

7 “It’s All Too Much”

TAPPING THE POWER OF COMPASSION WHEN TIMES ARE PARTICULARLY TOUGH

The journey of parenting rarely takes place along a smooth road with magnificent scenic views. Our experience of joy and delight in our children is often tangled with obstacles and challenges. Trying to juggle kids, work, home, and family obligations is a lot for anyone, and we can feel pulled in many different directions. When we can’t keep everything together and things don’t go the way we want them to, we usually blame ourselves. But it doesn’t mean that we’re not good enough or smart enough or lucky enough or that we screwed up. Look around. Do you know any family that doesn’t have challenges? That isn’t struggling in some way? That hasn’t experienced some hardship, death, or tragedy? The fantasy that the road should be smooth and gentle is a sure formula for suffering. There is an African saying that puts it succinctly: “Smooth seas do not create skillful sailors.” And uncomplicated times do not create wise or skillful parents. It can be easier to endure difficult times and keep our suffering in perspective if we find some unexamined benefit, some silver lining within the hardship. Poet Jane Hirschfield puts it eloquently: “Suffering leads us to beauty the way thirst leads us to water.”

When I think about my life, there was a period when nothing was going smoothly. It was one thing after another—my father lost his job, my grandfather developed terminal cancer, my aunt committed suicide, I had a difficult pregnancy with health scares, then an ill child, and then my father died suddenly and unexpectedly. I was reeling, and my family was stretched thin just trying to support each other and get through the day. As I look back, I realize that this difficult time helped me open my heart to

how painful and tragic our lives can be and what little control we have over our circumstances. And it helped me increase my compassion and develop gratitude for the times when there is smooth sailing.

One meditation teacher encourages students to allow themselves to be a “compassionate mess” at these difficult times. But so many of us feel the need to keep it together (or at least look like we do) or have a “stiff upper lip” during trying times. Many families, including my family of origin and the family I married into, don’t talk about difficult times at all (and the stiff upper lip easily turns into a stiff drink). Not everyone has an interest in processing thoughts and feelings, and some folks feel overwhelmed if they try—it can feel like opening a Pandora’s box of years of accumulated pain. When things are really hard, we often don’t know what to do. So we retreat or distract ourselves with our smartphones, our work, drink, food, shopping, exercise. And not wanting to impose on others, or thinking that others don’t want to be burdened by our troubles, we try hard to keep up a front that everything is just fine, pretending that we have it all together. I think about Carol, one of my closest friends, who is a very private person. She suffered silently in a tortured marriage for many years, telling only her therapist. When she finally decided to divorce, most of her friends and acquaintances were shocked—on the outside things looked so good.

Talking about difficult times is no guarantee of relief either. Juanita hit a point in her life where she experienced the “full catastrophe.” Her mother had a stroke, her father-in-law was struggling with cancer, and her youngest child was diagnosed with autism. It seemed that everyone needed special care. They were spread so thin no one had any reserves—either financial or emotional. “In my family we talk and talk and talk, spending hours on the phone, but it doesn’t help. We end up ruminating and worrying and then no one gets any sleep. We’ve tried to analyze our way out of the problems, but I think they are just too big to fix with talk.” She had assumed that analyzing her emotions was a good thing to do and this would help minimize their destructive impact. But after she began to practice mindfulness, she realized this wasn’t the case. “I was thinking all this intellectualizing was helping, that I was being rational, and then I realized it was actually making me more upset.”

It can come as a surprise to notice that trying to think our way out of problems can make them worse. Often we end up excavating past hurts or creating new worries, becoming preoccupied and living primarily in our heads, and then feeling even more helpless and discouraged. This is where compassion can play an important role.

Common humanity, one of the foundations of self-compassion, can

help as well. It is a relief to realize that we all have hard times and we all suffer. During these times we often judge ourselves harshly, isolate, and suppress what we are feeling. You are not alone in having this reaction. It is universal. But withdrawing is not the answer and can increase our suffering. As mindfulness teachers say, “Pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional.” The mindfulness and compassion practices in this chapter are designed to be “industrial strength” and to help you get through the trying times with kindness and perspective (and hopefully some humor), and to remember that this will pass.

Let’s start by bringing mindfulness and awareness to the challenges you and your family are facing:

Reflection: What Obstacles Are You Facing?

- *Give yourself a moment to sit comfortably or, even better, let yourself lie down.*
- *Start by putting your hand on your heart or, if you like, choose one of the forms of soothing touch (Chapter 3) that makes you feel held and safe.*
- *Bring some kind awareness to the “speed bumps” you are facing.*
- *What are you dealing with right now that is challenging, that makes you feel like you are being pulled apart?*
- *Are you facing health challenges?*
- *Issues in your relationship?*
- *Is your child struggling? If so, in what ways?*
- *Are you concerned about a family member? A friend?*
- *Are you having difficulty adapting to passages such as your son or daughter moving from childhood to adolescence or college or your parents starting to need your care?*
- *What about your own journey? Feeling as if you aren’t where you expected to be and powerless to change that?*
- *Is the stress taking a toll on your body? Your mood? Your sense of well-being?*
- *What supports do you have in place that work for you?*
- *Take a moment of mindfulness and compassion right now. Just let yourself be; no need to do anything or fix anything.*
- *Maybe these speed bumps are telling us to slow down a little?*
- *Let yourself stop and rest, even if just for a moment.*
- *When you are ready, jot down the issues that feel most overwhelming.*

- *Bring some compassion to yourself. Parenting can feel impossible at times.*
- *When you're ready, take a few deep breaths and find some movement in your arms and legs.*
- *Feel free to use the soothing touch whenever you might need it during the course of your day.*

There are so many ways that we feel challenged by daily life, and so many ways that things can fall apart. We don't need to be facing a terminal illness or a devastating change in circumstances. Our partner ignores us, our children don't appreciate us, our boss doesn't give us credit for our hard work, an elderly parent demands attention that we don't have time to give. "Tough times" can come from a seemingly endless list of smaller burdens that drag us down as much as from one big event.

Or they can come from the natural transitions of life. As our children get older, as part of the developmental process of separation and individuation, they often find fault with everything we say and do, frequently putting us down, often in front of friends and family. While this may all be part of the "developing brain," it still hurts and feels unfair. And sometimes adolescence continues well into the twenties (hopefully not longer). It can feel like everyone is irritable and on edge. Will it ever end? Will things ever return to "normal" (whatever that is)? Sometimes just reframing the problem can help. One piece of research I've found comforting is that tweens and teens can interpret a neutral comment as critical. No wonder we misunderstand each other so frequently.

