1 "Make It Stop— I Can't Keep Up!"

PARENTING IS OVERWHELMING

Out of Gas

It was one of those mornings. The baby hadn't slept, Amy's husband was out of town, and three-year-old Sophie insisted on wearing her new tutu to nursery school as snowflakes began to pile up on the New England January morning. Plus, they were late. Of course, they were late. Amy had time to feed the kids, but no time to feed herself.

"You can't wear your tutu and ballet slippers to school today," Amy insisted. "It's snowing."

"I don't care," Sophie retorted and resumed pirouettes.

Amy was in no mood for a fight. "Honey, we're late," she pleaded, her voice rising.

"We're late, we're late," Sophie mocked, imitating her high-pitched voice.

"Enough, no backtalk, we are going. NOW. Put on that jacket," Amy said, trying to sound firm but calm, as all the good parenting books recommend.

"You can't make me, you can't make me," Sophie chanted in a singsong. She gave up the dance and plopped down defiantly and stuck out her tongue.

Amy was furious. "Enough! I've had it," she yelled, picking up both kids and dragging them to the car, jackets spilling out of her hands. Opening the door one-handed to get the baby in, she tossed Sophie her jacket. Sophie immediately sensed a new stand she could take with her mother's conviction and compassion waning and rage seething: she promptly refused.

"You're not the boss of me," Sophie taunted.

"You can just freeze, see if I care," Amy retorted as she buckled both kids into their car seats and sped off.

Sophie started to wail, and then the baby joined in.

"Stop it *now*," Amy hissed, feeling overwhelmed and helpless. Clearly this was not one of her finer moments in parenting.

"I want my daddy," Sophie cried. "He isn't a meanie like you."

It was a relief, for everyone, to get to school. The teacher was understanding as she greeted them, wiped Sophie's tears, and led her inside with a sympathetic smile to Amy. Within minutes Sophie was coloring and laughing with her classmates.

Amy left, shamefacedly waving good-bye and feeling like a terrible mother. While Sophie had moved on, Amy's anger boomeranged as hot shame, guilt, and regret. She began to berate herself, saying, "I really suck at this. I'm an awful mother."

As she was driving home, the car began to sputter and spurt, then finally stopped. "Oh shit," she thought. Tom, her husband, usually filled up the car, but with him out of town she hadn't even remembered to check the tank, which was, of course, empty.

Amy sighed, packed the baby in his carrier, and started to walk to a gas station. The snow was coming down harder now. "Great, just what I goddamned need," she thought as she began to cry. She surprised herself with the intensity of her sobs. "How am I going to do this? How can I get through the next 15 years without driving myself and the kids crazy?"

It's Hard for Everyone

Maybe your terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day wasn't as dramatic as Amy's, or maybe it was worse, but we all have at least one story to tell about "that day." Hungry, angry, lonely, and tired, we've all run out of gas, or worse. Parenting is hard for everyone, but especially hard when family is far, and the village that it's supposed to take seems full of idiots or other parents who don't have the time for us. And this is how most of us parent these days, without a network and without a net to catch us or a hand when something inevitably goes south. The promise of parenting was connection and love, yet we find ourselves lonely and overwhelmed much of the time. And even if we do have some help, there is always a price to pay. It is so easy to run out of gas.

How can we gas up and not lock up the brakes? If we restore our own

well-being, might the quality of our parenting expand? Our aim in this book is to offer you a toolbox of techniques, anecdotes, humor, support, and guidance to help keep you sane during the parenting years and to help you find joy as well. And we'll help you learn to see the problems that arise not as intrusions or interruptions of your former child-free life, but as opportunities for wisdom and growth.

"Replenishment," you scoff. "What about anger management? Or Xanax? How about a double martini?"

I get it. We've all been there. But what I hope to teach you in this book is that it is easier to manage your anger, take responsibility, keep your mood steady, and enjoy your child (or children) while you are taking care of yourself. The writer Audre Lorde put it succinctly, stating that caring for oneself is not self-indulgence but self-preservation.

Offering yourself mindfulness and compassion isn't about giving yourself free rein to be lazy, to shirk responsibility, or to sit on a cushion and contemplate your navel while your kids are fighting and destroying the house. It's not about being soft on ourselves. On the contrary, mindfulness helps us see clearly and act from a place of kindness and wisdom. In fact, one definition of mindfulness is "clear seeing."

So what is mindfulness? There are many definitions, but the one that has guided me as a parent and psychologist is a very simple no-fuss, no-frills definition: "awareness of the present moment with kindness and acceptance." With the constant stresses and strains of being a parent, whether it's a night without sleep, a child's tantrum, sibling rivalry, difficult in-laws, or a critical partner, we need a warm and compassionate response to our experience.

"Sounds nice," you might argue, "but that isn't realistic. The world is tough; we're all constantly judged. It's out of touch to think you should always be kind and accepting. And sometimes I just get angry. And how do you teach kids right from wrong? How can you motivate them to do their best if you don't push? And we need to think about the future. It simply isn't practical."

These are all excellent questions, and I'll address them. What I'm proposing is a radical way to parent, to be a parent, a different way to be with our kids and to be with ourselves. Most of us are used to motivating ourselves with criticism, thinking that if we yell at and berate ourselves we will be better and more effective, happier and more successful.

In fact, self-criticism rarely works. Kristin Neff, widely known for her comprehensive research on self-compassion (see Chapter 2), has written extensively about this. Motivating ourselves with kindness and

compassion is actually more effective than using criticism. "Yeah, sure, more stupid psychobabble," you protest, ready to put down this book. Hold on. These ideas are impacting the business sector as well. Charles Schwab, financial leader and philanthropist, wrote, "I have yet to find the man, however exalted his station, who did not do better work and put forth greater efforts under a spirit of approval than under a spirit of criticism." Let's illustrate this by returning to Amy, who consulted with me not for therapy but for "sanity" as she put it.

"I don't need therapy," she protested, "but I do need a parenting coach. I don't know what I'm doing, my parents and my sisters, who also have young kids, are two flights away, I have no help, and I don't want to push away the new parent friends I am just barely making."

