PART ONE

Relational Aggression 201

The Who, What, and Why of RA

You've always been there, even in
Kindergarten, pushing my face into
a can of worms on the playground.
In grade school, calling me a witch
and telling me you'll burn me
at the stake at recess.
In middle school, you didn't want to
be my friend, you said I was weird,
too smart, too serious.
High school moments of pure hell,
of National Honor Society,
leads in school plays. Kisses of death.
In college, I kept to myself,
stayed clear of your jealousy,
alone with my own self-loathing.
In the real world, at every job,
you've always gone out of your way
to hurt me.

Aliza Sherman, "Take Me Down"

CHAPTER 1

All Grown Up and Ready to Sting
Adult Female Aggression

Mean girls grow up to be mean women,
make no mistake about that.

—A WOMAN CALLER TO A RADIO TALK SHOW ON BULLYING

It happens when you least expect it: the sudden, painful sting that hurts deeply, because you thought you were in a safe place, with other women and immune from harm. A word, a gesture, or some other seemingly innocuous behavior can be all it takes to wound in a way that hurts more than any physical blow. This is female relational aggression (RA): the subtle art of emotional devastation that takes place every day at home, at work, or in community settings. Unlike openly aggressive men, women learn early on to go undercover with these assaults, often catching their victims unaware. Many carry this behavior into adulthood.

What Is Relational Aggression?

RA is the use of relationships to hurt another, a way of verbal violence in which words rather than fists inflict damage. RA seems to peak in the early teen years when girls use a variety of behaviors that wound without ever pulling a punch. Word wars are often dismissed as "just the way girls are," or "she's just jealous." Whether or not you're a mother, you probably understand these scenarios

intuitively: the girl who gets excluded from a crowd she previously belonged to; the newcomer who fails to be accepted by other girls no matter what she does; the girl who is somehow different and targeted for that reason; or the popular Queen Bee, who buzzes from place to place spreading discomfort and manipulating others with her words. Sounds pretty juvenile, doesn't it?

Unfortunately, some women never outgrow these behaviors, turning into adults who slay with a smile and wound with a word. The mean girls of middle school may change into grown-up "shrews," "witches," "prima donnas," and "bitches," but underneath, the same game that started in grade school is still being played. In and out of the workplace, as individuals and in groups, these women continue to interact in aggressive ways reminiscent of high school hallways where girls jockeyed for social status.

After encounters with such women, you walk away wondering exactly what happened, and, sometimes, why you care so much. In a search for answers, you may even reflect back on your adolescent years, when behaviors such as jealousy, gossip, and forming cliques were the modus operandi. You may remember the moments when you sighed thankfully, thinking it was all behind you. The end result, when you discover it isn't, is feelings of confusion, hurt, and even fear. Consider the following real-life situations:

Rhonda, age thirty-four, is one of twenty-five female secretaries at a midsize legal firm. Her boss, impressed by Rhonda's computer skills, suggests she go for further training so she can help with the information technology needs of the firm. He offers to accommodate her time away for classes if she will agree to stay with the firm for a year after she finishes. When Rhonda tells her coworkers about the opportunity, they congratulate her, but in the weeks that follow, the emotional climate of the office grows noticeably cooler. Within a month of starting classes, Rhonda is no longer invited to lunch with the other women, and they frequently "forget" to pass on important messages that arrive while she is in class.

"What did I do wrong?" Rhonda asks Marci, the only coworker who isn't shunning her.

"Can't you see it?" Marci answers. "They're all jealous because you're getting an opportunity they aren't."

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Tina, an attractive twenty-two-year old, is one of three women participating in a corporate internship that will result in a job offer for one of them. So far, she is the strongest candidate for the position, which will involve working directly with the company's male CEO. One morning during a coffee break, Alice, one of the other interns, comes into the break room where Tina and the CEO are deep in conversation about a work project.

"Oh—*excuse me*!" Alice says loudly, a knowing smile on her face. Both Tina and the CEO invite her to stay, but she hurries out without another word.

A few days later, Tina finds herself alone in an elevator with Beth, the third intern.

"So, I hear things are really heating up between you and the CEO," Beth comments.

Blushing, Tina stammers, "What are you talking about?"

"Oh come on, Tina, you know exactly what I'm talking about. Everyone in the office does. You're sleeping with him just so you can get the job."

