Bridging Generational Gaps – A Conversation with Julie Halpert

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Guest: Julie Halpert

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Julie Halpert: 0:29
When I started writing this book, which was a while ago, I was a young mother and very overwhelmed trying to do everything. There was a pivotal moment where my mother had stayed over and was watching me run around like a crazy person trying to satisfy my three kids, get them out the door, get the baby dressed, and start my workday. I could feel her silent judgment of what was going on that, I was somehow was falling short. And I really felt like there needed to be a book that allowed the two generations to communicate with each other.

David Lowry: 1:01
That was Julie Halpert, an award-winning free-lance journalist who's with us today on Peaceful Life Radio. Hello everyone, I'm David Lowry. Welcome to the program, and with me today is my good friend Don Drew. Don, how are you?

Don Drew: 1:15
I'm doing great. David, how are you doing?

David Lowry: 1:17
Listen, I'm rooting for the Thunder and I don't know when this program's going to air, but hopefully if my prayers are answered, the Thunder will be the new champions.

Don Drew: 1:27
We will see.

David Lowry: 1:28
Either that or I'll be crying for the next year or so. But Don, tell us about our guest today, Julie Halpert.

Don Drew: 1:34
Absolutely. David Julie Halpert is an award-winning freelance journalist with more than three decades of experience writing for many national publications, including The New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Atlantic, and AARP. She writes the Second Acts Stories in the Wall Street Journal about those who have switched to new types of careers

and passions late in life. She is also the co-author of Making Up With Mom, which focuses on generational differences between women and their mothers and how to resolve them. She has focused extensively on issues of aging, writing about the many ways that boomers are redefining retirement and reinventing themselves during this period of life. And today we're fortunate to have her on Peaceful Life Radio. Her book is subtitled, Why Mothers and daughters disagree About Kids Careers and Casserole and What to do about it and explores the often complex and emotionally charged relationships between adult daughters and their mothers. Julie Halpert, welcome to Peaceful Life Radio.

Julie Halpert: 2:30
Thanks so much for having me.

Don Drew: 2:31
Julie, you wrote your book back in 2008, and we'll get around to what you've learned since then. But what led you to write Making Up With Mom? Was there a specific moment or experience that made you realize the book needed to exist?

Julie Halpert: 2:43
Well, the main thing when I started writing this book, which was a while ago, and by the way, I co-wrote this with Deborah Carr, who's, a sociologist. But I was living it because I was a young mother and very overwhelmed trying to do everything. And there was a pivotal moment where my mother had stayed over and was watching me run around like a crazy person trying to satisfy my three kids, get them out the door, get the baby dressed, and start my workday. And I could feel her silent judgment of what was going on, that I somehow was falling short. And I really felt like there needed to be a book that allowed the two generations to communicate with each other. These generations now it's different, I think probably with the current generation of mothers and their mothers. But for my generation, which is the boomer generation, we were living very different lives and raising our kids in many ways in a very different way than our parents raised us. There was often a lack of understanding, a lack of empathy, that led to tensions between mothers and daughter. I thought it would be amazing to have a book where a lot of women and their mothers could share their stories and then we could have therapist and other professionals weigh in on how they could bridge that gap. And so we interviewed 50 mother-daughter pairs, both mothers and daughters, and sometimes there was revelations in those conversations when we did them with the mothers and daughters together. And then we had all these real great takeaways, which I still often use in my own life. So it was a very practical book and because of Debbie's sociology background, she provided a great historical perspective of the role of women throughout time.

David Lowry: 4:13

Julie, this title hints at tension and hope. So why do you think the mother-daughter relationship is so often challenging and yet so important?

Julie Halpert: 4:24
I think it's because mothers and daughters really need each other. I. That daughters really value their mother's approval and are always seeking it. And yet, there are times when they often clash and they disagree, and it really becomes very hard. We look up to our mothers, no matter how different we are than them, which in many cases we are. What they say and do to show their approval is really important for us. There's constantly that push pull where you might be at odds with your parent, but you really want them to endorse what you're doing and show their love to you.

Don Drew: 4:58
Julie, were there any particular stories that moved you in the process of writing the book? Did you learn something that surprised or shifted your own perspective?