As we talked more, Amy's story unfolded. She had moved to the East Coast for her husband's job, leaving behind friends and family. "People are cold here, just like the weather," she said sadly. "And everyone looks so together. I feel like such a mess." She began to cry. "We moved here for Tom's job—not that he's ever here; they have him traveling twice a month. And when he gets home, he's exhausted and hungry and wants the kids to be all fun and the house to be all clean, and he forgets the house isn't a hotel room and doesn't have daily maid service . . ." She paused and drew a breath. "It just isn't happening." She was silent for a moment. "I'm taking care of everyone, I'm not sleeping, I'm lonely, eating the kids' leftovers because I gained so much weight, but now I'm hungry most of the time. Sometimes I feel I'm going so fast that I'm barely breathing. But what is scariest is that I feel that I'm losing myself and my brain is just *mush*. I've lost my old competent self. No one is taking care of me. I need some help and I need it now. That horrible morning when I ran out of gas and had to walk to a station in the snow, I saw the sign that said 'Full Service,' and I wondered, 'Will I ever feel full again? Am I always going to feel depleted?'"

I tried the following reflection with Amy, which helped her reconnect with feeling competent.

Reflection: Finding Yourself

Do you feel like you lost yourself when you became a parent? Take a moment and ask yourself the question "Who am I?" Ask it again. And again. Did "parent" come up in one of the first answers? That's wonderful, but who ELSE are you besides a parent? We can't lose this essence of who we are as we become overwhelmed with parenting.

As our work progressed, I added the following practice, inspired by Christopher Germer's *The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion* (2009), which Amy did when she woke up in the morning. This is a great place to start. We know that you're busy and don't have free time. Don't worry. Set a timer; it takes only three minutes. (Don't tell me you don't have three minutes.)

Tending to Yourself

🎧 *Audio Track 1*

- Take a moment and find a comfortable seat.
- Let yourself settle for a few moments.
- Find your breath. Sometimes we are so busy we don't realize that we're breathing. Where is it? Where do you most notice the sensation of breathing? Focus there and feel the breath move in and out.
- Let yourself feel one breath fully.
- Ask yourself, *How do I know that I'm breathing?*
- Notice any sensations in your body.
- What are you noticing? Are you hungry? Tired? What emotions are you aware of? What are you feeling?
- Just as you rock or hold your child, let yourself be gently rocked and held by each inbreath and each outbreath.
- Let the inhalation and exhalation soothe and comfort you, anchor you.
- If you like, put a hand on your chest or a hand on your chest and belly.
- Feel the comfort of your warm touch.
- Let yourself take five breaths. Yes, you have time for five breaths. You are breathing anyway.
- Give yourself permission to tend to yourself, to be kind to yourself. You spend so much time taking care of others, attending to their needs. Take a moment. What do you need?
- Give yourself permission to eat, to shower, to rest, to stop and breathe.

Amy tried this for a few weeks. Some days all she could manage was three breaths, but even that seemed to help. Even though this seemed so simple, she felt that it grounded her.

"Sometimes I'm so frantic that I forget to eat or don't have time to shower. I was running on empty. And now I'm realizing the truth of the saying that I grew up with in the South," she said with a laugh. "'If Mama

ain't happy, ain't nobody happy.' I can't not sleep or eat and expect the family to run smoothly. If I have nothing to give, everyone suffers. What I realized, which was a big breakthrough for me, is that I don't have to depend on someone else to fill me up. I can do it myself. I don't need my husband, my sisters, or my parents to nourish me. That was very freeing."

There are many ways to practice mindfulness and compassion. Not everyone likes to sit quietly and look inside. No problem. One size doesn't fit all. I'll help you find what works for you. I like to teach people short reflections, where they set aside a few moments (maybe when the kids have gone to bed) to take time for themselves and to consider their needs and desires. After this exercise, feel free to jot down what comes up for you.

Reflection: What Do I Need?

Find a quiet moment, either early in the morning or after the kids have gone to bed. If you like, in your mind's eye, imagine a powerful tree with deep roots and a strong trunk. Notice that the branches of the tree reach as high as the roots are deep. You might even imagine you are breathing in through the top of your head and out through your "roots" or feet.

Ask yourself, "What do I need?"

Pause and listen for words or images to arise.

Ask again, "What do I really need?"

Take a few minutes to be open to whatever comes up, without judging or censoring your response.

Write down what comes up for you.

When Amy tried this reflection, she found herself connecting with the image of the deeply rooted tree. "I left my family and sibs and community to come here, and I really miss that feeling of connection. I had this fantasy that once I had a partner, a home, and kids, all would be wonderful and I would have everything I needed. That I would feel full. I was so wrong. I feel so isolated here, so alone. And I thought I could do it all, but I can't. I need some downtime. I can't be there for everyone 24/7. That tree needs sunshine, water, and some fertilizer!"

Amy is not alone. So many of us feel isolated. Over the past 30 years,

as I've talked to hundreds of parents, I've seen so many paths that lead to isolation. Sometimes we wait until we think we have all the pieces of the puzzle in place—the career, the house or condo, a decent income—and we think, "Yes, the time is right." But then we may have trouble conceiving, and when we finally do have children, most of our friends have already had their kids or have returned to work. Instead of being with our friends pushing our kids on the swings, bathed in golden sunlight, we find nannies and babysitters. Suddenly, we feel out of sync. Or the company we work for transferred us to another state or even another country. So much for that dream. Or it may be that our partner feels that it is her turn to focus on her career, and most days we are the only guy at the playground, and the moms and babysitters aren't very friendly and there is no one to talk to—no matter how hard we try, how much we plan, it is never perfect and we realize how little control we have. (If this is the situation you find yourself in, you might also enjoy a practice in Chapter 5 called You Don't Have to Control Everything.)

Learning to Pause

People often complain that they don't have time to practice mindfulness, especially with small children. No worries; I understand. I didn't either. This is why the practices that I offer, especially in the beginning chapters, are designed for parents who are spread too thin and don't have time for themselves. Most can be done in three minutes or less. Researchers tell us that consistency is what matters, not large chunks of time. Think about it: What would your dentist recommend, one 40-minute tooth brushing a week or three minutes twice a day? And you don't have to sit still to practice mindfulness. It can be done walking, standing, driving (keep your eyes open), lying in bed, and even changing a diaper (see the Mindfulness in Daily Life exercises below).

Mindfulness doesn't have to be something you do alone in silence in a meditation hall on a remote mountaintop, but something that can become part of your crazy, busy life as a frantic parent trying to juggle way too much. Which is, in fact, when you need it the most.