Even happy events, such as weddings, can stir up buried feelings and resentments. And we all know what deaths and funerals can unleash. With the help of a decade or so, we can often look back at what seemed so dire and upsetting and laugh about it, but in the moment it is hard to have humor or perspective. In these times it is important to remember self-compassion and to have your own back. The wisdom of the ancient sage Rabbi Hillel still rings true: "If you are not for yourself, who will be?"

When Things Don't Work Out as Expected

No matter how much we plan, no matter how hard we work, the future we envisioned and aimed for doesn't always emerge. It's hard enough to feel

like the moody, irritable teen before you barely resembles the child you've raised. Then there's helping that teen make the transition to the adult world and out of the home. It can all feel like too much.

Vanessa came to see me, devastated that Jason hadn't gotten into any school that he wanted to go to. He was waitlisted for a few colleges but was feeling dejected about not getting into his top choices. Vanessa hadn't attended college, as it was a luxury her family couldn't afford, and she and her husband had done everything they could to help Jason succeed. The counselor at the high school wasn't giving sufficient guidance, so they hired a private college adviser, spending money they didn't have and dipping into their retirement funds.

Jason loved tennis and was good at it. He made the varsity team in his sophomore year. The college adviser, however, said that he needed to take all AP courses to get into a "good" school. Math wasn't Jason's strong suit, but his parents pushed for him to get into an AP calculus class. It was hard for him to keep up, and it took so long for him to do his homework that something needed to give. Between math tutors and getting extra help from the teacher, there wasn't time for tennis. Jason was a dutiful son, and he let go of tennis. But now, after all that work and sacrifice, he felt he had nothing.

"I'm so down," Vanessa said. "I put so much time and energy into getting this to work. I'm having trouble getting out of bed in the morning. My internist suggested that I talk to someone. We placed so much hope in him. And our daughter, Rebecca, has Down syndrome and won't ever go to college. We love her, she's an angel, but Jason was our future. We spent so much money that we didn't have.

"But the worst thing is that I feel so guilty and blame myself. AP calculus was hard for him, and he would have been so much happier if we had just let him play tennis. Such a loss on so many levels," she sighed.

Our lives are all experiments. We never know how things will turn out. This is where self-compassion and resilience can make a huge difference. I tried to model some compassion for Vanessa, acknowledging that she had done everything she could and Jason had as well. She had been blaming herself for making poor decisions. Jason was dejected, feeling that he'd let the family down. "I hear him crying at night, crying himself to sleep. I tell him things will work out, but he just shakes his head. He feels ashamed that he wasted our money, that he failed, and is spending all his time alone in his room."

In adolescence, it is hard to hold a larger picture of the complexities

of life, to realize that while a college rejection is hard, other opportunities will arise and other doors will open. It is common for kids to feel inadequate and to feel they have failed. Self-compassion can help us realize that we all fail and that it is part of the experience of life. Rather than fall into despair, we can learn from difficult experiences. (See Chapter 8 for more on imparting the lessons of self-compassion to your kids. The Self-Compassion for Parents Toolbox, at the back of this book, organizes all the practices to help make them accessible and family-friendly).

To help Vanessa put things in perspective, both for herself and for Jason, I asked her about what we call in MSC a “Silver Lining,” something that happened to you that was devastating at the time but turned out to be useful in a way you couldn’t have predicted. She thought back to when she had been passed over for a promotion. A coworker had been spreading nasty rumors about her so he would get the position. Once he got the job, he expected her to help him. “He threw me under the bus and then expected me to change the tire. The hell with that! I left that job. It was scary, as I was out of work for a while, people told me that I was stupid, I should just suck it up, but I refused to be demeaned. I landed on my feet in a better job with better pay. And an extra gift was that I met my husband in the new job, which never would have happened if I had stayed.”

Try this reflection exercise when you encounter hard times. Vanessa called it “Lemonade Stand” because Jason used to make and sell lemonade in their neighborhood and she took joy in his motivation and entrepreneurial spirit. It helped her connect with his strengths. “So,” she said, “when life gives you lemons, you know the saying. I’m learning you really can make something from disappointments.”

Reflection: Lemonade Stand

Write down your thoughts on paper or in your phone.

- *Take a moment out of your day. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths.*
- *Think of a time in your life that seemed hard to bear but, in retrospect, taught you an important lesson or had a positive outcome.*
- *Choose an event in the past that is now resolved and from which you feel that you have learned what you needed to learn.*

- *What was the event? Jot it down. What happened? How did you handle it?*
- *How did you turn the lemon into lemonade?*
- *What deeper lesson did the challenge teach you that you wouldn't have learned otherwise?*
- *Is there a current situation in your life where you've been handed a lemon? Jot that down.*
- *Pause. Bring some compassion to yourself in this moment.*
- *Might there be a potential lesson in this situation? Jot that down.*
- *Return to this practice during the day or weeks to come when you feel you need to change the optics.*

Vanessa used this reflection during the week. She reported she had stopped blaming herself. She also felt that she'd been able to help Jason once she reconnected with his strengths. "I told him that things don't always work out the way you want, but it builds character. That's wisdom from my grandmother as well. We explored other options—thought about a gap year, brainstormed about jobs and internships he might explore. He seems a little more upbeat about the future. He'd never seen me get that upset. I tried to keep it together, but I was really down and he knew it. It felt like a body blow. We had invested so much, with money, with emotions, for so long. But once I showed him I could bounce back, he seemed a little lighter. It's hard for all of us, but not the end of the world. He's young, and life is long. And I told him to be kind to himself. I wouldn't use the word *compassion*—he would sneer—but I just said, 'This is tough. We'll figure this out. Be kind to yourself.'"

Sometimes life gives us so many lemons that we feel that a stand is too small—we could open an entire lemonade store (or business)! For many of my students and patients, this practice has added some needed perspective. Carlos used this practice when he lost his business in a recent economic downturn and was feeling depressed and worthless. He worried that his kids would lose respect for him. Trudy, who had suffered a recent miscarriage, felt that this practice helped her develop some perspective and the grit to keep going: "I was feeling like I was defective, that something was wrong with my body, and this helped me persevere. Things don't always go your way the very first time."

What about you? When could you use this practice? This is a practice you can share with friends, older children, your partner, and family members when appropriate and when they are receptive.

When It Feels Like the Walls Are Closing In

At times, when we're feeling pulled in many directions, overwhelmed and worried, it's hard to keep going. Rob, who was concerned about his daughter's problems with "mean girls" not long ago, was now feeling "sandwiched." Rob's mother had fallen and broken her hip, and she needed nursing care at a rehab center for a few weeks to help her recover and manage the pain. After she was released, she needed his help to get to physical therapy and for her numerous doctors' appointments. These trips cut into his ability to do his job, and he was exhausted. He was also distraught about a change he had recently discovered in his daughter, Heather.

