work they do and blatantly try to avoid taking responsibility for themselves or the work that needs to be done because of them.

Unfortunately, these myths place women at risk for a variety of health problems. Women who are trying to be healthy females risk becoming physically and mentally ill in response to the stress they feel playing out their female roles. These women sometimes suffer from depression, anxiety, eating disorders and an assortment of addictive behaviors. Mothers with small children at home have fewer opportunities to exercise and eat properly. They are at greater risk for obesity and the medical complications, like heart disease, high blood pressure and diabetes, which are more likely to happen with people who are overweight. Sleep deprivation also increases the likelihood of other medical problems. Depression is a common response to feeling isolated; anxiety a normal reaction to the pressure of being responsible for others.

Playing out the female role in our society also impacts women's employment opportunities. When women are more focused on having a family rather than pursuing a career, they may not work toward the education or experience needed for the higher paying jobs. When they do work

outside the home, women without higher degrees are more likely to be in low-paying, service-oriented jobs that hold little prestige. Some of these jobs place them at risk for sexual harassment (Sanford & Donovan, 1984). Women who do pursue a career feel that they must betray what makes them female in order to compete in the male business world. For these women, there is dissonance between who they are in their personal lives and who they must be in their work lives (McKenna, 1997). The business world is still structured around the idea that men have full-time wives at home taking care of their lives while they are at work (McKenna, 1997). Women who do not have "wives" at home must do both jobs.

Women, who follow the rules associated with being wives and mothers, find that being financially dependent on their husbands can leave them with little power in their relationships. This makes them more vulnerable to becoming trapped in abusive or alcoholic marriages with few financial resources that are needed for escaping these violent homes. Without a way out, women can be raped by their husbands or boyfriends and receive little assistance from authorities who criticize them for staying in the situation (Walker, 1979; Sanford & Donovan, 1984). Even when they do leave, women are often blamed for the failure of the marriage.

Following society's standards for motherhood, places women at risk for depression, anxiety disorders, addictions, and for becoming abusive with their own children when frustration, exhaustion and loneliness get the better of them. For many women, myths control the kind of relationships they find themselves in, the career opportunities available to them and their choices around whether to have children or not. Women, by virtue of being female, are supposed to want a husband and children above all else. Being a grown up woman means being a heterosexual female with children (Sanford & Donovan, 1984). Historically, women's worth has been linked to their ability to produce children. Today's society continues to perceive women this way regardless of the relationship choices they may really want or the vocational goals they may have. Women are expected to place finding a man a priority in their lives. Lesbian women, particularly those without children, are seen as abnormal.

Careers are not taken seriously; they are considered an additional component to women's lives as wives and mothers. Women are supposed to be concerned with finding their Prince Charming and they are expected to put all their energy into attracting the attention of available men with their female charm and beauty. Once they are married, women are expected to be responsible for maintaining the relationship and for raising the children. Many women feel pressured to marry and have babies even if they have no desire to have children. When women do not follow these rules, they risk rejection, abandonment and criticism from loved ones. They are stigmatized, pitied or treated as if something is wrong with them for not wanting children; women without children are seen as not fulfilling their female role. Their problems with work, money or relationships are often not considered as serious as problems with marriages and children.

However, women who do fulfill their obligations to have children are also at risk for rejection, abandonment and criticism from loved ones. This message clearly plays itself out in the work world. Women without children find that their employers assume they will leave their jobs eventually to marry and have babies, whether they have actually planned to do that or not. In the corporate world, the rules are that work comes first, above family or a personal life. Long hours are expected and self-promotion a necessity. Women who take time away from their careers to have children risk future promotions or job opportunities. They are referred to as being on the "Mommy Track" now (McKenna, 1997).

Studies on working women found that those who take time off pay a price for doing so. Women, who took from anywhere up to nine months off to stay home with their children, were more likely to be denied promotions and raises. They also experienced lower pay than their counterparts who took no time off. They continued at this lower pay for years after they took their leave, enduring a possible lifetime second-class status in their professions and a loss of power that normally comes with advancement (Chira, 1998).

Women have historically been discriminated against for being female and mothers by being denied specific jobs or promotions, by being paid less money than their male counterparts, by being sexually harassed, and by being required to work on men's terms (Sanford & Donovan, 1984; McKenna, 1997). The work week, the office hours and the job schedule is designed for someone who has a "wife" at home who can get to the bank, get the kids to the dentist and fix dinner during business hours.

When women get married and have children, they are forced to make difficult decisions around whether to suffer financially and stay home with the children or contribute to the financial well-being of the family and sacrifice time with their children. No matter which "choice" the woman makes, she experiences a loss. Women, who put off having children to further their careers, are eventually confronted by their biological clocks and fertility problems. Women who pursue a career once their children are in school face discrimination because of their age, marital status and their responsibilities to their children.

The business world is just beginning to see the benefits of flexible work schedules, job sharing and the use of part-time employees in allowing women (and men) more options for balancing their work and family lives. And society is just realizing that quality care, available to all children, whether for working moms or stay-at-home moms needing a break, would provide children with proper supervision, a stimulating intellectual and social environment, and a secure attachment to others that will benefit them and their communities. Until this becomes commonplace however, mothers (and fathers) will continue to struggle with making the best decision for themselves and their families.

The Realities of Being a Wife

In order for women to have children, society dictates that they must first find themselves a partner. Movies, romance novels and television dish up a highly romantic version of falling in love. Women plan to "live happily ever after" once they have found their prince. Little is discussed about how men actually behave in their marriages or what women can realistically expect from their husbands in the form of emotional support. Husbands are unable to meet the fantasy image of Prince Charming on a daily basis. Heroes are expected to focus exclusively on the damsels in distress; a feat not possible for human beings who have needs and wants of their own. It can be exhausting to be on-call for rescue duty, especially when the television is on and the couch is so comfortable.

Beyond being disappointed in their husbands' lack of heroism, women who follow the rules of marriage are often shocked to find themselves held accountable for their husbands' behavior. Lacking any real power to control their men, women experience a loss of self-esteem because they feel helpless and powerless in their relationships. Many women describe feelings of despair and hopelessness when they are unable to exercise any changes in their marriages.

Lynne Bravo Rosewater (1993) in her book *New Roles/New Rules*, describes how women's training to be responsible for relationships places them at risk for becoming involved in a battering one. She explains that because women are taught to meet the needs of their men and to take responsibility for the functioning of the relationship, they are also to blame for the violence. Men do not share the same responsibility for meeting their wives emotional, physical and sexual needs. It does not occur to many of these husbands that their wives have needs and that they should meet them. They believe it is their right as the family provider to be taken care of and deferred to in the relationship.

Women are required to suppress their own needs and concentrate fully on the needs of their husbands in order for their relationships to be conflict-free. To do otherwise places women at risk for losing their husbands to other women more willing to play the female role. Concentrating on their husbands means that women are responsible for their men's emotional reactions, violent behavior and any of the negative consequences that occur because of the men's actions. Although women have little real power to control what their husbands do, they are still held accountable for it.

In battering relationships, women are frequently blamed for their men's anger and violence (Walker 1979, Rosewater 1993). Women are expected to be able to control their husbands' angry outbursts by effectively meeting all of their needs and placing few demands on them. There is a strong belief system in our society that a man would not behave so outrageously toward his wife if he were not provoked in some way. The logic goes that a woman of an abusive man must have failed her wifely "duties" so miserably as to "make" her husband furious with her. A woman's risk for being battered therefore, does not come from her vulnerability with the roles she is expected to follow as a female, wife and mother, but rather, her failure to perform these roles adequately.

These roles have not only set women up for an abusive relationship, but for the possibility for an alcoholic one as well. In the same way women are expected to control the violence, they are expected to control the drinking. Taking responsibility for a man's drinking means the woman is protecting him from the negative consequences of his drunken behavior. Wives are required to maintain a level of denial around the drinking while finding a way to stay connected to their husbands that does not interfere with the drinking. Frequently, this can mean drinking with their husbands, both to keep the men company and to keep them close to home. In this way, wives have a better chance of controlling where, when and how much their husbands drink. Drinking with husbands also maintains the illusion of intimacy.

Drinking with a husband allows the wife to share a common bond around the bottle. By having something in common, the marriage appears to be more compatible. The woman also finds that drinking helps to numb her awareness that she is not getting her needs met. It gives her relief from the anger she feels around those needs not being acknowledged. Furthermore, drinking provides an artificial boundary, much like anger does, to stop the demands for caretaking. No one expects a drunken woman to be able to make dinner or clean the house. Drinking creates a legitimate way for a woman to escape her duties as wife and mother, at least temporarily.

