5 "What Should I Do?"

WORKING WITH THE INEVITABLE UNCERTAINTY OF PARENTING

As we saw in Chapter 2, Chrissie's second marriage came with an evil stepmother role she hadn't anticipated. Four years later, her relationship with stepdaughter Jenny had improved, but she was worried about Steven, now eight.

"He's always been high energy and is in constant motion. So am I. I can't sit still, so I didn't think anything about it. He's also a natural athlete, like me, and he loves to run. However, he can't sit quietly at his desk like the teachers want him to do. So he's been having trouble in elementary school. We just had a meeting with his teachers and the guidance counselor. They say he's can't stay focused on his work. So the school has come up with an IEP (individualized education program), and he's getting special services. It's not that I mind him getting help, although it was hard at first—of course you want to think your kid is perfect—but what is really upsetting is that they think he should try medication. They say it will help him concentrate and help him sit still. It makes me furious. Giving a kid drugs in elementary school to calm him down? I think it is just to make things easier for the teachers.

"I don't want to be one of those difficult, arrogant parents who think they know everything. They say it would help, and my friends have kids who are on meds, and it has made things easier for them. But I don't want him to be a dulled-down medicated version of the exuberant child I love."

There is no simple answer to this quandary, which I hear from many parents. Should a child be medicated for problems with attention? Anxiety? Depression? Behavior? Aren't we becoming an overmedicated nation? Isn't it all too much? Since I'd never met Steven, I didn't feel qualified to

weigh in on what his treatment should be. However, I did connect Chrissie with a child psychologist to help the family sort out the best plan of action.

When we are feeling battered by life, compassion is a reliable antidote. As Maya Angelou wrote in her book *Letter to My Daughter,* "You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them." If we think about it, we are challenged daily to act on our own behalf and on behalf of our children and loved ones. Chrissie was so upset that she had stopped taking care of herself. She wasn't sleeping, she was staying up late drinking gin and tonics to calm down, and bingeing on her favorite TV shows accompanied by ice cream and cake.

When things spin out of control and we don't know how to proceed, we have a choice about how we respond to the difficulties and uncertainties that inevitably arise. Like every other parent in the world, you might feel rage, shame, and embarrassment when things go south, but you can work on holding these inevitable difficult emotions with care and compassion.

Take a moment to reflect on what you are dealing with.

Reflection: Working with the Uncertainties of Parenting

- *Put down the drink, turn off the TV, set aside your phone, and put the ice cream and cake away (at least for the moment—but don't worry; it's your choice). Things can get messy and tough sometimes. Every parent has hard times.*
- *Take a few deep breaths, put a hand on your heart, or try some soothing touch.*
- *What is uncertain in your life right now? What are you struggling to control?*
- *Is your child having trouble in school?*
- *Have the teachers identified a problem? Are you being asked to take action that doesn't feel right?*
- *Are you waiting to hear how your child performed on an important test? If she or he got into a school or college?*
- *Are you managing health issues in your family?*
- *Are you struggling with difficulty in your job? Or your partner's work?*
- *Have you experienced an economic downturn?*
- *Are you dealing with loss?*
- *Has your child been struggling with addiction? With the law?*
- *Are you dealing with the uncertainty of a separation or a divorce?*

- *Write down all the things that feel uncertain or out of control in your life.*
- *Pause. Stop. Bring kindness to yourself.*
- *All parents struggle; all parents suffer and fail. You are human. Don't blame yourself, don't criticize yourself.*
- *Try to look at the problems and uncertainties clearly, not ignoring or denying them—but try not to beat yourself up.*
- *No matter what they are, you still deserve kindness and compassion.*
- *Finish by putting your hand on your heart and taking a deep breath. You can return to this practice whenever you need it.*
- *See if you can bring this practice into your day as you return to your daily activities.*

Chrissie felt that this reflection helped her feel a little less isolated. "It's not something that you can talk about in casual conversation. I've kept it to myself. It's hard to talk to other moms about Steven's problems; they don't want to hear about them. They start to look anxious, like there might be something wrong with their kid. That he is having trouble too. Like it should be a big secret. But when I think about how everyone struggles with something, even if they keep silent about it, I feel better. We all struggle, but most of us don't talk about it."

While the reflection was helpful, she needed more. The dilemma with Steven was keeping her up at night. Chrissie found she was having nightmares where Steven morphed into a robot and she would wake up screaming for him to come back. "I think I'm the one who needs meds right now," she quipped, only half joking.

I introduced her to the classic practice of RAIN, which stands for recognize, allow, investigate, and nourish/nurture/natural attention (the *N* representing different words depending on the teacher) and is one of the most useful exercises that I know of for dealing with the roller-coaster emotions of parenting. The beauty of this practice is that you don't have to sit still to do it (unless you want to) and it can be done in the chaos of the moment. It can also be practiced in a more formal and reflective way to work with something that has happened and is upsetting you when you want to spend some time writing down your thoughts and reactions.

Often people turn to meditation seeking calm, but we can't bypass emotional distress, no matter how much we try. And as parents, it is virtually impossible to avoid. Self-compassion helps us cultivate new tools so

that we can relate more effectively to our difficult emotions when they inevitably arise. Developed by meditation teacher Michelle McDonald, RAIN is an effective way to welcome and work with difficult emotions. Almost every teacher has a variation of the practice, and I have experimented with versions by Sharon Salzberg, Tara Brach, and Rick Hanson. I developed this composite version especially for parents. It was renamed by Chrissie, who said she felt like the practice got her out of the "hurricane-force winds" of her conflicting emotions.

