

2 “Why Is This So Hard?”

USING SELF-COMPASSION AS A LIFE RAFT

Have you ever hated yourself for something you did or said to your child? Have you ever lost your temper? Behaved in ways you don't even want to think about, and you wouldn't want anyone to know, ever? Despaired that the “parenting police” (thank God they don't exist) would come to arrest you for some infraction?

We Are All Imperfect Parents

Don't worry, you are not alone. No one is a perfect parent, and everyone screws up. (Me too—just ask my kids.) This is a judgment-free zone. Your secrets are safe. This chapter is designed to help you develop some perspective on your imperfections and to illustrate how to respond with kindness (instead of self-loathing, a bottle of booze, a quart of ice cream, recreational drugs, you know . . .).

I'm not talking about going soft or letting yourself off the hook. Learning self-compassion isn't a “get out of jail free” card. It is about accepting that we are *all* imperfect parents. There is no need to dwell on the mistakes, to replay them endlessly in your mind, or to spiral down into a black hole of shame and regret. Beating yourself up doesn't help anyone.

Chrissie's struggle with her new stepdaughter is an illustration of what self-compassion looks like in action.

Meltdown

When Chrissie, divorced with a four-year-old son, married widowed James, who had a seven-year-old, things seemed to be going well. But apparently not for his daughter, Jenny, who wasn't on board with her dad's moving beyond dating and into a new marriage. Being left with grandparents while they went on a honeymoon enraged her, and she took it as a personal insult. "You're going away with *her*?" she protested.

When they returned, Jenny missed no chance to let Chrissie know just how miserable she was with a new mother. She became increasingly rude and defiant. Every day presented a new struggle. When Chrissie asked her to put her toys away, she ignored her or challenged her authority. She couldn't do anything right; Chrissie was rapidly losing patience and confidence.

"My friends tell me to chill, that this is just a difficult stage," Chrissie explained, "and that she'll come around. I just don't know how long I can wait. This weekend was the pits. James was traveling for work, and it was just us. I tried so hard to make it fun. We saw a movie that the kids wanted to see, Jenny had a friend sleep over, and we had spaghetti, her favorite, for dinner.

"But once the friend left the next morning, Jenny had a meltdown. The girls didn't sleep much, and she was overtired. She started picking on Steven, first teasing him and calling him names and then hiding his favorite action figures. The final straw was when she destroyed a Lego tower that we had been working on all day, hours of work. Then *he* totally lost it. And I wasn't far behind.

"But I tried to remember what the stepparenting books said to do, and so I said, 'Jenny, this is unacceptable. Time out. Seven minutes'—a minute for each year as the experts suggest.

"At first she just stood there defiantly. When I set the kitchen timer, she knew I meant business and went to her room, but first she stabbed me in the heart, screaming 'I hate you! You're not my mother. You'll never be my mother. I wish *you* were dead.'"

We All Have Negative Emotions

Chrissie told this story in my office, clutching a box of tissues as she wept and described how much she had wanted a daughter and how happily she'd looked forward to life with their new merged family.

I responded with a story of my own, about how my mentor had taken me aside after the birth of my first child and said, “No one else will ever tell you this. I want you to listen and not forget. Right now it is blissful, you barely notice the extreme sleep deprivation. It’s all roses and rainbows and baby gurgles. But at some point, mark my words, you will hate your child. I guarantee it.” I was stunned. This would never happen to me, never. And how dare he say this! He went on, “And when you do—it may be many years from now—remember: You are human. It happens to all of us.”

Chrissie stopped crying as I explained, “At the time it almost seemed like a curse to me, like a scene from one of those fairy tales where everyone gives the child a wonderful present and someone else gives a piece of coal. But it turned out to be one of the most useful things anyone has ever told me. It helped me make room for my angry feelings and not feel so ashamed of them.”

“And speaking of fairy tales,” I went on, “I was reading something recently, that in the early versions of the fairy tales it wasn’t the stepmother who tried to kill off her children. *It was the biological mother who wanted the child dead.* The evil stepmother became a literary device for those aspects of motherhood that we don’t like to acknowledge—anger, aggression, cruelty, hatred. It’s easier to split it off than to acknowledge the complexity of the mother’s feelings toward the child and the child’s feelings toward her.

“My mentor gave me permission to have my negative feelings, not to act on them of course, but not to add layers of guilt and shame, and not to feel that I was a bad or defective mother.”

Reflection: When Have You Needed a Life Raft?