Heather had just started high school and was having a hard time adjusting socially and academically. Confronted with a whole new group of students, she hadn't made any close friends yet, and she had failed a test in American history. Stressed and irritable, she would come home from school, shut the door, and stay in her room till dinner. She complained she didn't have time to set the table or load the dishwasher. When Rob asked if she was OK, she replied that she was fine—she just had lots of homework and she hated memorizing all the dates and battles for her history class. He knew something was wrong but didn't want to push and didn't know how to approach her.

One night when he was taking out the trash, he noticed a splash of red on a tissue. Initially he thought nothing of it, but there were other tissues with dried blood. He talked to his wife, who was also concerned, and then they spoke with Heather.

"At first she denied anything," he said, "and she got angry. 'Gawd, back off, you guys. I just cut myself shaving. I'm a klutz—you know that,' she lied. We didn't believe her, but we didn't know what to do.

"'You're not hurting yourself, are you, honey?' I asked.

"Heather insisted that she was just fine. 'Don't cross-examine me,' she yelled. But at night, when I was giving her a good-night hug, I noticed a few razor cuts on her arm, partially hidden by her pajamas.

"I knew if I confronted her she would get defensive. So all I said was, 'Honey, we love you, and we're here for you. You can talk to us when you're upset.' I think she wanted me to find the tissues but couldn't say that. I think she was too embarrassed.

"The next day she asked to speak to me privately. She told me she had been cutting herself. 'Please don't be mad at me, Daddy,' she pleaded. She didn't want to worry me because I was exhausted caring for my mother. She said she was feeling worthless and ugly. She worried no one at the new

school liked her or cared about her.” He paused and began to cry. “What can I do to help her? It’s horrible for a parent to know his child is wounding herself. And I have so much on my plate right now. What do I do? I feel like the walls are closing in on me.”

When children begin to harm themselves, it is crucial to get professional help before the situation gets worse. Heather evidently did want her parents to know she was suffering. I think of the famous sentiment from the British analyst D. W. Winnicott—children find joy in hiding, “but it is a disaster not to be found.”

We found a child therapist to evaluate Heather. Although she didn’t want to talk at first, the therapist was warm and knew how to reach her. It took some time, but they eventually developed a rapport. She worked with Heather to develop skills to cope with the new school, the challenge of making new friends, and the increased academic load. Within a few months, Heather began to feel less depressed.

To deal with Rob’s feeling of the walls closing in on him, I suggested this practice of Sky Gazing. At first he did it alone, but when Heather saw him lying on the grass looking up at the sky she wanted to join in. “That looks relaxing,” she said. This is a great practice for families. (In Chapter 8, there is a variation called The Vastness of the Night Sky, which is a family-friendly practice as well.)

Held by the Earth, Open to the Sky

The following meditation is especially suited for a balmy summer day or evening but can be done in any season. If it is too cold to go out, sit by a window and look out. It can be practiced either lying down or sitting up. I have made this practice accessible for adolescents, children, and adults.

Sky Gazing

- Start by lying on your back on a blanket or beach towel. While it’s ideal to practice on a patch of grass or soft sand, it’s fine to do this on an urban rooftop or a chaise lounge. Or any window with a view of the sky works as well.
- Start by taking a few deep breaths and let your body settle into the earth. Your eyes can either be open or closed.
- Feel yourself being held by the ground. Feel that the earth is comforting you, that it “has your back.”
- Consciously relax each body part: the feet, the legs, the pelvis, the

back, the belly, the shoulders, the arms, the chest, the neck, the jaw, and the eyes.

- Let yourself rest, allowing your muscles to soften and release. See if you can let go of any tension or clenching.
- Find your natural breath, letting it come and go without controlling it or forcing it.
- Become aware of the space and openness within your body.
- When you are ready, open your eyes if they have been closed. If the sky is bright, you may want a pair of sunglasses.
- Let yourself rest while you watch the clouds pass through the sky. Become aware of the spaciousness and openness of the sky. Imagine you can bring this openness into your body.
- If thoughts, emotions, or sensations arise, allow them to pass as effortlessly as the clouds.
- No need to hold on to anything; just allow it to be held in the vastness of the open sky.
- Let yourself rest in the spaciousness within your body and outside of your body.
- See if you can carry this sense of openness with you through the day.

This is also great to do on vacation or as a respite during a stressful week. It is a meditation that helps us recharge and renew as well as develop a broader perspective on our lives and our worries.

Rob found some comfort in this practice, as did Heather. “It makes me feel like there is some space in my world when the walls start to close in,” he reported. “When I start to think about all the things I have to do in caring for my mother, driving her all over town, getting her groceries, cooking for her, taking her to all her medical appointments, and my worries about Heather, I think of the sky, pause, and take a deep breath. And I’ve come up with a phrase that is helpful. I say, ‘Yup, your mother is losing altitude, but she’s still here.’ And I feel grateful for that. And ‘Heather is having a hard year.’ And then I add, ‘And the sky is blue.’ It helps me remember the open sky and the sense of space, and I don’t feel as trapped.”

I taught this practice to Vanessa, who did it with Jason as well. She appreciated lying down during the day. Jason, who was interested in science and was intellectually curious, used *The Vastness of the Night Sky* (Chapter 8) as a way to learn the constellations. He liked the fact that when he looked at the vastness of the sky his worries seemed less pressing.

This is one of my favorite practices and something that I like to do on a warm summer day. It can be used in a variety of situations and doesn’t

need to be limited to challenging or upsetting times. It is a good practice to do when you're stressed, when you've been at your computer or work desk for too many hours, or you just need a break (better than eating, bingeing on TV, or online shopping).

Feeling overwhelmed by paperwork, Eleanor used this practice to help manage stress shortly after the death of her father. Alberto, upset by conflict within his family, used it as a way to chill out and not escalate the arguments. Jonathan, worn down by his daily commute, which seemed to take more and more time each year, used it as a way to refresh and renew when he got home. For him it was a needed pause from the stress of his work life and helped him transition to being with his family. Sometimes the entire family joined in. At times they watched for shapes in the clouds, sometimes finding dinosaurs and dragons, sometimes just listening to the songs of the birds and the crickets if it was at night. "It's stealth mindfulness for me. I get to teach the kids to relax, but not in a heavy-handed or formal way."

Working with Our Thoughts

Valerie had been through a difficult time in the past five years. She was emerging from a contentious divorce and custody battle. Matt, now ten years old, was trying to adjust to the fallout—his parents at odds and the stress of living in two households. Valerie was having trouble setting limits and boundaries with him as she didn't want to be the "bad cop," but Matt was not cooperating with her and was challenging her authority.