Try it sitting, standing, walking, lying down—whenever the winds of life knock you down.

The Rain/Hurricane of Self-Compassion

- ***Recognize.*** To face an emotion, and have some resilience, we need to acknowledge that we are feeling it. Bringing the skills of mindfulness to bear, we notice what is happening. Let's say you've had an interaction with a child that leaves you feeling raw and upset. Don't try to ignore it, sweep it under the rug, or deny it. Saying, "Oh, it's nothing," can actually make it worse. Look at it. You might label it if the practice of noting has been helpful. "Ah, this feels like anger." See if other thoughts follow, such as irritation, sadness, thoughts about not being respected. You may notice that you want to cry. It might be that you are criticizing yourself for being angry: "Good parents don't get angry." Whatever it is, you are not the first parent who has ever felt this way. Just let yourself recognize it with some kindness.

- ***Allow.*** Allow the emotion to be there, even if it is unpleasant to do so. Don't try to control it. You are giving yourself permission to feel it, even if you think you shouldn't be feeling it. Remember, we don't invite our emotions to arise; they just do. You might say, "I should only have loving feelings about my child" or "This shouldn't upset me," but let things be as they are. Some teachers have us imagine that each feeling or thought is a visitor knocking at the door. Greet the feeling, acknowledge it, then let it go. Rather than dismiss difficult feelings as "bad," rename them as painful. This opens the door to increased self-compassion. With this framework, you can create space for your emotions to arise even if they are uncomfortable. See if you can bring self-compassion rather than self-criticism to what you are experiencing.

- ***Investigate.*** The steps of recognizing and allowing help us bring curiosity to the investigation of our emotions. This is different than being caught in a reaction against them. We are not trying to analyze an

emotion or construct a story about it, which can distance us from the immediacy of it, but to get closer to it. See if you can get curious and interested in what you are experiencing, with an attitude of friendliness or tenderness. We can begin to explore how it manifests in our bodies, and what the emotions might contain. Anger, for example, can also contain fear, hurt, helplessness, and sadness. See what the soft feelings might be under the rage. Here we can focus on gaining insight. Progress doesn't mean that we no longer have negative emotions—that doesn't happen, especially as a parent. It is just that we become more open to insights and understanding about what is arising.

- ***Nourish (with Self-Compassion).*** Self-compassion arises readily when we recognize that we are suffering. Tune in—what does the part of you that is suffering need? What is most comforting to you right now: reassurance, companionship? Try out the loving-kindness phrases from the last chapter. What words might feel comforting? "I love you," "This is not your fault," "I'm listening," "I'm here for you." "Parenting can be painful and difficult." See if any of the gestures of soothing touch will settle you. Even a small gesture of offering love to yourself can be nourishing. Notice that you are having a feeling without being it. You are more than your anger. Don't spiral down into recrimination or judgment. "I'm an angry terrible parent and that will never change. This is just who I am." Try instead a friendly "Oh, I'm suffering right now." See if you can disentangle from the experience. This is just a small part of all that you are. Let this experience pass.

This is what came up for Chrissie as she worked with the practice of RAIN during the week:

"In the **Recognize** step I realized not only how angry I was, but how scared I was. I realized I was worried that I would lose Steven, that he would become someone else. And I worry that I won't be able to protect Steven from hurt—not that we can ever protect our children from hurt. It felt like someone had punched me in the gut.

"I'm always trying to fix everything. So I was spending all this mental energy trying to figure out how to fix Steven. I came up with all these plans: I would enroll him in a karate boot camp to help him learn focus and discipline. That would cure him. Or get him into gymnastics since he loves to jump and do backflips and fancy turns on his skateboard. I'm always trying to solve problems. Ha. And I was feeling like such a bad and inadequate parent, and even imagining that my genes were defective. So

I just stopped and let all the feelings be there, allowing them, the whole shitty mess of them. I just let myself stop and pause for a few minutes. 'OK, Chrissie, you can't control this one. Chill.' " That helped.

"With the **Allow** step, I acknowledged that he is struggling in school, which I was denying. I was blaming the lazy teachers, the principal, the large classroom, my husband, my ex-husband, my genes. And then I could acknowledge that I'm upset and that it isn't my fault. I was feeling like everyone else was at fault. That wasn't getting me anywhere. I was telling myself I shouldn't be so emotional, or so sensitive, or be upset. Lot of good that was doing. I just made everything worse, and the school thought I was a bitch on wheels. I was acting like everyone was an enemy to be conquered—the school, the teachers, the guidance counselor, the ADHD if that is what we want to call it. I've been fighting with the diagnosis. Now I'm letting myself feel the hurricane of emotions. I was trying to eat my way out of the feelings.

"With the **Investigate** step, I started to feel what was in my body, which was a huge mess, a knot of fear and anxiety in my belly. A sense of 'Oh no, not this again.' And there was a sense of shame, that I'm not a good mother. That I did something wrong when I got divorced. That it's all my fault and that I've screwed Steven up for life. So rather than spinning and trying to fix it, deny it, or hate myself, I just felt the mountain of pain and hurt and worry that I was carrying. Usually I yell at myself and berate myself. This time I worked on caring for myself.

