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WHEN PARENTS FEEL POWERLESS

There are many aspects of parenting through an eating disorder, and the truth is, nobody is prepared for them. Meetings with the treatment team, meal planning, and late-night internet searches, desperately seeking guidance for how to move forward—it's exhausting.

And there's another aspect of this journey that few people expect. Loneliness.

Even though your child is the one who has been diagnosed, you're the one who is disoriented and confused. Lost in an ocean of feeling: guilt, fear, and invisible grief.

THE EMOTIONAL LANDSCAPE NOBODY TALKS ABOUT

Parents regularly describe feeling that they're supposed to be strong. Steady and focused. The message, whether it's explicit or not, is that your child's feelings are what matter now. Your own feelings need to be set aside so that you can focus on your child's treatment.

And while this has an element of truth, *you are going through something, too.*

Likely, you feel powerless as you watch your child lost in symptoms. You may feel angry at the eating disorder, at the treatment providers, at your child, or even at yourself. Perhaps you feel ashamed because you

said something sharp, or lost your temper, or wish that things could be different. That your child was different—or that you were. Or you may feel numb, because this has gone on for far too long and your body has learned that this is the only way to carry on.

These feelings do not mean that you are a failure. On the contrary, they are signs of how much you care and how overwhelming it is to care when there's no immediate, obvious way to help.

For many parents, these feelings are even more unbearable because they imagine that they're the only people who feel this way. But they aren't.

These experiences are real—and common. They just mean that you're human, like the rest of us.

What you're experiencing is called *relational trauma*. You're watching someone you love suffer deeply without knowing how to reach them. This disrupts your sense of safety at the most basic level, shakes your confidence in yourself as a parent to the core. This is more than just stress. It's a rupture in the emotional link between you and your child, and it hurts terribly.

This book is about helping you stay in contact with your inner world. Because without that, helping your child is far more difficult to do.

This inward contact is the place where reflective, attuned parenting begins.

PANIC, GUILT, AND THE ILLUSION OF CONTROL

When a child develops an eating disorder, many parents react by going into overdrive. They begin to research, micromanage, track every symptom, analyze every moment. If you find yourself in this place, ask yourself: What's beneath all the activity?

For many parents, it's *panic*.

Panic is more than just stress or emotional overwhelm—although those can certainly be there, too. It's a deep, bodily fear that you're losing your child and you don't know how to help.

This is what relational trauma feels like. It's about more than your child suffering. It's that your relationship—the connection between you—is under threat. When you perceive this, your nervous system does what it was designed to do: It seeks to restore safety through control.

“If I can just do the right thing . . .”

“If I can get her to eat, somehow . . .”

“If I can stop him from lying to me . . .”

“If I don't miss anything, the situation won't get worse.”

Often there's a belief: *If I do everything right, my child will be okay.* While this belief is completely understandable, it's also completely unsustainable.

Inevitably, something goes wrong. The meal that you planned doesn't happen. In that moment, the panic takes over. Perhaps you go silent or yell. And then the guilt rushes in.

In this context guilt often becomes a way to punish yourself for losing control. *For not being able to control what was never fully under your control.*

That's how the cycle gets started.

Panic → Control → Rupture → Guilt → Panic again

Importantly, this cycle can't be broken through better behavior. What's required is *better reflection*. And reflection happens only when we let go of the fantasy of perfect control and make space for something that is real.

I can't stop this disorder on my own. What I can do is stay emotionally present while we walk this path together.

This isn't resignation. It's grounded, steadfast commitment. And it opens the door to a very different kind of strength.

THIS IS SO HARD TO TALK ABOUT

Parents know how to talk about their child's symptoms. Most can describe in great detail the behaviors they have observed. They can even describe the diagnosis and the treatment plan.

But it's harder for parents to talk about what's happening inside themselves.

As a therapist, it's rare for me to encounter a parent who can easily say:

"I feel like I'm failing them."

"Some days I dread coming home."

"At times I resent how much this has taken from me."

"I hate to admit it, but I wonder if they're doing this to punish me."

Why are these things so hard to say, despite being common feelings for parents in this situation?

Because when these thoughts arise, they're followed by shame. An internal voice says, *You shouldn't feel that way. What kind of parent are you?*

The truth is that these aren't bad thoughts. You aren't just reacting to your child's behaviors. You are emotionally responding to something that is happening between the two of you. And this means that your emotions, no matter how painful and confusing, are valuable information.

Therapists often talk about this in terms of *countertransference*: the emotional reactions we have in response to someone else's inner world. While you aren't your child's therapist, the same principle applies:

- You shut down when your child withdraws.
- You feel rage when they lie.
- When they binge or restrict, you feel abandoned.
- You feel taken for granted when they refuse to talk.

These reactions aren't mistakes. On the contrary, they are signals. They draw your attention to the places where your connection with your child is strained, where you are registering emotional disconnection, and where unfinished business from your own past may be getting activated.

The task here is not to suppress these feelings. The task is to get curious about them.

What am I feeling now?

What could this feeling be protecting me from?

Does this remind me of something from my own childhood or another relationship?

That's the reflective stance. When you practice it as a parent, the emotional intensity you are feeling softens. It's not that the situation has been fixed. It's because the feeling has been named.

Naming creates space. Space makes connection possible.

And connection is what helps you begin to repair the emotional link between you and your child.

SELF-REGULATION AS A PARENTING TOOL

The first task of a parent is not to regulate your child. It's to regulate *yourself*.

Your nervous system is part of the emotional environment that your child is living in. The way you show up—tense or grounded, emotionally flooded or reflective—shapes what can unfold between the two of you.

Self-regulation is *not* about being always calm. Nobody can do that. It's about maintaining contact with your own internal world, which in turn enables you to respond to your child from a place of awareness instead of a place of emotional reactivity.

