

When I Stand In Your Shoes: An Open Letter from a Mom to a Teen

By Nina Bingham



I'm going to say to you what I wish I'd gotten a chance to say to my daughter. In 2013 she took her own life at the age of 15 due to severe depression. Since I'll never be able to say these things to her, as part of me getting better, I'll say it to you instead (thanks for listening):

Just because I don't understand you, talk too much and don't listen, think I know everything (which I definitely do not), can be demanding and harsh, expect too much of you, and don't show an interest in what you are into, doesn't mean I still don't love you. I get so worried about how I'm going to pay the bills, buy the groceries, make the rent and car payments, buy you the things you need like new clothes and stuff for school that I lose sight of you as a person. I start thinking of you as one more responsibility that I have to take care of-and that's when I turn into a dreaded parent. I stop being *me*, and I take on this super-mom attitude, and then we're reduced to the parent and child, which isn't working anymore, because you're not a child anymore.

You're becoming an adult-and it completely throws me off. Your friends have become the people you talk to now, and suddenly I'm the odd man out. I'm supposed to know how to handle all this change, but I don't, not really. I got used to being your best friend. I'm expected to let go one day like you're a balloon, and let you fly like you're supposed to, like I taught you to, like I told you to.

But here I am, still holding onto this string, my fist just won't let go. I see you growing into a sane and strong person, sometimes even stronger than me. But I can also see (because I'm older) when you've chosen the wrong path. It's in these moments that I get worried and lose my cool. Instead of talking to you like *me*, the understanding person that I am inside, I talk to you like a parent (which you hate), and suddenly I'm talking but you're not listening because I'm lecturing.

And I'm using that "know-it-all" tone because once, when I was your age, I faced the same kind of decisions-and got hurt. So really, when you look at it, the "mom-tone" is used when I'm feeling scared for you. In an irritating way, that should tell you I care. A LOT. I care enough to stop and lecture you, enough to stand up to you when you're angry with me, enough to hug you when you go stiff on me. I probably care too much, which is why I either give up when you're mad at me (because I really, really don't want to alienate you), or I push too hard. It's so frustrating, wanting to help-and feeling you can't see me over my mom voice. Sigh.

So here we are, you on that side and me over here, and both of us wanting the same thing-to be close, to have a healthy relationship. This has been a problem for every single mother and daughter throughout

time, and they've had to work through it. Some do, and some don't. Some mothers and daughters just give up trying to understand each other and stay estranged. Others keep trying, throughout their whole lives; trying to stand in each other's shoes.

I think that's what it takes to have a good relationship-any relationship: seeing for a minute through the other person's eyes. When I stand in your shoes (and I wouldn't want to go back to being a teen, not for a million bucks), I see a world that's completely messed up. And you're probably wondering how the heck you're supposed to grow up to be normal in a society like this, where everything is depicted as perfect and romantic and enchanted, but where everything is actually screwed up, dysfunctional and crazy. Sometimes I wonder the same thing, and I'm an adult!

When I stand in your shoes I feel like I don't stand a chance, because I've grown up in a family where nobody understands me, and everybody's busy with their own problems, and so it makes me feel like I'm gonna have to do this alone. And that thought scares the crap out of me. So I hook up with a boyfriend or a girlfriend, which is what I've been dreaming of, this amazing soul connection-only to find out they are messed up too, but at least I'm not doing this alone anymore.

When I stand in your shoes I begin to get the sinking feeling that life is going to be this way forever-insane, confusing, frustrating, and just plain pointless. So I start to get depressed, because the world, which commercials tell you is just waiting for you to conquer it, is, in fact, unconquerable. As I look through your eyes, I see a world where everything is upside-down.

When you're depressed because the world and everybody in it seems completely untrustworthy, I want you to remember one thing, probably the most important lesson you'll ever learn. It is: Life is hell not just for you, but for everybody-and that's why there are so many crazy people in the world doing crazy things to hurt each other. So while you're in your room thinking that nobody understands what you're going through, I'm in my room thinking the exact same thing. Kind of ironic, isn't it that we feel the same way, yet have such a hard time reaching out to each other?

I'm in the next room feeling left out, misunderstood, pushed away and confused, just like you. I'll try harder to be brave-to ask you for a hug when I need reassurance, and I'll try not to pretend I'm perfect (because you see how messed up I can be). In exchange, I hope you'll try to bust out of the myth that I don't care, or you're not important, because the truth is: YOU ARE EVERYTHING, everything that's important to me. I just get scared to say it, just like you do, and I just get busy, just like you do. You see, we're not as different as we thought.

Here's my motherly advice (this time, said from the heart): next time you feel like you can't go on, please try and remember me. I'm probably just barely holding on, too. Maybe if we stand in each other's shoes for a minute and are honest about our feelings, we'll be able to get through this crazy hell-hole called life *together*. I don't know about you, but that's all I really need-to know you're on my side.

Love you, imperfectly, but forever-
Mom

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If you or a person you love is having thoughts of suicide please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.