According to Karen Johnson (1991) in her book *Trusting Ourselves The Complete Guide to Emotional Well-Being for Women*, women have a great deal of difficulty saying "No" to loved ones and setting boundaries around the amount of caretaking they will do. Alcohol is useful in decreasing a woman's sensitivity to the needs of others. It impairs her ability to meet those needs. She is too drunk to do laundry or pick up the kids from school. Drinking may also be used as a way to get needs met. Frequently, family members are required to take over when the woman has been

drinking, in a way that they would never have to do if she were sober. The woman has found a legitimate way to escape her responsibilities, to take a break, and of avoiding having to put everyone else's needs before her own.

Women can become dependent on alcohol to cope with the rules associated with being wives and mothers. This dependency can lead to alcohol abuse and eventually, to alcohol addiction. Drinking that started out as an effective way of setting boundaries and numbing anger over unmet needs, can become a coping mechanism for other problems. As time goes on, drinking can be seen as the only solution. Invariably, it can also be used to suppress the rage that results from the deprivation felt when basic needs do not get met. For this reason, many recovering female alcoholics find themselves caught up in the rage cycle when they get sober. They can also find themselves struggling with anxiety, depression and other addictions. Although the alcohol has been removed, they are still left with the original problem of figuring out how to set limits on their caretaking.

As wives, women are often expected to do all of the cooking, cleaning, shopping and other such household tasks. Women are not paid for this work, nor are they given much recognition, respect, appreciation or gratitude for it. Their work is given little value, is never-ending and is often taken for granted. Although there is *no* biological imperative that proves this work should be done by females, women are led to believe that it is their biological destiny to do it. When they marry, women are automatically expected to take over the functioning of the home. Even bachelors who have looked after themselves for years understand that the care of the household will become the responsibility of their wives once they marry. This is true when women work outside the home as well (Sanford & Donovan, 1984). Regardless of the job they do or the money they bring home, women are still assumed to be responsible for the home and the majority of the household tasks.

While the working man returns home from the day at the office to relax in front of the television set, the working woman usually returns from work to start dinner, clean up after she has cooked, straighten up the house and attend to the man's sexual needs before retiring for the night. Many men believe that their wives would and should do anything for them (including sexually) if they love them. This belief system reinforces the dynamic between couples that women are there to service their husbands (Stanway, 1988). Although few women agree with this male perspective, they are controlled by it when their husbands react negatively to their attempts to set boundaries.

The rules of what it means to be a wife are enacted immediately after the honeymoon. Couples usually agree that wives will need to be home when the babies are born. They should therefore, not waste any time in taking over household tasks in preparation for this future. In reality, even if the woman becomes pregnant immediately, she usually continues working until the baby arrives. By then, many wives have taken on two jobs (one inside the home, the other outside the home) while the husbands work only one. However, women are usually shocked to find that the workload quadruples after the baby is born and their energy level diminishes considerably from giving birth, nursing and sleep deprivation. Nevertheless, both men and women have grown accustomed to this arrangement and the belief system that *what the wives do in the home is "women's work"* is strengthened.

Some women relish the thought of staying home and find that "working" on their own homes and caring for her husband (Lush, 1987) is far more satisfying than "working" for someone else. The amount of money most women can make tends to be much less than their husbands' and marriage is seen as bringing these women a new-found financial security (Sanford & Donovan, 1984). Unfortunately for some of these women, the novelty eventually wears off as the monotony of

household tasks, the lack of self-esteem that comes from doing unpaid work that is not appreciated and the introduction of children removes the glamour once attached to this role. What women find instead is that the work never ends, the children never stop needing and their husbands feel it is beneath them to lend a hand.

Many husbands see their wives' work in the home as time-consuming and deserving of little recognition (Stanway, 1988). Since men tend to measure the worth of any endeavor according to the look of the finished product and its economic value, housework by definition does not fit the parameters and therefore, contains little value. As a result, men consider the ability to do such work as part of what makes women feminine and that it requires little intelligence or initiative (Stanway, 1988). In response to this attitude about women's work, wives are frequently more depressed, passive, and phobic and show more neurotic symptoms than their single counterparts (Stanway, 1988).

In addition, the emotional work women do in their families is not tangible to most men and therefore, difficult to measure. Men are often not adequately trained to meet emotional needs in the way women learn to do as little girls. Men are not as comfortable with emotions and they are not as prepared to offer their wives the same emotional support in return (Stanway, 1988). It would be too threatening to their image of themselves as men to do so. In addition, many men lack the experience to know how to be emotionally supportive. In response to emotionally unavailable men, wives have developed an effective, albeit dysfunctional, way to create the illusion of intimacy they so desperately crave in their relationships. Women have learned to complain.

Complaining serves many functions, not the least of which is conversation (Kingma, 1993). When women complain, they are able to experience the relief that goes with disclosing that something is wrong, while at the same time, protect themselves from having to ask directly for what they want and risk rejection. Complaining among women is a way to be vulnerable, share painful experiences and experience intimacy (Kingma, 1993). Other women know how to respond with empathy. Sharing similar stories of their own helps to forge a bond between the complainer and the listener. The fall-out occurs when women generalize this communication skill onto men.

Men often react to complaining by getting defensive, angry or frustrated. In a way, this is exactly what women are looking for -- an emotional interchange. Women would rather endure a highly charged, passionate exchange of words than stand in the shadow of their men's silence (Kingma, 1993). For most women, this kind of emotional encounter is better than nothing at all and it creates an illusion of intimacy between the couple. Unfortunately, little change occurs and the depth of their emotional interchange never grows. Couples do not experience the kind of emotional intimacy women are starving for or the kind of respect men desire. In fact, it is a closed system of communication that is self-reinforcing. Women complain, men defend and nothing changes.

The Realities of Being a Mother

The rules associated with motherhood place women in situations where their own needs do not get addressed. In reaction, feelings arise from this deprivation that lead women into depression and resentment. Women are required to be physically and emotionally available to helpless, dependent children 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Children are not tolerant of their mothers' needs for sleep, food, quiet, alone time, bathroom excursions or adult stimulation. They are only focused on what they want and need. This is especially true in adolescence when the growing teenager's goal is to

demand freedom, privileges, and whatever resources the family possesses. In addition, children and teenagers are constantly testing the limits and boundaries mothers establish for them. They do this to get what they want when their mothers' resolve is weakened. In response to this relentless testing, mothers feel ignored, unloved, unappreciated and angry.

Being a wife and mother is time-consuming, physically exhausting and emotionally demanding. A woman has little time left to concentrate on what she needs and wants. This is particularly true when young children or elderly parents are involved. One of the most stressful times in a woman's life is immediately following childbirth. After the rigors of giving birth, the woman may spend months, and sometimes years, sleep deprived while trying to meet the demands of a continuously needy infant. Small children are no less exhausting with their constant demands for attention and their dependency on others to get the most basic needs met. Many women feel isolated, alone and overwhelmed under these conditions. There is seldom another adult available to offer emotional support or to help make decisions about what is best for their babies. Most women are home alone with their children for long periods of time. There are few resources available for physical help with child care, cleaning the house or keeping little ones busy.

In most societies throughout human history, women have not always had the primary responsibility of raising their children (Sanford & Donovan, 1984). In most cultures, the extended family participated in the care of the children. The entire community believed that it took a village to raise a child. In Europe, wealthy families have traditionally relied on wet nurses, tutors, servants or nannies (Swigart, 1991). In America during colonial times, families depended on the "mammy" to care for their children (Sanford & Donovan, 1984).

At the end of World War II however, there was a major change over how society perceived women and their roles as mothers. Women, who had worked outside the home during the war, were now told to give up their jobs and return home because their children's well-being depended on them. Soldiers coming back from the war needed the jobs women had held and the family structure was reorganized to accommodate these changes. The birth rate soared and women, in the interests of the American family, put their efforts into their homes, children and husbands.

Unfortunately, women found that being a full-time housewife and mother had some major drawbacks. In the first place, giving exclusive responsibility for children to their mothers means that they will be blamed for anything that goes wrong with the children (Swigart, 1991; Sanford & Donovan 1984; Chira, 1998). Fathers escape the challenges involved in raising their children as well as escaping the blame and responsibility for how they turn out.

The greatest advocates for "mother blaming" are found in the mental health profession. Over the years, mothers have been blamed for autism, schizophrenia, homosexuality, eating disorders, attention deficit disorder and a host of other mental illnesses (Chira, 1998). Stay-at-home mothers have been told they are too smothering and doting; working-outside-the-home mothers are confronted with being too distant, unavailable and neglectful (Swigart, 1991; Chira, 1998). Bad mothers are given names, according to Jane Swigart (1991) in her book, *The Myth of the Bad Mother*, names like the "Castrating Mother," the "Smothering, Intrusive Mother," and the "Cold, Rejecting Mother." There are no such labels for fathers.