"It's been bad enough losing my husband and the financial and social support. The end of the marriage has been heartbreaking and very lonely, and I'm furious, of course, but what is the most difficult is that I feel like I've lost Matt as well—instead of seeing him every day, now I only get him 50% of the time. He was the center of my life, my universe. This is so unfair. Things feel so empty without him. And when I do see him, he fights with me and challenges me. On the weekends I don't have him, I feel so alone. It's not like all my friends are young and single and we can go out and have fun together. They all have family and their homes and don't want to spend their free time with me. I'm a reminder that marriages fall apart, and they don't want to think it could happen to them, that their husband could have an affair and leave.

"And I blame myself for the end of the marriage. If only I hadn't gained so much weight, I might have been more attractive; maybe he wouldn't have fallen for the perky fitness instructor at the gym. Should I have had plastic surgery?

“The worst thing is that I feel that I’m losing Matt’s respect. And he’s angry with me as well. This has disrupted his life big time. His dad and new girlfriend take exciting trips, they go hiking and skiing, and Matt’s life with them is much more fun. I can’t afford to take him to cool places. I’m in a rut where I’m constantly reliving what happened, my thoughts are spinning, and I keep replaying what happened. I feel less present for Matt. Most of the time I’m feeling inadequate and unwanted. I’m not much fun for him these days. I’m not fun for anyone.”

While Valerie and I talked about how to set fair and consistent limits with Matt, we also worked on managing her depression. One of the most effective ways to work with depression is to work with our thoughts, not to believe or get behind every negative thought. When we are down, our pattern of thoughts can often settle on a theme of inadequacy and self-loathing. During the divorce Valerie felt like she was engaged in a war with her ex; now she was battling with herself. However, if we take distorted thoughts about our self-worth as absolute truth, we buttress our depression. Mindfulness can help us cultivate a new relationship with our thoughts. Rather than analyzing them or trying to get rid of them, we learn to let them be. If we can perceive a thought such as “I’m unwanted” as just a thought, we can take away its power to upset us. In mindfulness practice we are often taught to label our thoughts, such as “a thought that I am worthless” or “a thought that I am inadequate.” This practice takes it a step further and weaves in compassion.



Just Because You Think It Doesn’t Mean It’s True

- Start by sitting comfortably and letting yourself settle. Bring your awareness to your breath or to the sensations of your body sitting.
- Come into the present moment by anchoring yourself with the practice of breathing or of listening to the sounds around you.
- When you are ready, bring your attention to your thoughts, letting them be the focus of your awareness.
- Notice how they arise, intensify, and then pass away.
- See if you can observe them but not get caught by them, just watching, not agreeing with them.
- Don’t force this process, don’t try to make your thoughts go away, don’t try to evict them from your mind.
- Try bringing some warmth and kindness to the thoughts. If for example you notice a thought that you are worthless, or an inadequate mother, put one hand on your heart and pause. Add the other hand if you like. This is a difficult thought to be having. Yes, this hurts.

- Watch your thoughts the way you would watch the drama in a film. Or, if you like, you can imagine that you are on a train and the thoughts are part of the scenery.
- As in the previous practice of Sky Gazing, you can imagine the thoughts as clouds passing through the sky. Some are storm clouds, dark and threatening; others are cumulus clouds, light and airy. Notice them and let them dissolve.
- Connect with the spaciousness, but acknowledge that some thoughts bring storms and intense weather. Know that these will pass.
- If at any time a thought takes you away and you begin to feel scattered, or sucked into the storm of your thoughts, stop. Bring compassion to yourself. These thoughts are here. This is a difficult moment. But thoughts don't last forever.
- If you find yourself being taken hostage by a thought, pause and steady the mind. Think of every inhalation as a chance to start again and every exhalation as a chance to let go.
- When you find that you have become distracted, return to your breath or your body. Let this calm and anchor your awareness.
- When the thoughts arise during the day, you can say to yourself, "This is just a thought; this isn't the truth."

Valerie practiced during the week. At first it was hard to stay with a thought and to watch it rather than getting taken over by it. But as she practiced, she found it easier to follow her thoughts, imagining them as the view from a train. The sense of creating some distance was a relief for her. She saw herself going to her usual "end of the world" scenario and was able to interrupt that pattern. "This helped me realize that all I was feeling and believing about myself and taking so seriously were just thoughts, not really who I am."

But what was most helpful for her was that she began to see the relationship between her thoughts and her turbulent emotions. "So a thought arises about our vicious custody battle, and wow, the thought triggers this intense emotional storm. And I'm livid, I'm enraged. My fists are clenched. I'm caught in this avalanche of emotion. I hate my ex. And then I stop and I realize that there's no need for all this rage and drama; it is just a thought. He isn't in the room, the lawyers aren't here, the judge isn't here, the girlfriend isn't here. I'm just here alone in my new condo. The drama is over. I can chill!" She paused. "I realized that I was replaying this nightmare over and over and I could stop it. What a relief!"

Meditation teachers have us inquire into the nature of thought—“What is a thought?”—noting that a thought in itself is insubstantial. Still, it can have enormous power over us, and if we don’t pay attention to the thoughts that have risen, we can suddenly be sucked into the drama and emotions that they evoke. However, if we can pause and realize that it is just thoughts that are stirring us up, and that they are “real but not true,” often we can bypass the rage, the annoyance, the rumination, and the endless justifications.

Reflection: What Thoughts Get You Going?

Dot down what comes up during this reflection if you like.

- *Spend a moment getting curious about the thoughts that get you going.*
- *Do you have thoughts that hijack you and send you down the rabbit hole?*
- *What are they? Are you getting caught reliving the fight you had with your partner this morning?*
- *Still spinning about your mother-in-law’s putdown last Christmas? Or was that a few years ago? (Don’t worry, this is a judgment-free zone. We often hold on to slights for years.)*
- *Your daughter’s rude comment about you still stinging weeks later?*
- *Are you obsessing about a problem your child is having in school?*
- *Or an insult from a person you consider to be a friend?*
- *Still thinking about an argument with your mother? Still harboring rage?*
- *How about that nasty comment from your boss?*
- *Not talking to a sibling or a family member? The relative who couldn’t bother to come to your wedding?*
- *Come back to the moment; disengage from the thought stream. Let it pass by.*
- *Bring some compassion to yourself. Put your hand on your heart or practice soothing touch.*
- *Don’t beat yourself up. You didn’t invite this thought. You didn’t ask it to intrude on this peaceful day.*
- *Breathe in; start again with this fresh breath. Breathe out; let it go.*

Noticing Your Critical Thoughts

There are myriad ways that can use the preceding practice in your daily life. Many of the people I work with find this one of the most helpful tools in the “Self-Compassion for Parents Toolbox” at the back of the book. Miriam found herself constantly judging her parenting, imagining that others were judging and criticizing her as well and feeling that she wasn’t doing a very good job. This was an opportunity for her to notice that criticizing and judging were just another form of thinking. When she caught herself thinking, “I’m a bad parent,” she managed to interrupt the thought and bring some wisdom and humor. “Well, not in every moment,” she learned to say to herself. “The way I handled Jerry’s meltdown when he didn’t want to leave the playdate was pretty damn good.” If she was feeling particularly down on herself and needed a “booster shot” to help with an especially sticky critical thought, she added the You Are Not Your Fault practice (Chapter 1) to help work with her inner critical voice.

