

Mindful Parenting: Getting Your Emotions Under Control

We live saturated with information, plugged into devices using applications that daily, hourly and minute-by-minute repeat and reinforce messages that convey information, anxiety and concern. As parents we not only have to figure out what age-appropriate access we want for our children, but also how to manage our own responses to this never-ending barrage.

This has nothing to do with any particular party or point of view. Being plugged in fans the flames of anxiety and outrage. The gulf between people holding opposing opinions often feels insurmountable. Change always produces anxiety and everyone can agree that things really did change with this election.

We're familiar with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Once someone has suffers a significant trauma, the emotional impact of each subsequent upheaval or disaster is amplified. For many people in metropolitan New York, whether or not you were personally affected, 9/11 was a significant traumatic event. The toll from Super-Storm Sandy, the Great Recession, the 2016 election, and more personal events, like the death of a loved one, don't entirely disappear. Loss of resiliency makes it harder to bounce back. Being aware of this helps to counteract the emotional rollercoaster caused by the latest upsetting event or news story.

What is a parent to do? We have to engage this issue on three fronts:

1. Manage your own reactions; be aware of the face you present to your child and how you talk with your family about issues and concerns. This isn't only about what is age-appropriate information, but how to talk to your child about fears and anxiety.
2. Control the 24-hour news cycle. How much information is too much information? You want your child to be involved in civic life, but does that mean they should have an open window to the full range of what you're thinking and feeling? Your answers to these questions are highly personal; whatever you decide, you should be aware of the effect on your child's sense of well-being and security—regardless of the risks and dangers you feel.
3. Learn how to disagree and how to have a dialogue with someone with a different viewpoint. Living where polarization and not compromise is the norm in politics is one thing, but think about how the behavior seen on the

nightly news would translate onto the playground. Children need to see dialogue and compromise modeled.

The first step is to become aware yourself, about how you are reacting – whether it is to something you read on your Facebook feed or your response to an “idiot” driver in front of you when you’re rushing to get your child to school on time.

Here are some suggestions for taking that first step:

This may sound simple, but it is powerful. Just unplug. Park everyone’s smart phone or tablet when you walk in the door at the end of the day. After checking in after dinner, resist the urge to read the umpteenth update.

Identify the positive and name it. This doesn’t mean that the causes of your stress are to be ignored. Try to find something good in your day. The positive feelings you generate will empower you to face the scary stuff.

Practice some mindfulness techniques when your blood begins to boil. Step away from what you’re reading, think about the present moment; really pay attention to your child, focus on what they are doing and try to identify and think about what all of your senses are telling you. Think about making that moment an indelible memory.

Come up with your own “curse” to use when you feel a blast of frustration while driving. That made up expletive allows you to vent but also introduces humor into the moment, a valuable tool to diffusing anger.

Focus on keeping your interactions human. Really look at the grocery store cashier, smile and ask how their day is going when they start to ring up your purchases. Let that car trying to pull out of a parking spot on a busy road, rather than racing around it.

Express gratitude; this includes to your spouse and children for simply making you smile. Say it and mean it.

Show empathy and act on it.

We've all be through a lot lately. Bringing your own emotional thermostat under control is a first step to managing stress and anxiety. Not only are you reducing your own levels of anxiety, you are laying a strong foundation being able to help your child learn to regulate their emotions.

Taking Action

Mindful Parenting: Techniques for Practicing Emotional Regulation

(Drawn from Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (Adapted from Rathus & Miller, 2015))

Understand and name your emotions; identify them and know what they do for you.

- Ask yourself questions about what you are feeling; what is it, what prompted it, does your emotion fit the facts?

Decrease the frequency of unwanted emotions, by changing them once they start

- Step back and get unstuck; shift attention away from the emotion you are feeling.

Decrease emotional vulnerability and increase resiliency

- Practice TIP: Change your body Temperature to change your automatic nervous system

Intensely exercise to calm down your body

Progressively relax your body

Reduce emotional suffering by managing extreme emotions:

- Accumulate positive emotions and recollections of pleasant events, build your emotional muscle through practice, anticipate strong emotions and map out your response.
- Physical well-being matters by practicing Please:

Treat Physical Illness

Balance Eating

Avoid Mood Altering Substances

Balance Sleep

Exercise

Build your reservoir of positive activities:

- Short term: do and feel things that make you feel good and, whenever possible, try not to focus on worries.
- Long term:
 - Don't avoid or procrastinate doing those things that you don't want to face. Putting them off creates additional anxiety and stress.
 - Set goals for yourself related to what you value. Make these things that you **can** accomplish.