Parenting is a messy business, and we all have negative emotions toward our kids, times when we’ve felt overwhelmed and inadequate, lost our temper or didn’t behave like Mother Teresa. You are not alone. How often have you exploded at all the little accidents?

Have you ever:

- *Freaked out when your child threw up on you? Peed or pooped on you? Spilled milk on a new rug?*
- *Lost it when your kids spilled grape juice on a nice new outfit on the way to a wedding?*
- *Flipped your lid when your kid had a tantrum and threw food in a restaurant? Or at Grandma’s house? Or in your friend’s living*

room (the one whose house is all neat and tidy) and everyone turned to stare at you?

- *Blown up when your child refused to get dressed?*
- *Become furious when your child bit or scratched a sibling? Or a friend's child?*
- *Thought you would lose your mind with a colicky baby who cried nonstop for 12 weeks?*
- *Felt trapped when the kids got sick with chicken pox during Christmas and you had to cancel your plans? And you really needed a holiday?*
- *Felt ashamed when your child struck out in a tied baseball game? Or failed to make the winning shot in basketball?*
- *Decided that you had the wrong kid and are living the wrong life?*
- *Thought about putting the kids up for adoption and running away to an idyllic Greek island?*

Add the moments when YOU really needed a flotation device . . .

Yes, of course we get upset. And we all lose it! The list is endless and we all melt down. Self-compassion is about giving yourself a break and making a fresh start. Remember, parenting is an impossible profession.

Chrissie nodded in recognition and said, "I think what is hardest for me is that I start to beat myself up, and I start criticizing myself. If only I were Jenny's biological mom I wouldn't yell, I would be a better mother. I would be able to love her. On a bad day I feel like I'm a grinch and my heart is a few sizes too small."

I asked Chrissie what she liked about Jenny.

"Let me think," Chrissie replied. "She's her own person. No one is going to push her around. She's determined and she's a fighter. I feel for her, I really do. Losing your mother at four years is horrible. And her mother had been sick for years before she died. And it was so hard for James as well."

How easily we extend the compassion to others that we deny ourselves.

Reflection: When Have You Shown Kindness to Others?

- *Take a moment to reflect on the times you've shown compassion for other kids or to other parents who are struggling.*
- *Pause; choose one and write it down.*

- *What was the situation?*
- *How did you respond?*
- *What did you say?*
- *What did you do?*
- *How did the other person respond?*
- *How did you feel about yourself?*
- *Allow yourself to let the experience land. Give yourself a moment or two to take it in, to remember it. Stay with it for a few moments.*

We are often so harsh with ourselves, forgetting those times when we were kind, helpful, and loving. Or when we made a difference in someone's life.

One easy way to enter a mindful state is to remember the good. In fact, one definition of mindfulness is *remembering*. Let yourself remember and savor the good that you have done. Take a second and try that right now. Yes. And then the next second, and the next.

The ABCs of Self-Compassion

Chrissie is not alone. Almost all of us feel like inadequate parents. Which is why self-compassion is so important for parents. It can help shift our inner dialogue from constant self-blame and self-criticism to acceptance, kindness, and appreciation. It can help us see that we are just as deserving of kindness and understanding as our children, friends, and other loved ones.

Self-compassion is a healthy way of relating to ourselves when things get tough. And when you're a parent, that may feel like most of the time. While it can take courage to look at ourselves and to acknowledge our imperfections, accepting ourselves as we are, it can also transform our lives and those of our families.

Dr. Kristin Neff, one of the world's experts and a pioneering researcher in self-compassion, was the first to define it and to create a scale to measure it. The MSC course rests on a solid empirical foundation. However, soon after her young son was diagnosed with autism, she had to put all her research to the test. In the shock after the initial diagnosis, she allowed herself to feel what she was feeling—grief, disappointment, and other emotions that she felt she wasn't "supposed" to feel. She didn't fight her emotions and learned to comfort herself when she was having a hard time.

After the shock, she made the decision to accept her son unconditionally and to love him no matter what. What she found has profound implications for all parents: when she could give love to herself, she could give love to her child. And this helped her find the strength and the resources to be the best mother she could be, even in the most challenging times.

Have you experienced something similar? Or has a close friend? A family member? Most of us know many people who are struggling. Perhaps a neighbor whose teen is dealing with addiction? Or struggling with mental health issues? Do you know someone dealing with loss? With disability? With major health issues?

And it isn't just the major life challenges that are hard; the daily mundane grind is enough to drive us bonkers (not a clinical term): the hormonal mood swings of a preteen, the emotionally sensitive toddler who melts down if things don't go his way, the middle school tragedy of not getting the lead in the school play, the high school slump after not making the varsity team, and so on. With kids, there is always something that can drive you crazy.