Jake noticed a running critical commentary in his head, as if he were listening to a sports broadcast or a reality TV show: “Folks, there Jake goes; he’s lost it again. Why did you say that to Sam? That was stupid. Jake is a loser of a dad. Watch him mess up again. He’s failing at everything he does. How many years of therapy are his kids going to need to recover from such incompetent parenting? He is the weak link. He’s fired. Get outta here!”

One technique that helped was to give these thought patterns a name. Sandy named her litany “Bad Parent.” Jake called his “Loser Dad Gets Fired.” Ideally, the labels help us bring some humor and perspective to our negative thought patterns. In an experiment, Jake tried singing his thoughts in different voices, as if they were a dramatic musical or an opera. As he was having fun adding trills and high notes, responding with a dramatic baritone and bass, he couldn’t help laughing. And his commentary lost its power over him.

Turn It into a Song

Try turning your critical commentary into music—whatever genre is fitting.

- Hip-hop?
- Country and western?
- Blues?
- Rock and roll?
- Folk?

- A melodramatic opera?
- A musical? Maybe add some movement.

Have fun with it. You can even create your “Top Ten Hits,” things that are common themes in your inner dialogue.

When we can allow our thoughts to be seen, heard, and known and realize that they are just thoughts, our relationship to them shifts and they lose their power over us. In this way, with music, humor, or awareness, we can release ourselves from their toxic and destructive potential. In seeing and understanding what is going on, in bringing compassion to these painful inner commentaries, we can release them. This is a gift we can give to ourselves whenever things get overwhelming and we feel stretched too thin. Yes, it takes some practice and work, but the willingness to look at our “inner operas” is a gift of freedom.

Finding the “Mentor” in “Tormentor”

Teens are challenging for most parents. Even when we’re not dealing with a raft of other difficult problems that are competing for our time and attention, adolescence can be a difficult period for parents. The adolescent brain is “under construction,” so this is a time that is often marked by rapid shifts in moods, behavior, interests, and friends. The more we can stay calm and steady, the better off everyone is. At times it may seem like our kids or partners were put on earth to torment us, but (using a phrase from Dick Schwartz, developer of Internal Family Systems) if we can step back and see what we have to learn from the situation, they can become our “mentors.” However, let’s be real. When we feel dissed, demeaned, and insulted, it is hard to see anything but our rage and reactivity. How can we get peaceful enough to make this transition? Let’s look at how Chrissie and Meghan kept their sanity when they felt stretched to their max.

Pink Hair and Blue Tattoos

A few years earlier, Chrissie’s relationship with stepdaughter Jenny had improved since the first year of her marriage to Jenny’s dad, and her main concern was their son Steven. Now Steven’s ADHD has stabilized, and Chrissie is losing sleep over Jenny again.

“Dealing with this kid is one of the most challenging things in my

whole life,” Chrissie explained. “We seemed to find a truce, and I was managing well enough that I didn’t need therapy. We learned to respect each other and get along. Sometimes we even enjoyed each other and had fun together. But now Jenny is 15, and she’s hell on wheels. Everything is a fight. She challenges every boundary and limit I set. She thinks she can argue and negotiate everything. Getting her to cooperate seems harder than finding peace in the Middle East. Impossible.

“But last weekend took the cake. She goes to the mall with a friend, and she has her own money from babysitting. Plus, it was her birthday, so she had some cash from her grandmother. She comes home, get this, with pink hair and a tattoo on her ankle. It’s small, but it’s a real tattoo. She didn’t ask my permission, or my husband’s permission (he’s away on a business trip, of course); she just went ahead and did it. I think she’s been plotting this for weeks.

“As you can imagine, I went ballistic and hit the ceiling. I grounded her for two weeks.

“And she fights back. ‘It’s my body. You have no right to control my body,’ she retorts. She knows I’m a huge supporter of women’s rights, but she is a kid. And I’m trying to be a responsible parent. So I say, ‘You live in this house and you follow the rules we set. You’re too young for a tattoo.’

“‘I hate you, I hate you. I wish you weren’t my mother,’ she yells and storms upstairs to her bedroom. We haven’t talked for days. It felt like déjà vu all over again.”

For those of us who have been teens, or tried to raise teens, this may sound familiar. Almost every parent has a story to tell about piercings, tattoos, nose rings, or some other rebellion involving the body. Dr. Judith Herman, a mentor of mine and a pioneer in the study of trauma, once explained it to a group of her students in the following way: Teens may look like adults once they have developed and grown to their full height, but with tattoos, piercings, and so on, they are asserting their independence, announcing to the world that they are not adults and that they reject the norms of the adult world.

So, how is a parent to stay sane during repeated acts of defiance?

Reflection: Acts of Defiance

Start with your own history and then look at how defiance is being manifested in your family. Grab paper and pencil or your phone.

- *How did you assert your independence and autonomy when you were a teen? Sex? Drugs? Alcohol? Music? Acting out in school?*

- *In what ways did you challenge your parents? How did you deal with their limits? With the curfews they set? With rules around the family car?*
- *How is your child asserting his or her independence? Sex? Drugs? Alcohol? Music? Piercing? Tattoos?*
- *How is your teen challenging your limits or the boundaries you set?*
- *Step back and look at your behavior and look at your child's behavior. What is most upsetting for you?*
- *See if you can set aside your self-righteousness. What could you learn from your child? Is there a part of yourself, or your behavior, that you would like to address? If so, what is it?*
- *Write your answers down and then give yourself a few moments to reflect on what has come up for you.*

Chrissie tried this practice and came back humbled. “Yup, I wasn’t an angel. How convenient that I forgot what an absolute terror I was! Sneaking out at night, sex with my boyfriend in the park in the middle of the night, smoking weed, as well as stronger substances. Amazing I didn’t get caught. I certainly gave my parents a difficult time. But I still wished Jenny had gotten my permission for the tattoo and the pink hair.”

“And what would you have said?” I asked. “My guess is that she knew the answer, which is why she defied you.”

“OK, I get your point,” she said and smiled. “But I’m a parent now. I don’t want to condone bad behavior or let her think she can get away with it.” She paused. “OK, I’m getting off my high horse. But this is the million-dollar question: How do I not lose it with her?”