The second drawback to being full-time mothers alone at home with their children is that women are, just that, alone. Alone to experience the tedious, exhausting, draining and demanding self-sacrifice work that is required when caring for completely dependent individuals. Women, isolated

in their homes, do not have the benefit of knowing that other women are having the same experiences. Mothers, who love and adore their children, are shocked by their intense emotional reactions to the repetitive nature of childcare. Telling children the same thing, over and over again, is boring and emotionally draining. However, mothers are not allowed to have these feelings. According to the rules associated with being a mother, women are supposed to (Sanford & Donovan, 1984; Chira, 1998; Swigart, 1991):

- Be totally devoted to their children
- Never get bored or tired with doing childcare
- Never feel anything but unconditional love for their children
- Never get angry or resentful over the sacrifices they make on behalf of their children
- Not mind their lack of freedom
- Not miss their lost leisure time
- Not miss time with their friends
- Not mind continual interruptions by children when they do see their friends
- Not miss having employment options that support having children
- Not have ambivalent feelings about their children
- Not mind that their work carries low status as unpaid labor
- Not mind being financially dependent upon someone else
- Not be uncomfortable with their increased vulnerability that occurs when financially dependent on someone else
- Be comfortable with the isolation, loneliness and lack of intellectual stimulation
- Not feel the monotony, repetition and frustration around doing the same chores every day, all day long

In the 1970's, feminists tried to address these issues by confronting the lack of employment options and financial opportunities women had in comparison to men. Unfortunately, the movement was only able to address the tip of the iceberg. The backlash was an entire generation of women who felt belittled for being just "housewives" and put down for wanting to stay home with their children (Sanford & Donovan, 1984). What was lost was the chance to address society's attitudes about women, wives and mothers and to see the job of raising children as an honorable profession deserving of respect, admiration and assistance. No one should be left with the exclusive responsibility and care of children. The real issue is to help men and women learn to share raising their children and the household tasks that go with it and to restructure our society around the importance of raising children as a community.

Women who struggle to follow the rules for being a good mother will inevitably feel like they are failing at some point during their child-rearing years. These rules are unrealistic, unhealthy and ultimately, destructive to our species. The increase in violence, the disintegration of the family structure that is following the rising divorce rate and the hopelessness of today's youth about their future suggests that it is time to re-evaluate the importance of "mothering." Changes must occur to better address the needs of women, men and their children. In the meantime, the natural, normal response to the dehumanizing rules associated with motherhood is for women to get angry.

6

Anger and Myths

Challenging the Myths

Although many women experience a great deal of joy caring for their husbands and children, it can be exhausting to give love, support, attention and physical care to others. At the very least, the process creates those very same needs in the one providing the care and women are justified in needing to take breaks from taking care of others. As nurturers, women ensure that the connection between loved ones continues regardless of the sacrifices they make to maintain the relationships. However, women are also equipped with a biological instinct to preserve their own well-being. These two conflicting drives create a crisis for women. While women bolster the emotional well-being of spouses and children, they are expected to ignore or repress their own basic needs. Yet, they have an inborn mechanism that prevents them from sacrificing their own needs beyond a certain tolerance level.

Every human being, regardless of gender, has basic needs that must be met in order to thrive. Some of these basic needs are physical and associated with survival such as food, water, sleep, and shelter. Others are psychological and particularly important to women; like the need to belong and feel loved and important. In addition, all human beings share a need for power and freedom in their relationships (Glasser 1984). When these needs are denied, the body experiences a state of panic and turns up the volume on its demands to get these needs met. One of the ways the human body has of alerting us to take action is by expressing anger. Anger is a very useful emotion in that it motivates the individual to persevere toward a goal in the face of insurmountable obstacles. Undaunted, the angry person can be extremely determined, focused on a specific goal and unlikely to be thwarted in their efforts to achieve something of importance to them.

When women's needs for attention, emotional support, physical help, a break from caretaking, freedom in their relationships and personal power are not met, their bodies send out a variety of different warning signs. These signals alert women that they can not continue giving to others until some of their own needs are met. Initially, these warning signs come as headaches, neck and shoulder pain, stomach aches, and fatigue. When these signals are ignored, the warning system gets louder and women become irritable, frustrated, anxious, short-tempered and easily overwhelmed. Women, who do not recognize that their bodies are trying to protect them, tend to punish themselves for having these feelings. They do not realize that their experiences are normal and common for women (and men), who are doing more than they are physically capable of doing.

As their needs increase and the resources to get those needs met decrease, women feel resentful that what they need is not given a higher priority in the family. They feel taken for granted, frustrated that the work is not deemed important or valuable, and they believe they should be given some recognition for all of the work they are doing. However, women are not usually permitted to voice these feelings and even if they do, they are frequently told that their experience is unique to them. Women who complain too loudly are told that their irritation is an indication that they are not performing their roles adequately. For women who do recognize that they need and deserve a break, it is not always practical to take one. Unfortunately, most women are alone, isolated and without physical help. They can not stop their children from needing them. There is no one available to provide for their children if they stop caring for them.

Under these circumstances, women must reject their biological instinct for self-preservation and continue nurturing their children beyond their tolerance level for giving. Babies are hungry, children need supervision and husbands expect to get their needs met after they get home from a day playing their roles as the primary financial provider. Regardless of how women are feeling or what their work load has been, they are expected to get dinner ready, supervise homework, organize baths and read to the children at bedtime. Even women who work outside the home full-time and bring home a paycheck find their husbands and children eagerly waiting at the door for their return. At the same time, women are getting messages from their bodies telling them to stop caretaking and do something for themselves.

One mother described how she never had a chance to go to the bathroom, take a shower or eat while her baby was awake. The infant was very demanding and the woman was often forced to leave her baby crying on the bathroom floor while she jumped into the shower. The stress she experienced each time she did it, according to this woman, made it that much harder to do it the next time. It was easier on her, she said, to forgo the shower altogether. Another mother told how her children followed her into the bathroom with little regard for her privacy because they needed attention, questions answered, or help with homework. These women found little relief from caretaking because family members adhered to a set of rules insisting that women have no needs of their own. The myths explain that nurturing is women's "normal" and therefore, healthiest state. In truth, women who have not been able to respond to their bodies' internal warning system find that the signals just get louder and more persistent until what they experience is anger.

Anger is an emotion women are generally not permitted to have, let alone express. Anger is considered unladylike and those that do express it are perceived as "bitchy." Women, caught up in the myth that they are supposed to be "needless and wantless," do not understand that their anger is serving a purpose. They miss the significance of these feelings and are unable to acknowledge that anger is the body's way of protecting itself. In fact, most women are usually in denial that they are not getting their own needs met and as a result, blame themselves for feeling angry at helpless children, hard-working husbands and needy friends. They try to hide their frustration, repress their anger, project it onto something else or pretend that their resentment is justified by blaming loved ones.

Many women express their "forbidden" anger by becoming irritable, critical and nagging toward their partners. Women, as a rule, are unable to admit that they have needs or that they have a right to get these needs met. To do so would interfere with their image of themselves as women, wives and mothers. Instead they must focus their anger onto finding fault with children for their neediness or ridiculing husbands for their emotional incompetence. It is not that women are suddenly annoyed by this behavior in loved ones; it is more likely that they feel like failures for no longer being able to

meet these needs.

Women act this way toward husbands and children in order to protect their image of themselves as healthy, normal females. Men tolerate it because it is a small price to pay to ensure their needs have priority in the relationship. Children, on the other hand, have no choice but to accept their mother's behavior because they are too young and powerless to confront it. Unfortunately, women who express their anger this way never address the real issues. Change does not occur and the dynamic hopelessly repeats itself over and over again.

For some women, the alternative is to challenge the myths and beliefs of our society. These women reject the notion that they are not supposed to have needs. They believe in their right to getting those needs met and see themselves as individuals separate from those they care about. These women do not take responsibility for loved one's behavior. They insist on limiting their caretaking, frequently set boundaries around how available they are willing to be and enthusiastically pursue their own goals. Unfortunately, there is a price to pay for not conforming to society's myths. Women who rebel against the norm are threatening to women who are struggling to abide by these myths. Those that believe the myths have strong feelings toward those who dare to rock the boat.

Women, faithful to these myths, feel put down, criticized and rejected by women who refuse to play their roles according to society's rules. Some of these women are perfectly happy with the status quo and do not want it to change. Other women secretly feel like failures because the myths have also not been true for them. Nevertheless, they have invested years of their lives following these rules and the truth is often too painful to face. When myths are challenged, questions arise over what is wrong, why people are rejecting the old ways and how the new ways are going to impact those who fit the myths.

For example, when middle-class women began asserting their rights to pursue a career, the stay-at-home mothers felt threatened that their decision to be home with their children would be seen as meaningless. Working mothers felt put down because middle-class women began acting like working outside of the home was a new phenomenon. The long history of women working on the farms, gathering food for the village and sewing cloth into clothes was completely ignored. Also being ignored was the reality that many women have to work outside the home to put food on the table. Many of these women would have loved to have the option of staying home with their children (Chira, 1998). To many mothers financially responsible for their children, women with careers had the advantage of doing work they loved, while they were trapped working at jobs they hated just to put food on the table.

