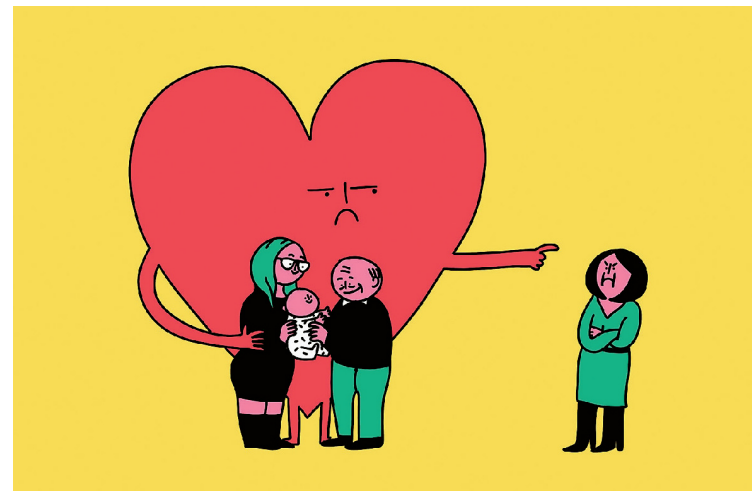


Emma Barnett tells a woman her baby is the best defence against her father's spiteful new partner

## Only room for love



**Q**I have just had my first baby after several miscarriages and am due to travel abroad with my husband to visit my father so we can proudly introduce our daughter to him. He is divorced from my mother, who has a serious mental disorder and has been absent from our lives since my sisters and I were young.

My father has been our rock, best friend and advocate over the years. He has now met someone he loves, but this woman has made it clear she does not like us daughters (now all in our thirties) and would rather have my 70-year-old father to herself. She has been very competitive, mean-spirited, offensive and near pathological on countless occasions — smashing plates in an argument, attempting to pit one sister against the other and bad-mouthing us in front of strangers and acquaintances.

She is a successful and wealthy woman who has no children of her own. It has taken me and my sisters years to move past the trauma of our violent childhood and abandonment by our mother, but we are doing well. In order to maintain this peace, we have kept a polite and careful distance from my father's new partner, which has worked until now.

However, he has just informed us that they intend to marry. In

a bizarre move, he has also left all his assets to her to dispose of among us when he is no longer with us. I want nothing but happiness for him, but I am struggling to understand why he is with someone who openly confesses to hating us and wants us out of his life. He has no answers when I ask him. How do I interact with this woman who causes us such immense stress, pain and anxiety? How can I ensure a friction-free trip?

**A**First off, huge congratulations on your baby. I am thrilled for you, especially after the rocky road you and your husband have traversed to get to this point. It is an important time for you both and no one should detract from your happiness. Now, to the difficult stepmother-to-be. Deep sigh. I had hoped these characters had died off in pre-feminist fairy tales, but alas not.

Your baby is not only a wriggling bundle of joy, she is also your best defence. What's so brilliant about having her with you on this trip is that all eyes — especially

**I had hoped these characters had died a death in fairy tales, but alas not**

your father's — are on her. You can land messages through her and never have to respond directly or even look at your dad's fiancée. For example, if your stepmother is being deliberately difficult about the day's plans, not missing a beat or looking up from your daughter, you can simply reply: "Well, I'm not sure that's really our cup of tea today, especially as our lovely little one was looking forward to spending some quality time with her grandpa."

You will win hands down, as your father's heart melts. Plus, as she's never had a child, she'll find it hard to protest when you choose to do your own thing. If she does, you can simply reply: "No offence, but you haven't done this and I need to work towards my daughter's needs." Slam dunk.

All the while, keep smiling and focus on the reason you are there: your dad. When your daughter-defender is tucked up in bed, busy yourself with making food or hanging out with your father. Don't let his other half get a rise out of you when you are without your shield. Float above the madness and remain indifferent to her. It's the only way to win this weird war. And don't exhaust yourself bad-mouthing her to your husband once you both retire to bed. It's futile and will only make your task even harder.