Fortunately, anyone can learn self-compassion—in part because we know what to say to others and how to treat those that we love and care about. We just need to give ourselves the permission to feel it for ourselves. Self-compassion has three basic components:

1. Kindness to ourselves, without harsh judgment, along with the motivation to help ourselves and to inquire about what we need.
2. The recognition that we are all imperfect and we all lead imperfect lives. This acknowledgment of our common humanity can help us feel less isolated and alone and connect more deeply to others; other parents are going through similar struggles.
3. Self-compassion rests on a foundation of mindfulness. We learn to be present with whatever is happening, rather than to go into denial or put our heads in the sand. We often need courage and strength to do this. However, mindfulness gives us the space to step outside our immediate reactions and gain some perspective.

Let's see how Chrissie learned to use self-compassion with her stepdaughter.

"We all yell," I reminded Chrissie. "We all melt down, both kids and adults. What is important is returning to a place of kindness and working

to repair any damage in the relationship. This is a tough situation, and it isn't going away any time soon. Can I teach you something that might help when it gets hard? I call it the Self-Compassion Life Saver for Parents. It's about learning how to respond with kindness when things get tough."

"Nope, sorry. Sounds silly and indulgent to me, and selfish. I just need to toughen up. Get a backbone, become a no-nonsense, no-bullshit step-mom. Zero tolerance for bad behavior."

"Hold on. People often misunderstand. Self-compassion isn't about becoming a wimp, making excuses, or letting yourself off the hook. It's about learning to respond kindly to yourself when things are difficult."

Chrissie rolled her eyes. "Yeah, as if I have time for that? I'm responsible for three people now."

"Let me try again, from another perspective. When you burn yourself cooking spaghetti for Jenny, what do you do?"

"Well, first I swear a blue streak, call myself a stupid idiot, then I apply some ice, a bit of cream, and a bandage."

"Exactly. We know how to respond kindly to our bodies, but it is harder to respond kindly when we get burnt by life."

"OK, you have a point. I'll try it, but I'm not about to get a personality transplant. Are you suggesting I say, 'You poor, poor baby. Life has been so cruel to you. Here, have chocolate cake and ice cream for breakfast! Let me buy you another toy! Do you want to stay home from school and watch TV instead?'"

"Being compassionate doesn't mean being a doormat. Of course you can still set boundaries, have rules, set limits around inappropriate behavior. Kids need structure.

"Let's do this together," I said. "It takes virtually no time. And you can put a hand on your heart. The touch is soothing and comforting."



Self-Compassion Life Saver for Parents

Audio Track 2

- *This is a moment of suffering. Or, ouch, this is hard, really, really hard.*
- *Validate your feelings. Let the words feel natural.*
- *Parenting is full of tough moments. Many parents feel this way. I'm not alone. This is part of life.*
- *Add words of kindness. Let me be kind to myself. Chrissie, I'm here for you.*
- *Feel free to put a hand on your heart.*

“It’s that simple. Try it in the heat of the moment, Chrissie. When it all feels like too much. I’m not promising miracles, but it helps. I want to help you learn to respond to her rather than react.”

Reflection: Putting Self-Compassion to Work in Your Life

Building on the list you created in When Have You Needed a Life Raft?, see if you can brainstorm about moments when it all feels like too much and you could use this practice. For most people, there is something that happened today (or is happening right now?)—a fight before breakfast, an incident on the way to school, sibling rivalry, harsh words that we exchanged over dinner.

- *Ask yourself what has been hard for you today.*
- *What is it that you need now?*
- *Were there moments when you felt alone? Unappreciated? Unseen? Like staff or a servant?*
- *Take a few moments and try the Self-Compassion Life Saver for Parents.*
- *Jot down a few notes. What was it like? How was it to extend kindness to yourself? What did you notice?*

Chrissie came back the next week with a report.

“The self-compassion stuff helped. But the language didn’t work for me. So I rewrote it a little.”

“Great, I want it to be your own.”

“Jenny tried to bait me this week, but I kept my sanity. I didn’t totally lose it. I think you’re right. She’s trying to get attention, create a reaction, stir up trouble. So she takes Boo-Boo, Steven’s favorite stuffed bear, the one that he sleeps with, and hides it. He’s frantic. And, of course, James is working late. They start to fight, pushing each other, hitting, biting, pulling hair, the full catastrophe. I pull them apart. Another calm, peaceful bedtime,” Chrissie says sarcastically.