Sharon, the forty-year-old mother of teenaged Susanna, decides to volunteer for the band parents group at her daughter's high school. When Sharon takes her lunch hour early so she can attend the first meeting, the six other moms already there are slow to acknowledge her. When the meeting runs late, Sharon apologetically gathers up her things and puts on her coat.

"I'm sorry. I have to get back to work," she explains.

"Oh, you're a *working mom*," one of the women comments, exchanging a knowing glance with the others.

Same Behavior, Different Age

The incidents just described involving adult women are not so different from the teenager shunned by her friends, talked about in the hallways, or excluded from activities by other girls. Mean behavior exists on a continuum for both adolescents and adults. In an attempt to understand why, Judith Sutphen, a former director for the Vermont Commission on Women, met with a group of 130

teenage girls to discuss self-esteem and interactions with others. In the following excerpt from her report, Sutphen offers a possible explanation for why women may act to undermine one another and the consequences that result:

> There's been a lot of attention focused lately on mean girls. . . . "Relational aggression" is the new buzzword for girls who tease, insult, threaten, maliciously gossip, play cruel games with their best friends' feelings and establish exclusive cliques and hierarchies in high school. Writers try to reassure us that it's not that girls are born mean; they just get that way when they're with other girls.
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> . . . All the attention has made me think about why girls learn to hurt through relationships, and how this translates into our lives as grown women.
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> Perhaps girls don't necessarily want to be mean, they just want to be. "Be" in the sense of personal power, the kind that everybody wants. The shortest path to this goal for a girl, the Morrisville teens told us, is to be with a guy.
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> It's not until a lot later that they realize that maybe this power-through-another is not exactly what they were looking for.
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> But it's what they know.
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> Bringing all this into grown-up life as women, we are often ill prepared to support one another as some gain access to public power on their own. Women supervisors frequently note that directing male employees is easier than directing female employees. Women who are bold enough to step into public life through politics or the media are often most harshly critiqued by their own gender and held to a double standard in their accomplishments. Perhaps we've learned those girlhood games too well.
>
> It's time to unlearn them.

In her book *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girl's Development*, Dr. Carol Gilligan adds further insight to this issue. She stresses that while both girls and boys desire genuine connections with others, girls mature through forging

relationships rather than separating from them, which makes the failure to connect so problematic.

When there is a persistent failure to bond, to be heard, and to be understood, girls learn unhealthy relational patterns that can last into adulthood. The results can be long lasting: The head of a clique of mean girls in middle school aggressively makes her way through high school and college and bullies her way to the top in career or volunteer pursuits. The go-between girl who learns to survive by staying in the middle position continues to operate "behind the scenes" in adulthood. Tragically, the teen who believes she deserves the role of victim continues to place herself in a passive role in relationships long after she leaves the halls of high school.

Women who have never had true female friends, who avoid activities because they involve women, who disparage women as a group, or who deliberately work in male-dominated environments because they don't like women are everyday examples of a basic failure to connect with peers. This theory could explain why RA is so much more common (but not exclusive) to females across the lifespan.

The Mature Bee

Relational aggression in younger women generally involves three players: the bully or aggressor, the victim or target, and the bystander, a girl in between who watches aggression occur but may or may not intervene. In adult women, it seems apparent that RA becomes much more deliberate as well as subtle, and the in-betweener may play a different role because adult women are less likely to stand by passively and watch such situations unfold. Some of these women even adopt a malicious variation of the in-between role. If a bully is the Queen Bee, her sidekick is often the Middle Bee, who isn't directly aggressive, but who creates a context where women with a tendency to respond aggressively to threats will do so. For example, the Middle Bee may be the woman who makes sure the Queen Bee bully hears all the office coffee break talk—twisted so that it reflects badly on her. The Middle

Bee woman senses which behaviors are guaranteed to incite a potential aggressor and doesn't hesitate to use them.

In the same way, the Afraid-to-Bee adult woman demonstrates the victim role perfectly. Unlike an adolescent girl whose forming identity is vulnerable to the slings and arrows of a bully, the Afraid-to-Bee is more aware of her abilities and often knows that her tormenting Queen Bee is unreasonable but lacks the confidence to respond assertively. She is truly afraid to be her own person.