Women, who reject society's expectations, find that they too suffer negative consequences for doing so. They are often labeled as mentally ill, ostracized by people they love and ridiculed for being different. Many women have difficulty finding husbands who respect their way of doing things or are divorced by men who did not appreciate their different perspective. More importantly, women who challenge the "norm" are often punished for it. The most painful punishment is to lose custody of their children. According to Susan Chira (1998) in her book, *A Woman's Place Choosing Work and Family Without Guilt or Blame*, working mothers often lost custody of their children to working fathers who had parents or a wife who could stay home with the children. Chira found that judges were swayed in their decisions by their beliefs that mothers belong at home with their children. In these cases, judges believed that children were better off when their mothers stayed at home even when that meant staying at home with women other than the biological mothers.

Working mothers were therefore, not awarded custody of their children if the father had another woman who could stay home with the children.

There is little recourse for those women who find that the myths do not accurately reflect them or that challenging the myths sets them up for a variety of negative consequences. Anger, the natural response to such conflicts is not permitted. Anger, the primary way for the body to send out a warning sign that something is wrong can not be acknowledged. Anger, an emotion that provides energy for enacting change is not allowed to be expressed. Yet, anger does not go away until it can motivate the individual to stop the self-destructive behavior.

Over time, the anger itself creates stress and a toll on the physical well-being of the women experiencing the feeling. Women who feel angry at being powerless to create change and punished for behaving outside the norm must eventually redirect their anger and frustration into something acceptable in order to survive. Some women turn it into depression, anxiety or an addiction. Other women turn their anger into rage. By raging, they can turn up the volume and often force change in others who are taken by surprise by the women's behavior. Although the change may be temporary, it at least provides some relief for the moment.

Anger Is a Feeling

Anger is a physiological response to feeling threatened, violated or abused. It can be an extremely useful emotion and a necessary one for survival. Anger is a warning sign that something is wrong and the body reacts by triggering the defensive "fight or flight" response. Angry feelings are triggered when boundaries are violated, basic needs are not met or a threat is perceived. The energy released with anger allows an individual to fight back, protect herself or to flee from danger. Adrenaline is released, the body prepares for action, and the mind becomes focused on self-protection (or the protection of loved ones). Without anger, human beings would not know when there is danger to their well-being and they would not have the necessary resources to protect themselves.

Women experience anger in their relationships for three reasons. First, women in their roles as wives and mothers are required to meet the needs of others and to do so in lieu of taking care of themselves. Regardless of their own physical and emotional state, mothers regularly put aside their own needs to caretake helpless and dependent children. Women are expected to ask for nothing in return for this self-sacrifice. In fact, the sacrifice is rarely recognized, let alone acknowledged. Since this is an unrealistic demand on any human being, the woman experiences anger as a warning sign that her behavior is dysfunctional.

Second, most women want to be good wives, mothers, daughters and friends. Their conflict over how society expects them to fulfill those roles and their desire to fill them in a way that is true to themselves creates frustration. Whether women are trying to follow the myths or are rebelling against them, they are unsuccessful in resolving this conflict. Anger is the body's way of alerting women that something is wrong with their behavior, the situation, or the environment.

Third, women have a variety of feelings, among them anger, when they discover that they are required to follow a set of rules that society has decided will not allow them to be viewed as healthy adults or respected as women. While men are seen as adults after a long day at the office, women are not perceived as adults after a day with the children. Women's self-esteem is seriously impacted

when the work they do is rated as unimportant and given little value or appreciation.

Anger is a protective mechanism. It is used by the body to sound an alarm that something is wrong. Wives and mothers who recognize that their anger is telling them something are more likely to search for a way to balance their own needs with those of their husbands and children. Women's anger is warning them that something is wrong, and that danger exists for themselves and for their children. Women, who fail to recognize this warning sign, or refuse to respond to it, place themselves in further danger of becoming mentally or physically ill, addicted to alcohol or other drugs, or of risking the welfare and safety of their children.

Mothers, who are unable for any reason, to respect their bodies' natural, normal protective system are at risk for misplacing their anger onto their children. Many times, women are not even aware that their anger is a warning sign. Other times, mothers are distracted by their conflicting feelings when it comes to anger and their children. Although exhaustion and anger are natural responses to children's constant testing of boundaries, few women understand that it is normal (Swigart 1998). Many women fear that they will become abusive or be seen as monsters if they even admit to having angry feelings toward their children. Ironically, women are at greater risk of abusing their children when their anger is not allowed to be expressed appropriately and addressed as a signal that they need help. Society's expectations that mothering is an exclusive job requiring no breaks, no job-sharing and minimal support threatens the women's well-being as well as their children's safety.

Women's roles require them to place the needs of others before their own. They are instructed not to express the anger associated with meeting those needs. They are not permitted to confront how little society appreciates the work they do. However, it is part of the human condition to experience an emotional reaction when deprived of basic needs. Babies are born with the ability to express angry as a way to alert caregivers that they have a need. By crying when they are hungry, wet or cold, babies can exert some influence over their caregivers to meet these needs.

When their cries are not responded to immediately, infants tend to cry louder and become more demanding until they receive attention. This initial, biological programming is never lost. Although young girls eventually try to ignore this instinctual response in an effort to comply with the rules for being female, their bodies do not allow them to completely forget how to use anger as a way to alert others that their basic needs are not getting met. Yet, when women send out a cry for help, it seldom gets the same nurturing response it did when they were babies. It therefore, becomes necessary to increase the volume in order to be heard. Unfortunately, this behavior is often treated as an unnecessary emotional outburst or an over-reaction to what is going on at the moment rather than a response to an ongoing problem.

In our society, young girls are taught not to express anger, not to ask for what they need, not to assert themselves and definitely, not to confront someone for failing to provide for them. What they are taught to do is to find indirect ways of getting their needs met. A classic example of this method is seen when a woman asks her husband if he is cold because she is the one who needs the heat turned up. If he answers yes, she is relieved. If he should insist he is fine, the woman finds herself trying to convince him otherwise. This indirect way of getting her needs met may succeed in getting her husband to turn up the heat, but the price the wife pays for using this technique is a loss of self-esteem. Although she may have gotten her needs met, she does not feel very good about herself because the way she got her husband to address what she needed was by convincing him that they were really his needs.

Getting her needs met by convincing others that they are meeting their own needs serves to reinforce the woman's lack of importance in the relationship. Her husband is not provided with an opportunity to demonstrate his ability or desire to take care of her. When her husband turns up the heat because he suspects she is cold, the wife never realizes that he is trying to be there for her. She believes it is because she convinced him that he was cold. The couple loses an opportunity for intimacy, the man a chance to be a hero and the woman insight on how much her husband cares for her.

In this no-win scenario, many women experience pain. If they do not acknowledge the needs they have, they will feel deprived, angry, and frustrated. If they find seductive ways to get their needs met, they lose self-esteem, any sense of empowerment and feel resentment that they are not granted the same rights to get needs met that loved ones experience. If they do admit to having needs and assert their right to getting those needs acknowledged by loved ones, they risk being accused of being unfeminine, a demanding wife ("bitch"), or a selfish, self-centered, bad mother. No matter what course of action these women take they risk something negative and this creates a huge conflict for them. No matter which way they turn, they can not solve this dilemma in a satisfying way. As a result, women's bodies respond to this conflict with more anger, just like the infant who cries louder for the caregiver who has not responded.

Eventually, the woman must respond to the anger she feels or risk her health. Anger that is not addressed can do a great deal of damage to the body. Yet, women are not allowed to be angry, express this anger or make changes that would eliminate the anger. Therefore, women must find an alternative way to cope with their anger. Some women turn to alcohol, drugs, food and other addictions to cope with their feelings. Others become depressed, anxious and phobic. A large number of women find that their anger turns to rage.

When Anger Becomes Rage

Rage, although just as much of a taboo as anger (if not more so!), serves an important purpose in women's lives. Faced with the impossible conflict of feeling anger and not being permitted to express it, rage can seem like a viable option. On one hand, women are expected to be needless and wantless nurturers, who are responsible for the success of the relationships. On the other hand, women, in reality, experience neediness, acute emotional deprivation, exhaustion and resentment. Women must find coping skills that will allow them some relief as caregivers, while maintaining loyalty to the roles and rules of being female.

Ironically, rage can serve this function in much the same way alcohol, drugs, food and depression do. What these coping mechanisms have in common is a loss of control. The woman is, theoretically, powerless over the process and therefore, unable to take responsibility for stopping the behavior. In addition, each one of these behaviors provides emotional relief around her caregiving activities. A woman too drunk, too depressed, or out of control in a rage is unable to perform her duties as wife and mother. In a sense, rage, depression and addictions of any kind erect an artificial boundary around the woman, which protects her from the neediness of others while allowing her to maintain a rigid adherence to her roles as a female. It is not that she is refusing to follow the rules associated with being female, a loving wife and good mother, it is that she is unable to abide by them because she is out of control.