“So I say, STOP this, everyone separate. Now. Chill-out time. In your rooms.

“We all go in our rooms, and I notice I’m losing it again, and I really feel it in my body. And I start paying attention to my thoughts. I start hating her, then hating myself, feeling I’m inadequate, blaming myself, and thinking divorce is the only way out. I was desperate, so I tried the Life Saver thing. But I changed the language so it’s more realistic.

“I took out the nicey-nice sugar coating.”

- *This is a moment of pure shit.*
- *Being a parent can suck. Being a stepparent really sucks. Exponentially. This is fuckin’ impossible.*
- *Let me be kind to myself. This will pass. Maybe in this century.*

“And I put a hand on my heart. It almost felt like I was giving myself a hug. It felt good. I was a little calmer.

“When it was over, I said, ‘OK, guys, we need to find Boo-Boo. Let’s work together. We’re going to be detectives.’ I pulled out flashlights for everyone. ‘Scavenger hunt. I hear Boo-Boo calling. He’s saying, “Help! Help!” Let’s go! He needs us.’”

“I got her engaged, rather than our usual futile fighting. And guess what? Boo-Boo was hidden behind the toilet. Gross. We never would have looked there. She found him, of course.”

“We washed him off, cleaned him up, and Steven fell asleep, even though the bear was wet.”

“When I was putting Jenny to bed, I gave her a kiss, and rather than wanting to strangle her I thought about what I liked about her. And I admired her humor, her gumption. I said to her, ‘Sometimes this is hard, honey, but we’ll get through this. I love you.’”

“She smiled, hugged her stuffed animal, and fell asleep.”

“The practice helped me get a grip, and it might keep me from going absolute bonkers and leaving James in a fury. I don’t want another marriage on the rocks. One was enough.” She shook her head. “He’s not objective about Jenny. He feels so guilty that Karen died. He can’t hear anything negative about his precious kid without getting mad at me.” She sighed. “I think this is going to be a long process. And I’m going to need all the help I can get.”

Working Skillfully with Our Emotions

We all experience difficult emotions, but many of us haven’t been taught how to handle them effectively. We often deny them, become numb, or pretend that we’re not feeling sadness or anger, especially if we grow up in a family where these emotions are taboo. Like Chrissie, Dylan was trying to find a different way to be with difficult emotions.

Avoiding Default Positions

When an opportunity arose for Jan to take a new, exciting job, she and Dylan decided it was her turn to focus on her career. So Dylan works at home while she's away. But he finds it lonely—and finds being the primary parent challenging. Their older child has always been pretty “rough and tumble” in Dylan's words, but third-grader Nathan is “a quiet, sensitive kid,” and Dylan isn't sure how to respond to him with sensitivity of his own.

The annual school concert is coming up, and all the kids are excited about it. Nathan “isn't exactly musical,” his dad reports, but he loves singing to himself while he's playing or in the shower, and he doesn't seem to care that he can't carry a tune. Unfortunately, the music teacher apparently does care, and at one point she stopped the music and said, in front of everyone, “Nathan Johnson, I think it will be better if you just mouthed the words.”

It took a while for Nathan to tell Dylan the story, because he was absolutely devastated and embarrassed. At first he just moped and didn't want to talk. Once the problem came out, as Dylan recalls, “I tried to get him to cheer up, told him it wasn't a big deal, to forget about it, but he couldn't. I didn't know what to do. But telling him to cheer up just made it worse. Not only did I feel totally unequipped to help my son, but I didn't really have any idea what he was feeling. In my family, my dad would have told me not to have a sad face, and that would have been the end of the discussion. I was raised not to feel anything that was uncomfortable. My mom was the type of woman who, when asked how she was after having surgery for cancer, replied, ‘never better’—I feel unprepared for parenting Nathan.

“I hate the fact that the teacher silenced him. And I hate the fact that I feel so useless. I think he misses his mom. I started to feel worse and worse, brooding that my wife is the better parent and that I'm incompetent. Other dads aren't at the playground, they have important jobs at offices; they don't work at home. And then I got angry at the teacher for shutting him up and shaming him, and then I started hating myself for being such a loser of a dad. My thoughts just took off and I was this angry, bitter mess. And then, after the kids were asleep, alone with Jan away, I got out the gin and poured myself a few drinks.” He winced. “All that got me was a hangover.”

We all have default positions we take when faced with uncomfortable

emotions—we run away, escape to TV or our smartphone, drink or snack.

Reflection: What Is Your Default Position?

