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“Who Am I Now That I’m a Mom?” Redefining Who You Are and How You Work

All women are aware that motherhood is going to change their lives. We know that having kids makes it more challenging to focus on work and spend time with friends and pursue hobbies. But what I don’t think most women are aware of (or at least I wasn’t) is how motherhood fundamentally changes your sense of who you are.

Here are a few examples:

- “*Who is this lady crying at ASPCA ads?*” As we discussed in Chapter 2, motherhood brings with it a completely new set of emotions, many of them foreign to us. We often feel surprised when we experience emotional responses that we don’t recognize as our own. After having my sons, I, someone who formerly regarded animals with ambivalence at best and antipathy at worst, started crying at those Sarah McLachlan ASPCA commercials, believing for whatever reason that the puppy at the end looked like Sam. Suddenly, it was Sam who was left in the cold, starving, with a half-bitten-off ear. Through my tears, I wondered, *How the hell did I become one of those people who cry at animal rescue commercials?*

- “*Why can’t I think straight?*” We talked in Chapter 1 about mom brain, how the issue is less that we actually lose cognitive capabilities and more that we suddenly have so many more things begging for our cognitive attention (remember my pre- vs. post-kid pie charts?). Faced with such cognitive overwhelm, we may lose our ability to approach something with single-minded focus and feel far less sharp as a result. Jada, a patient of mine, remarked that she had previously viewed herself as a smart, informed

person. But when she became a mother, she could not keep up with the news or pop culture, to the point where she confused a well-known political candidate with a television actor. When a friend pointed out her mistake, she was horrified (and mortified).

- *“What happened to my body?”* If you became a mom by giving birth, you may feel like you don’t recognize yourself in the mirror and your once-familiar body doesn’t feel or work like it used to. Whether you gave birth or not, it’s incredibly difficult to find time to do the things you once did to maintain your body and appearance, like exercise, eat healthy, and, well, shower. And when you spend most of the day with kids draped all over you, it’s hard to feel like your body is truly your own. All of these factors can impact both your satisfaction with your appearance and your desire to be intimate with your partner.

- *“Where did the athlete/singer/party girl/partner/helper go?”* Many of us stop playing our familiar roles once we become parents. This makes sense, of course; new moms simply don’t have the time and emotional resources to devote to sports or partying or helping. But—are we still the athlete/singer/social butterfly/consummate romantic partner/family helper at heart? And if not, who are we, other than Mom?

- *“Why doesn’t anyone know me for who I really am? And why don’t they seem to care who I really am?”* Laura was a veterinarian, a job well known for sparking the curiosity of others. When she started carting a baby around with her, however, people seemed to lose interest in her job and instead just wanted to know about her kid. She was embarrassed to admit that she at times purposely wore scrubs to day-care dropoff in the hopes that someone would engage her in a discussion of her career. But it never seemed to happen. Nobody seemed to care about her life outside of her son.

- *“Where’s my gold star?”* Before I became a mother, I was used to earning praise and thanks for my hard work as a psychologist and employee and friend. But once I had Matty, I was rarely if ever praised for my parenting. In fact, the opposite was often the case: as babies or toddlers my sons seemed to give me feedback only when I did something not to their liking. Sam once told me he was going to “throw [me] in the dumpster” because I insisted he eat the slow-cooked oatmeal I’d made for him instead of a cheese stick for breakfast. In the face of nothing but negative feedback, I couldn’t help but think that I was no longer the competent, effective person I’d once been.

- “What should I do about work?” Pre-kids, work is what moms devote most of their time and energy to. Post-kids, moms have to adjust their working lives to accommodate the little people they’re now devoting most of their time and energy to. Many struggle to decide whether to work at all—assuming they have a choice. Moms are understandably frustrated that dads don’t seem to have to make any of these decisions; even today, no one assumes that fathers’ careers will change one iota once they have children.

Clearly, our identities as mothers are challenged on a number of fronts. We’re forced to adapt to our new mom emotions, brains, and bodies and have to figure out where work and our former passions fit into our new lives. I so wish that someone had warned me about the profound identity shifts and lack of validation that accompany new motherhood. Had I expected it, I might have spent less time puzzling over why I didn’t feel like myself anymore and more time trying to adapt to my new identity.

Now when I talk to moms about maternal identity, I often bring up one of the central tenets of DBT: that it is important both to accept the things we cannot change and work to change the things we can (basically the serenity prayer, in therapy form). In this chapter, we’ll discuss how both acceptance and change can help you successfully craft your new mom identity. At the end of the chapter, we’ll focus specifically on work–life identity in a special section devoted to the topic.

New Mom Identity: A Lesson in Acceptance

Accepting that aspects of who you are as a person have fundamentally changed can be extremely difficult. Fortunately, it turns out that some of these identity changes can have unexpected positive consequences. And even when certain identity shifts don’t seem at all positive, you can generally find ways to respond effectively to the change. Much of this can be accomplished through values-based goal setting, which we’ll be discussing at length in the second part of the chapter.