Why Are Women Often Their Own Worst Enemies?

Many of the women who voiced opinions on this question said that power is the underlying motivation for adult RA—the power to manipulate members of the PTA, the power to control a corporate climate, or the power to dominate physically at the gym. Because women traditionally have little power, this line of thought suggests that the instant there is a perceived threat, aggression occurs as a protective mechanism.

Others believe women and men are naturally opposite in terms of roles and values. While women supposedly focus on nurturing and helpful relationships, men strive for power. Women want to make connections and be liked, while men want to achieve goals and be superior, even if that means alienating others.

Some suggest that low self-esteem propels a woman into an aggressive or passive stance, and that giving or accepting emotional abuse is all about the view one has of oneself. Regardless of her role as Queen Bee (constantly on the offense), Afraid-to-Bee (scared victim), or Middle Bee (always in between), according to this theory, hurtful female behavior is motivated by feelings of inferiority.

Then there's the suggestion that aggression is learned behavior. According to proponents of this belief, women who grew up in aggressive and violent situations or who learned to interact with others in particular ways as children are more likely to use those same behaviors to relate to others throughout life.

Evolutionary psychologists such as Dr. Anne Campbell (*Men, Women, and Aggression*) explain that women are not by nature

violent. Aggression between women occurs as a genetic, protective drive to find the best circumstances to ensure the survival of children. Historically, this meant finding a protective male who was a good provider, but there are suggestions that this instinct to compete for resources may still motivate many women. That is, women are driven by a deeply ingrained biological need to acquire protection for their offspring, while men are motivated by acquisition and domination.

You might be the CEO of your own Fortune 500 company, according to these researchers, but underneath the power suit and between the networking lunches is a drive to care for and protect your "children," whether they are real, potential, or metaphorical (for example, clients, projects, employees, new business). In this world, women view other women as competitors for resources, with men being one of the more helpful resources. To that end, an evolutionist believes that all female interactions are part of a quest to ensure the survival of real or potential offspring.

Cognitive specialists stress another gender-based difference: men and women learn in different ways. Women attempt to see things from all perspectives and understand diverse points of view, while men frequently take an adversarial position and question new material.

A major cultural difference in men and women's roles is the emphasis placed on physical appearance. Women want to be attractive and men want to have attractive partners, which may result in rivalries within both genders.

All of these theories suggest that an undercurrent of competition may underlie female relationships, manifested in covert forms of aggression such as undermining, manipulation, and betrayal. Regardless of whether you buy the power theory, the self-esteem hypothesis, the learned behavior position, or the evolutionary psychology perspective (or some combination of all four) it is clear that RA is:

- Internally motivated
- Driven by a sense of threat or fear
- Used primarily by women
- A behavioral dynamic that can be changed with effort

Most experts agree that the aggressive Queen Bee is a victim in some ways, too, suffering from the same feelings of fear, anger, and lack of confidence she fosters in others. In fact, my work suggests that all women who get caught in the destructive dynamic of RA suffer in one way or another.

"Women who don't believe in themselves, who are threatened by others and see them as 'the enemy,' will lash out in an effort to make themselves feel more in control. In reality, they're not," explains Tia, a women's health counselor who has heard many stories of Queen Bee behavior. "But this isn't rational behavior we're talking about." She adds that victims and in-betweeners often experience the same conflicted emotions.

Undoing the Damage

The good news is that with help RA can be unlearned and more positive relationship skills adopted. Across the country, organizations geared to help girls have begun to show that there are ways to nurture a kinder, gentler breed of young woman who is able to use power in positive ways. Adult women are also learning to leave the "RA way" behind, as the following story demonstrates.

A Lifetime of Bullying Comes to an End

LYNNE MATTHEWS

At age twenty-four, I was passive, weak, and easily manipulated. I saw myself as a people pleaser, and I wanted everyone to like me. For most of my life, I had attracted friends who were the polar opposite; many were mean and demanding, and they bullied me.

When I was five, it was Linda, the girl across the street, who was my age. She made me do things I didn't want to do, like defy my mother, make fun of other girls, and lie. Bullying me was her greatest pleasure in life, and I was the prime victim. As a little girl, I was very responsible. If my mother told me to be home at a certain time, I was going to listen to her. One night, while Linda and I were playing handball against her garage as the sun went down, I had a feeling of dread, because I knew my mother was expecting me. When I told Linda I had to leave,

she cornered me and said, "You aren't leaving. You're playing with me until I say."