One of the most accessible practices is the Parenting Pause, adapted from psychologist and meditation teacher Tara Brach. Brach teaches that a simple pause of just a moment or two has the power to shift the tone and direction of an interaction, an invaluable skill to have as a parent and in all relationships (especially intimate ones).

Why Can't You Get the F#k to Sleep!*

Lionel had a busy and stressful job in sales. Before they were married, he and Kyra, his wife, had agreed to split the childcare 50/50. This had sounded good in theory, but Tyrone was premature and had trouble breathing. Things were getting better, but both parents still worried about him. Now that Tyrone was seven months old and still not sleeping through the night, no one in the house was sleeping through the night. Kyra worked in retail, which meant long hours and often weekends. For the first few months, when she was on maternity leave, they were feeding the baby on demand, and they worried about every cry. Now that she was back at work, her boss didn't take kindly to her pumping during the day. Feeding the baby every two hours at night was an added stress.

Lionel was sure he could do a better job and generously offered to handle the night feedings. "No problem, I've got this," he reassured Kyra. However, it wasn't as simple as he thought. Wanting to do it "right" and show Kyra how competent he was, he got up whenever Tyrone whimpered, fed him, and then tried to put him to sleep. However, Tyrone, delighted to see his dad in the middle of the night, decided it was party time and refused to go back to sleep. The night feedings went from five minutes to 50, and Lionel's exhaustion was showing up at work, with careless errors on the job.

Nights were getting worse, not better. "We need to do sleep training," Lionel said. "My job is on the line. I'm making mistakes and falling asleep on the job."

"No way," Kyra insisted. "It's abusive and sadistic. We are not doing that to our baby."

When Lionel and Kyra came in for counseling, they were barely speaking (or sleeping). Their disagreement over Tyrone's sleeping habits was causing a rift in the marriage. Not only were they severely sleep deprived, but the problem had stirred up issues from Kyra's own family. She was certain that "crying it out" would harm Tyrone. Lionel insisted that Tyrone was fine and thought she was being "overly emotional" and told her so. This kind of disrespect triggered Kyra's memories of how her father had treated her mother, and she fought back, telling him he was insensitive. They were caught in a vicious cycle, and neither one could stand down. By this point, Tyrone was almost a year old.

After watching this pattern of escalating conflict, I asked, "Can we try something different here? We just keep going around and around in

circles. Can I teach you a mindfulness practice that might help interrupt the cycle?"

"No way," Kyra responded defensively. "That is too woo-woo for us. We already have a church. I don't want any trendy bullshit. Not going there."

"OK, what I want to teach isn't out there at all. It is about reducing your stress, reducing the constant fighting, and getting some sleep."

"Well, that would be a miracle," Kyra said sarcastically.

"No harm in trying. If it doesn't work, you don't have to do it."

Desperate, Kyra and Lionel agreed to try.

While this practice is effective with couples, it is also helpful for tensions between a parent and child. Set a timer for three to five minutes.

The Parenting Pause

- Start by sitting comfortably and taking a few calming breaths.
- If you and your partner have been fighting, it is fine to go to separate rooms.
- Let yourself stop. Just sit and give yourself a break. Don't try to fix anything right now.
- If you find yourself ruminating and your thoughts are spinning, or you are fuming, just acknowledge that.
- Just be with it, whatever you are feeling, even if it is difficult.
- You might say to yourself, *This is hard; this hurts.*
- Pause. No need to act right now. No need to fight right now.
- Feel your feet on the ground and notice any sensations in the body.
- Know that whatever you are feeling, it will pass.
- Try to bring a little kindness to yourself.
- Take a few more grounding and centering breaths.
- Before you return to your day, see if you can tune in to what you need right now.
- As you go through your day, take a pause whenever you need to anchor and get perspective.

"So, what did you notice?" I asked.

Kyra laughed. "I fell asleep. Sitting up. Can you believe that?"

"I dozed off too," Lionel joked. "Hey, this might help with the sleep deprivation."

The two were able to acknowledge just how exhausted they were,

where before they had denied it and argued about it. Their homework was to practice pausing for three minutes a day. They reminded each other to pause when they started to get into a fight, and it seemed to bring some humor and perspective. Tara Brach writes, "When we pause, we don't know what will happen next. By disrupting our habitual behaviors, we open to the possibility of new and creative ways of responding to our wants and fears."

I think of the Parenting Pause as a kind of flotation device that has kept me, and my clients, from going under. I have used it during those times when the kids are fighting and don't seem able to stop and I've had more than enough. It was a lifesaver when my aging father kept asking the same stupid questions over and over again and I could barely hold it together any longer and just wanted to scream, "Why are you asking me that again? I just told you!" It is one of my favorite practices when you have reached the end of your rope.

Tatiana used this practice when her mother humiliated her in front of her children by talking about all the mistakes she had made when she was young and what a difficult child she was. "I felt like I was an inch away from disowning her and denying her access to her grandchildren forever. Luckily, I was able to pause and collect myself before I did major damage." Jonathan used it when the kids badgered him to buy them toys or a sugary breakfast cereal they had seen advertised on TV. Al, whose in-laws treated him like he was an incompetent father, found it was his go-to practice when his mother-in-law criticized his parenting and told him how it should be done. "It really helped me keep my shit together. It would have been so easy for me to erupt in anger and say, 'Given what kind of mother you were to Diane, how dare you give me any advice!' That of course would've had disastrous consequences. I'm so glad I held my temper. I think of pausing as my 'superpower' that I turn to when I've run dry."

After a few weeks of practice, I made a suggestion to Kyra and Lionel: "I don't know if you're open to this, but you could try the pause with Tyrone."

"That's absurd," Kyra countered. "He can barely talk."

"But babies understand a lot, more than we realize."

"So what are we going to say?" Kyra mocked. " 'Tyrone, now just take a deep breath and pause'? Are you kidding me?"

Everyone laughed. "Let's talk this through. I hear you, Kyra," I said.

"For next week, Lionel, how about if you try pausing before you go into his room? Even if he is fussing and whimpering. It's OK. Babies fuss,

it just goes with the territory. It doesn't mean something is wrong. You want him to learn to soothe himself."

"Trust me, that won't happen." Lionel challenged. "Not with this kid."