"And the **Nourishing** and self-compassion ending helped. I'm so critical of myself, and the only way I nourish myself is with wine and cocktails and chocolate. I know, not the kind of nourishment that goes anyplace other than my waist and butt. I got in touch with a part of me that is really terrified for him. I was able to extend some kindness toward myself, rather than the usual loathing, saying, 'Chrissie, hang in, be there for yourself, you're a good mom.' And then I was able to feel some of that kindness for Steven: 'Oh, my sweet baby, I love you, I won't turn away. I'm here, kiddo, you aren't alone.'

"I feel like I'm settling a little, not fighting so much about this, not raging as I was last week," Chrissie reported. "I'm in a saner place."

Compassion to Go

I like to think of the "Hurricane" practice as "self-compassion to go." It isn't a practice that you need a quiet space for. You can use it whenever you need a shot of compassion, rather than that extra shot of espresso (don't

worry, sometimes we need that as well). How have other parents used this practice? Samantha had a fight with her son about carpool arrangements for soccer practice, and he yelled at her and was disrespectful. It didn't work for her life to take him and pick him up for every game, but he wanted her to be there. She was furious that he didn't respect her needs, but there was no time for quiet reflection to calm down. She was in the car and on the way to work where she had to give an important presentation and not be a mess. Although she was driving in rush-hour traffic on the highway, she was able to recognize what she was feeling, allow it to be there, even though it was unpleasant, investigate what she was experiencing with some curiosity and friendliness, and then nourish herself, gently observing that this was painful rather than beating herself up. "It got me out of that ruminating rage I get into, where I spiral down into a funk. And I get that he wants me to be at every game, but I'm only human, and my needs matter too."

Hiroto used the practice when he and his ex-wife were going through a bitter and contentious divorce and custody battle. The kids were getting caught in the cross-fire. Whenever he felt overwhelmed with anger and bitterness, he turned to RAIN. "It helps me feel a little less crazed and work with my feelings in a constructive way rather than being afraid of their intensity. I'd started drinking again, I was so upset. Downed a whole bottle of wine myself the other night. I just wanted to numb out. It's been so hard. I have a broken heart, a fear of the future, and the desire for revenge. But I need to put the kids first. Now I feel that I'm a little more understanding of how much this hurts. I'm not drinking every night, taking things out on my colleagues, or yelling at the kids. I'm learning to relax in the midst of all this chaos and change."

The Illusion of Control

In our fantasies about the children we will produce, we often dream that our best qualities will live on. For many parents, it comes as a shock to realize that their child has a distinct personality, with needs and desires and wishes of his or her own. Our children are not us. And often, the more different the child is, the more difficult it is for the parent. Many parents blame themselves when their children are not in line with their fantasies of what the child should be. In the privacy and safety of the consulting room, parents often complain that they have been catapulted into a permanent relationship with a stranger. It is not what they imagined, not who

they imagined. And often they don't even like the stranger. They worry that something is wrong with them: Was it their failure to bond? Could it be the result of a Caesarean section? Can they blame their unemotional mother or father?

While many of us take pride in how different we are from our parents—more emotionally attuned, more open-minded, more balanced, more successful, more enlightened about politics or the state of the world—we often despair when our children are different from us or when they decide to live according to their own values, which often conflict with ours. We often believe that not only should we control our own destinies, but we should control those of our children.

This false belief is often a major cause of stress and anxiety. When we begin to question it, we see how delusional it really is. Before we start beating ourselves up, we might want to ask, "Now how could I have controlled that?" More often than not, we could not have prevented the difficult situation for which we are nevertheless blaming ourselves. Our children are biologically different. They carry recessive traits and genetic material and are subject to environmental conditions that are beyond our control. As Chrissie began to realize, the task is to learn to love our children as they are and not for the reflection of ourselves in them.

The next time you find yourself wanting to change your child, or have him or her behave a certain way, or be someone you want him or her to be, try this reflection:

Reflection: Letting Your Child Emerge

- *For much of our lives, especially before we had children, we were used to being the center of our universe, feeling we could control at least some aspects of our world.*
- *Our culture reinforces that—social media encourages us to have others "follow me," "like me." Our phones show us "our" weather, news, stocks.*
- *Let that drop away. Center with the breath, the sounds around you, the sensations in your body.*
- *When we have children, everything shifts. The universe expands, and we lose our sense of mastery and control. Suddenly we feel more vulnerable, things feel shaky, the future becomes uncertain.*
- *See what it feels like to stop trying so hard to have it all together.*

- *Let yourself rest. Stop pushing. Relax your striving.*
- *We often assume that we should be different, and that our children should be different, and it is our job to fix them.*
- *The more fear and worry we have, the more frantic we are about trying to manage our lives, and the lives of our children.*
- *It's exhausting to be trying to manage everything 24/7. To feel that we have to perform, that our children have to perform.*
- *What if you didn't have to try to make your child be anything? If you could just allow him or her to be? To enjoy? Not to have to do so much or achieve so much?*
- *Imagine Michelangelo in front of a beautiful piece of stone, waiting, listening to see what the stone wants to become. Can you imagine bringing that kind, gentle, loving attention to your child?*
- *Do not force. See if you can guide, support, let this child unfold.*
- *Try saying silently, "I see you. I'm listening. I care about you and your needs."*

Mindfulness encourages us to see the whole web of conditions, influences, and factors that come together to create any given moment. We are part of a greater whole. Much as we might want to (or think we do), we don't orchestrate the universe. On a good day we might have some control over ourselves and our children, perhaps getting them to eat a healthy dinner, do their homework, and not hit their siblings, maybe even connect with you in a meaningful way, but beyond that our powers are sadly limited. The awareness of a bigger picture and a vaster universe can help ease our self-blame or guilt when our children have problems, don't behave, meet our standards, or perform as we think they should.