The Power of Equanimity

Equanimity is frequently taught in meditation centers, but it is rarely mentioned in parenting books. Yet it has enormous value for parents. Called the “secret ingredient” in mindfulness, it helps us find balance and not get overwhelmed by life, but keep an open and responsive heart. Like mindfulness and compassion, equanimity is an ability that can be developed in the midst of life. We don’t need to run away to a mountain retreat to cultivate it—the laboratory of parenting, with its chaos and frustration, is a perfect environment. It is a perfect complement to mindfulness and

compassion and bolsters these practices. With equanimity we can accept things as they are, seeing clearly without getting caught in our desire for things to be different. The concept, rooted in ancient Buddhist thought, translates as “seeing with patience and understanding,” qualities we need in abundance as parents. An illustration of equanimity, often used by meditation teachers, is of a wise grandparent at a playground with a toddler. As the child is happily digging in the sand, her favorite red shovel breaks and she begins to wail, inconsolable, perceiving this as a tragedy. The grandparent, who has endured true loss, doesn’t diminish the upset, but comforts the child, imparting a perspective on how to manage the sorrows of daily life.

I wanted to give Chrissie an experience of equanimity and started with the following practice, which is adapted from a meditation the Dalai Lama gave to thousands at Harvard University. It uses the metaphor of a still place beneath a stormy sea to cultivate equanimity. This is a good practice for turbulent times and may become your go-to practice after a fight with your kids, partner, in-laws, coworkers, or others.



A Still Place beneath a Stormy Sea

- Start by sitting comfortably or lying down, taking a few breaths to ground and center. Feel free to use the breath, the sensations of the body, or the loving-kindness phrases to help you come into the present moment.
- Visualize a boat anchored in a deep harbor. It is a lovely, peaceful day, and the water is calm. But suddenly the wind shifts. Dark clouds roll in, and the wind and waves pick up, battering the boat.
- Notice as the storm intensifies, with high winds, hail, driving rain, and enormous waves.
- Now imagine that you can drop below the storm, perhaps in scuba gear if you like, and bring your awareness to the anchor at the bottom of the ocean.
- Let yourself rest here at the bottom of the sea, seeing the storm and wind and waves high above you.
- Even though the storm is raging, see if you can experience some calm and spaciousness at the bottom.
- Let yourself rest here, taking a break from the storms in your life and the storms and high winds of parenting.
- Give yourself a few moments for restoration and rejuvenation.

- When you are ready, take a few breaths, find some movement in your arms and legs, and open your eyes.
- As you return to the stormy surface of your life, remember that you can return to this stillness whenever you need it.

“I think I fell asleep,” Chrissie said and apologized. “I’ve been so upset that I haven’t been sleeping. It was good to get a respite from the daily struggle with Jenny. I’ve been taking it so personally. I know it has seemed earth-shattering this week, but I’m sure when she’s in her thirties with her own kids we will look back and laugh and laugh about it. I feel much less wound up, less reactive.”

Reflection: Getting Back in Balance

“Yeah, sure,” you may snicker. “When did I have balance? Not since the kids were born, maybe not even then,” you sigh. In addition to the Still Place practice, try asking yourself the following questions, which are designed to help you see a situation with more patience and understanding.

Grab that pen and paper again, or your phone, and jot down your thoughts.

- *What situation is troubling you? What happened? What did your child (or partner) do? What was said?*
- *Now pause and consider. Why do they feel the way they do? What might be the reasons? With Jenny, for example, what did she want? Why the need for pink hair and a tattoo?*
- *Rather than getting stuck in reinforcing your position—I’m right; she is wrong—see if you can move from conflict to a deeper understanding.*
- *This is not hard to do, but it is hard to remember to do. Give yourself credit for making the effort.*
- *Ask yourself, What can I learn from this situation? Can we do this differently the next time?*

Chrissie worked with these questions and the Still Place beneath a Stormy Sea practice during the week. She began to understand Jenny’s perspective, and what she saw surprised her. “At first all I saw was an act of defiance, and I thought it was all about me and her need to rebel against

me. As I slowed down and considered what she was feeling, I saw a little, insecure kid desperately trying to be cool and to fit in. She thought the pink hair and tattoo would suddenly make her belong. My heart opened a little more. It's so hard to be a teenage girl these days."

Good Morning, Heartache

Jessamyn felt that she'd hit bottom. She'd recently left an abusive, alcoholic marriage that had gone on for many years. While she was relieved to be out, she was feeling lonely and scared being on her own and trying to support herself and her 16-year-old daughter on her meager income as a cabaret singer. But as if that weren't enough, her 90-year-old mother, who had been her "rock" her entire life, had developed dementia. Her decline was rapid and heartbreaking. When she began to wander naked through the streets at night, Jessamyn realized that she couldn't keep her mom safe in her home any longer. All the stress and all the changes were taking their toll, and Jessamyn was waking up in the middle of the night unable to return to sleep, the Billie Holiday standard "Good Morning Heartache" running through her head.

"You'd think that was enough," she told me, "but my daughter just got suspended for plagiarism. She's a good kid and said she didn't realize she was doing anything wrong, or at least not terribly wrong." She smiled ironically. "A friend offered to share a term paper to help her out, and she's lazy and was upset with all that is going on, so she figured she could make some minor changes on the paper and turn it in. No one would notice. Didn't work, and she got caught. They suspended her for a week, and she's on academic probation. Now I have one more thing to manage. How could she have been so stupid? And so sloppy! I lost it with her, really blew up and yelled at her for being careless and lazy. For not having enough of a work ethic. I slapped her. I know I shouldn't have, but it was the last straw for me, just put me over the top. I just can't keep up. I feel like I keep getting knocked down by life. I'm just trying to keep my head above water."

Given the multiple stresses Jessamyn was experiencing, I taught her an equanimity practice to help her ride the waves of distress and keep balanced. But before doing that, I acknowledged her pain and how hard it is to parent during stressful times in our life. Sometimes it feels like we just can't handle one more stressful thing. They are, however, unavoidable, and denying them or resisting them can make it worse. There is a saying that I find useful when we are spread too thin and it is hard to manage everything: "You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf."

This is a useful practice for riding strong emotions, such as anger, sadness, fear, or anxiety, as well as intense desire for food or sex. This practice was inspired by the pioneering work of G. Alan Marlatt, who created a practice called *urge surfing* to help patients deal with addictions. And this is my “go-to” practice for when you are feeling knocked down by life.