"I hear you. And I've been there," I said. "Let me tell you a story. One of my kids was waking up so frequently, nearly every two hours, that I started to fall asleep with my patients! I was so exhausted I couldn't keep my eyes open. Not good form. A snoring therapist is not very helpful, and my patients were not amused. I had to figure it out before I lost my job!" The couple nodded.

"Think of it as something that you're going to teach him, just as pretty soon you'll teach him to play catch."

"I will not allow him to scream bloody murder," Kyra insisted. "Or I'll put a stop to this," she warned.

No Trendy Bullshit

Over the next few weeks, everyone worked together to help Tyrone sleep through the night. They started gently and slowly. Rather than picking him up to feed him, Lionel came in and put a warm hand on the baby's back.

"It's OK, big guy, you don't need another dinner. You're good. I'm here, I love you."

Sometimes he would sing, often the songs his mother and grandmother sang to him or ones he learned from church. When he sang, Tyrone smiled, snuggled with his blanket and teddy bear. As he got used to this, sometimes all Tyrone needed was a pat on the back and gentle words. "I'm here, you go back to sleep. Everything is OK. Mommy and Daddy love you."

While Tyrone would still fuss at times, and it didn't work every night, it was getting better. Things were going in the right direction. Tyrone was learning that he could fall back asleep without being held and fed.

"It's like he's finding his own rhythm. You know, it's like he's taking in the rhythm of the songs, the words and the beat, and feeling them in his body. Really, I swear," Lionel smiled proudly. "I'm from a family of musicians; he has it in his blood and bones."

Over weeks of work, as Tyrone's parents learned to understand and respect his natural cycles of sleep, and that he no longer needed to be fed on demand, it was easier for them to let go. As Lionel and Kyra themselves began to pause and settle, and to work together on the sleep problem, their

constant bickering diminished, and they started to enjoy each other again. And everyone was finally sleeping through the night, or close enough, anyway. "You know, I thought no way at first," said Lionel, "but this stuff has really helped."

"Mommy Doesn't Love Me Anymore"

It had been a rough year. Meghan had spent the last few months of her high-risk pregnancy on bed rest, and the labor and birth were complicated. She needed an emergency C-section so she and the baby would survive. Both she and Lila were still struggling with health issues, and Meghan barely had enough energy to take care of herself, let alone a fragile baby and her rambunctious five-year-old, Johnny.

And, to make matters worse, Meghan was struggling with the death of her mother, who had passed away when she was pregnant. She had been on bed rest, so she wasn't able to see her or say good-bye. Theirs was a deeply ambivalent relationship, but the force of Meghan's grief took her by surprise. She had no idea she would ever miss her mother this much and often wished that her mother would magically appear to help, especially now.

In fact, she was thinking about her mother as she was trying to cook dinner one night. Her husband was at work, having taken on an additional job to help cover the medical expenses. The insurance had covered only a small portion of the costs. He was doing as much as he could, but he was exhausted and irritable as well. They thought that giving Johnny a playmate would be fun and make their lives easier—no one had bargained for this nightmare.

"Johnny, could you please play with Lila while I make dinner?" Meghan asked.

"What should I do?" he asked.

"Oh, just tell her a story or sing to her; anything is fine," Meghan said.

Johnny started by singing his favorite songs, but then quickly ran out of material. The baby started to cry. On top of everything else, she had colic and cried constantly. It put everyone on edge.

"Try something else," Meghan suggested. "Dinner's almost done. Just a few more minutes."

"Can't we send her back to the hospital?" Johnny suggested. "I don't like her. Too much noise."

"Stop that. She's your sister, and she's been sick. She's here to stay."

Giving his mother a mischievous grin, Johnny made up his own song and sang it in a singsong rhythm.

Mommy loves you
She doesn't love me
But I don't care
I don't need Mommy anymore
You can have grumpy Mommy
I don't care
She's all yours
I don't need a mommy anymore.

Meghan was speechless. She didn't know what to say or do. She wanted to yell and scream and give Johnny a time-out. She even wanted to spank him, which she swore she would never do, but she didn't have the energy to do anything but go to bed. And he was doing what he had been asked. She just hadn't asked for the aggression. "Wow," Meghan thought, "now I get why my mother hit us so much. I had no idea I would get so angry with my own child."

"But I do love you," she protested. Johnny didn't look convinced. And truth be told, she was furious with him.

They ate in stony silence, the only soundtrack the cries of the new baby.

Meghan put the children to bed and then went to her room. She felt ice cold and numb. When her husband returned home from work, she could barely speak. She'd been crying for hours, wrapped in blankets, shivering, hugging the baby's stuffed animal.

"Another hard day? What's up?" Her husband did little to hide his annoyance.

"I'm damaged. I'm deeply flawed. And I've damaged Johnny; he hates me. I can't do this—it is too much," Meghan sobbed. "I'm a horrible mother."

At the hospital clinic, Meghan was diagnosed with postpartum depression and started on medication. As she began to stabilize, we worked on helping her get her health back, mourn her mother, and get more support.

Meghan had no time or interest in any formal mindfulness practice. Just getting through the day was a victory, but she was interested in anything informal to help her "get a grip," especially on those days when Johnny was challenging and the baby was colicky.

We created the following practice together. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, you don't have to sit to practice mindfulness; it is fine to practice walking, standing, or lying down.

Bouncing the Baby Meditation

- Start by standing, feeling your feet on the ground.
- Find a comfortable position to hold the baby.
- Rock from side to side, back and forth.
- Feel the warmth of the baby against your body.
- Hold the baby against your heart, letting him or her listen to the heartbeat.
- Bend your knees, gently bouncing the baby up and down.
- Let yourself feel held by the earth, feeling your bodies in space.
- Feel free to turn, to dance a little, even to sing.
- Tune in to your breath, perhaps synchronizing your breath with gentle movement.
- Let the baby be rocked by your breath.

You might want to add some phrases that you recite to the baby. Feel free to create your own, but Meghan created the following rhythm that soothed her and the baby: *You're my baby and I love you like crazy.* The other phrase that helped was *I'm here for you. Things have been tough, but we'll get through. Yes, we'll get through this together. We'll find a way.*

It is fine to walk, to dance. Feel free to make this practice your own.

The doctor was right—the colic subsided in a few months. As Meghan recovered, she turned some of her attention back to her relationship with Johnny, but she was still angry.