"I Can't Get Off This Treadmill"

In Chapter 2 we saw how Anton felt compelled to micromanage his kids, even to the point of dictating what they ate. This urge stemmed from his worries about the future and his desire for them to have secure lives. But he was feeling exhausted trying to run a business, manage his kids, and keep his wife happy. "I feel like I can't stop, and I worry that if I do everything will fall apart. I know I put them under a lot of pressure to perform. The more fear and uncertainty I have, the more I try to manage and control everything. And I know it isn't good, and I'm embarrassed to admit this, but I often resort to guilt and threats to get the results I want. And I blame

them for making me stressed. I know it's a vicious cycle, but sometimes I feel I don't have any choice."

Clearly Anton needed to relax a little. I thought a story might help:

Once there was a little boy who noticed some white hairs on his father's head.

"Why do you have those white hairs, Daddy?" the son asked.

"Well, you know how sometimes you misbehave? And sometimes you won't eat your dinner? Or you fight with your brother? Or you make me mad? Or you make your mother cry? Well, every time you do something bad, I get a white hair."

The little boy thought and thought. He was quiet for a while.

"But Daddy," he said, seeing the contradiction in his father's argument, "why is Grandpa's hair totally white?"

Anton broke out laughing. "That's a good one, that is very good," he said, slapping his knee. "In fact, I want to talk today about Samir. The issue is that Samir is being defiant again. He makes a big stink when I ask him to do the extra daily math problems I assign him." I raised my eyebrows.

"The public school isn't preparing him sufficiently. He's in a large class of about 30 kids, and he's not being challenged. And he tends to be lazy. Strong math skills are the key to success in this world. The teacher is too busy and too overwhelmed to give him special attention, so I need to make sure he is working to his capacity. I've stepped in to supplement to make sure he's acquiring the skills. And I know math. I can teach him better than the teacher, who is a sweet young woman, fresh out of school, but not a mathematician.

"The problem is that he fights me every time. It's disrespectful. I'm doing this for his own good. He sulks, sometimes he throws a tantrum. I'm sure you can imagine how well I take to that."

"What does he say?" I asked.

Anton relaxed a little. "He says it's boring; he doesn't care."

"What does he care about? Playing video games?" I asked.

"Yes, like most kids his age, he likes games of skill. And he's good at them. But he loves animals."

"Being around animals?"

"Everything about them. Watching them, reading about them, watching TV programs. He's obsessed."

"Sounds like he's found a passion."

"There's this old dusty museum that he loves, it's connected to one of the schools nearby. And they have these ancient displays of animals of every type from all over the world. It's a natural history museum. He's in

heaven when he's there. My wife takes him, often with friends or with his brother. They have classes where they learn about science, the animals, and old skeletons. Sometimes they sketch them, build models of the animals, sometimes do some research. And he has a good sense of humor. 'Dad, we saw a *man-eating tiger* today. It looked scary. Wouldn't want to meet him in the jungle! And there was a bird that was all colorful and they named it a *secretary bird*. Isn't that silly?'

"How do you respond?" I asked.

"I joke with him. 'That's nice. Now do your math problems. The man-eating tiger will not get you a job, my son. This is a dog-eat-dog world, and you need to be able to survive. Get to work. I don't want that tiger to eat *you*.' "

"What if, after the math problems, you spend an hour at the museum with him, as special father/son time?" I asked.

"He would love it, but I *really* don't have the time."

"You can disagree with me if you like, but my bet here is that if you spend an hour with him at the museum and get to see what he loves, he might not fight you as much."

He rolled his eyes. "I guess I could give it an hour, but it's not going to help him get a job or survive in this world," he challenged.

"Look, Anton, I get how busy you are, and how leisure activities seem like a luxury. We can't control the job market, but you do have some control about how you relate to your son. It might help build a stronger relationship with him, which you want. And remember, we don't know what the economy is going to be in 15 to 20 years. Those skills of classification, observation, and analysis can translate into many things. OK?"

Anton heaved an irritated sigh.

"Anton, I know you want him to achieve. We all want our kids to achieve and do well and be successful. And it's important for kids to find some balance. And for parents to support their interests. I'm just asking you to spend an hour. Deal?"

As Anton walked out, glancing at his smartwatch, I wondered if I would ever see him again.

Bigger, Better, Faster

We dream that our children will be improved versions of ourselves—smarter, more athletic, more attractive, more successful. We often go to great lengths to make this happen. Over my 30 years of practice, I've

watched parents with limited means use precious savings to pay for exam tutors and college consultants to provide their children with every advantage, only to feel bitter and enraged when the investment of time and money makes a minimal difference, if any.

There is a story that when Jean Piaget, the Swiss developmental psychologist, came to America in the 1960s to lecture on his ideas about the stages of child development, someone would inevitably ask, "How can we speed these stages up?" The question became so ubiquitous that he came to call it "the American question."

His reply embodied some Zen wisdom: "Why would you want to do that?" He didn't see any virtue in pushing kids ahead of their limits, feeling that it was neither healthy nor desirable. He trusted that children would reach the developmental milestones in their own time. We tend to think that the better we are at parenting, the faster our children will develop. What gets lost here is a sense of fun and of play.

At the core of the question is a basic desire that is so human, one that both Anton and Chrissie share—how can my child have a happier life, or a life with more ease, than I've had?