"But—" I protested.

"No buts," she sneered, pointing to the ball. "Play!"

A little while later, I heard my mother calling my name from across the street, desperation in her voice. I was torn. Linda saw me hesitating and demanded that I keep playing even though my heart wasn't in it. Everything ended when my mother marched over to Linda's house, a scowl on her face. I couldn't please either one of them. I felt like a failure.

At age twenty-four, it was Marsha, another bully. She masked her bullying with her sense of humor by using a joking voice to get me to do what she wanted. I loved her wit and wanted to be around her all the time. She was funny and shocking, saying things to people I would never dream of uttering. Where I was shy and reserved, she was boisterous and loud. She would do anything to get her way and loved to make me do things for her. But if I didn't, watch out. She would barrage me with whiny threats like, "Come on, you have to do it or I'm going to be really pissed off," or "Don't be scared. You need to stand up for yourself!" If I still refused, she would get mean. "Come on, f——r," she would protest, using profanities to egg me on.

When Marsha moved into her own apartment about an hour away from me, it was a big deal. I would drive up there every so often and spend weekends with her. One evening, we decided to order Chinese food. The delivery boy arrived while Marsha was in the shower. I had just enough money to give him for the food and none left over for a tip. He totally understood. When Marsha found out, however, she was furious. "I can't believe you didn't give him a tip," she hissed. The next morning, she drove me to the takeout place and handed me a few dollars.

"Go," she said.

"What?" I asked. I had been under the impression we were going to the mall.

"Give him the tip. Say you were stupid and apologize. Those guys work hard. How would you feel?"

It was a horrible moment. My heart started to pound and I was angry, so deeply angry that I couldn't speak. "No," I finally said.

"Do it."

"No. I can't believe this."

"Do it. Come on, f——r," she said. "If you don't do this, you're a horrible person. He needs his tips. He works hard." She said it in her half-joking voice, but it was a threat: do it or you won't be my friend.

I got out of the car slowly, defeated. I went into the restaurant and explained who I was. I left the money in some girl's hand and got back into the car, slamming the door.

"See, was that so bad?" Marsha asked, already back in her teasing mode.

"No," I said, my head down.

Marsha and I are no longer friends. Last year, I decided that I was tired of being a doormat and questioned why I was attracting these types of friends. I explored it further. What was it about me that allowed this to happen? Why couldn't I stand up for myself? It was crazy. I seriously began to reevaluate my place in the world and realized that I needed to be strong. I thought back to that scared five-year-old. What did I expect to happen if I didn't do what Linda wanted? The bullying started with me, and it could end with me. It wasn't physical bullying, but it was psychological abuse. These people saw that I was weak and played on it. And it was going to stop.

If you've ever distanced yourself from a situation in which another woman deliberately prevented you from achieving your goals or made you feel put down and unworthy, you've probably come to terms with your own Queen Bees. If you're the aggressor and wake up each day contemplating how to maintain your position as queen of the hive, you may be ready to free yourself from anxiety-driven aggression and develop genuine power. Regardless of your situation, the following passage shows how the inherent strengths of women can be used to continually transform peer relationships.

The Art of Antagonism

OLGA DUGAN, PH.D., AND SHERRY AUDETTE MORROW

This spring, in the interest of nurturing our friendship (that is, finding an excuse for a "girls' night out"), we decided to nurture our creative interests and take an art class together. By the

fifth week of our six-week drawing workshop, the two men and five women, including our instructor, had familiarized themselves with the relational dynamics of the studio setting. We artists had separated, both along gender lines and by attitude toward one another. This separation became especially clear during the fifth class, when the subtle tension of relational aggression rippled between two of our female classmates.

The men, Arney and Joe, whose age difference mirrored the differences between their drawing styles and subject matter, took tables at opposite corners of the studio, effecting detachment from each other and the rest of the group, while we occupied two tables along a side wall, sitting close enough to share our materials and the occasional word of encouragement without disturbing anyone's concentration. Our instructor, Bonnie, seemed to float about the classroom, simultaneously distant but connected as she entertained and instructed on topics varying from ways to create form over shape using light and shade to creative ways to dump undesirable wedding shower presents.