Regarding your father's finances, it's usually a waste of time arguing with folk about their cash. He will do what he wants and while he's under her spell you're on a hiding to nothing. However, as a diligent daughter, you might want to make sure he has sought legal advice regarding any changes he has made to his will.

Due to what happened with your mother, you obviously have decent reserves of strength. Use them to ring-fence your happiness with your family unit on this trip. Allow your father into your love bubble — and use it to defend yourself from your stepmother's worst barbs ■  
@emmabarnett

## Family



### I'VE FOUND MY SOULMATE, AGAIN

# 3

The average number of times people believe they have met "the one" during their lifetime

TOUGH LOVE ILLUSTRATION BY GECLE DORNEAU FAMILY ILLUSTRATION BY BEN CHALLENGER

When a teenage love affair falls apart, don't look for solutions, says Lorraine Candy, just show you care

## Tea and empathy



**T**hey sit on our sofa, limbs entwined, heads resting together, all smiles as they test out their exciting new status as boyfriend and girlfriend. It's lovely to see these young couples, friends of my 16-year-old daughter, lounging about our home, though I can't help but feel sad for them. After all, teenage love is inevitably doomed, isn't it? Few people spend the rest of their lives with their childhood sweethearts. For these teenagers, their first taste of bitter heartbreak lies just round the corner.

So how do you handle that as a parent? How, I wonder, do you avoid telling them that there are plenty more fish in the sea and that they'll get over it? The two most unhelpful truths that lovesick teenagers never want to hear.

Bella Hird, a psychotherapist who specialises in adolescents, says the key for mums and dads is to show empathy rather than sympathy over the break-up of that first relationship. Empathy is about connecting with your teen, bringing to mind that feeling you once went through and letting them know you understand how awful it is.

However, if you simply show sympathy, you disconnect from their emotions instead of experiencing the lows with them. "What you must not do is silver-line the situation for your teen," Hird tells me. "They won't want this problem to be solved by an adult. They want you to recognise how important it is for them. You should climb inside the heartbreak with them, show

that you understand their pain and be empathetic about that. I know parents find it terrifying not to be able to cure their child of the anguish and sadness around a break-up, but you have to accept you cannot sort this out for them."

She also says you must remain non-judgmental about the specifics of the separation, biting your tongue in face of illogical teenage reasoning.

Hird explains that changes in the brain are rapid during adolescence, and that dealing with negative emotions such as heartbreak can actually be a good thing as it helps teens to learn how to process negative feelings. This will improve your child's emotional resilience.

If you think you need to seek professional help for your inconsolable teen, a questionnaire for parents or children at [Welldoing.org](http://Welldoing.org) will help match

them with a therapist. There are also some first-person stories on YouTube that teens may find comforting to watch. A short film about empathy versus sympathy by Dr Brené Brown, an American motivational speaker and bestselling author, is also useful.

A lot of teen parenting seems to be what I call "sitting with sadness". From friendship tussles to disappointments with academic results, these teenage years are as much about just being there as they are about proactive problem solving. I find these rites of passage the hardest of times as a mum because you want their pain to end as quickly as possible. You feel helpless in the face of enduring distress. Cuddles just don't cut it like they used to and cups of tea only go so far. Sometimes, though, sitting with sadness is all there is to do ■  
@SundayTimesLC



## Parenting Hacks How to cope with teenage heartache

### WATCH YOUR WORDS

Never offer comfort by starting a sentence with "At least you..." Rather, tell them that it's OK not to be OK. It is better simply to console than to try to look for positives.

### DRY YOUR EYES

Tears can be cathartic, but they do eventually need to stop. Get them up, go for a walk or take them shopping — a change in scenery can help alter their mood.

### TIME HEALS

It may not be of much help right now, but it's true. They may find their friends' company more helpful than yours, so give them the space to hang out with their mates.

### HOME COMFORTS

Finding happiness in small things works as a distraction. Cook their favourite food or snuggle up in front of a film. But don't feel rejected if they want to be left alone.