Yet the underlying truth is that the more we try to control and micromanage, the more our children will push back. I think back to the woven finger puzzles I played with as a child—the more you struggle to free yourself, the tighter the grip. In seeing the underlying innocence of Anton's wish for his son, even though it manifested with a fierce intensity, I remembered my mother's attempts to teach me to write. She'd been a talented journalist and had dreamed of moving to New York City to achieve her dreams. In the story she told, she had given up a job at a prestigious magazine after being diagnosed with a heart condition. She put aside her dream, became a schoolteacher, married, moved to the suburbs, and had two children. But dreams die hard. Her restless unfulfilled ambition surfaced when I was in middle school and became her new focus. However, I had no talent and no interest. The more she tried to get me to write, the more I resisted and became defiant, producing work that showed a total lack of style or creativity. I was more interested in visual arts and the theater, and the unlived life of my mother didn't engage me. In fact, I ran as fast as I could in the opposite direction. I just wanted to act. She eventually gave up on that project to improve me.

Anton didn't cancel his appointment for the next week. "I have to give you some credit," he said sheepishly. "We went to the museum together. I don't think I remember seeing Samir so happy. He ran around all the rooms, with all these cases of ancient specimens, pointing out the bears,

the birds, the blue butterflies, the skeleton of a dinosaur, a prehistoric fish embedded in rock. He knew so much. I have to say, I was impressed. He knew all these animals. And he was so happy that I was there. He gave me a big hug as we were leaving. He never does that anymore. I think I was so caught up in my fears that I wasn't seeing him. I'd look at him and just see my own anxieties reflected."

If you find you're getting caught in your own needs and worries and losing sight of your child, try this reflection. If you like, grab some paper and pencil (or your phone) and write down what comes up for you.

Reflection: Seeing Your Child Clearly

- *What makes him come alive?*
- *What does she love to talk about? (Even if you usually tune out.)*
- *Where is she most creative?*
- *What does he like to play with?*
- *What are her passions?*
- *What do others appreciate in your child?*
- *Reflect on what your child loves to do. Make a list:*
  - ***Building***
  - ***Drawing***
  - ***Cooking***
  - ***Art***
  - ***Sports***
  - ***Dancing***
  - ***Experimenting***
  - ***Being in nature***
  - ***Writing***
  - ***Organizing***
  - ***Being with other children***
  - ***Dreaming***
- *How can you help your child express his or her gifts?*

"Anton, I'm curious. Do you ever play together, do things that are fun together?" I asked.

His eyes narrowed. "Sometimes we play soccer together. It's important for him to be agile and athletic."

"Anything else? Just spending time together hanging out?"

"Sometimes, but I try to be productive," he responded. "We don't watch TV much. I don't want him to goof off."

"Before you go, can I tell you about some research on brain development?" I asked.

Play Is Not Frivolous: A Touch of Science

Some parents erroneously believe that their children shouldn't waste their precious time on aimless play as it doesn't achieve concrete goals. But it turns out to be necessary for health. Recent research shows that the absence of play contributes to depression and anxiety. Playing can help our children build more resilient brains.

All children, in all cultures, know how to play. It's not something we need to teach them. But as adults, we often don't realize its value. Psychiatrist Stuart Brown argued that play not only strengthens our social skills but enables us to find balance. During the state of play, we can begin to open up to new possibilities and creative ideas. Play fosters a more resilient brain. Some scholars believe that the opposite of play is not work but depression. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi tried an experiment where he asked his subjects not to do anything "enjoyable" for 48 hours. After just one day, participants reported increased sluggishness and difficulty sleeping. The deterioration in mood was so pronounced that the experiment was stopped.

Marian Diamond, a professor of neuroscience, performed some classic experiments on play. She divided rats into three categories, offering them either an enriched environment, a standard environment, or an impoverished one. The enriched environment offered toys and friends. The standard was a smaller box with friends but no toys. The impoverished one had neither toys nor friends.

The findings were that the animals who had toys and friends had thicker cerebral cortexes with greater neural connections. However, the rats in the impoverished environment showed decreased cortical thickness. (The cortex is the part of the brain responsible for paying attention, awareness, and cognitive functioning.) This research was a breakthrough in showing that the environment can change the brain for the better and that play may help the brain function more efficiently, developing parts of the brain that help us learn, remember, and make optimal decisions.

Think about ways that you might play with your child. It might be going to a museum, or playing catch, engaging in an art project, or roughhousing. But it can be something as simple as taking a walk together or looking at the sky. And it doesn't need to take hours—the research shows

that children can thrive with even a few minutes of one-on-one time with a parent.

And it's not just children who thrive; we do as well. But many adults have forgotten how to play or don't realize its value. The recent research on neuroplasticity in the brain shows that our brains are still growing, changing, and evolving. It turns out that for adults as well, when we are having fun the brain grows and creates new connections. These in turn become the foundation for innovation. Just as meditation can change the brain for the better, increasing memory, attention, compassion, and even our lifespan, our brains need the benefits of play. It's a win–win situation. We get to relax and destress, and our brain benefits as well.

After some back and forth, Anton and Samir created this practice. They tried it right after a snowstorm, but it can be adapted for any weather or any time of year and any environment.