Riding the Waves of Parenting

- Start by sitting comfortably, taking a moment or two to settle and anchor your awareness.
- Feel free to follow the breath, notice the sensations in the body, or use the loving-kindness phrases to help yourself come to center.
- Start by thinking of an incident with a child (or partner or parent) where you didn’t behave up to your standards, acting in a way that didn’t serve you or your child. (No judgment, please.) It might have been yelling, blowing your top, or becoming enraged in response to a difficult interaction.
- As you think about this incident, see if you can remember the emotion that preceded the behavior. Go back to the emotion and stay with it, labeling it if you like: “This is anger.” “This is frustration.” “This is sadness.” “This is exasperation.”
- See if you can pause before the emotion peaks or in the moment before you explode. Stay at the edge. Breathe and relax into the experience rather than resisting.
- As you reflect on the event, watch how the wave of feelings and thoughts may rise in intensity. Be with this rising and notice the sensations in your body. See if you can stay with the “rising” rather than fighting the wave or going under. Trust that the wave, no matter how big, will subside.
- Try using the breath or the loving-kindness phrases as a surfboard to help keep you steady. Don’t worry if you “wobble” as you try to find your balance. Constant adjustment goes with the adventure of parenting, just as in riding a real surfboard. See if you can find a flexible, dynamic balance.
- If you “wipe out” or fall off, don’t worry. We all lose our balance in parenting. We all get knocked over. Don’t beat yourself up; just get back on and keep riding those waves. This is a lifelong practice. The waves really don’t stop . . . and sometimes they come from all directions.
- Be kind to yourself. You’re doing the best you can.
- Stay as steady as possible until the wave of emotion begins to fall and

subside. Feel free to return to your breath or loving-kindness phrases before ending the practice and returning to your day.

Jessamyn liked having something that she could do that helped. “When I’m upset I usually open the fridge to eat, pour myself a stiff drink, and feel sorry for myself. Sometimes I feel like I’m drowning in my sorrows. This helps me feel like I can get back on my feet.” To add something extra on really hard days, Jessamyn tried the reflection that follows—When Do You Wipe Out?—as well. She found the reflection helped her anticipate what would push her buttons, and respond constructively, rather than losing it.

We all have things that push our buttons and situations that cause us to “wipe out.” Cecilia would lose it when she opened her daughter’s bedroom door and saw dirty clothes and books and sports equipment piled mile high. “It made me worry that she was going to be a hoarder. She seemed totally incapable of hanging anything up or putting anything away. It made me furious and I’d go berserk. I’d totally lose it. Now, after learning to ride the wave and keep a modicum of balance, we set a time once a week where we all pick up, my husband and me included. That way she doesn’t feel targeted. And when the house is picked up, we all go out for ice cream. Much easier than it used to be.”

Reflection: When Do You Wipe Out?

This is a pencil-and-paper exercise.

- *Take a moment and let yourself rest. Aaahhhh . . .*
- *Give yourself a chance to reflect on when you “lose it.”*
- *Sometimes it is small things, like a kid not putting food away or not helping load the dishwasher.*
- *Other times it is the classic spilled milk. Or not cleaning up the kitty litter. Maybe not taking the dog out for a walk? Or when your kid is defiant? Talks back? Is lazy or sloppy?*
- *Sometimes it is when someone is chronically late or forgets to call or text. Or when your partner has a meeting at night and neglects to tell you and you cooked a really nice dinner, or planned a fun family outing.*
- *And it can be bigger things, like someone lying to you, deceiving you, cheating on you.*
- *Jot down what it is that sends you over the edge.*
- *Do you notice any patterns? If so, can you do anything differently?*

- *Can you discuss how to do things differently so there isn't constant fighting?*
- *See if your family can brainstorm with you to offer suggestions.*
- *Try to work out a plan to make interactions go more smoothly.*
- *Remember, while it may not seem this way, no one really wants you to wipe out.*

When You Need Industrial Strength

There are times in life when only industrial strength will do. Sometimes things are so challenging that you feel you need ten extra-strength practices instead of just one to get you through the day—or the next hour. The end of a marriage, the loss of a child, a life-threatening illness or injury, a dying parent, or an addiction can make it feel like your life is unraveling. In times like this it is hard to cope, to make sense of your suffering, or to find some larger meaning or redeeming value.

Meghan's son Johnny is now in high school, and things were going well until Johnny started smoking weed. "He had friends, was playing soccer, and then he started hanging out with this group of kids, too-cool-for-school slacker types, and they started smoking weed together. I'm not a prude, and I tried it in college and I know it is about to become legal, but I didn't want him smoking too much and losing motivation. We talked about it, and he promised that he would stop. I trusted him; I really did. And things seemed better for a while. But the last few weeks he has been acting strangely, he is keeping the window open all the time, and we noticed that he was sneaking out of the house at night. His grades are dropping, he's missing school, and I'm worried about him. The other day his eyes were looking glazed over, he was jumpy and irritable, and it seemed like something was up. He had been seeing a nice girl, and she was a good influence, but she dumped him for a football player, and since then he's been really down. It's the first time he's had his heart broken. I tried to talk to him about it, but he didn't want to talk to his mom. I get that. I never wanted to talk to my mom at that age.

"But yesterday Dan and I were folding laundry together, and he put it away in Johnny's room. Johnny was out with his friends. One of the dresser drawers was open, and something caught his eye. We try not to snoop, but Dan opened the drawer, and underneath Johnny's T-shirts were drug paraphernalia, pills, and a stash of cash. I'm worried. I hear so much about the opioid crisis that I'm scared, and I'm afraid that he'll become addicted.

“I’ve been a mess. I couldn’t sleep last night, I’m blaming myself for this, and I was having nightmares that he overdosed. I know you’ll think it’s an extreme reaction, but I worry. Dan and I have plans to talk to him tonight.”

“Of course you do, it’s a natural reaction, and of course you are upset,” I responded. “But you don’t know what is happening yet, so let’s take it slowly and see what is going on. Before you talk to him, let me give you an exercise that will help keep you grounded and will help you get clear.”

This is a reflection that helps with clarity during difficult times and can also be done during transitions—from middle school to high school, before college, or even when your child is beginning kindergarten or elementary school. It gives you a chance to gather your thoughts, express your love, your hopes, and your fears. It isn’t something that you need to give to your child unless you want to—it is a practice for you.

Reflection: Letter to My Child

Grab paper and pen.