Rage is particularly effective as a barrier against further caretaking. Few people are willing to make demands on someone who is angry. Human instinct is to avoid such people and women who

are raging may finally find the alone time they need to recover from their exhaustion around taking care of others. In some cases, loved ones may be anxious to make the woman feel better (or at least stop the expression of anger) and be willing on these rare occasions to meet some of the woman's needs. This response by husbands, children and other family members to finally react to the woman's needs develops into a cycle of behavior that is not only destructive but also self-reinforcing.

Without realizing it, family members actually encourage the woman to rage by paying attention to her when she does. This teaches the woman that she will not get heard until she raises the volume. Eventually, she learns to rage sooner. It works the same way as a television set that is ignored as background noise when the volume is low. Family members barely notice that it is on. However when the volume is blaring, it becomes difficult *not* to pay attention. The woman's rage serves a similar function. The husband and children do not pay attention until the woman explodes. Eventually the woman's rage becomes cyclical.

The Rage Cycle

The "cycle of rage" begins when the woman, following the rules of how to be a nurturing wife and mother, discovers that she is unable to meet society's expectations without going beyond her own tolerance level for giving. She is not supposed to say "No" to the demands of her husband, children and extended family. She is not permitted to turn down loved one's requests for help or to assert her own needs. Her family, because of the myths, expects her to respond to their needs, eventually becoming dependent on her to do so. Unfortunately for everyone involved, there are serious problems, not only for the woman, but also for her friends, husband, children and other loved ones.

In their efforts to take care of others, women actually rob loved ones of learning to take care of themselves. When women meet the needs of others, instead of letting them fend for themselves or learn to ask for what they need, they protect husbands and children from experiencing their own neediness. By eliminating their neediness, a painful state to say the least, women are also eliminating loved ones' motivation to learn vital life skills. For most human beings, pain is a great motivator for encouraging change, learning new behaviors, and expressing appreciation for what it takes to reduce our pain. It is part of the human condition for people to be grateful for the help they ask for and to resent help that is given before it is needed or wanted.

Most people do not want to feel dependent on others and will go to great lengths to deny any dependency that does exist. One way to avoid feeling dependent is to have needs met before they are recognizable as needs. Husbands, who never have to deal with dirty clothes because laundry is mysteriously done when they are not looking, can fail to identify that this need exists or that their wives are meeting it. By not acknowledging either the need or the fact that it is getting met, husbands can ignore that they are dependent on their wives. In addition, men are not given the opportunity to develop an appreciation for what is involved in meeting their needs.

Unable to appreciate the energy, effort and time that goes into the work women do, husbands fail to be grateful, impressed or respectful for all that goes into their care. People tend to appreciate help more when they know what that help entails. Unless they have experienced doing it for themselves, husbands and children do not understand the "behind the scenes" work of a good meal, clean home, organized schedule or any of the variety of things women accomplish on a daily basis on behalf of their families.

In a similar vein, husbands and children are often protected from experiencing the negative consequences of the poor decisions they make because women tend to come to the rescue when something goes wrong. For example, the mom who brings forgotten homework or lunch to school for the child who neglected to put it in her backpack prevents the child from experiencing the teacher's reaction to her mistake. This feedback is valuable information for individuals in building skills and competency and in recognizing self-destructive behaviors. Children, who can rely on parents to compensate for all their errors, mistakes and poor problem-solving, fail to improve on these skills. On the other hand, children who are allowed to suffer some reasonable consequences are more likely to develop strategies, learn new skills or come up with better solutions to their problems.

Another example of how rescuing is ineffective and how it is responsible for creating a whole new set of problems can be found in the alcoholic home. Many wives of alcoholics believe their role is to keep the household functioning, their husbands taken care of and their children protected from the drinking regardless of the obstacles. In order for them to achieve their goals however, wives must compensate for their husbands' deficiencies when they are too inebriated to play their roles as husbands and fathers. Women feel compelled to minimize the true impact of their husbands' drinking in an effort to fulfill their duties as wives. Unfortunately, this protection (or enabling, as it is called in the addiction field) allows husbands to continue their drinking without experiencing negative consequences to themselves or loved ones; negative consequences that would allow them to see what their drinking is doing to their families.

In the addiction field, wives of alcoholics are seen as enabling the drinking because their caretaking prevents their husbands from experiencing the drinking as self-destructive. Interestingly, this reaction from healthcare professionals places more blame on women for carrying out their roles as nurturers than it does in making alcoholic men responsible for putting their wives in the position of having to enable them. It is obvious women's efforts to meet their husbands' needs and protect their children, especially in the face of a crisis such as alcoholism, is a natural extension of their roles as wives and mothers.

In alcoholic homes, women's roles are played out by protecting their husbands from the consequences of their addiction. In other families, women's caretaking is experienced by husbands as normal, the way things are supposed to be. Men play their roles as financial providers and they expect women to do their part. Husbands are frequently unaware of the price women pay for playing this role and most would be shocked to find out how their wives feel. Men have no reason to question the roles they and their wives are playing in their marriages. Society has taught men the rules for "female" and "male" behavior and they follow them accordingly. This dynamic between husbands and wives is mostly unconscious, played out in countless American families and thought to be normal.

Over a period of time, the woman's overfunctioning focus on others begins to take its toll. She becomes exhausted, depleted, overwhelmed and needy herself. She is hungry for attention or at least a break from the constant demands of her children and husband. Her own needs for basic survival, freedom and power are triggered. Sometimes she is further burdened by premenstrual symptoms, an illness or a personal crisis, which increases her own needs for support and comfort. In any case, the woman gets tired and then resentful that she is expected to be the one to give. She makes feeble attempts to get her own needs met. She may whine, complain, nag or become tearful. Usually, her husband and family react negatively to this behavior. Understandably, they find her attitude unattractive and are confused by her emotional reactions toward them. They have been

comfortable with the roles played as they have been and feel no burning desire to change them. It does not occur to the husband that his wife may feel differently.

At this point, the woman becomes angry and then guilty for being angry. The woman is experiencing difficulty with the rules society dictates for wives and mothers. However, she feels uncomfortable getting angry about these rules or with the people who need her to take care of them. The woman is in a quandary. To be a good woman, she must be nurturing and giving. She tries to be that kind of woman to fulfill her own need to belong and feel loved. To experience this connection or belonging, she must follow society's rules for female behavior. Yet, she is resentful because the rules that would make this connection possible require her to ignore her own boundaries. As a result, she denies having needs and does not respond to her body's warning system that she is not acting in her own best interests and well-being.

The woman, who has never learned how to balance the needs of others with her own, never becomes comfortable in asserting an equal give and take in her relationships. She never develops the ability to determine when she has given more than she has to give and is therefore, at risk for falling into the cycle of rage. This woman does not feel she has the right to ask for what she needs or that she is allowed to stop giving when she is on empty. She believes it is her job to meet her family's needs no matter what and that she has failed as a woman, daughter, wife and mother when she is unable to keep giving. To add further to her stress, she does not feel appreciated or respected for following society's rules. She is expected to play her role with little recognition, gratitude or acknowledgement from loved ones. In fact, taking care of others does not empower the woman in her relationships and because caregiving is regarded as low-status work, it often affects her self-esteem as well. If she is required to keep giving beyond her tolerance level, she becomes exhausted from the continual demands of loved ones.

Eventually, the conflict between how women view themselves and how society expects them to behave creates a personal crisis for most women. Society says women should be happy in their roles as wives and mothers, while many women feel exploited, resentful and needy. In response, women feel anger they are not allowed to express. Many women are trapped with feelings they are struggling to deny and stuck with a lifestyle they are trying to embrace. The anger and resentment continues to build until it becomes rage.

Women's rage takes many forms depending on the woman, the family dynamics, her role models and her resources. Sometimes rage is expressed verbally. Other times it can be physical. Women in a rage have been known to yell, scream, verbally abuse, hit, kick, punch and hurt the same people they are supposed to be nurturing. Although this behavior may not initially make sense, the woman's rage works to stop loved ones from making constant demands for getting needs met. Rage works as an artificial boundary. Children hide, husbands distance and parents stop asking their daughters for help. For that moment in a woman's life, she is not being bombarded with the needs of others. In some families, the woman may even find relief from her own needs when husbands and children scurry around trying to make her happy.

One of the sad truths about the rage cycle is that when the woman does rage and people respond, she finally feels heard, at least temporarily. Although it may be for the wrong reasons, the rage works to express anger, escape caretaking responsibilities and get heard. In families where the rage has become a pattern, loved ones take the woman's frustration more seriously by paying careful attention to her behavior and responding to her demands. Unfortunately, family members who respond only when the woman rages help to set up the self-reinforcing part of the rage cycle. As

much as women try not to get angry, their rage helps to create the boundaries they lack around caretaking and allows the focus to shift onto what they need. The down side unfortunately, is that women are devastated when they break the taboo around expressing anger and are ashamed that their anger was so damaging. This experience reinforces women's (and society's) perceptions that women's anger is dangerous.