Adventure Walk

- Get outside; leave the phones inside. Take a few minutes to unplug. Trust that there won't be an emergency in the next few minutes.
- Breathe in; feel the fresh air as you inhale.
- Notice the temperature. Feel it on your skin.
- Look up, notice the light in the sky. What is the weather?
- Look down; feel the ground below you.
- Listen—are birds singing?
- If there is snow, could you find animal footprints? What animals have been here?
- Notice what might be growing. What plants or flowers might you notice?
- If it's warm, try resting on the grass in a park. Watch the clouds.
- If your child is interested, look at the night sky together. See if you can identify constellations.
- Meet your child where he or she is. Young children often like to watch traffic, trucks, taxis, or trains go by.
- An older child might like to stop for a cup of hot chocolate and watch as people go by.
- Talk about what you see, what you hear.
- Have a conversation.
- Listen to your child. Talk with your child. Enjoy being with your child. Allow both of you to be enriched. Repeat as often as possible.

This is compassion and self-care for you and your child. You both get to share valuable time together and to practice "being," not just doing. Not only is this good for decreasing stress and increasing brain development, but you have enjoyed the precious moments of just playing with your child.

The Piano Recital

It was a big day for Alex and her family. When I met Alex (see Chapter 2), she was wearing an "I Can't Adult Today" T-shirt. She still had her reservations, but for the most part she was enjoying parenting and watching her children grow. It seemed, though, like there was always something. Alyce, her daughter, now ten, was about to have her first piano recital. The whole family (with the exception of Alex's brother William) came to cheer Alyce on. When Alex was growing up, most of the attention and adulation in her family had gone to William, so she was making an effort to ensure that all her children felt seen and supported.

Alyce was nervous. She hasn't been playing piano for very long, but her teacher thought she was ready to perform. "It'll be a great experience," she promised. Alyce had practiced for weeks, and things were falling into place, or so it seemed . . . but when does anything go smoothly?

"It was all looking good," Alex explained. "She had been practicing and practicing, so much that I thought I would scream if I heard another mutilated version of *Chopsticks* and *Twinkle Twinkle.* She only had three short pieces to play, and they were sounding pretty good, other than the occasional wrong note.

"But the night before the recital she was so nervous she couldn't sleep. She came into my bed for comfort, which she hasn't done for years. I tried to bolster her up. 'You'll be fine, honey,' I said. 'You'll kill it. Trust me.' Ha, famous last words. Now I feel like I pushed too much, that she was doing it for me. That I wasn't really listening to her when she said she didn't want to do it. I wanted her to shine so much . . .

"Anyway, she gets up on stage, looks around at the audience, and looks absolutely terrified. She turns white. She starts to play, makes a few minor errors, but keeps it together. She then moves on to a very simple and slow Chopin *Prelude,* the most challenging piece for her, and I don't know what happened. She started the piece, made a few mistakes, then just stopped. The teacher went over to her and they talked, and she started again. And then just froze. Again. She couldn't do it. There were hushed

whispers in the audience. The teacher went over to her again, they whispered, the teacher announced a brief intermission, and escorted her offstage. There were tears streaming down her face.

"I wanted to cry, I felt so bad for her. And my mother, being her usual empathic self, puts us both down and says, 'What happened? She couldn't take the pressure? You were like that too. You always crumbled.' So then I was doubly humiliated. And furious.

"During the intermission people come over to us, fake nice and all concerned, saying things like 'Oh, I hope Alyce is all right.' Or false consolation like 'These things happen.' Or 'It's a lot to perform in front of a crowd.' I just wanted to disappear under the floor, but I had to put on a smile and a game face.

"We sat through the rest of the recital and watched all the other kids do a great job. No one else froze. She wanted to leave, but I told her it wasn't polite. She was so ashamed that she wouldn't talk to us and refused to eat when we went out to her favorite restaurant for our celebration. She was punishing herself. 'I don't deserve to celebrate.' It was awful. Just awful. I tried to comfort her, of course.

"What's hardest for me now is that I think I pushed too hard. She never really liked to play, and getting her to practice was a daily battle. It wasn't that I wanted to make her into a concert pianist, but I thought if I persisted she would come to enjoy it. Now I feel like I was asserting my will; I was trying to control her.

"So, guess what? Now I'm the one who can't sleep. I'm beating myself up. I feel like I'm tumbling down the rabbit hole yet again." She began to cry. "It feels like something is always falling apart in my life."

We all have hopes and dreams for our children. But very often, things don't happen the way we fantasize they will. In fact, rarely do things go the way we want. And usually when they don't, our response is to try harder and to control even more. I wanted my daughter to be a ballet dancer, partly because I loved ballet but never danced beyond junior high school, as my body changed at puberty and I didn't have the genetic material to be a lithe, wispy ballerina any longer. But she absolutely *hated* ballet and hated the teacher. She refused to go. After a few weeks I stopped insisting, as it was a losing battle. She was her own person, and she wasn't going to do something just because I insisted. I let go.

Of course we need to manage so many things in our kids' lives—getting them to school, making them breakfast, lunch, dinner, making sure they do their homework, getting them to lessons, sports, playdates,

and so on. But often we try so hard because we are trying to heal our wounds or thwarted desires through them.

This isn't always the case, but it is good to take a calm and understanding look at what lies underneath our relentless drive to micromanage.