Yes, You’re Now That Person Who Cries at Animal Rescue Ads

If you’ve read Chapter 2, you pretty much know what I’m going to say here. It’s important that you accept the new emotions that come with motherhood, even if they do not fit with your pre-mom self-image. I’ll remind you of what I said in Chapter 2 about confusing emotions: You can either spend

your time trying to figure out why you feel a certain emotion and/or trying to make an unfamiliar emotion go away, or you can mindfully focus on the emotion (perhaps using an exercise for this purpose, like leaves on a stream), approach it with curiosity instead of criticism, and figure out how it fits with your new sense of self.

For me, this involved consciously changing my thinking from “Why the hell am I crying at ASPCA commercials?” to “Hmm, I guess I’m now one of those people who cry at ASPCA commercials.” What this has meant, practically speaking, is that I am much quicker to defend helpless victims, be they animals or people, than I was before I had kids. I’m much more sensitive to perceived injustices. I’ve spent a considerable amount of time calling my elected officials about issues like immigration and gun safety, something I don’t think I would have done before I had children. And I honestly consider my newfound sensitivity to be an important part of the person I am now.

Prepare to Lose Your Edge (Temporarily)

In Chapter 1, we talked about the many ways in which our brains change once we become parents. At any given time, there are a million thoughts and concerns in our heads, competing for our attention. Our kids take up a lot of space in our mom brains, often crowding out other topics. For moms who previously identified themselves as being well organized and focused, this can be a particularly distressing development.

This was certainly the case for me. When I returned from maternity leave after having Sam, I had a number of brand-new patients scheduled to start therapy with me. I’ve always prided myself on being able to remember details about each and every person I work with, but during those early months I was horrified to discover that I’d confuse the specifics of some of my patients’ stories. Someone would bring up her daughter and I’d realize I had been confusing her with another new patient who had two sons. I didn’t understand what had happened to my once sharp mind.

We unfortunately need to resign ourselves to the fact that perhaps we won’t be as cognitively sharp, or be able to focus quite as successfully, when our kids are small. As we discussed in Chapter 1, this is less due to cognitive deficits and more due to cognitive overload. Plus, as we know, lack of sleep can certainly contribute to mental fuzziness. However, I can personally attest to the fact that these focus and attention issues definitely improve with time as your kids age and you start sleeping again. In the meantime, however, the box on the facing page offers a few quick tips that can help.

Quick Tips for Improving Focus and Attention

- 1. Use memory aids.** I worked with a mom who persistently misplaced her cell phone, and together we discussed her creating a "home base" on her kitchen counter where she could put things like this whenever she was done with them. Another mom who was always forgetting certain things her kids needed for dropoff made a morning checklist for herself, listing every item she needed to pack for her three children before leaving the house. I used a memory aid to solve my patient confusion issue: I made a list of all of my new patients with bullet points containing the important information I needed to remember about each of them. I'd consult this list before my sessions to make sure I was getting everyone's stories straight. However your mental fuzziness tends to manifest itself, consider using a memory aid to help.
- 2. Put the phone away!** You don't need me to tell you that the phone is a constant source of distraction. If you're feeling mentally overloaded, consider turning your phone off or placing it in another room or even just turning off notifications. Quieting your phone, even temporarily, can be a great way to quiet your mind. We'll talk a lot more about managing your phone time in Chapter 7.
- 3. Set timers.** This is another strategy we'll elaborate on in Chapter 7, but I think it's worth mentioning here. I used this strategy with Ana, who couldn't focus at work because she was always browsing the pictures of her twins that her husband frequently uploaded to their new family blog. Ana and I decided that she would check the blog once an hour on the hour and would set a timer for 5 minutes. Once the timer went off, she knew she had to close the blog and resume working.
- 4. Use mindfulness.** If you're struggling to pay attention to the task at hand, whether at work or at home, consider taking an "adult time-out" and practicing a mindfulness focusing exercise. Mindful breathing or progressive muscle relaxation are both great for this purpose. After completing such an exercise, you'll be in a more focused, centered headspace, which will improve your ability to fully engage in whatever you need to be doing in the present moment.

Acknowledge All of the Changes Happening to Your Body (Nonpuberty Edition)

So this is a complicated one. Accepting that you can't look or feel like you once did can be incredibly difficult, especially because it isn't just about your appearance; it's also about feeling uncomfortable in your own skin and the intimacy issues that can result. Fortunately, there are a number of helpful strategies to help you manage your body image and self-care issues, which we will discuss at length in Chapter 6. We'll also delve into feelings about sex in Chapter 9. In the meantime, you can start setting values-based self-care goals when you tackle the values worksheet at the back of the book.

"Mom": The Role of a Lifetime

Moms often lament that the role of "mom" swiftly replaces all the other roles they once played. While it's certainly true that motherhood leaves you with less time and brain space to be the party girl or the family helper or the elite athlete, you can learn to play modified versions of these roles that fit better with your current circumstances. You can adapt what it means to "party," organizing get-togethers at a nearby bar that start at 6 and end by 9. You can teach your parents how to call you on FaceTime whenever their computer "breaks" and they desperately need your assistance. You can decide to train for a 5k instead of a marathon. By getting creative, you can find new ways of playing old roles. Our discussion below about setting values-based goals will help you do this (as will our discussions about self-care in Chapter 6 and navigating relationships with partners, family, and friends in Chapters 9–11).