When you're emotionally dysregulated—lost in shame, rage, panic, or whatever it is—your capacity to reflect goes offline. You can't access

your curiosity, empathy, or creative thinking. In that moment the parent that your child needs most is temporarily replaced by a parent who is just struggling to survive. That doesn't make you a bad parent. It makes you a parent under stress.

The goal is not perfection. It's recognition. To notice the moment you start moving into reactivity and, in that moment, to choose to return to yourself, even if only partially.

PRACTICE

A FEW PRACTICES

1. Put words to what's happening inside.

Say it internally: "I'm overwhelmed." "I'm shut down." "I'm terrified."

This is a small act of reflection that can calm your nervous system.

2. Breathe.

A few slow, deep breaths won't fix the situation, but they can create a small space. In that small space there is room to make a choice.

3. Say less. Soften your voice. Feel into your body.

We may try to fix the rupture with words. But emotional regulation is mostly nonverbal. Your tone, posture, and energy matter more than the verbal script.

4. What does this moment require of me?

Maybe it's silence. Or a boundary. Sometimes it's stepping away for a while to come back with more clarity and capacity to reflect.

When you start to practice this, your child will feel it. Even if they don't say so.

Self-regulation is about more than just survival. It's a way to provide emotional leadership. Leadership with presence—not panic.

It's one of the deepest and most sustaining gifts you can offer your child who is on the journey to recovery: the experience of a parent who can feel deeply without coming apart.

THE SHAME LOOP AND HOW TO INTERRUPT IT

All parents have moments that they aren't proud of.

I could list hundreds of examples. They yell. Or freeze. Or say something mean. Something they never imagined they'd say to their child.

Afterward, they are devastated. Angry with themselves. Guilty. Ashamed.

Guilt: *I did wrong.*

Shame: *I am wrong.*

And when shame appears, the capacity to reflect collapses.

In the context of eating disorder recovery, this is dangerous. Shame fuels a sense of urgency. That urgency drives a need for control. Control leads to rupture, which leads to more shame.

It's a terrible, exhausting loop.

The Shame Loop

1. The behaviors trigger panic.

- Your child restricts, binges, or hides food. You feel powerless and terrified.

2. You move into emotional reactivity.

- Most of us have a core strategy we use when under pressure. Yell, shut down, or withdraw.

3. **The relationship feels strained.**
 - Your child distances, resists, escalates. The emotional disconnection deepens.
4. **You feel ashamed.**
 - Not just about what happened, but about who you think you are.
5. **You promise to “do better” by controlling your child and yourself even more.**
 - Which brings you right back to the first step.
6. **The loop is sustained by a false belief.**
 - If I can do this perfectly, the situation will improve.

A central message of this chapter is that eating disorders don't respond to perfection. In fact they are often constituted, in part, by the search for it. Eating disorders respond to emotional presence. And presence begins with compassionate curiosity, especially toward yourself.

Pausing and breathing, naming, softening. This is the reflective stance.

It won't change the past, but it will shift the emotional atmosphere of the present. And that may make the present more workable, so that the future will be different than it would otherwise be.

PRACTICE

HOW TO INTERRUPT THE SHAME LOOP

You won't be able to interrupt the cycle described above by trying harder. You interrupt it by noticing you're in it.

Try this:

- Pause. Breathe.
- Ask yourself: *What's happening inside right now?*
- Put it into words: *I feel like I'm a terrible parent.*
- Frame it with compassion: *It makes sense that I feel this way. I care so much, and I feel powerless.*
- Ask yourself: *What does this moment need from me? Not to fix the situation but to stay connected to my child and to myself.*

MIA'S FATHER

When I met Mia's father for the first time, he looked exhausted. He said he'd been trying to hold it together for months. Meal plans, arguments late at night, and the relentless fear of doing the wrong thing. "I thought I could stay calm," he admitted, "but last night I just froze."

Mia had, again, barely touched her dinner. He knew she was slipping again, but instead of speaking up, he went silent. "I felt this storm coming up inside me. Panic, guilt, the whole thing. But I couldn't say anything. It's like my body just shut down. She left the table after a minute. I sat there for an hour afterward, just staring at nothing and feeling numb."

When I asked what he felt in that moment, he stopped. "Honestly?" he asked. "I felt like a failure. Like maybe she'd be better off with some other parent."

We stayed with that feeling together. Not to fix it, but to name it and let it speak. Later, he said it was the first time he realized that his silence wasn't just about his daughter. It was his shame, his heartbreak, that was freezing him. This insight didn't change the situation overnight. But it gave him a way back to having his voice in the room. A way back into relationship.

YOU'RE NOT ALONE

When you feel emotionally overwhelmed, or lost in shame, or feel like throwing in the towel, remember this: *You are not alone.*

Parents never imagine themselves in this situation. Dealing with a child who refuses to eat or binges in secret. Navigating explosive fights at the dinner table. Parents want to support their children. But often they're in a place of profound emotional depletion.

When you're in that place, it's easy to wonder:

Am I doing this all wrong?

Am I making things worse?

Did I cause this?

So let's be clear. Your presence—no matter how imperfect—is an essential part of your child's healing. Just by reading this book you are doing one of the hardest things a person can do: trying to show up for someone you love, again and again, no matter how difficult it feels.

You aren't going to be perfect.

You don't have all the answers.

But you can stay in relationship with your child and with yourself.

Your task is to:

- Notice when you're emotionally flooded.
- Put your feelings into words.
- Slow down when you start to speed up.
- Get curious when you feel emotionally reactive.
- Turn toward repair when there is rupture.

This is reflective parenting. It doesn't require perfection. It requires commitment and practice.