Reflection: A Compassionate Look at Micromanaging

- *Start by sitting comfortably, taking a few deep breaths.*
- *Let yourself settle by listening to sounds, noticing your breath, feeling the sensations in your body.*
- *Think of a situation where you felt you were micromanaging your child.*
- *Put a hand on your heart. Be kind to yourself; be gentle.*
- *What was the situation? What did you do? What did you say?*
- *What were you feeling? What were you thinking?*
- *Jot down a few notes. What is coming up for you?*
- *See if you can get underneath the urgency that you may have experienced.*
- *What was driving you? What did you need? What was the dream? The hope? The unfulfilled desire?*
- *Are you touching on any unhealed wounds?*
- *If so, what are you remembering?*
- *Let yourself rest. Be compassionate with yourself.*

Alex and I tried this practice together. This is what she reported:

"I went back to one of my fights about piano with Alyce, and now that I look back they were daily. I had this belief that kids need to learn about music and should play an instrument. There wasn't any music in my home growing up, and I think I just wanted to give my kids something I didn't have. I wanted my kids to be cultured. To have a home where sports wasn't the only topic of conversation and the TV wasn't always blaring. But I think I pushed too hard. I'd become a little dictator about it.

"And I hadn't remembered this until my mother pointed it out, but I hated being onstage in front of people. You're going to laugh, but once during a Christmas play, I think I was eight or so, I was supposed to be one of the three Wise Men. I was so scared I forgot my lines and ran offstage crying. I didn't even remember that until my mother made that nasty comment about Alyce."

To deepen her exploration, I taught Alex the following practice.

You Don't Have to Control Everything

Audio Track 6

- Start by tuning in to your body, giving yourself a moment or two to stop.
- Notice where you might be holding stress in your body.
- How are you feeling? Exhausted? Always on? Ready for a vacation from parenting?
- Get in touch with what you think your kids should be. Reflect on the times you insist that things should be done your way.
- When have you felt that your child was not good enough? That he or she needed to be fixed? That you wanted him or her to be different?
- See what emotions you are in touch with: Fear? Anxiety? Worry? Sadness?
- What are you noticing in your body?
- What would it be like to stop fighting this fight, to put the gloves down, even for a moment? To rest? To listen to yourself? To your child?
- Just let yourself rest. Just be. Take in the stillness.
- Bring some tenderness to this struggle.
- Try to see your behavior, and your child's, with compassion, with gentleness.
- What if, even just for a minute, you let go of micromanaging your child?
- Let things be as they are.
- Take a pause from fighting with reality.
- Stop. Rest. Breathe.
- As you return to your day, see if you can continue to see yourself, and your child, through the eyes of compassion.

"This helped me get some clarity on the next step with Alyce. She's been refusing to go back to piano lessons, doesn't want to see the teacher or the kids again—she felt so ashamed—and I didn't know what to do. The more I think about it, I'll just give it a break over the summer and not force it. I think the issue wasn't the music, but that she didn't want to have to perform in front of everyone. I get that—I didn't want to perform either. But what shifted is that I don't have to make her. I can take the pressure off and let her find her own way back."

I tried this practice with Anton as well. He was surprised to realize just

how "bone tired" he was. "It was a relief to let go of fighting all the time. At first I was afraid to let go of controlling my son as I thought something awful would happen. And then you gave me permission to do it just for a moment, so that made it easier. I realize that I don't have to be a slave driver all the time—just when it's necessary," he joked. "When I saw him at the museum, I realized that he has a lot of motivation when he is interested in something. He really loves those animals and remembers all this information about them. I was just insisting that he do what I thought was necessary for him to survive. Maybe I'm learning to trust him a little more rather than force a square peg into a round hole, or whatever that saying is." Anton smiled, looking more relaxed. "And we're fighting less," he added.

The Lump

When we last saw him, Tyrone was seven and Lionel and Kyra were struggling with his Little League experience. Now in middle school, he's doing well: "He has good friends, he's happy," says his dad. "Spends too much time on his phone, like most kids. We struggle about that. I can't believe that he's thirteen. But the reason we came back is that Kyra is having health problems," he said, looking worried.

"What's happening?" I asked, concerned.

"Well, a few months ago I found a lump. I didn't think it was anything, and it was a busy time of year. I put if off for a while, then finally called my doctor," Kyra said, beginning to cry.

"They said I needed a biopsy, which is scary and painful, I hear. It's in a few days. The worry and uncertainty is getting to me. Thanks for fitting us in on such short notice.

"My mom, if you remember, had breast cancer and died when Tyrone was a toddler, so I'm really worried. I have this dread, I'm worried that I'll die too young like my mom, and Tyrone is still really young. I don't want to go through this."

"I feel I'm not able to be here for Tyrone. He knows I'm going through tests, and I can tell he's worried. I'm really emotional and distracted. I look at him sometimes over dinner and burst out crying. I've never been good at keeping my emotions under wraps."

"How does he respond?" I asked.

"Mama, why are you crying?" he'll ask and then come over and give me a hug. "Everything is going to be just fine."

"But I don't think I'm going to be fine. I watched my mama die, and I don't want him to watch me die. He's too young, and I'm too young."

"I'm with you," I said, thinking of those I'd loved who had died. "But right now we don't know what is happening; we just know that things are uncertain and scary as well. What do you need right now?"

"Well, first of all I'm scared shitless, and I feel like I shouldn't be."

"Of course you are. Who wouldn't be?"

"Really? I was thinking I was a wimp. That I should just muscle through it. That's not happening. I'm melting down, and I feel so weak."

"Where does that belief come from?" I asked.

"I feel like I have to be strong, not show any weakness."

"Kyra, it's OK to be human. It's OK to have feelings, to be scared," I said.

"Yeah, but that wasn't how I was raised. I was taught to be strong. To not show my feelings—other than anger, or course," she smiled." It's hard to do it different. I'm trying not to overreact, but I don't want to die."

"I get it," I said.