Recognize That "Momversation" Will Be Your Daily Vernacular

Remember Laura? She wondered why no one seemed to care about her career as a vet or anything besides the fact that she had a kid. I wish I could say that this gets better, but it doesn't, at least not for a while. As a mom of a 6- and 9-year-old, I still find myself talking primarily about my kids anytime I'm with other parents at school or playdates. If anyone does find out that I'm a psychologist who works with stressed moms, they'll usually say something like "Man, I could really use your help!" and then totally drop it.

For better or worse, moms of young children tend to speak the language of kids (a phenomenon I've heard referred to as "momversation"). This is because kids are our common ground; whatever our differences, we are all raising kids, and kids are always a socially acceptable topic of polite

conversation. I don't know whether the mom I see at dropoff has any interest in psychology, but I can guarantee she'll want to chat with me about the stomach virus that ripped through our children's school. In addition, as we've discussed, moms are always on cognitive overload and just may not have the space in their mom brains to think about anything other than their kids.

So you need to accept that lots of moms will only engage you in conversation and will not ask much about your job or anything else about you. But here's what you can do: deliberately nurture friendships with people who are interested in talking about topics other than kids. These might be friends from work, or from college, or even fellow moms of young kids who seem to want to engage in deeper conversations. At a birthday party a few years ago I saw a mom in a *Hamilton* T-shirt and pounced. I was thrilled to have a 10-minute conversation in which kids were not mentioned at all.

In Chapter 11, I'll share specific skills for effectively finding and reaching out to like-minded moms. In the meantime, you can start thinking about friendship goals when you complete the friends section of the values worksheet.

If You Want a Gold Star Sticker, You'll Have to Buy It Yourself

I had a patient once who shared that she got regular performance reviews at work and wished she could get regular parental performance reviews. I would absolutely be in favor of that idea. (Although who would provide such a review? Your nonverbal baby? Your irrational toddler?) The idea that there could be regular opportunities for other people to praise our efforts and provide us with constructive criticism is extremely appealing.

In the absence of such reviews, however, there are a few ways you can seek out validation. For starters, try to adopt a "proof is in the pudding" mindset. Your kids might not tell you that you're doing a great job, but you can sometimes see the results of your hard work by observing their behavior. This is easier to witness with older kids who are verbal and social: you can see how the things you've taught them play out in the way they treat other kids and handle stress and make decisions. But you can even sometimes recognize the fruits of your efforts with babies and toddlers, such as when you sleep-train your baby and it actually works or when you notice your toddler sharing toys.

Also, partners and like-minded mom friends can be great sources of validation, especially if you're willing to ask them for it. We'll be talking about how you can go about doing this when we delve into couples issues (Chapter 9) and friendships (Chapter 11).

Crafting Your New Mom Identity by Focusing on Your Values

It's clear that there are many aspects of the maternal identity shift that we have to accept. But as we discussed, even as we're accepting our altered circumstances, we can consciously make changes that enable us to retain at least some of the identities we used to inhabit. Many of these changes can be accomplished by pursuing values-based goals.

Values work is a prominent feature of ACT. Dr. Steven Hayes, the founder of ACT, describes values as “chosen life directions,” noting that values are meant to guide us as we make choices in different areas of our lives, such as intimate relationships, work, and friendships. I think values work is extremely helpful for new moms, who, because of all the issues we discussed above, cannot possibly live their lives the way they once did. You need to be able to focus on what's really important to you and make time for those people and things that are truly meaningful. Using your stated values as your guide, you can start to make informed decisions about how you want to live your life each day. Values work can also help you think through how you want to approach parenting.

Remember What Really Matters

The first step in living according to your values is articulating what your values are. To do this, you must consider different critical domains in your life (e.g., relationship with your partner, parenting, work, and self-care) and think about how you want to live your life within these domains. Take parenting, for example. Say you decide that parenting is an important value domain for you (which I'm assuming it is, if you're reading this book!). How do you want to be as a parent? How do you want your kids to regard you? Do you want to emphasize structure or spontaneity? Discipline or permissiveness? Acknowledging your parenting values, and then making decisions based on these values, will help you become the type of parent you'd like to be.

To help you think through all of your values, I've created a comprehensive values worksheet, located at the back of the book. The worksheet includes 12 valued domains: relationship with partner; parenting; extended family; friendships; work/career; health/self-care; education/learning; recreation/leisure/passions; spirituality; community engagement/activism; holidays/special events; and family vacations.

Within each domain, I include a series of possible values. Take some time to determine whether you hold any of the values listed and add any additional values you may deem important. Next I present a number of values-based

statements, which reflect how you want to live according to your particular values. Place a check next to those statements that apply to you and add any additional statements that further reflect your chosen values.

To help you with your values worksheet, I've included an excerpt from a values worksheet completed by Joy, the stay-at-home mom of a 2-year-old and a 5-year-old. See the box below for a sample of Joy's values and corresponding values-based statements. I chose to highlight three of the valued domains that Joy reported were most important to her: relationship with partner, parenting, and recreation/leisure/passions.