- *Let yourself settle, turning to your breath, the sensations in your body, the sounds around you, or the phrases of loving-kindness.*
- *Take a few really deep breaths. Let yourself slow down.*
- *Begin with love and compassion. You might want to start with an image or memory that stands out for you when your child was an infant, or even during pregnancy or childbirth. What do you remember? What were the feelings?*
- *You might want to write about the connection that you felt with your child. The moments when you bonded, when you looked into each other’s eyes, when he or she first smiled or laughed.*
- *Remember the sweet times together. Pushing him or her on the swings in the playground, going to the beach on vacation, traveling together, watching a sunset, smelling a flower, noticing a baby animal. Write down some of the times when you felt really close to your child.*
- *Remember the funny times as well. What did your child do or say that made you laugh out loud, that made you feel so grateful for this precious being? Write that down as well.*
- *Now think of the difficult times you’ve been through together—a move, a loss, a divorce, an illness, a natural disaster. How did*

- you get through this hard time? What brought you together? Take note of the strengths of the relationship, how you have weathered storms and have been resilient.*
- *Look as well at what hasn't gone well, what you regret doing or saying, what you wish you could "do over" or "take back." Perhaps there are things you might like to change about your behavior? Challenges because your temperaments clashed? Mistakes you made? Write this down as well.*
 - *Don't blame; don't get self-righteous. Don't assert that you are always right and virtuous and your child is misguided and stupid. Don't judge right now.*
 - *Finally, think about how you might like to move ahead in a positive direction. How can you start again? Acknowledge that you are both fallible human beings and that you aren't a perfect parent.*
 - *See if you can reach out, heal the wounds that exist, repair any damage, say things that you might not have said, ever, that could be healing to hear. Write that down. Accept responsibility for your failings, for the times you have misunderstood your child, the times you may have let him or her down.*
 - *Brainstorm about a plan that would address the issues that need to be dealt with in the relationship. How can you move ahead constructively, without blaming or shaming your child?*
 - *Take a few more minutes to write down other things that come to mind that you want to express.*
 - *When you are ready, return to your breath, the feelings of your body, or the phrases. Put a hand or two hands on your heart. And give yourself credit for writing this letter.*
 - *See if you can let the love and compassion expressed in this letter guide you in your interactions with your child.*

Meghan wrote the letter between sessions and read it to me when we saw each other again. "Johnny is used to me yelling at him and being critical, and he was surprised that I was understanding when we talked. However, that didn't mean that we were wimps. He was pissed that we were going through his things and got all defensive about that, but as we talked it turned out that he was feeling pressured to try more drugs, and riskier drugs, and painkillers. His friends were stealing drugs from their parents' medicine chests. I think he was relieved, although angry with us.

He admitted it was hard for him to say no, and he was caving under pressure. We've reached out to the other parents so they know what is happening. And we insisted that he go to drug counseling. He doesn't want to, but he knows that he's in a dangerous situation. I think he was actually relieved, though he would never say that, that we noticed and are helping him."

Meghan asked if there was something else she could do in the middle of the night when she started to ruminate about all her failings and wish that this wasn't happening to her and her son.

For some, the following practice might require a willing suspension of disbelief. But for those who try it, it can offer a powerful shift in perspective. While it is a good practice for extreme situations, it is also helpful for everyday disappointments.



When Things Fall Apart

- Start by sitting comfortably. Take a few breaths and a few moments to ground and settle yourself. Use whatever practice you find helpful—the breath, focus on the body, or the phrases of loving-kindness.
- Bring your attention to the difficult situation you are facing. Stay in touch with what you are feeling, what you are thinking, as well as what you fear.
- Notice where you feel this in your body. Let yourself sit in the middle of this mess.
- Imagine, and this might take that suspension of disbelief, that before you were born you decided to have this experience to help you grow.
- Imagine that you are sitting with some wise guides or elders who care about you and want the best for you. Discuss with them how these events will help you learn.
- Rather than resisting these events, can you allow them to be? Can they become lemons for you? Can you work with them?
- Sit with what arises for you and see if you see this situation with new eyes.
- What is it like to imagine that you chose this situation rather than had it imposed on you?
- Imagine that these circumstances can become an opportunity to develop new strengths and skills, not just a burden.
- As challenges continue to arise, or when you find yourself feeling like a victim, see how the bumps in the road can become a chance for growth and learning.

Meghan was skeptical but tried the practice and found it made a difference. “At first I was feeling self-pity and asking, ‘Why me, why did I get a son like this?’ but it helped me step back from being a victim. We ran into some former neighbors the other day that we hadn’t seen for a while. Their son struggled with depression and addiction and went through rehab—a few times. It finally took, he turned his life around, and he works with addicts now. He’s 30. The neighbor joked that he’s really good at his work ‘cause he knows recovery from the inside. But he said something that really touched and inspired me. ‘I tell people my son is in the business of saving souls.’ His words gave me hope.”

Mindfulness in Daily Life

Do you ever find yourself wanting hope? Or at least some comfort? It’s the middle of the night. You can’t sleep, again. You’ve counted sheep, you’ve counted your breath, you’ve tried the touch points, and you have even tried labeling your emotions. There’re so many you can barely count them—anger, fear, worry, betrayal, distress. Yup, parenting can be like that. Compassion helps a little, but the rumination keeps coming. It’s hard to stop rumination. Your thoughts keep spinning. One meditation teacher once told me that rarely do we have useful thoughts in the middle of the night. He was right. Our thoughts, in that quiet darkness, which often seems endless, tend to be more dramatic and reactive than we might like. Sometimes it feels like morning will never come. Try something different—try getting up and doing walking meditation to interrupt the cycle of rumination. The goal isn’t necessarily to get back to sleep, but to allow yourself to be a fallible, imperfect, and struggling human being, a “compassionate mess.”

What we often don’t realize, in the early years of parenting, as we try to get our newborn baby to sleep, is that our interrupted sleep continues for years—seems there is always something new to worry about. This practice can help when you need something more.

Mindfulness at 4:00 A.M.

Audio Track 8

- Just get up if you’ve been struggling with sleep for hours. Sometimes you just can’t force it.
- Turn on a night-light so you don’t trip over the furniture. Find a space to walk, even if it is small.

- Stand comfortably, eyes open, with your feet about hip distance apart.
- Let yourself feel held by the ground. If you like, imagine that the earth is supporting you, holding you, anchoring you.
- Become aware of sensation in your feet. Feel free to shift your weight from side to side.
- Start walking slowly, but let yourself remain relaxed and alert. Feel the sensations of your feet touching the ground.
- You can say to yourself, “touching, touching.”
- Bring your attention to each movement of walking—the touching, the moving, and the placing of each foot.
- Notice your internal experience as you walk. (And if it’s your bedroom you may be walking around in circles. Parenting feels like that as well.)
- If you like, you can expand your awareness to notice the sounds, texture, smells, the darkness and shadows around you.
- If your thoughts start spinning, or you feel overwhelmed, bring some kindness and soothing touch, placing a hand or two on your heart if you like.
- Don’t try to control this, let this be easy, relaxed. You can say to yourself, “Just this moment. Nothing more.”
- If this is a time when you really need industrial strength, add these phrases: “May I be safe and protected, even if there is no safety.”
- “May I be peaceful, even if there is no peace.”
- “May I be embraced with kindness, even if there is no kindness.”
- When you feel ready to stop, return to your breath and the feeling of your feet on the ground.
- See if you can carry this awareness and compassion into your next activity.