Mortified at their outburst, these women want to forget their anger and return to being socially-accepted wives and mothers. On the positive side, their rage has made it possible for the women to release pent up anger and get some of their needs met; on the negative side, husbands, children and extended family are furious with the women's behavior. Frightened by the women's anger, family members chastise the women for their outburst and loss of control and in response, the women promise to control their behavior. Most women swear that they will never rage again and increase their efforts to be the wonderful nurturer expected of them. In this way, the rage has helped to release emotions and the women can now return to their role as nurturers. Everyone benefits and the status quo is reinstated.

The woman, who is recovering from a raging outburst, focuses even more on meeting the needs of others. She is particularly vigilant of her husband's needs, and he often finds that his wife is more open to sexual requests after she rages. She is even more determined not to say "No" to demands made by loved ones because she feels she has failed them by raging. Once more she becomes the passive, needless and wantless caregiver, available and willing to play her role as nurturer in the family. She denies her resentment and becomes even more committed to never get angry like that again. She feels incredibly guilty over the anger expressed earlier, and considers it abnormal and further evidence of her failure to be a healthy woman. Her shame over her past rage adds to her guilt, which increases her motivation not to admit to the anger she begins to feel once more.

This time, the anger builds up faster and stronger. She becomes more exhausted, needier and eventually, angrier because she is more determined to fulfill her role as wife and mother. Her family, in a similar vein, feels justified in making more demands. They believe they are entitled to the woman's increased efforts to meet their needs on the grounds that she failed to meet them earlier when she raged. The family becomes entrenched in a cycle. The guiltier the woman feels about the last bout of rage, the greater her efforts to be the perfect nurturer and the more her family feels entitled to focus on what they need. The greater the family's demands, the angrier the woman becomes until her rage erupts once again.

The rage cycle is very damaging to women, their husbands and especially children who have little understanding of why mother "flies off the handle" every so often. Many families blame the outbursts on hormones and it is not uncommon for the rages to coincide with the woman's menstrual cycle. The additional stress around premenstrual symptoms can overwhelm the woman's efforts to play out her role perfectly (Lush, 1987). The woman's self-esteem is severely affected by her raging behavior and she becomes vulnerable to being abused by an angry husband. She is also at risk of becoming addicted to alcohol, drugs or some other substance in order to numb the pain, shame, and resentment that she feels, both for her failure to fulfill her role and for her outburst. The woman who rages does not feel good about the way she got her family's attention, even if it did mean getting a break and getting some needs met. It is a hollow victory for the woman who comes out of it with little self-esteem. Family members tend not to feel good about her either. Everyone believes the woman has failed as a wife and mother and this belief system increases the likelihood that the cycle will continue.

In spite of the negative consequences, the rage cycle is seductive because it does work. It helps women get basic needs met, especially if they have no other options. Husbands, children and parents may take the woman more seriously during her outburst than any other time in their relationship. Many choose this time to show appreciation for what the woman does out of fear of losing that support if she continues to be angry. Women gain some freedom from continual demands and they experience an illusion of power when loved ones suddenly pay attention to what they need.

Rage is a very powerful emotion and the woman who expresses it comes to feel powerful in her relationships. Suddenly she has the power to demand what she needs, to make things happen and to influence the behavior of loved ones. This power is momentary and an illusion however, because it is based on fear. It is not an effective way to feel empowered in relationships and it is only useful to women who have no other means of acquiring power in their relationships. Women caught up in the rage cycle see no other way to curtail caretaking demands, set boundaries or to feel empowered. They are trapped between abiding by society's expectations and feeling like a failure because they are not able to fit the role. Alone, isolated and with limited awareness of the big picture, women are unable to see that they are not the only ones having trouble fitting into their roles as wives and mothers.

Although not immediately apparent, husbands and other family members also benefit from the rage cycle. The woman's behavior gives loved ones a reason to rationalize the rules and roles everyone is expected to play in the family. Her rage reinforces the taboo that it is not healthy for women to get angry, to express that anger or to use anger as a signal that change needs to occur. Family members, who have enjoyed getting needs met without the responsibility of reciprocating, appreciate the woman's humble response after an episode of rage and her increased efforts to please them. The spotlight stays on the woman and what is wrong with her, rather than what is occurring in a system that is not working. Change does not have to take place if everyone agrees that the focus is on the woman's behavior and the solution is that she should try harder to be an appropriate wife and mother.

Who Is At Risk?

Women who are most vulnerable to succumb to the rage cycle are those that lack boundaries, assertiveness skills and those who strongly believe in the rules society has about being female. Female alcoholics and drug addicts are particularly prone to the rage cycle, both because of the lowered inhibitions for expressing anger and the loss of control associated with alcohol and other drugs. Alcoholics and addicts also report experiencing the rage cycle in early recovery until they are able to develop healthy boundaries and learn assertiveness skills.

Mothers of young children or children with disabilities, women with dependent parents, single mothers, and women suffering from Pre-Menstrual Syndrome, disabilities or chronic ailments have more on their plate than the general population. Chronic pain, whether it is physical or emotional, wears down resources, increases needs and creates frustration and resentment. Raising children is exhausting for anyone and mothers need incredible support to be good parents. Society often underestimates the amount of emotional and physical energy that goes into taking care of children.

Women with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) with or without hyperactivity have a low tolerance for frustration making them likely candidates for raging. They have fewer internal

resources for coping with frustration and tend to have greater needs for emotional support. Their anger over unmet needs is triggered more quickly and their rage can be more volatile. In addition, women with ADD or other disabilities often go through the rage cycle more frequently, feel more shame and guilt over their exaggerated behavior and are chastised more often by family members already coping with the consequences of the woman's ADD.

Women with ADD frequently get overstimulated with demands for caretaking and experience greater difficulty meeting them successfully. Low self-esteem follows repeated failures to be the perfect nurturer because of ADD symptoms. The most common symptom of ADD is the inability to pay attention long enough to learn a new skill, remember important information or recognize when they have needs of their own. They forget to do things that are important to the family and they have a low tolerance for frustration. ADD women get bored easily, often fail to complete tasks and are usually disorganized. All of these skills are necessary for running a household, and so family members are often the first to experience the woman's disability and to react negatively to it. Under these difficult circumstances, ADD women tend to try harder to look like a "normal" female by strongly adhering to society's version of how "normal" women are supposed to behave. This is particularly true for ADD mothers who continually try to compensate for their deficits with their children.

Understandably, women who feel they have failed to live up to society's standards, suffer from low self-esteem. The worse the woman feels about herself, the greater her need to have a sense of belonging, to feel empowered in relationships and to experience freedom in her daily choices. However, the worse her self-esteem, the more difficult it is to get those needs met. Women with low self-esteem do not feel worthy enough to ask for what they need and tend to try more desperately to please others in order to feel connected and loved. Unfortunately, the more they give and the less they receive, the more likely they are to become involved in the rage cycle.

Woman married to alcoholics are also vulnerable to raging. Alcoholic husbands frequently abdicate all responsibility for the relationship and themselves as their drinking prevents them from taking care of even the most basic of needs. These men typically need more caretaking and have less to give in return. The alcoholic marriage is often filled with chaos, confusion and a constant denial of reality. Many women feel controlled and manipulated by their alcoholic spouses. As a result, they often feel frustrated, resentful and needy.

Rage is one way to get the alcoholic's attention. It also offers the woman some relief from the anger she feels about her husband's obvious prioritization of alcohol over her. Wives of alcoholics have more than their share of anger over the consequences of their husbands' drinking and less permission to express that anger. Rage can be a great distraction from the drinking, while at the same time providing relief to the woman around her pent up emotions and needs. The woman's periodic bouts with rage do not threaten the stability of the marriage in any real way. No one in the family realizes they are participating in a cycle and each member believes that the last outburst will in fact, be the last time the woman rages.

Rage also ensures that change does not occur to disrupt the current family system. Unlike anger, which alerts the woman something is wrong and action must be taken, rage alerts the woman that something is wrong with her. It is the body's way of pointing out that the warning system has been ignored. However, for women who do not recognize that they have missed the earlier signs of danger, their rage only points out that they are doing something wrong. The something wrong women believe they have done is to fail at being the perfect wife and mother. Their solution therefore, is to increase their efforts to play out their roles better. However, the only solution that

works on a permanent basis is to break the rage cycle and confront the fairy tale myths women are expected to live by.