A few things to note as you're completing your values worksheet. First, you will not necessarily care about all 12 domains. If continuing your education, say, is not important to you, you probably won't check any of the values or the values-based statements in the education/learning domain. Second,

An Excerpt from Joy's Values Worksheet

Domain: *Relationship with partner*

- Values: *Communication, Connection, Humor, Intimacy, Supportiveness*
- Values statements: *I value communicating openly with my partner, sharing my feelings and perspectives and listening to my partner's feelings and perspectives; I value having the time to work on my relationship with my partner; I value having the opportunity to pursue kid-free social and recreational activities with my partner*

Domain: *Parenting*

- Values: *Adventure, Authenticity, Caring, Fun, Role Modeling*
- Values statements: *I value exposing my children to unique experiences; I value engaging in "fun" activities with my kids; I value imparting my own values to my kids; I value being a source of emotional support for my children, who they can turn to in times of need*

Domain: *Recreation/leisure/passions (Joy's passion was doing "craftsy stuff")*

- Values: *Accomplishment, Challenge, Community, Creativity, Fun, Ritual*
- Values statements: *I value being able to engage with my passion on a regular basis; I value the stress relief/mental break that comes with pursuing my passion; I value pursuing my passion by myself; I value repeatedly setting and reaching goals*

within the domains that are important to you, you'll find that only some of the sample values and statements reflect how you want to approach that domain. It is only those values and statements that you'll place a check next to.

You also may find that you endorse a large number of the sample values in a given domain (especially in the domains focused on relationships). If that's the case, I encourage you to prioritize, noting your top three or four values and values-based statements. This will make things easier for you when you start to think about values-based goals.

Finally, it's useful to think about how your values may have shifted since having children. Some moms find that their values change entirely. Others continue to hold the same values but think differently about how they can enact those values in their daily lives. And some end up reprioritizing the things they value, with family becoming more of a priority than, say, leisure pursuits. Consider how your values may have changed and try to capture any of these changes in your worksheet.

You can (and should!) use the values worksheet as a reference throughout the rest of this book. As we discuss specific issues like maternal anxiety and relationship changes, I'll be continually referring you back to the worksheet. Note that you do not need to complete the worksheet in one sitting; in fact, you might wish to tackle certain sections as you're reading the chapters that correspond with those sections. This would mean, for example, holding off on completing the section on partners until right before you start Chapter 9.

Use Your Values to Set Goals

Now that you've articulated your values, try setting a few attainable, short-term, values-based goals for yourself. To start, look at your worksheet and choose two or three values to focus on. In selecting values, there are two things you should consider. The first is feasibility: what is reasonable for you to work on right now, given your current circumstances and the age of your kids? For example, I love musicals and very much value performing in shows. But community theater companies rehearse for several hours each week, often on weeknights, which is when I'm done with work and able to focus on my kids and husband. I therefore decided to hold off on honoring my musical theater value until my kids are older and I have more flexibility.

You should also aim to select values that are particularly meaningful for your own self-definition. Paula, for example, always considered herself to be the "helper" in her family. She prided herself on her close relationships with

her parents and her uncanny ability to fix their frequent computer problems by turning the power off, then back on again. Because she appreciated her role as a “helper” and wanted to retain that part of her identity, she prioritized the extended family value. This resulted in her setting several values-based goals regarding her family relationships, including scheduling regular FaceTime “dates” with her parents and allotting a certain number of days per month to take her baby to see them.

Once you’ve decided which valued domains to focus on, write down one goal for living your life within this domain. This goal should be small, specific, and easily achievable in the short term. As we moms often can’t think much beyond the present hour, it makes sense to start working on small, short-term goals. Once you’ve met these smaller goals, you can start to think about experimenting with larger ones. If I and the moms with whom I work are any indication, larger goals become easier to pursue as your kids get older and your life falls into a somewhat more predictable routine.

When trying to set goals, it may help you to think about how you acted on each of your important values before you had children. For example, if you’re someone who’s always valued activism, what sorts of social justice organizations were you involved with before you had children? Would it be possible, even in a limited way, to recommit to these organizations? Do you have friends who still work in the community who might be able to help you become active again?

Here are the three valued domains Joy chose to focus on, along with a small goal associated with each of them.

Domain: *Relationship with partner*

- Values: *Communication, Connection, Humor, Intimacy, Supportiveness*
- Goal: *Set aside Sunday night, post-kids’ bedtime, as “date night at home.” Both of us need to put our phones away. Each week we can decide what we want to do during this couple’s time.*

Domain: *Parenting*

- Values: *Adventure, Authenticity, Caring, Fun, Role-Modeling*
- Goal: *Plan one “adventurous” activity per month, involving taking the kids someplace different and modeling enthusiasm and exploration for them.*

Domain: *Recreation/leisure/passions (Joy’s passion: doing “craftsy stuff”)*

- Values: *Accomplishment, Challenge, Community, Creativity, Fun, Ritual*
- Goal: *Go to Michael’s and buy craft supplies for new projects. Work*

on projects while watching TV after the kids are asleep or while they're napping.