"Good," she said. "I'm wondering, is there something you can do to help me chill, to be with this? I keep having images of my ma on her deathbed. Not good." She smiled. "I bet you never expected to hear that from me. I know I gave you an earful when Tyrone was a baby, but now I really need some Zen," she laughed.

"Let me teach you some practices that will help you stay as steady as possible during the procedure and to help you be with the uncertainty. I know it seems counterintuitive, as we usually try to control how we feel, but let yourself be with whatever comes up."

We can't make things look a certain way, and we can't control the outcome, much as we want to. It's hard to find balance in life, and especially hard to find some sort of balance when we're parents. It often feels like we move from one crisis to another with barely time to recover or catch our breath.

The following practice helps us find some perspective, no matter what is happening. It's useful for difficult times. When we are knocked off balance, we learn to return to center. We learn not to judge ourselves for the emotions that arise but respond to them with understanding and kindness toward the pain we feel.

An image that is often useful in developing some equanimity during the trials of life is that of a mountain. No matter what the weather, the mountain remains steady and solid. While many teachers offer some variation, this practice is designed for parents, and it can help you weather whatever storm may be happening in your life right now.

Finding a Steady Center

- Start by sitting comfortably, finding your seat, or lying down if that is easier. Take a moment to be with the breath, sounds, or the loving-kindness phrases.
- Visualize a towering mountain, either one that you have visited or one that you create in your imagination. Like all things, this mountain changes, but it changes in geological time.
- Imagine that your body can become as solid as the mountain—solid, still. Let the legs be the base, the arms and shoulders the slopes, the spine the axis, and the head the peak. Let yourself be grounded, present. No matter what is happening with your family, allow yourself to be present, not to run away.
- Visualize the mountain as seasons begin to change. (You can begin in the current season and then move through the others.) See it in fall, surrounded by warm, golden light. Gradually fall gives way to winter, and the mountain is assaulted by violent storms, high winds, blizzards, ice, maybe even an avalanche. Notice how the mountain remains quiet, steady through the storms.
- Watch as the seasons flow into each other. In spring, the snow melts, the birds begin to sing again, animals return. Wildflowers bloom. The streams overflow with melting snow.
- See the mountain in summer, bathed in light, majestic. The snow is gone, except for the highest peaks. Notice that in every season clouds can obscure the mountain; sudden storms can arise and pass away.
- See the mountain through the course of the day, beginning with the first light of day. Watch the first light of morning, then the deep golden light and shadows of afternoon. Notice as the day gives way to the rich colors of sunset, and finally the dark night, filled with stars and galaxies, endless open space across the vast horizon.
- See if you can become like the mountain, still and grounded, no matter what the weather, the time, the season, the external events. Let it all come and go, accepting change, not resisting or pushing it away.

Kyra practiced Finding a Steady Center when she became worried and anxious. To this practice I added an informal mindfulness practice that helps us stay in the moment. Kyra was finding that she was having images of being on her deathbed, which of course were disturbing. I wanted to help her stay in the present moment, even with its uncertainty and worry.

Grounding in the Moment

In my office I keep a bowl of natural polished stones that can be used to help people anchor and savor the present moment. This is an informal practice that can be done at any time or in any place. While we find "worry stones," rosary beads, malas, and the like in many ancient traditions, this version is inspired by the Here-and-Now Stone in the Germer and Neff's MSC course.

- I asked Kyra to choose a stone that she liked.
- On a walk or a trip to a beach or a park, a river or lake, see if you can find a stone that appeals to you.
- Start by examining your stone. Notice the color of the stone, the way the light hits the contours of the stone.
- Let yourself enjoy the stone. Rub it. Feel it on your skin. Put it on your cheek.
- Close your eyes and feel the hardness of the stone. What is the texture? Is it rough or smooth? Warm or cool?
- Let yourself "bond" with the stone. Reflect on how old it might be. Scientists tell us that the stones we find might be several million to even a billion years old.
- Let your stone help you get some perspective on what you're experiencing.
- You might notice that when you're focused on your stone, feeling it, appreciating it, there is less room for worry about the past or future.
- Let your stone help you come into present-moment awareness.

Kyra took the stone with her and held it in her hand as she was going through her biopsy. It helped her get through the procedure.

"I realized that I was making everything worse by thinking that I was dying. I was adding all this drama, and I didn't need to. As you told me a while ago, rather than thinking, 'This is it, I'm on the way out,' I've started saying to myself, in as calm a voice as I can, 'Kyra, we don't know. One step in front of the other. One moment at a time.'

"It's like, yeah, the weather on the mountain is stormy right now, but it's gonna change. In just a little while, this will pass.

"And Tyrone always helps with the humor. He's always liked Monty Python. When I'm worried or preoccupied, or want him to help a little more, or I get a little short with him he'll say, 'Mom, you're not dead yet.' So I say to myself, 'Kyra, this sucks, but you're not dead yet. Just keep going.'

"And I have to tell you a funny story. I was on the subway on my way to work, and it stops. It's common for it to stop. But I didn't want to be late, and I got worried. I get my stone out of my purse, and I start rubbing it. The subway starts up again. The woman next to me says, 'How'd you do that? Where'd you get that stone? Is it magic? I want one too.' I got a good laugh out of that."

One of the remarkable benefits of self-compassion is that it helps us develop resilience. As we become more accepting of our flaws, of the fact that we can't control our bodies, our children, our parents, or our partners, we become more able to accept uncertainty and to relax with things as they are, not as we want them to be. We learn not to hold on so tightly and to begin to let go of our agenda for how things should be.

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