During the first two weeks, Reena and Micheline, or "Mitch," had migrated to what seemed to be front and center of the studio, their tables angled in a way that kept them from seeing each other's work, yet allowed them to share some "friendly" conversation. With pointed effort, they occasionally stood and crossed over the little chasm of floorboards between their tables to peek around each other's shoulder and critically eye the other's sketch pad. We had become accustomed to their wry exchanges, but one night their voices seemed pitched an octave higher than Madonna's soprano lilting from the radio, their words polite, their tone hostile.

Tossing auburn hair over a squared shoulder, Reena made what we thought was a rare effort to look Mitch in the eye as she described the Audi her husband "simply up and bought" for her "for no good reason." "I would have preferred a Land Rover," she added for good measure.

Mitch didn't bother to toss her ash-blonde curls; they just danced along the perfect lines of her gym-sculptured shoulders as she glared back at Reena. "My husband has this awkward way of buying me the most expensive and strangely timed presents, too," she claimed, bristling at the challenge of a verbal duel.

They continued sparring, comparing Stickley furniture, classy neighborhoods, and Reena's career as a freelance journalist to Mitch's dalliance as a landlord working out of the penthouse of her own apartment complex. Neither seemed able to best the other, until Reena changed her tactic.

"Have you ever eaten at Le Bec Fin?" Reena asked, inquiring about a restaurant the mayor and others among the city's glitterati frequented, but that she and her husband could afford only once or twice a month. Expressions of pretended disappointment, frustration, and, strangely, satisfaction flitted across Reena's face all at once. She was back on firm economic ground, familiar turf upon which she felt equal to Mitch.

Mitch affected concession and shook her head no, then, smiling broadly, asked Reena if she would join her for dinner, rattling off a list of expensive eateries she and her husband visited regularly. With a tight smile, Reena hesitantly accepted her offer. Disappointment flickered in her eyes. She could no longer deflect Mitch's parries without becoming openly rude. She had lost the verbal battle and thus was relegated to the subordinate position in what looked like a potentially ongoing acquaintanceship. In the silence that followed this wordplay, the two of us looked at each other, awed by, yet undeniably familiar with, what we had witnessed.

Relational aggression does exist between adult women on the community level. Reena and Mitch were part of the polite catfighting and one-upmanship in which women often feel compelled to engage. We have witnessed this type of behavior in all venues of both our personal and public lives and have been guilty of partaking in it ourselves. When we go into battle, our ammunition is our prestigious careers, our brilliant children, our better homes, cars, clothes, and vacations, even our illnesses and our shortcomings. As long as we have the biggest and the best, we can outshine everyone else and, in some twisted way, legitimize ourselves.

We recently went through a transformational period in our own twenty-year friendship, which made us especially sensitive to and grateful for the stark contrast between our behavior toward each other and that of the women in the studio. We had reached a point where the "things" of our lives had become more important than the friendship, trust, and communication that formed the foundation of our relationship.

> We now share our thoughts and feelings at greater depth than we ever have, with consideration for the freedoms and limitations that characterize Sherry's lifestyle as a wife, mother, and editor of her own literary magazine along with the contrast of those that shape Olga's life as an English professor who is single and financially independent. We celebrate the similarities of our interests as writers, painters, and middle-aged women who have known each other since undergraduate school, but this did not come to us until we dropped the expectations of each other that kept us insecure, poised for disappointment, and always competing for a place in the other's life that we could not trust we already had.
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> Mitch did not invite Reena to dinner; she dared her, and Reena submitted to being bullied. Because of our experiences reconnecting, both through our art class and through our honest efforts to accept each other, we now understand that we must put aside our fear of failing to appear strong and independent in order to embrace the strength, self-sufficiency, and confidence that exist in both ourselves and the women who surround us—our mothers, our sisters, our friends, and our acquaintances. Women can and must learn alternative ways to foster relationships based on understanding, acceptance, and mutual respect for every woman's right to define what it means to be a woman in a community of women. Only then will we all be capable of reaching our full potential for self-exploration and for becoming true friends.

Olga and Sherry speak to the positive power of female connection, and describe why overcoming RA at all ages is a must. The gift of friendship and support they share is one every woman deserves.