As you can see, Joy's goals are very concrete and specific. If she had set vague goals, like "get more alone time with husband" or "do some more crafting," there's very little chance that she'd achieve them. Make sure the goals you set are well defined, so you know exactly what it is that you'll be working to accomplish.

Also note that Joy's goals are small and attainable. Take the parenting goal, for example. Joy realizes that she can't realistically take her kids on daily "adventures," as these entail commitments of time and money that Joy does not have. But she can plan a monthly excursion, giving herself the several weeks before to determine where she wants to go and what she'll need to do to get her family there.

Take some time to set a few small values-based goals for yourself. Once you've decided what your goals will be, you can start figuring out how to incorporate them into your daily routine. It's important to note that we'll be discussing goal setting throughout the book. So consider this to be your first pass at goal setting; you'll continue to hone and refine your goals as you read more about specific issues like self-care and relationships.

Get Creative—and Get Ready to Compromise

Setting values-based goals may necessitate some creativity on your part. Let's take Joy's "date night at home" goal, for example. She told me that her value of going out alone with her husband conflicted with other values she held; specifically, she valued saving money, and she did not feel comfortable leaving her kids for the night. She and I put our heads together and came up with the idea of scheduling date nights at home with her husband, when they would commit to ditching their phones and spending time engaging in activities both of them valued, like watching classic movies and cooking elaborate meals together. This allowed Joy to honor several seemingly conflicting values.

Like Joy, many of my mom patients have had to get creative with their goals. Take the mom who loved cosmetics but didn't have the kid-free time or the money for regular trips to the makeup counter: she committed to devoting one of her son's naptimes per week to watching YouTube makeup tutorials and doing her own makeup while she watched. Or the mom who valued involving her children in activities but recognized that getting her little ones to and from these activities was stressful for her (thus conflicting

with her value of prioritizing her self-care) and expensive (thus conflicting with her value of frugality): she decided to choose one activity per season for each of her kids. With enough creativity, you can find a way to work toward all of your meaningful values-based goals.

Schedules and Routines: They're Not Just for Kids!

You know how kids are said to thrive on routine and predictability? The same is true of parents! As far as I'm concerned, there is nothing scarier than staring down a completely unscheduled day with your child. Setting a schedule for yourself in advance, even if it includes totally arbitrary tasks (like taking walks or returning stuff at the mall) will reduce the anxiety and boredom that come with an empty day with a little one(s).

Anxiety/boredom reduction is only one of the many potential advantages of setting a daily schedule for yourself. Most relevant to what we've been discussing, setting a schedule will help ensure that your values-driven goals are met. If you're establishing a schedule for yourself ahead of time, you can include those activities that will help you stay true to your values.

How you set up your schedule is up to you. You can establish a schedule each night that you'll follow the next day. You can also set a schedule on Sunday evening for the coming week. You can keep the schedule on a sheet of paper or put it into the calendar on your phone (my personal preference). You can determine what you will be doing on an hour-by-hour basis, or you can think of your day in terms of what you'll be doing in the morning, afternoon, and evening. It honestly doesn't matter what you put on your schedule for any given day, so long as you're making progress toward at least one values-driven goal.

You can also use your schedule to help you break more overwhelming goals into smaller pieces. Say you value order and organization and cringe every time you see the many large boxes of infant clothes and toys in your basement. You know you need to sort through these boxes but don't feel you have the time. Why not schedule yourself to do a little bit of cleaning/sorting every week? Break the large task into smaller chunks and schedule yourself time each week to tackle a specific chunk. Bigger values-based tasks become far less overwhelming when they're divided into manageable parts.

In the box at the top of the next page you'll see Joy's schedule, and at the bottom of the page you'll see a schedule for Kayla, who's a working mom with a 2-year-old. Let's start with Joy's schedule. As you can see, there's nothing ambitious here. She's not trying to reorganize her closets or teach her kids to speak Italian. Instead, she aims to engage in one of

Joy's Schedule

Pre-nap: Take kids to park
Nap time: Throw laundry in, work on knitting
Post-nap: Grocery store
6-8: Dinner, bedtime routine, bed

her values-based activities, working on a knitting project. She also plans to devote some time to taking her kids to the park and some time to stopping at the food store. She chose one major activity for pre-nap, a second for nap time, and a third for post-nap. This is a reasonable schedule that she can likely adhere to, which will help her feel like she's accomplished something.

Turning to Kayla's Monday schedule, you can see that she doesn't have too many slots to fill outside of her 9-to-5 workday. She decided that she wanted to focus on her self-care values of reading, exercising, and doing mindfulness work, all of which would help her manage the stresses of a long workday and commute. She thought about waking up early to exercise, but that turned out to be incredibly punishing. She also attempted to read after she put her daughter Sadie to bed, but ended up passing out with an open book on her face. She decided to schedule reading and/or mindfulness practice for her train commute and to try to take a walk every day during her lunch hour. Although she missed the lunchtime gripe sessions with coworkers and just watching the scenery slip by on the train, she was pleased that she was able to squeeze some self-care time into her workday.