"I know that this is an awful thing to say, and please don't lock me up, but I don't like him anymore. I don't want to be with him. He's . . . kind of a jerk! Sometimes he pinches the baby just to piss me off. She cries, and I go into a rage." She paused. "I'm a pretty pathetic excuse for a mother," she said, shaking her head.

This is something that parents rarely talk about outside of the consulting room, but there are often periods in the parent–child relationship where there is tension and anger—long ones. Yet tough times in any relationship are an inevitable part of being human. While we are used to discord in adolescence, and even expect it, negative feelings can arise at any time. It's perfectly normal to feel irritated with your child (and with your

partner as well). However, we tend to feel guilty about having such feelings and deny or suppress them, believing that something is wrong with us.

Reflection: What Pushes Your Buttons?

Let's take a moment to look at what sorts of things typically come up that cause negative feelings for parents.

- *Let yourself pause. Ahhh, you need and deserve this moment of reflection.*
- *Take a few breaths or listen to the sounds around you. Take this in. Let yourself fill up.*
- *Sometimes it is easiest to start by remembering what caused your parents to lose it. Was it when you . . .*
  - *Didn't do chores?*
  - *Didn't clean up after dinner?*
  - *Talked back?*
  - *Spilled milk or food?*
  - *Didn't clean your room?*
  - *Fought with your siblings?*
  - *Got into fights with kids at school?*
  - *Didn't do your homework?*
  - *Didn't get good grades?*
- *How about you? What makes you angry? What brings up negative feelings for you? Jot it down, paying attention to any patterns you might notice.*
- *Finally, bring some compassion to yourself (and even your parents if you can). We're all human, and we all lose it at times.*

Researchers tell us that "what we resist persists." So, if you are noticing irritation, don't fight it. Notice it, acknowledge it, and then let it go. Thoughts and feelings rarely last more than 30 seconds. Try not to create a story about it or turn it into more than a passing, and human, moment of irritation. If it's still nagging at you, make a practice of what we call the compassionate **NAG**.

Notice the feeling or sensation.

Allow it to linger, without fighting it off, watching it wax and wane, and eventually

Let it **G**o.

Often seeing your child with what the meditation teachers call "Beginner's Mind" can help reset the relationship. It is very easy to get stuck in negative patterns of behavior. Fortunately, we can shift this way of seeing and relating. Try this reflection practice when you need to clean the slate and shift the dynamic of a relationship.

Reflection: Seeing with Kind Eyes

Try doing this practice when your child is sleeping.

- *Without disturbing his or her sleep, quietly sit by your child.*
- *Watch your child breathe. If you like, try to coordinate your inhalation and exhalation with that of your child.*
- *Without being hard on yourself, reflect honestly on how you see your child. What thoughts or feelings are arising right now?*
- *Often our thoughts are neutral or critical. Do you often say, "Why are you wearing that to school today?" "Why are you so messy?" "Do you have to complain about everything I say and do?" "Why won't you eat your vegetables?"*
- *How are you reacting and interacting with your child? Don't judge and berate yourself, but get curious. Do you notice the stain on a T-shirt, the fire engine that is left in the living room?*
- *Try looking at your child as if it is the first time, as if you have never seen him or her before. Rest there.*
- *What do you notice? See if you can see something new in your child's face.*
- *Spend a moment with your child's vulnerability. See the strengths as well as the weaknesses.*
- *What might be causing his or her suffering?*
- *Reflect on how your child, like all beings, wants to be happy.*
- *Can you allow your heart to soften as you see your child from this new perspective?*

Meghan practiced this a number of times, and it helped her reconnect with the things she loved in Johnny. She began to see things from his perspective—how hard it must have been when she was on bed rest, the disruption to the equilibrium of his old family structure, the ways he had felt displaced. Of course he was angry and acting out. She could see that now and began to soften. For the first time she saw the possibility that her anger wouldn't last for his entire life.

I suggested that they try to do something together, just the two of them. Could Dad watch the baby on the weekend for an hour or two while they had some special time together?

It took some negotiation, but Johnny liked the idea and helped make it happen. At first it was pizza lunch, his favorite food, at the neighborhood pizza place. This evolved into lunch and then kicking a soccer ball together in the playground. Meghan had played soccer in school, and she was able to show Johnny some fancy footwork, which he tried to imitate. It felt good for her to be physically active again, and Johnny was impressed.

"Cool, Mom," he said with admiration. "That is awesome!" Things were on the upswing.

Just a Bad Cold

It seemed like just a bad cold. "Don't worry so much, Valerie," her husband chided. "Kids get colds all the time. You always overreact." Four-year-old Matt, however, was miserable. He was so stuffed up it was hard to breathe, he couldn't sleep, and he was achy and irritable. "Just send him to school. It's not a big deal—don't make a sissy out of him." Matt was their first child, and Valerie had heard all her life that she was too emotional. So she packed him up with a warm sweater, scarf, gloves, and hat and took him to daycare. He barely had a fever, and she needed to get to work herself.

A few hours later the teacher called. "Matt just threw up. You need to come and get him," she insisted.

"Great," Valerie thought, "so much for getting any work done."

By the time she arrived at daycare Matt's temperature was over 100 degrees and he seemed unusually pale and listless, but glad to see her.

She gave him something for the temperature, but the fever didn't go down. In fact, it went up.

"This isn't right," Valerie told her husband, "I'm taking him to the doctor; something is wrong."

"Jesus, Valerie, let him sleep it off. You can't call the doctor at night, and we both need to rest. Don't bother her; it's just the flu."

When the fever persisted the next morning, Valerie had to call in to her workplace to take off another day. "How on earth do people keep a job when they have kids?" she wondered, feeling angry, trapped, and worried.

The fever continued to climb, and Valerie took Matt to see the pediatrician. He was listless, struggling to breathe, and his heart was racing.

The pediatrician examined him and in a calm but no-nonsense voice said, "Take him to the hospital, let's get him on medication immediately.

And Valerie—" The doctor paused and put a hand on her shoulder. "I don't want you to worry, but go directly to the hospital; don't stop at home."

Of course Valerie began to worry. She bundled Matt into the car and drove as quickly as she could to the children's hospital in the city. She hated driving in city traffic, especially during rush hour, but she had no choice.