Julie Halpert: 5:07
Yeah, there are a couple of things. It's funny' cause I haven't looked back at this book in a long time. So today I was looking back at it for the first time in a long time. And there was one particularly interesting story about a daughter who felt her mother was criticizing her for being overprotective of her baby. She slept with her baby, and the mother thought that wasn't right. Anytime the baby would cry she would run to the baby, and the mother thought this was gonna instill in the child a sense of dependency that was not helpful. So the daughter emailed the mother, even though she lived near her, and said something to the effect of, When you say these things, it makes me feel inadequate, like, you're questioning my parenting and don't think that I'm a good mother. And the mother responded and said, I never meant to imply that. I think you're a great mother. And so sometimes the way people behave isn't what they really are thinking. And what we often found through this book was that leading with empathy, leading with, the way you're acting is making me feel this way often, it may not necessarily resolve the problem, but it could allow each generation to understand each other. The other lesson that I took away and that I try to use as I parent my daughters to this day is, be careful about not pushing your children to lead the life that you want them to lead. Accept their choices and allow them to do whatever it is that makes them happy. There are oftentimes when I wanna chime in and give advice, and tell them what to do or what I think they should do when, what's more helpful, when they're having an issue, is to just listen. I mean, I think in Hamilton It's talk less smile more. I would say Talk less, listen more. We all can benefit from really listening and hearing whoever is coming to us with a problem instead of just trying to jump in and solve it.

Don Drew: 6:52
We had a guest on here a while back that talked about the importance of asking more questions, and I think that's really a big part of what you're saying.

Julie Halpert: 6:59
Yes, absolutely. Yes.

David Lowry: 7:00
Julie, when you spoke a moment ago, so many things came up for me about raising my own kids and my parents in law and my parents and all the advice I got. I probably needed all of that advice, but at the time it didn't feel helpful. And these days I try to remind myself of just how it felt when I received all of that advice. My parenting days are over. I need to respect what my kids are doing. But one of the things that you mentioned that Oh, I think you're a good mother. I think our children really need to hear that from us. Because they need all the help they can get don't they?

Julie Halpert: 7:37
That's a really great point and I will never forget my mother rarely laid on the praise, even though I knew she was proud of me. She just wasn't very demonstrative. There was one time when I remember she said, I think you're a great mother. And I think I nearly burst into tears because I hardly ever heard that. I think that goes so far. I mean, the message can be delivered at any time, like when there's a time of self-doubt, or your child is really struggling with the colicky baby, or feels a sense of guilt, which mothers often do and they have lots of things to juggle, just to say, I just wanna let you know, I think you're a great parent, a great mother. It can be extremely valuable and giving that unsolicited praise goes a long way.

Don Drew: 8:18
One of the big themes in your book is how generational shifts, especially in gender roles and career expectations, can create conflict. And we'll talk here in a few minutes more about current generational issues. But help us unpack some of what you learned in this process?

Julie Halpert: 8:34
Our generations, they've shifted, right? The people who are young mothers today have probably more in common than I did with my mother. But at the time we wrote this book, there was a very big difference between women who raised their children in the fifties and sixties and those who raised their children in the subsequent generation. In all sorts of ways. Women more commonly stayed home, did not work outside the home to raise their

children. That also allowed them the chance to spend more time cleaning and cooking four-course meals and lives, in some respects, were narrower, although some would argue less stress. There are other women we interviewed, interestingly, who actually did work during that time. When their children decided to be stay-at-home moms, they were very resentful of that because they felt that there were these opportunities open to them that they didn't wanna take. Often, when you got married right away, before you had kids, some women, at the time that we interviewed, decided not to have kids at all, or certainly decided to have smaller families for a variety of reasons, economic, professional. So that was often a big source of conflict. Why aren't you having kids? Why are you waiting too long to have kids? Why are you not having more kids? And also the role of men. Father's a generation or more ago, weren't as involved in the rearing of children and the mothers sometimes felt like their son-in-laws did more or were even taken advantage of by their daughters. That was often a source of conflict. Today, similarly in the area of, having children, a lot of young people don't wanna have children at all because of climate change and all kinds of other factors. Definitely economic factors. So you've got differences in the way people live their lives, 50 or 60 years ago versus the way people are living their lives today.

Don Drew: 10:19
Yeah. My son, who is 38, I've noticed he and his friends are much more directly involved in their children's everyday life than I was in my generation. Part of my understanding of what I was supposed to be doing is making money so that the world can continue on good for everybody. And the reality is that I missed out on a lot. I look at my son and his friends and I go, Man, they're getting it a whole lot better than I did. And I think it's really a positive role change that's taken place in these last couple of generations.

Julie Halpert: 10:49
Definitely. And the other thing I should mention is that the extent to which children are scheduled is starkly different than a generation ago when like the summers you just, roamed on your bike all day and you were called in for dinner, right? And moms, even though they were at home, they may or may not have done as much in terms of managing a child, taking them to these activities, getting involved at every level. So that's another source of conflict where the grandparents will be like Why do you have to have them scheduled so much? Right? And then the parents say well, that's how it's done.

David Lowry: 11:17
You're absolutely right. There is such a big generational difference. I related to what you said about the shifts between our generation and how it was. I had a very structured notion of what my father was supposed to do and subsequently what I was supposed to

do, and how my sisters were supposed to function in the family. Where do you see the biggest disconnect between the generations?