But what if Kayla or Joy is unable to adhere to her schedule? What if

Kayla's Schedule

7:30 a.m.: Drop Sadie off at school
8-9 a.m.: Train commute—read book, do mindfulness app
9-12: Work
12-1: Lunch hour, walk (with or without coworkers)
1-5: Work
5-6: Train commute—read book, do mindfulness app
6 p.m.: Pick up Sadie
6-8: Dinner, bedtime routine, bed

even a short trip to the food store or a walk during lunch proves too ambitious? It's critical to remember that not following through on your schedule does **not** make you a failure. We all know how unpredictable life with young kids is, and so, despite our best efforts to prepare, we often can't follow through on daily goals. One kid's diaper blowout can cause your daily routine to, well, blow up. So go easy on yourself if you've spent an entire day doing nothing but cleaning poop and watching YouTube; or if you barely made it to work and passed out as soon as your kids fell asleep. The next day will be a fresh opportunity for you to meet a values-driven goal.

Finally, note that the values-driven goals you may set for yourself now might be very different from the goals you set 6 months from now, and certainly a year or 2 years or 5 years from now. You should aim to revisit your values worksheet on a regular basis, noting whether and how your values and priorities have changed, and setting new goals consistent with these changes.

How to Navigate Your Work Identity

If you don't work or don't consider work a priority, feel free to skip this section entirely. If you are one of the many moms for whom work-life identity questions are prominent and stressful, please read on.

I've heard a wide variety of work-life stories over the years. I've worked with moms who choose not to work but who later regret that choice; moms who are forced to work because they need the money but who would much prefer to be at home; and moms who think a part-time work plan is the way to go, only to find that they are always expected to be on call both at work and at home. Most of these moms experience guilt of some kind and believe that their work and home lives aren't "balanced." At the same time, they are exposed to countless blog posts and advertisements and articles asserting that they in fact can "have it all!" and that leaning in or leaning out will somehow solve their work-life angst.

There is so much that's unfair for us working moms. Most of us do not have paid maternity leave. We're expected to pay equal attention to our work and home lives, but there are not enough hours in the day (nor stores of energy, even for the most organized, together mom) to make this possible. We're told that achieving a work-life balance is a real possibility, even though our government does not provide us with any of the resources that would enable us to achieve such a balance. And of course, no one ever even talks about the work-life balance when it comes to dads. It's

assumed that dads can continue pursuing their careers while we moms work *and* pick up the parenting slack.

I hope at some point our government will start advocating for working mothers. I hope by the time my sons are fathers, parental leave will be widely available, and fathers, like mothers, will be expected to honor both home and work commitments. But unfortunately, we're not there yet. In the meantime, you need to think carefully about what you're willing to sacrifice (and ensure that your partner does the same; much more on equitable parenting in Chapter 9).

Work-life issues are exceedingly complicated for American moms, and my goal here isn't to try and simplify what remains an incredibly complex problem. Instead, I want to share some CBT and ACT skills that will help you make thoughtful, reasoned decisions about how you want your work and home life to look. Make sure you have your values sheet in front of you; it will serve as a helpful guide as you set your priorities.

Use Your Imagination

We often use imagery in CBT—to help people think through how they will approach a scary situation, as a means by which we can expose ourselves to anxiety-provoking thoughts, and/or as a form of mindfulness or relaxation. When my mom patients come to me with lots of career angst but literally no idea about how to proceed, I generally encourage them to engage in an imagery exercise. I simply ask them to close their eyes and envision themselves as working women. Where are they? What are they doing? Who are they with? I encourage moms to let their guards down and see where their minds take them. See the box on the facing page for an imagery script.

I purposely don't ask moms to consider their kids when they do this exercise, although obviously their kids and their child care situation will be a prominent feature of their workday. Again, I just want moms to be able to think completely freely for a few minutes, and considering kids and care issues tends to limit their ability to do this.

I'm aware that such a visualization exercise might sound a little hippy-dippy. However, doing imagery work can provide a rare opportunity for you to allow your mind to roam without being bogged down by worries or practical considerations. Some moms end up being surprised by what they see themselves doing. One mom told me that she literally could not picture herself working, which she took as a sign that staying at home

Work–Life Imagery Script

Try to imagine yourself at home, preparing to start your workday. What are you wearing? Are you dressed formally? Are you in jeans? Are you in workout clothes? Are you carrying anything with you? Take some time to consider how you're dressed, from head to toe.

How do you get to work? Are you getting into your car and driving? Walking? Taking the train? Or are you just traveling to an office space in your own home?

So now you arrive at work. Where are you? At home? Somewhere outdoors? A big office building, where you have to take the elevator to get to your floor? A smaller office building? A school? Some sort of performance studio? A store? Take some time to take in your surroundings.

What are you doing? This doesn't have to be anything specific; you may just see yourself sitting at a computer in a cubicle or working in your own home, or sitting in a conference room in a meeting, or doing some work outdoors, or walking around on a sales floor.

Who's with you while you're working? Are you by yourself? With one or two others? With a group of colleagues? Surrounded by people on all sides?

Once you've gotten a general picture of your work environment, give yourself some time just to imagine yourself there.

was the right move for her. If you find career planning to be overwhelming, consider starting off with an imagery exercise. It can help spark your thinking about how you should proceed.