By the time they arrived at the hospital, his fever had spiked to over 103. He was still having trouble breathing. The wait was interminable. Valerie felt so alone. "Please, he is struggling to breathe, can someone look at him already?" Valerie grabbed a triage nurse, trying to get some help.

Within moments they were in the emergency room, with Matt on a metal table with bright lights on him, surrounded by a circle of doctors, nurses, and young residents. Suddenly there were machines, tubes, and monitors attached to his little body. Things moved so quickly. It seemed surreal.

"It's good you brought him in when you did," the attending doctor said. "Your little guy has a serious respiratory infection. I want him to spend the night here so we can keep an eye on him."

Valerie was frantic but relieved that Matt was in good hands and that her concerns were being heard. She had tried mindfulness, but there was no way she could focus on her breath while Matt was struggling with his. When she tried to find her breath, all she could think of was his pain and suffering and how he was struggling to breathe. But she needed something to get through this ordeal. She was exhausted, her body was shaking, and she would spend the night trying to sleep in a chair by his hospital bed.

Valerie liked listening to sounds, another popular and practical way to meditate, and found this to work better for her than trying to follow her breath. She adapted that basic practice for the hospital.

The Sounds of Life

- Start by sitting, standing, or lying down. The posture doesn't matter. Let yourself get as comfortable as possible.
- Begin to listen to the sounds around you. This may include the heat, the air conditioning, wind, rain, or traffic.
- No need to name the sounds, to hold on to them or push them away. Allow yourself to listen to the sounds as they are.
- Imagine that you are listening with your entire body, picking up 360 degrees of sound. Above you, below you, behind you, in front of you.
- Notice that each sound, like every story, has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

- It may be that some sounds are annoying or irritating, while others don't evoke a response. Don't judge the sounds; just listen.
- When your mind wanders, no problem, just bring it back to the sounds in the room and to the present moment.
- See if you can allow yourself to rest in the sounds of the moment just as they are.
- Even if this is a difficult moment, know that this constellation of sounds will never appear again in exactly this way.
- When you're ready, take a deep breath, find some movement in your hands and legs, and open your eyes if they have been closed.

When Valerie reflected about the experience, she realized that listening to the sounds in Matt's room helped her stay present and not spin out into worry or catastrophic thinking, which was so easy for her to do. "Usually I would have been annoyed by the noise and beeps of the monitors, the presence of the IV, the respirator, but these sounds felt protective. I knew that the machines, even with their lights and activity, were keeping him alive. And knowing that helped keep me from being a total hysterical mess."

While the practice helped Valerie get through a dramatic situation, this practice is also useful in daily life. Although meditation and yoga teachers may focus on the breath, this is not the best route for many. Bringing attention to and anchoring in the inner, rather than outer, world may stir up uncomfortable emotions and memories. For folks with a history of anxiety and trauma, a gentle way to bring mindfulness into daily life is to bring attention to the sounds around us. For many people who are skeptical of meditation, the practice of listening to sounds is generally more accessible. And it's easy. We don't have to make the sounds come or go. We don't have to manipulate them. We can listen to sounds without making any effort. The sound appears, we hear it, and we're present.

Rosa came to see me to help manage the stress of three small children and an aging mother who required care after her knee replacement. She didn't think mindfulness would work for someone with such a busy life. I told her that the practice is like puppy training, requiring patience, humor, and self-acceptance. She set aside just three minutes a day and found that she could return to the present moment "one sound at a time." Tuning in to the sounds around her as she ran between soccer games and her mother's rehab helped her feel less agitated.

Alessandra had a history of trauma and sexual abuse. She wanted to try mindfulness but became agitated when she tried to feel her breath.

Listening to sounds became a way for her to stabilize and come into the present moment. When she began to feel overwhelmed by memories of the past, or fears that something bad would happen to her daughter, listening to the hum of her air conditioner or the sounds of street traffic helped her anchor her awareness in the moment and in her present life, so different from the rural home where her abuse had occurred. With practice, as she focused on the sounds of her hard-won new life and child, her ruminations about the trauma began to subside. We can also listen to sounds and tune in to our other senses as we walk, sit on a bus, or wash dishes. While our minds race to the future or get stuck in the past, our senses are always in the present.

Mindfulness and compassion are not just practices for exhausted, stressed-out parents who are trying to juggle too many balls without dropping them all. They are tools for life. These are skills that can help you manage the consequences of the truly challenging situations that we all face—families that didn't meet our needs or who were abusive, the emotional strains of illness, financial burdens, being a single parent, trauma, and the aftermath of addictions. Mindfulness and compassion offer the promise of a different relationship with our burdens and the freedom not to be defined by our histories and the events of our lives.

"I'm Drowning"

Rob was raised not to talk about problems. In his self-reliant family, needing help was a sign of weakness. His wife could see he was down and needed help managing his stress. He was a hard worker, the oldest of five. "I'm loyal. I try to be the person who is always there, someone you can trust. I won't let anyone down," he told me.

"I don't complain, feel it is disrespectful. My mom was a nurse. She's tough, no nonsense. If you were sick you went to school anyway unless you were bleeding from the head. She's a good honest woman. My dad worked construction. Proud. Street smart. When I was a teen he was hurt on a job. Had to go on disability. Got down, started drinking. My mom stepped up to the plate, started to work extra shifts. I stepped up as well. Had a paper route, started to bag at the local grocery store. You can't make much when you're 15. I had to help with the younger kids as well while my mom was working. We were eating cereal for dinner, and then I decided to learn how to cook dinner. Nothing fancy, but I can boil water." He smiled. "Dad is pretty much bed-ridden now, with some dementia. Sad, really sad." He shook his head, looking down at the floor. "I still try to help out and

support them; he has lots of medical expenses. My sibs try to help out too. But we all have our own families and expenses. The disability payments don't cover shit."

"After school I went into the family furniture business. Hoped they would pass it on to me. I learned accounting. And it was a steady job. And they treated me well; things were good for a while. I started a family, felt like I was going someplace. But then my uncle got sick, cancer, and he couldn't keep the store running. And I didn't have money to buy the business. That was it. 'Sorry, kid,' he said. 'Wish I could do more for you.' "

"So, a dozen years of hard work and nothing to show for it. Not even much of a severance. I'm out on the street. I have a wife, three young kids. I pride myself on being a good provider. I've been looking for a new job, sending out résumés, doing searches, calling friends, but nothing. And it's been months. I'm worried. Money is tight, so I'm driving an Uber. People treat me like a servant. My parents and family depend on me to help. My wife teaches nursery school, but that's not enough to support us. I feel like I'm useless. Sometimes I wake up in a panic in the middle of the night, in a cold sweat; it's hard to breathe. And some days, when it's bad, I feel like I'm drowning."