Treatment Issues

Breaking the Cycle

Numerous changes in the field of psychology have proven to be beneficial for women who want to confront the myths behind marriage and motherhood. For years the consensus among experts has been that independence and individuality was the measure of psychological health in both men and women. Against this standard, women were considered immature and inferior because of their obvious reliance on relationships for self-esteem. However, professionals have come to realize that society benefits from women's drive to be in relationships. What was once considered psychological immaturity is now being recognized as an evolutionary strength. Our species survives within relationships. Women's ability to form relationships makes it possible for them to nurture their offspring and to do so in a group setting. The loss of this method of nurturing threatens the cohesiveness of the family and the community.

Theories on the psychology of women have advanced in recent years to include an entirely different model of psychological growth than the earlier one proposed for men. This new theory is very different from men because it results from a shared experience with women; the biological role of pregnancy, childbirth and lactation, the social role of motherhood and society's perceptions of these roles. These roles and their value, or lack thereof, have a profound effect on every woman's sense of self. In response to this enlightened awareness, the new female psychology has defined women's sense of themselves in relationships as "self-in-relation" (Johnson, 1991).

While men's psychological growth comes from detaching from mother and pursuing independence in order to identify with father, women's psychological growth develops within the continuing attachment with mother. This pattern of developing an identity, a sense of self and self-esteem within relationships continues for women throughout their lives, both in their marriages and in their roles as mothers. As women take on the mantle of motherhood, they are required to form attachments to their own children, particularly daughters, and in doing so ensure the survival of the species. The time has finally come that the work women do in relationships is being respected for what it is, a biological necessity.

In order to break the cycle of rage in women, it is critical to respect women's needs to be in relationships. Women can be admired for their strength in their ability to make (limited) sacrifices on behalf of their relationships. It is time for society to acknowledge the importance of women's nurturing to the survival of the next generation and give permission for women to:

- Have needs
- Be assertive in getting those needs met
- Be angry when those needs do not get met
- Confront others when those needs do not get met

The key factors that contribute to the possibility that women will rage is the expectation that women are:

1. Supposed to nurture without concern about getting their own basic needs met.
2. Exclusively responsible for husbands, children, aging parents and ailing friends.
3. Blamed for the behavior of loved ones and the choices they make.
4. Not respected for the work they do in their relationships and homes.

An intervention on the rage cycle requires that the entire family confront society's rules on marriage and motherhood. Once these rules are examined for what they are, women can work with each other and with their families to develop more appropriate and healthier guidelines on how to be good wives and mothers. Women need to learn how to be assertive in asking for what they need, to establish healthy boundaries on how they want to be treated and to set limits on how much they are capable of caretaking before they need a break. Family members need to learn to respect these boundaries and to show their appreciation for the work women do to maintain the household.

Anger is a normal feeling, a useful feeling, a necessary feeling for survival. In order to provide women alternative ways to cope with societal messages and the feelings that arise from them, women must be given permission to both have needs and to feel angry when those needs are not met. Women need to recognize and respect their anger as a warning that they need a break and a signal that it is time to take care of themselves. Women must learn how to express anger appropriately and to become more comfortable with asserting their boundaries. Men must learn how to respond appropriately to women's anger and respect the boundaries women set. Both women and men must learn to respect the work women do and be more willing to share the load more equitably. Each person must share in the responsibilities of the relationship and *take turns* in getting their needs met. Men, in particular, respond favorably to the concept of fairness and a balance of needs and responsibilities in their relationships. A critical component to this understanding is to confront the myth that women enjoy caretaking and do not suffer from it in any way.

One of the most destructive views on motherhood is that raising children is easy and always fun for women. When men caretake, they are frequently shocked at the degree of difficulty experienced with raising children. Mistakenly, they assume women find it less difficult or demanding because they are biologically wired to nurture. This is not true. Parenting children is hard work for both mothers and fathers. Many men have a better understanding of their wives' roles as mothers once they realize that their wives often feel the same way they do as parents. Although mothers and fathers love their children very much, parenting can be demanding, exhausting, difficult and sometimes painful for everyone, regardless of gender. Men are often surprised to discover that this is just as true for their wives as it is for them.

Women are often frustrated with men that are not jumping in more to perform household tasks. It must be realized that no one (male or female) has ever fought for his or her right to clean a toilet, scrub the floor or do the laundry. There is nothing virtuous about cleaning a house that would motivate individuals to demand that it is their turn to perform the job. Nevertheless, many women experience a sense of achievement and pride for a task well done. Men, on the other hand, tend to

have more difficulty experiencing a sense of accomplishment when the stove they just cleaned needs to be used now to cook dinner. One wife described how painful it was for her husband to see anyone use the bathroom after he cleaned it. At work her husband, like many men, was accustomed to being rewarded for completing projects. In contrast, household projects are rarely completed and many men have difficulty with the concept that there is no finish line when performing household chores.

Another area of conflict between spouses occurs when women measure their husbands' household jobs by the same standards they use to judge their own work. Many husbands are reluctant to volunteer to do tasks that place them in a position to be criticized. Yet this is often what happens when men make attempts to enter their wives' domain. Men often go about a project with their own way of doing things. (This is equally true among women, but for some reason this is not always easy for wives to recognize.) Women, on the other hand, are often attached to a particular way of doing things. They view this way as the only correct way to accomplish the tasks. Needless to say, men are usually not privy to this information and resent it when women "correct" them on how the work needs to be done. Men who feel that the floor should be swept once a week are going to be confronted by angry wives who believe their husbands are shirking their responsibilities if they do not sweep the kitchen every day.

Men also tend to have a higher tolerance level for dirt and clutter (Byalick & Saslow, 1993) and therefore do not perceive the mess their wives identify as unacceptable. As a group, husbands are not as disturbed by clutter or disorganization. They "do not see" the crumbs on the counter or the socks on the floor partly because they tend to spend less time in the home and partly because their attention is on more important matters and interests. This infuriates women who find it hard to believe that their husbands are so "blind" as to miss what is so obviously apparent to them. It is also true that men who are accustomed to seeing household tasks as "women's work" must cope with their feelings about doing something that does not feel very masculine to them (Stanway, 1988). Some of the difficulty in "seeing" the household mess and doing something about it is that it sparks the husbands' struggle to maintain their masculine identity.

Finally, men who "have won the lottery" so to speak, in finding wives willing to do the boring tasks necessary to run a household will naturally resent being asked to "give the money back" and start sharing the work equally. It is unrealistic to blame men for having enjoyed the relative freedom from housework they have experienced. They have been following their own myths about what it means to be a husband and father. People tend to take for granted what they have, whether it is a standard of living or a beautiful view out of their office window. They often fail to appreciate these things until they are at risk of losing them. Interestingly, rather than show more appreciation for what they have, human beings often get angry over the threat of losing it. Men are not unusual in that they are experiencing their own anger and resentment over losing out on a good deal.

Educating women and their families on the absurdity of the rules associated with both male and female roles is the first step towards recognizing the need for change. The next step is to create new rules where men and women can work together to find out how to share the responsibilities of home, marriage and children. A healthy relationship is one in which there is a balance of needs, power, responsibility and respect. How this balance is acquired however, must be determined according to each partner's needs. Husbands and wives can learn to take turns, participate fully in meeting each other's needs and aim for fairness in their relationships with each other.

Women also need to be supported in their roles as mothers. The old adage that "it takes a village to raise a child" should not be lost in our large modern cities. It is inhumane to expect mothers to take exclusive responsibility for their children. Counselors can be a voice in reassuring women that motherhood requires a peer support group. Women need help in finding ways to *share* the job with their husbands and other family and community members, even though giving up control of their children can be frightening for many women. Ironically, wives can be quite vocal in demanding changes from their men, as far as household tasks are concerned, but refuse to allow husbands, access to their babies. Mothers often have very specific ways of caring for their children and fail to realize that fathers are naturally going to have their own way of doing things. While men are beginning to see the benefits of spending time with their children, women are learning the loss that comes with sharing them. In a way, they are having the same experience men did when women entered the work force.

Raising children has always been the women's domain and allowing men to enter the "childcare force" requires the same shift in belief systems that were rocked when women began working outside of the home. This will be a difficult transition for some women. On one hand, they will no longer be burdened with primary responsibility or all of the blame for their children. On the other hand, children will develop the same loving attachments with their fathers as they have now formed with their mothers. This will be particularly evident if the couple should divorce and both parents want full custody of the children. Just as men lost power in their relationships when their financial status changed in the family, women will lose power over their children when their maternal status changes. As painful as this may be for some women, change must occur if the rage cycle is to stop.

In order to change the rage cycle, women must learn about healthy boundaries and how to establish them appropriately. Women can benefit from building assertiveness skills, learning how to identify basic needs in themselves and ways to communicate those needs to others. However, women must first accept that they have equal rights to get their needs met. As women become better skilled in recognizing when they have reached their limits and in setting boundaries around those limits, they will not succumb to unhealthy forms of anger to achieve the same goals. In addition, by confronting their limitations and giving themselves permission to live outside the confines of the rigid rules that currently define a female's place in society, women will acquire more power within their relationships.