Julie Halpert: 11:41
I think it's more a lack of understanding or an interest in understanding. So, even if my life is different than the lives my children lead, I'm curious and I wanna try to figure out why they do what they do, and I wanna try to support that. In my parents' generation everything seemed more rigid. There were certain ways to do things and you didn't diverge from ways. They were just really very different. And, again, I think with subsequent generations there's less of a gap because their lives are a bit more similar. And the other issue I should mention that's naturally different is my parents and their generation had us generally when they were much younger. So they were, I wouldn't say peers, but they were younger and they hadn't lived as much life. I think older parents do things differently. I mentioned before the overprotection thing, hyper involvement, that parents get involved in. I wouldn't say it's just one thing, but there's a lot of judgment there and I think where there's judgment, there's gonna be conflict.

Don Drew: 12:37
Julie, when we first started talking, you mentioned that you don't consider yourself an expert on intergenerational relationships, and I wanna honor that by asking you about your own experience. Your relationship with your mother has evolved since writing, Making up with Mom, and you've raised two daughters to adulthood. What have you learned or experienced that might help mothers and daughters who want to improve their relationship but don't really know how to begin the conversation?

Julie Halpert: 13:02
I would say that on both sides with my own mother, she was unusual for her time in that she did work full-time. She was a teacher, so she did have her summers off. And my father was very much a hands-on father. He made our lunches. He took us to school. He was very involved, which is amazing. She was less demonstrative. And again, I always had a sense of needing to make sure I was wearing lipstick when I went to see her. She was very into how people looked and your external appearance. She always felt like she knew what was right. Didn't seem all that interested in learning from me, and she could be a bit judgmental. Interestingly, as I was writing the book, we learned from mental health experts there's something called the good enough relationship. I mean, there are some people whose parents are just toxic, and of course you can't continue to have a relationship with them. But I learned to respect my mother for who she was. Her father was very difficult. Her mother was lovely, but she didn't get a lot of that love and affection from her father. So I began to understand the impact of that on her, and that she really

always wanted the best for us. And at some point, I stopped seeking her approval for things. And that was very freeing. She hadn't even really read my book, and then she was gonna be interviewed about it for a local publication. It shocked me. She wasn't free flowing with the compliments. She would compliment us to other people when she was bragging about us. But there came a point in my life where I was just like, You know what? It doesn't matter. I have a wonderful family. I have supportive husband, and so I'm not gonna let this rule me. And in terms of my relationship with my daughters, I notice the parts of my mother that I am like, which is I wanna jump in and tell them what to do. I'm not always as much of a listener as I should be. So I try to really be very intentional in that. And somebody gave me this advice. say, Do you want my advice or do you just want to vent? I've had my younger daughter say, Thank you for just letting me vent. It's sometimes really hard to do, to hear somebody's problems and not be able to help them solve them, but sometimes that's what they need. So I'm very curious about them and their lives. I always say I love you and I'm proud of you. If I don't say it verbally, I write them birthday letters once a year. Which my mother actually started to do with us too. So I really try to make sure they know they're supported, and that's really the most important thing.

David Lowry: 15:12

I thank you for what you said about giving compliments to your kids, letting them know how proud you are of them. I think that's so important. My dad has been gone for quite a while now, but one of the things I remember, when I think of dad, is him saying how proud he was of me. How many times did he say that? I don't really know, but it stuck with me. Some people call it The Blessing, when a parent blesses their children by saying, Hey, you're great. I really respect you. That's good. You also mentioned something about advice giving. There's something so appealing about being asked your opinion about something and we almost always wanna take the bait. I've come to a different opinion about that. One of my sons is a CFO for a big corporation, and the other one is a programmer, he went to Berkeley, and he doesn't really need my advice. I just say, You make decisions as good as I do. Do what you think you ought to be doing and just know I'm behind you on that. Hearing you talk about this brings that up for me.

Julie Halpert: 16:14

Yeah, my younger daughter's a journalist. Until very recently, she was sending us her articles to read, and I'd be like, you have this, you're a professional journalist now. You don't really need me to look at your articles anymore. You got this. But sometimes that's what they need to hear.

David Lowry: 16:28

Well, they never really get away from not needing us to love,,respect and to brag on them and to be, Hey, I got your back and all of that. But I have found that if you were to really give in and say, well, you might have used this different voice or had these sources you might find out how quickly they'd turned on you.

Don Drew: 16:48
Yeah, they generally don't need our advice, do they?

Julie Halpert: 16:50
Right?

Don Drew: 16:51
So Julie, looking at the book, like I said, it's been a few years since you wrote Making Up with Mom. If you were to revisit writing that now, what new themes or generational dynamics do you think you might explore in today's context?