Use Your Values to Prioritize

Next, take a look at the work section of your values worksheet. Which of the values statements did you place check marks in front of? Rank all of your checked values statements in order of how important they are to you. The top three or four statements represent your most significant work-related values and should therefore serve to guide your thinking about your career.

Below I provide a number of examples of moms who used their values

sheets to make work–life decisions. I note their top-ranked work values statements and explain the choices they made based on these values. As you can see, all of them prioritized very different things and as a result ended up on very different career trajectories.

Ruby: "I need to talk to some adults"

Ruby's top-ranked values statements

1. *I want to get out of the house and interact with other adults.*
2. *I want a job/career that gives me flexibility.*
3. *I want to help people/make a difference with my work.*

Ruby didn't want to climb the corporate ladder, nor did she have any desire to return to her pre-kid career. She just wanted to engage her mom brain in some non-kid-related topics and get out of the house for a few hours each day. She also wanted to have some flexibility in her schedule so that she didn't have to work when she didn't want to. She decided to take a part-time job working the front desk at a yoga studio in town owned by one of her friends. This gave her the opportunity to engage with other adults and even take free classes, which fulfilled her self-care value of regular exercise.

Ruby lamented that she didn't make more money—and in fact, her entire salary went directly toward paying the babysitter who was watching her kids while she worked. She also acknowledged that this job didn't necessarily allow her to make a big difference in the world. But she ultimately decided that she would have to sacrifice her last value in the service of her first two.

Soraya: "I want to make partner"

Soraya's top-ranked values statements

1. *I want to rise to the top of my field.*
2. *I want to make as much money as possible.*
3. *I want to use my brain for something intellectually challenging.*

Prior to having her son, Soraya was on the partner track at her law firm. Making a good living and earning a prestigious partner position were very important to her. She knew that she would have to sacrifice flexibility

and availability for her son, but she decided that her career was worth sacrificing for. So she found a very reliable nanny and continued on the partner track. She struggled off and on with mom guilt, which was ultimately the reason she sought help from me. We talked often about how she could compensate for missing out on her son's milestones, which typically involved having her nanny take lots of videos of her son. But Soraya often just had to come to a place of acceptance: her commitment to work meant that she would miss some things at home.

Eva: "I want to make money"

Eva's top-ranked values statements

1. *I want to make as much money as possible.*
2. *I want a job/career that gives me flexibility.*
3. *I want to use my mom brain for something intellectually challenging.*

Eva needed a full-time salary and had no choice but to work full-time. Despite this, she longed for a career that would provide her with some flexibility so that if one of her children got sick or had an event at school, she could be there. In order to satisfy her dual desires to make as much money as possible and be as flexible as possible, she chose to work in an office that allowed employees to occasionally leave work early or work from home. Unfortunately, she found her job to be boring: she had to sit in a cubicle and stare at a computer all day and didn't have many opportunities to think creatively. Eva had to sacrifice her third value, using her brain for something intellectually challenging, in order to honor her first two values.

While these three moms pursued very different paths, they were all forced to make choices and to accept the sacrifices that came with these choices. None of them achieved any sort of perfect "balance," and none were 100% satisfied with their situations. Each of them came up with the best solution for their particular needs and circumstances.

Like these moms, you probably won't achieve the elusive "work-life balance." And at some point (or more likely, many, many points) you will probably feel guilty for the sacrifices you're making, as when you "phone it in" at work so you can get home for your kid's holiday sing-along or when you miss your kid's holiday sing-along because you have to work late. (In

Chapter 8 we'll discuss strategies for coping with the guilt that comes with not being able to do everything perfectly.) But by focusing on your values, you'll at least ensure that you're pursuing a career that reflects what matters to you at this particular stage of your life (and your kids' lives).

P.S. It's OK to Prioritize Your Work!

In a viral *New York Times* opinion piece titled "I've Picked My Job over My Kids," an accomplished lawyer and mom wrote candidly about how she routinely prioritizes her work over her children. She notes: "My choice is more than a financial imperative. I prioritize my work because I'm ambitious and because I believe it's important. If I didn't write and teach and litigate, a part of me would feel empty."

Not surprisingly, this article was met with a storm of criticism. (One comment on the piece included the following: "I'm not buying it. There are thousands of highly competent lawyers out there—some would say a glut. Everyone has only one Mom." I should note that this comment was written by a man.) But I responded to the article with vigorous head nodding and some subtle fist pumping. This is because it underscores a point I've been making to my mom patients for years—that it is OK to want to work and to find work a welcome respite from the drudgery of child care. Feeling this way does not make you a bad mother, despite what Jeremy from NJ says.

If you love working, and you love your kids, commit to your job and to finding a child care situation that works for you and your kids (see below for details on this). And try your best to ignore the Jeremys of the world—they don't know you, and they don't know what you need to function well as a person (and as a mother)!

Remember That Work Priorities Will Change

When Rena's children were small, she prioritized being at home. She had absolutely no space in her mom brain to even consider returning to her elementary school teaching career. When her kids hit the toddler years, she found that she wanted to do something to engage her brain and started blogging about strategies parents could use to help their children learn to read. Her stint as a blogger eventually led to her becoming a reading tutor, working one on one with local kids. The older her children got, the more hours she was able to devote to the blog and tutoring. By the time her

kids were school-age, she had somewhat accidentally turned her blogging experience into a full-fledged career.