Women who are successful wives and loving mothers may find that they end up getting divorced. One of the drawbacks to playing society's idea of the perfect wife and mother is that women's lives are devoted to others and many women stop growing as people (Lush, 1987). Many women, after years of maternal devotion, are devastated to lose their husbands to a mistress. Men like adventure, a challenge, a mystery, and wives who play out their roles perfectly according to society's expectations often fail to provide much interest to their men (Lush, 1987). Their husbands may admit that their wives were perfect in every way but these women became the roles they played and therefore were perceived as boring and too predictable to the men who were once attracted to them. Men do not want to be married to the maid; wives need to have lives outside the home to stay interesting to their husbands.

Finally, anger is an emotion every human being feels. It is a survival mechanism that signals that a threat exists and must be attended to immediately. Anger should never be ignored and when it is, there are usually dire consequences for doing so. Anger should be acknowledged in the same way women react to a red traffic light. Something is happening and anger is one way their bodies can warn them to evaluate the situation and respond. The woman's response may be to assert a need of

her own, set a boundary around her caretaking or take a break from it altogether. Once she is able to take some kind of action to protect herself and get her needs met, she is less likely to rely on rage to solve her problems for her.

An important tool for women trying to end their cycles of rage is to learn how a woman's body responds to feeling angry. For some women, it is a tense jaw, a knot in their stomachs or pain in their shoulders. Many women miss these early warning signs or attribute them to stress. However, these signs are important ways for women to become familiar with their limitations, who they are and what they want or need. Once the anger is identified, women must learn to connect their anger to what is currently happening in their lives in order to identify what the anger is telling them. After recognizing what is making them angry, women can learn to brainstorm for solutions.

For example, one woman found that she got angry every night after she came home from her job as a school teacher. What she eventually realized was that the demands of her husband and children were overwhelming the moment she walked in the door. Like many men coming home from a long day at the office, she felt she gave all day to the children in her classroom and she needed some space before giving to her own children. Her children, on the other hand, missed her and were anxious to get her attention when she walked in the door. This woman was able to brainstorm with her family on how to make this transition easier for everyone. It was finally decided that, rather than come home immediately, she would stop off at a nearby park for a fifteen minute break after which she would come home more available to her family.

Once this woman stepped outside of society's definition of what she was supposed to do when she came home from work, she was able to identify her anger as a warning signal that she was giving beyond her tolerance level. In the past, her belief system about how mothers are supposed to behave required her to give to her family regardless of how she felt. Many times the results were nights of her raging and the children scurrying to their rooms. Afterwards, her husband would berate her for her behavior and blame her for frightening the children. She would respond by forcing herself to be more available to her children the next night after work. Her husband and children got the message that it was their right to get their demands met even when the woman was tired from work. She got the message that there was something wrong with her because she had to force herself to give to her own children.

When the family confronted their old beliefs and adopted new ones, they began to respect that their mother had limitations. Husband and wife learned to negotiate how and when to meet each other's needs and how to share responsibility for caretaking their children. When the woman felt anger, she acknowledged it as important and shared her experience with the family. Together, they helped to identify what might not be working and figured out how to resolve it in a way that ensured everyone felt that their needs were being addressed. In the end, it was a simple tool that ended years of raging, verbal abuse, hostility and pain.

The Reality of Myths

There is an assumption behind myths that they apply to everyone, every time and under every circumstance. When challenging the myths that are not true for them, many women try to make new myths that more accurately reflect who they are. However, a common mistake is to assume these new myths are now correct for everyone else, every time and under every circumstance. The truth behind myths is that they often describe some people, at some time in their lives and under some

circumstances. Women who can come to terms with this reality will be more likely to challenge the myths that do not apply to them without making other women wrong for complying with myths that describe them perfectly.

An example of making assumptions about myths is seen in the belief that stay-at-home mothers are able to meet their children's needs better than mothers who work outside of the home. It is assumed that stay-at-home mothers are available all day to give their children attention, intellectual stimulation, plenty of affection and a variety of educational and social experiences. That these women are thoroughly enjoying their children every minute of the day, feel entirely satisfied with their daily routine in the home and are completely fulfilled in their roles as wives and mothers as defined by our society is unrealistic as an extreme.

However, it is not unrealistic for some women to find staying at home with children an ideal job. The truth is that there are many women who feel perfectly happy when they are taking care of husbands and children. They can not imagine a task more rewarding and feel fortunate to have the opportunity to devote all of their time and energy to their children. Nevertheless, this does not mean that they do not have difficult days or that they could do it without support.

Many of these women are fortunate to have physical help from their husbands and extended family. There may be financial resources for hiring a house cleaner to do the heavy work in the home or to get help with childcare. The children and fathers may also contribute to helping mothers enjoy their roles in the home because they are easy to be with. The children may be good-natured, fairly independent and introverted enough not to require a lot of outside social stimulation. The fathers may show enthusiasm and respect to the mothers for the work they are doing. They may be satisfied and extremely happy with their own roles as financial providers. They enjoy their careers, the intellectual stimulation of their jobs and the financial rewards and respect that go with their prestigious positions. When they get home, these fathers look forward to spending time with their children, thereby providing their wives with breaks from caretaking.

In contrast, there are also women who struggle through the long, lonely hours with needy, dependent children. They are extremely bored without adult conversation and companionship. These women may have career aspirations, require a large amount of intellectual stimulation, be extremely extroverted and need plenty of friends and lots of social time. Their children may similarly be bored spending time at home alone with mother, require outside social contacts and need a lot of attention. Some children are just naturally more difficult than others. Colicky babies, demanding two-year-olds and older children who want to be continually entertained can be challenging for any mother isolated for long hours with their children. These women may have husbands with demanding jobs that keep them away from home for long periods of time. If financial resources are limited, these women may not be able to afford to hire help with the house and children. Without breaks, they are worn down with the workload and they may not have the time or energy to provide their children with very much attention or many social activities.

Many unhappy, lonely and frustrated stay-at-home mothers may depend on television or computer games to entertain their children. They may be busy with several children, lots of housework or depressed in front of the television themselves because they resent being home. Many mothers rely on children playing with siblings and find they spend very little one-on-one time with any of their children. In fact, these children may be starving for outside educational and social experiences and would benefit from attending an excellent day care facility with lots of interesting play options and other children to interact with.

Many working (outside the home) mothers on the other hand, may be spending more time actually interacting with their children than their stay-at-home counterparts, because they see the time with their children as limited. Many working mothers work part-time, in a home office or while the children are at school, so that they are home when the children are home. Yet, according to our myths, they are not stay-at-home moms because they do work outside of the home. It is assumed that their children are not benefiting from their attention. Other working mothers may hate their jobs, work long hours and be too exhausted by the time they get home to fully enjoy spending time with their children. These women resent having to work and wish they could stay at home to raise their children.

In this example, it becomes clear that no myth can fully describe every human experience. Each woman has her own set of needs, as does her husband, her children and her parents. Not every woman is well-suited to spend long hours with children and not every woman is interested in pursuing a career or working outside of the home. Some women, who stay at home with their children, are providing them with a rich environment, while other women are too depressed, lonely and exhausted to give their children much more than basic care. Some working mothers are able to balance exciting careers and intimate relationships with their children; while others work long hours for little pay and come home too exhausted to spend time with their children. There are working mothers who are able to find excellent care for their children through an enriched day care or extended family and there are those who have no adequate supervision or care for their children.

In every home, women and men must find a way to balance their needs with the needs of each other and their children. To do that effectively, the family must brainstorm together on how to create a situation where each member is getting what they need. There is no one right answer for everyone. However, the myths women are currently creating should aspire to be healthy, flexible and realistic. In order to achieve this goal, women and men will probably need to look at the larger issue of how we, as a society, are spending our time, structuring our work week and valuing our families. It would seem a noble cause to remember that it does take a village to raise a child. We need to work as a community to make it easier for women and men to balance their work and family in a way that meets the needs of everyone involved.

It is inaccurate to assume that every woman feels comfortable staying home all day to care for her children or that every man relishes playing the role of primary provider. Men and women should be free to negotiate the nurturer and provider roles with each other in a way that creates healthier families. To insist that roles are based on gender or should be divided equally misses the individual needs of the people involved. Most people are comfortable with the gray areas between these two extremes.

The myths around marriage have been destructive for wives who have trouble letting go of the Prince Charming fantasy. Their disappointment in the men they marry often leads to conflict, pain, and divorce. Accepting that the hero image is not realistic and learning to accept their husbands as human beings would save a lot of marriages. In the end, the myths we create as a society will hopefully be seen for what they are -- ideals to strive for only when they fit with our own value system, not injunctions to obey regardless of the fit. Human beings are remarkably diverse and our myths should reflect this diversity. When they do, women (and men) will find that they are able to live healthier and more functional lives with each other. Most importantly, the cycle of rage will have been broken.

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