"And some days I hate myself," Rob said. "I'm distracted, angry, I feel like I can't do anything right. I beat myself up if I forget to pick up some milk at the store."

It was clear how devoted Rob was to his family and how hard he tried. And also how hard he was on himself when things didn't work out as planned. It turns out that 75% of us are harder on ourselves than we would be on a friend. To help him get perspective, I asked what his best friend would say.

"Oh, probably that I'm going through a tough time, but it'll get better."

"OK, how about if we try an exercise that might help keep that perspective?" I suggested.

"You think an exercise can help? How would it do that? Will it help me get a job and feed my family? I'm not into simplistic solutions," he said skeptically.

"There's good research behind this. Let's give it a try; I'll do it with you," I said.

The following reflection is adapted from Germer and Neff's Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) course. It can soothe and help us through life's more challenging trials.

Reflection: What Would Your Best Friend Say?

- *Take a moment and sit quietly. Think of a kind and loving friend. It could also be a teacher, mentor, relative, or even an animal or spiritual being.*
- *Notice how you feel in the friend's presence, in your body and mind.*
- *Tell this friend what you are going through and how hard it has been for you.*
- *What would this friend say to you? Imagine the words, the tone, even the facial expression. Feel free to write it down in the form of a letter or a note.*
- *Be open to any words, images, and feelings that arise.*
- *What would he or she do? Consider offering yourself a pat on the back, hug, or gentle squeeze if it feels right.*
- *If it is helpful, write this response down and carry it with you, in your wallet or purse, and then turn to it whenever you need some support or comfort.*

Rob imagined his best friend from high school, Jack, who was his rock-climbing partner and still a good friend but had moved away.

"When I was doing the exercise," he told me, "I felt him say, 'Buddy, it's not your fault. It isn't. Ease up on yourself, man. Just hang in. You can't control life. You're a good man. I used to trust you with my life, and you never let me down. You'll turn this around. If ever there was someone you could count on, it's you.' It felt like the kindest thing anyone has said to me in years." A tear leaked out of the corner of his eye. "Maybe I'm not so bad after all." He paused. "And it feels good not to keep it all in. These worries have been eating me alive."

"Rob," I said, "What Jack said to you is almost the same as what the meditation teacher Wes Nisker teaches, and I find it so true. He tells people, "You are not your fault."

"I feel like I'm at fault. I shouldn't have worked in the family business. But I didn't know; it seemed like a safe decision. I can't blame my uncle. I feel like I have to take responsibility for things not working out." He paused. "Sometimes I feel like an idiot."

"Rob, we make the best decisions we can. We don't know what the future will bring. You couldn't see this coming. If we think about it, who we are and what happens in our lives involve a whole constellation of factors—our parents, our genetic inheritance, our culture, where we

grew up, our economic situation, world events. It doesn't mean abdicating responsibility for our behavior and our actions, but it also doesn't mean blaming ourselves for every little thing, every deficiency, every flaw, every time we forget the milk. We can't predict which job will last, we can't predict who will get ill, we can't predict the swings of the stock market, the weather, or the impact of natural disasters."

The following practice, inspired by Mark Coleman, which Rob did daily, helped him begin to ease up on himself.

You Are Not Your Fault

- **Start by sitting comfortably, letting yourself settle. You can do this practice sitting, standing, or lying down.**
- **Reflect on how you are not your fault. Did you order this body? Did you ask for this critical mind? Your ethnicity? Your personality style?**
- **Did you order your dysfunctional family online?**
- **There are so many factors and variables that shape our lives that are totally outside our control.**
- **Take the largest perspective you can. The big picture can help us develop compassion for our quirks and challenges.**
- **The psychologist Carl Jung suggested that we are not what has happened to us but what we choose to become.**
- **Instead of judging, blaming, and berating ourselves, what if we offer some kindness and compassion for our challenges?**
- **Reflect on what it is like to see your life from a larger perspective.**

Mindfulness in Daily Life

Of course most of parenting isn't about adorable smiling babies, no matter what we all imagined years ago before we embarked on this path. There was a reason that Dr. Freud called parenting an "impossible profession." Fortunately, the practices you'll find in this book have the power to reverse much of the physical and emotional toll that comes with parenthood. The act of training our minds, like training our bodies at the gym, helps us with everyday tasks that are so important to parenting—decision making, emotional flexibility, responsiveness, and understanding. Training our attention so we can be more aware of the present moment, rather than caught up in concerns about the past or worries about the future, also nurtures qualities that are crucial to the happiness and well-being

of a family—resilience, calm, equanimity, compassion, and connection with each other. Dr. Richard Davidson, a neuroscientist and pioneering researcher, stresses that our emotions can be *trained*. So can our responses to the drudgery of parenting. I'm not advocating being a Pollyanna who loves every aspect of parenting (hard to love diapers and toilet training), but I am suggesting that we do have choices about how we respond to the least pleasant aspects.

Most parents with young children change at least six to eight diapers a day. One estimate suggests each child will go through 8,000 diapers. And if you have more than one child . . . you can do the math.

No amount of mindfulness and compassion will remove unpleasant things from our daily lives. Poopy diapers will not magically disappear or suddenly turn to gold. But what happens if we bring awareness to the task of changing diapers? How we respond to the daily drudgery of parenting can have an impact on our day. While we can't make the unwanted tasks of parenting go away, we do have a choice about how we are in relationship to them. Mindfulness teacher Sharon Salzberg stresses that mindfulness doesn't depend on what is happening, but it is about "how we are relating to what is happening." It is the difference between thinking "My life is mired in shit and it always has been and always will be—this is just the current iteration" and thinking "This is an unpleasant task, but it is necessary and beneficial for my child. Let me just be with it."

When the daily demands of caring for your child feel overwhelming and are getting you down, try these practices of mindfulness in daily life. Like training a muscle, we can train ourselves through simple acts like diaper changing to be with the rest of the not-literal shit that will arise in the course of parenting, which will be even more than 8,000 changes.