Julie Halpert: 17:04
Well, I would say the most important thing is technology, the impact of screens and technology and relationships. Again, it's pretty neat that a lot of older parents do text and use FaceTime. And honestly, it's probably brought them close to their children and grandchildren if they don't live locally. But that has revolutionized the way people live their lives. It was just starting to blossom when my kids were really little. We didn't have to deal with phones, texting, and access to the internet. That really has revolutionized how people live their lives, how people parent, and draw boundaries. And I can only imagine the rifts it must create between the adult children and their parents. I remember being astounded when I would see a parent taking a kid to coffee and they're on their phone and the kid's right there in the stroller. Like, oh my gosh, you're missing this moment. But they're natives with this technology. Also the challenges that young adults face. It's hard for them to purchase a house. There's job instability. We have a whole host of other much more challenging factors now. We have rampant gun violence, climate change, and a very divided political environment where people can't really often speak civilly to each other. There seems to be so much division. All those things really factor into how you parent your kids, whether you decide to have a child, in a way that none of that really existed when I was a young mom.

David Lowry: 18:22
Julie, have you heard of this term called no contact? Parents who are facing this problem of no contact because of the stress of intergenerational communication is so tense that some families are saying, I'm not gonna have anything to do with you anymore.

Julie Halpert: 18:37
It's a great question. Sometimes it was the case with people who had different cultures like immigrants raised a certain way, and then they tried to impart that on their children who were raised in the United States. This is a really sad situation and it's definitely something that should be navigated with the help of a mental health professional because it is a pretty drastic move and obviously there's a lot of major issues at play there. So my advice would be to get the advice of somebody who specializes in this to figure out how to proceed.

David Lowry: 19:03
Sounds like great advice. Julie, you've had tragedy in your life. Talk to us about that and tell us what, we need to know, especially as it relates to Garrett's Space. Why is that so important to you?

Julie Halpert: 19:16
My husband and I lost our son Garrett, to suicide in 2017 when he was 23 years old. It's the worst thing a parent can ever endure. And, we were really trying to figure out how we were gonna go on. There was a huge gap in treatment for young adults who are struggling with mental health issues. And so we have created and are literally in the process of building a non-medical residential center where young adults, ages 18 to 28, can come for short stays in a beautiful natural environment, a healing environment, and gain coping strategies on how to live in what is a very hard world and also get support from peers and be with others who are experiencing similar challenges and get help that they're not alone their struggles and that they can heal and learn how to live a full life. We started this, officially, as a nonprofit in 2019. We purchased land on 76 acres just outside of Ann Arbor. And we literally just broke ground on it. We also have been running virtually since COVID Wellness programming where young adults meet for mood and movement activities in a support group with peers. And they are finding a community they've never found before. It exceeded our wildest expectations in so many wonderful ways. We hope to make this a model. We hope to have a Garrett's Space someday in Oklahoma and Tennessee and Chicago and all over the world because this is a model that really is just common sense. There's such a dearth of support options now for young adults who are facing innumerable challenges. We feel very fortunate that this is coming to fruition and we hope we'll make a difference and save lives.

Don Drew: 20:45
So Julie, what's next for you and how can people learn more about you and your work?

Julie Halpert: 20:50

What's next? I'm a working journalist. One of my gigs that I really most enjoy is the Second Act Stories that I write for the Wall Street Journal about people who pursue interesting and new passions late in life. These are in The Journal twice a year, in November and April. And I'm always looking for great candidates. So people who are doing something really out there and interesting that gives them incredible joy, if anybody is interested you can reach me through my website which is julie halpert.com. We just hired executive director at Garrett's Space. Our website is Garrett, two Rs. Two T's, two S's. it's a pretty comprehensive website that tells you a lot about what we're about. If you are seeking help, we have a section for that. We have crisis resources. We are offering wellness programming free of charge, but it is for people within a 58 mile radius of Ann Arbor. Once the residence opens, however, it'll be offered to anybody anywhere in the country and we are going to be offering service but we're going to be offering our service on a sliding scale so anybody who qualifies to be admitted could do so regardless of their ability to pay. We really want this to be Accessable.. If you wanna donate, you can certainly donate online there. We're of course always eager for support year round. This is a very ambitious project and it will require a lot of financial resources. So we're always looking for that.

Don Drew: 22:03

All relationships are complex and cross generational relationships between mothers and their daughters are no exception. Modern pressures and generational shifts will always present challenges as each of us are in fact learning as we go, finding out what it means to be a brother, a daughter, and a mother at each stage of our lives, whether we are 20 or 80. Julie has provided valuable insights today, and I look forward to reading more of your articles on Second Acts. I also want to remind our listeners that Garrett Space is dedicated to reducing suicides and filling critical gaps in supportive care options for young adults 18 to 28 facing mental health challenges. They're located in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and you can find them online at garrettsspace.org. Julie Halpert, thank you so much for joining us on Peaceful Life Radio today.

Julie Halpert: 22:49

Thanks so much for having me.