Rena's story illustrates two important concepts. First, the work decisions you make while your kids are small are by no means permanent. I can't tell you the number of moms I know who have made significant career changes at various points in their children's lives. One of my sister's best friends, who'd stayed at home with her four children when they were small, started law school when she was 40 years old. A patient of mine who jumped off the corporate track when she had her first child got her real estate license and is now a realtor with a large clientele. A friend of mine went back to work after having her first and second child, but after having her third decided that she wanted to be home full-time and quit working entirely. These women's careers all took dramatic turns as their children got older.

Second, smaller jobs and side projects or even volunteer positions can turn into more high-powered careers once you have more time and mom brain space to devote to them. I think a lot of moms, myself included, assume that if we are making the commitment to going back to work after having kids, we have to hit the ground running the second we're back in the office. But in many careers, that's simply not true. I fell into this trap: when I started working after my maternity leaves, it took a while for me to build up my clientele. While things were slow I was very down on myself, believing that my career was a "joke." I only now realize that I would not have been able to mentally handle a full caseload at that point, and that I was working at exactly the right pace for me at that time. Now, 6 years later, I can (and do!) handle a lot more.

So yes, be very thoughtful about your work-life mix now but also recognize that your feelings on the matter will likely change. And that's a good thing! You don't need to commit yourself now to a set of work-life values that you will need to adhere to for the rest of your life. If you're looking for further guidance on work-life issues, please see the Resources, where I list several excellent books and articles to help guide your thinking.

Coping with the Child Care Nightmare

I didn't want to end a section on working motherhood without talking about the child care decision. Maternal anxiety about child care starts immediately after our children are born (or even way before that for some

moms, who are forced to put their unborn children on school wait lists). Those who are lucky enough to have a choice about their child's care face an array of confusing options (see the Resources for more on the significant inequities in American child care).

I remember talking to an older relative at a family party when Matty was 6 months old. At the time he was in a day care center we loved. This family member somehow got on the topic of neighborhood parents he knew who sent their infant to day care. He was shocked that they did not see their baby all day and deemed them “irresponsible.” I was tempted to tell him that my husband and I were similarly “irresponsible,” but for the sake of politeness kept my mouth shut.

As with all issues involving parenting, there is so much judgment around child care decisions from all sides. There are those who, like my relative, think day care is akin to torture, and there are those who believe that day care is the only way to properly socialize children. There are those who praise nannies as a godsend and those who criticize nannies for always being on their cell phones. Believe me: there is no child care situation that goes uncriticized. (Criticism of moms—a theme we'll be returning to often!)

If you're agonizing over which care situation to adopt, stop and answer these two questions:

1. Is your child being well cared for in this care situation?
2. Is this care situation working for *you*?

If your answer to both of these questions is “yes,” then you've found the right care situation for you and your family.

Regarding question #1: I truly do not think it matters who is caring for your child, as long as your child is well cared for. My children's day care providers loved them (shout out to Ms. Kelly of the Cuddly Clouds!) and treated them like their own children or grandchildren. Being loved is what matters. There is no one right person to care for your child. It can be a day care teacher, or a nanny, or a relative.

Regarding question #2: Being a mother of young children is hard as it is. Burdening yourself with an untenable child care situation makes it infinitely harder. Take my former patient Callie, for example. At her last session with me she explained that her son, who was in kindergarten, complained so much about the aftercare program at his school that she pulled him out of it. Because Callie works, she had to find a nanny for her

son, a near impossibility in the middle of the school year. So she cobbled together an arrangement with two different nannies who worked on different days and switched her work schedule around so she could pick up the slack. As a result she no longer had time for therapy.

As you can see, Callie was only considering the needs of her son. The aftercare switch was incredibly burdensome for her. She had to pay more for the nannies than she did for aftercare, which was a financial burden for her; she was forced to rearrange her work schedule; and she no longer had time for much-needed therapy sessions.

You absolutely need to consider yourself when making care decisions. Pick the situation that works best for everyone involved, even if it isn't your child's (or your judgy relative's) top choice. And once you've made your decision, give yourself (and your kid) time to adjust to the new child care situation. I don't need to tell you that little kids tend to struggle mightily when they first start in a new care situation (I can still remember 18-month-old Sam sobbing as I left him at a new day care), only to adjust fairly quickly to their new routine. The same tends to be true of mothers. By the end of Sam's first week at his new day care, I, like him, had pretty much fully adjusted and had stopped crying at dropoff.

Hopefully, with time, you'll end up feeling good about your child care situation. Keep in mind, though, that your answers to the two questions I posed above might change as your child grows. If they do, you'll need to make a change in care. I know of many, many moms (myself included) who switched day cares or nannies at some point. I also know a number of moms who switched from "Grandma day care" to a real day care once their kids hit the preschool stage. If you're starting to feel inordinately stressed about your child's care situation, ask yourself the two questions again and reevaluate. Your main objective should be to ensure that both your child *and you* are well cared for. See the Resources for more information about child care options.