- Pick one of the goals and make a plan with achievable action steps. Include a way to measure and keep track of your progress.
- Get to work! Start immediately on the first action step.
- Give yourself credit for each action step and share your success. Celebrate the accomplishment of your goal.
- Repeat.
- Reflect on how your achievement impacts your emotional well-being and regulation. You're building a kind of mental muscle that supports emotional resiliency.

Curious to try meditation?

“Mindfulness of Breathe” from The Free Mindfulness Project. This website includes free guided meditation exercises, <http://www.freemindfulness.org/>

Preparation

Sit or lie in a comfortable position. You may choose to close your eyes or keep them open, if you are feeling tired it may be useful to let just a little bit of light in to keep you alert.

The Breath

Begin by gently moving your attention onto the process of breathing. Notice the sensations of each breath as it happens, whether you focus on the rise and fall of your chest or abdomen, or on the feeling of the breath at the nostrils. Really feel what it is like to breath, just observing it as it happens.

As you engage in this exercise you may find that your mind wanders, caught by thoughts or by noises in the room, or bodily sensations. When you notice that this happens, know that this is okay, and simply notice the distraction but gently bring your attention back to the breath.

Ending the exercise

Take a few moments to yourself, connecting with your experience in the present moment. Expand your awareness from the breath into the space around you, and as you feel comfortable to do so, opening your eyes and bringing the exercise to a close.

Reflections

Take a few moments to think about what your experience was in this exercise, and how you feel in the present moment.

Tips for Talking with Someone You Disagree With

- Before the conversation begins, use the techniques for regulating your emotions and relaxing your body. Remind yourself of techniques to counteract your emotional reflexes.

- Start the conversation with open-ended questions and statements: “Why do you feel this way?” and “Help me to understand your position...”
- Be respectful, even when you disagree. Try to understand why a person feels the way they do.
- Calmly present your own position or point-of-view.
- Create common ground, even if it is unrelated to what you’re talking about.
- Agree to keep talking even if no resolution is reached.
- Offer options for resolution or compromise
- Your goal isn’t winning the argument or convincing the other person; the goal is finding an agreement, which may just be an acknowledgment of differences.

Steps to Unplug and Tune out the Noise from Social Media and the News

1. Create a parking lot for your family’s technology.
2. Limit when you check your devices – even if you need to be on-call for work, carve out a block of time where you commit to not checking email or social media.
3. If the news is making you crazy, create playlists of music or entertaining (but not political comedy) podcasts.
4. Establish a routine for when you check the headlines. Don’t do it first thing in the morning, during the witching hour between the end of the school/work day and dinner.
5. Use a timer to limit the time spent on social media. If you’re really hooked, set up “parental controls” for yourself!
6. Don’t take your device to bed; even better, don’t use a screen for the hour before you go to sleep.
7. Find ways for your family to be together without cell phones in hand – family dinner or game night, outdoor play, or shared hobbies.
8. When you get together with friends, have everyone agree to not look at or use their phones or tablets.

Getting better at regulating your emotions isn’t only about control, it’s about action.

If there is an issue you care about, find ways to get involved.

Volunteer locally.

Get out and get active. If the gym isn’t your thing, find a friend to walk with regularly.

Further Reading

How to Practice Mindfulness Throughout Your Work Day (Harvard Business Review)

<https://hbr.org/2016/03/how-to-practice-mindfulness-throughout-your-work-day>

6 Mindfulness Exercises You Can Try Today (Pocket Mindfulness)

<https://www.pocketmindfulness.com/6-mindfulness-exercises-you-can-try-today/>

How to Practice Mindfulness Meditation (Psychology Today)

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-courage-be-present/201001/how-practice-mindfulness-meditation>

The Free Mindfulness Project. This website includes free guided meditation exercises,
<http://www.freemindfulness.org/>

How to Have Difficult Conversations by Don Mager (Psychology Today)

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/some-assembly-required/201703/how-have-difficult-conversations>