Dirty Diapers

- **Before changing the diaper, just stop.**
- **Take a breath. Feel your feet on the ground.**
- **Look at your baby. Look into his or her eyes. Smile.**
- **See if you can be with what arises during this task—the sensations, thoughts, feelings, smells—in an accepting, nonreactive way.**
- **When we like things, we want to hold on to them. When we dislike things, we want to push them away out of irritation or annoyance.**
- **One way to relate skillfully is to acknowledge, like it or not, this task is not going away.**

- Be aware of the steps of changing the diaper—taking clothes on and off, using wipes, ointment, powder.
- The baby may scream, fuss, fight. This is what babies do. Take a deep breath, stay grounded. This moment will pass.
- See what it is like to allow things to be as they are, not to be repelled by the act.
- This is part of life. The Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh used to say, "No mud, no lotus."
- As you finish, know that you are keeping your baby clean and comfortable.
- If you like, end with a smile and a hug.
- Repeat 8,000 times.

Many meditation teachers emphasize that you don't need to take major chunks of time out of the day to sit quietly—what parent has that luxury? One helpful maxim is the idea that mindful moments, many times during the day, can make a huge difference in your well-being and your ability to cope with stress. One of my teachers put it simply: "Short moments, many times." Practicing mindfulness doesn't have to be a big deal. You can do it anywhere, anytime, and doing what you usually do. The aim of these practices is to learn to be present even during a mundane or unpleasant activity. The point of informal practice is to do what we always do, but know that we are doing it, perhaps by checking in more deeply with our senses.

Try the following practice on a busy morning when you barely have time for breakfast (don't worry, I won't lecture about the benefits of herbal tea). It reminds me of a meme I recently saw online that simply reads "There's a guy at this coffee shop, not on his phone, not on a laptop, just drinking coffee. Like a psychopath." How often are you just drinking your coffee when it's time to drink your coffee? Mindfulness doesn't have to be on a cushion for ten minutes, it can be with your coffee for ten minutes. OK, maybe five minutes. Because you really need two things to stay sane as a parent, your coffee and your five minutes.

Drinking Coffee Meditation

- If you make your own coffee, stop and take a breath while the water boils.
- Listen to the sounds of the water or the sounds of your coffeemaker.
- Smell the coffee; let yourself inhale the fragrance.

- As you pour the coffee, use all your senses, bringing attention to the color, the smell, and the steam rising from the cup.
- If you add milk, cream, or sugar (or substitutes), notice that. Pay attention to the act of stirring.
- Stop before taking the first sip. Let yourself inhale the aroma.
- Feel the warmth of the cup.
- Let yourself enjoy the first sip. Ahhh.
- Let yourself actually taste the coffee.
- What do you notice? What does it feel like on your tongue? Feel the sensation of swallowing.
- Take a minute to sit there (or stand if it is one of those mornings) and pause as you drink the coffee, noticing as many moments as you can.
- See if you can bring this focus and awareness into the activities of your day, adding a new activity to bring complete attention to every few weeks.

Tedious Tasks

Just as mindfulness can help us see our children with a fresh perspective, it can help us bring a different attitude to things we do on autopilot or things that we resent or find to be drudgery. We haven't counted how many loads of laundry we've folded or how many dishes and pots and pans we have washed and dried, but trust me, it's even more than the numbers of diapers. For many years, cleaning up has been a dreaded chore, unpleasant but necessary. And, as with everything, we have no choice about doing the dishes, or laundry or diapers, but we do have a choice as to how we relate to these tasks. We can grumble and complain, or we can try to find something new or maybe even pleasurable in the task. Another way to bring more mindfulness to the mundane is to deliberately make it a process of discovery and get curious—as you do something for the umpteenth time, can you find something new in it? See if you can notice something you've never noticed before in the pile of laundry, the color of the dishes, and OK, well, maybe or maybe not something new in that diaper. Our children are already naturally curious; especially when they are young, they are expressive about this. Ask them to join you and notice the sensations and experiences of the chore. They'll often narrate their sensory experience without prompting: "Oooh, the water is warm, the soap is tickly, the bubbles are funny." Try to find that miracle in the mundane. If they can, you can.

Many teachers teach a deceptively simple practice of bringing

awareness to the hands. I first learned the practice from Tara Brach. This is one variation I created for parents:

Mindfulness of Hands

- Before washing the sink full of dishes, or folding the mountain of laundry you've been avoiding all day, allow yourself to stop for just a moment.
- Look at your hands. Begin wiggling your fingers and gently rotating your wrists. Become aware of the movement.
- Clench and unclench your hands. Feel your hands from the inside out.
- Notice sensations, pulsations, and vibrations within them. You don't have to name them; just feel them.
- Become aware of each finger, the palms, the backs of your hands.
- See what it is like to inhabit your hands. You may find that other parts of your body begin to relax and let go.
- Notice your neck, your shoulders, your jaw. Has anything shifted?
- Let your attention rest in your body before starting the next activity.

These practices can build on each other. Try the following brief reflection.

Reflection: Soap Bubbles

- *Try to remember the first time you played in soapy water.*
- *For some young children, soap bubbles can feel magical. Children often see rainbows in them, which adults, lost in the drudgery of it all, stop seeing.*
- *As you begin to wash the pots and pans from dinner, look at the soapsuds with fresh eyes.*
- *Imagine that you are seeing these bubbles for the first time, which, in fact, you are.*
- *Become aware of your hands, feel the warmth of the water, smell the soap, bring your full attention to the activity.*
- *Become aware of what you are bringing to this task. What are you feeling? Are you resenting the burden of washing and drying a pile of dishes? What happens if you approach this task as if you are doing it for the first time?*
- *See if you can carry this awareness of what you are bringing to the activity to other tasks during the day.*

Someone once asked the Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh how to practice mindfulness. "Do you want to know my secret? I try to find a way to do things that is the most pleasurable. There are many ways to perform a given task—but the one that holds my attention best is the one that is most pleasant." It's simple brain science if you think about it. And Thich Nhat Hanh always recommends smiling as you breathe. Why not enjoy the breath? And I'd take that further: why not at least try to smile at the dishes? The same applies to parenting and the tasks that go with it. When we resent the diapers, the dishes, and the laundry, we can become angry and irritable, feeling burdened by the details of running a home and caring for a family. But if we can find moments of freshness, even in mundane tasks, it can transform our experience of the daily tasks of living.

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