- *Grab some paper and a pencil or take notes on your phone. (No, don't check your messages or social media or return a text. That can wait.)*
- *Spend a moment taking a few breaths, coming into the moment, putting your hand on your heart, or giving yourself a hug.*
- *Ask yourself this question: When emotional discomfort comes up, what do you do?*
- *Most of us distract ourselves, finding solace in things like food, drink, Netflix, or recreational drugs.*
- *What is your default position of choice? Jot it down.*
- *Notice it, with kindness and without judgment.*
- *Give yourself some compassion. Yes, it is hard to feel this, to have this happen. Be with it, even if it is just for a minute.*
- *Try saying to yourself, "It's OK, let me be with this. Let me feel it, even for a moment."*
- *Take a few soothing breaths, and when you're ready, return to your day.*

Dylan knew that the ways he was trying to handle emotions he didn't fully understand and wanted to get rid of were not making him feel any better, so he was open to learning new ways to deal. Before he was ready to learn how to be with difficult emotions, however, he needed to learn how to be kind to himself when he was in pain.

When I was in training, Prozac and the other SSRIs were just coming out, and one of the psychiatrists on the unit started calling them "ego glue." We all liked the metaphor because it described the benefits that folks were experiencing. People felt like the medication helped them function more effectively, which made them feel better about themselves. Mindfulness can help as well, and for some people it is as effective as medication.

One of my meditation teachers once quipped that there is only a one-letter difference between meditation and medication. There are many classic practices that use the breath as an object of meditation, taught in one form or another by almost every teacher, but the following practice is a version with self-compassion, designed just for parents.

Dylan and I did this together in a session, and then he practiced it during the week, setting aside five to ten minutes a day.



Ego Glue for Parents

- Start by sitting comfortably on a chair or a cushion.
- If you are too exhausted to keep your head up, feel free to lie down. (No guilt; I've been there.)
- If you need to curl up in a ball or move into a fetal position, it's OK.
- Take two to three deep breaths, letting yourself settle, letting yourself stop.
- There is nothing you need to do right now, no one to care for. This is time for you to rest.
- Really. Aaaaaahhhh . . .
- If you like, put a hand on your heart or another soothing place as a reminder to bring some kindness to yourself.
- Notice that your body will breathe without your doing anything. Let your body breathe you.
- You don't have to micromanage your breath. You don't have to control it.
- Just feel the breath, feeling the natural rhythm of it flowing in and flowing out.
- Distractions will arise—thoughts, emotions, worries, discomfort, plans. Just let them go and return to your breath.
- If you doze off, don't be concerned. We are all exhausted.
- Be aware of what has come up without judging yourself; just notice the thoughts *I'm terrible at this, I can't even rest, or I'm a hopeless idiot, I'm such a stress case.*
- Don't get mad at yourself for having a thought or a feeling. Acknowledge it and let it go.
- Let yourself have a new response, rather than beating yourself up or criticizing yourself. Let yourself begin again.
- Starting again with kindness and warmth, not staying with your breath, is the essential practice. This is what we are trying to cultivate.
- Let your whole body be moved by the breath.
- Allow yourself to be rocked, held, even internally caressed by your breathing.
- For the last few moments, just feel the comfort of your breathing.

- Your breath has been with you since you were born. Think of it as a friend.
- Release the attention to your breath, sitting in the quiet of your experience. Let yourself feel what you're feeling and be just as you are.

Dylan had tried breathing practices before but hadn't liked them: "I always thought that the point was to stay with your breath and not let your mind wander, which is why I hated it and found it boring and stupid. However, I really like the idea of learning to start again and not constantly chastising myself when I screw up. Now that could be useful. I'm used to building an arsenal of rage at my wife, the teacher, my kids, my life . . ."

"Exactly," I said. "You are learning how to get out of your own way."

This practice is an adaptation of a core practice in the MSC course. It is something that can be used in the heat of the moment, when you are feeling an onslaught of difficult emotions. Used daily, as I suggested for Dylan, it will help you build your self-compassion muscle and increase your resilience and your ability to deal skillfully with difficult emotions.

Self-Compassion: A Way to Stay Afloat

A client mentioned a meme she found online. It goes something like this: Parenting is saying the same things over and over and expecting different results. Oddly enough, that is also the definition of insanity. Is this a coincidence? Maybe not.

For most of us, life can be hard. In fact, it can be *very* hard. And having children often makes things harder. It makes us vulnerable and anxious in ways we weren't before. It increases stress exponentially. Suddenly, we are responsible for another person, who is totally helpless and dependent. It takes our time and attention away from our relationships, our work, and our needs. Formerly well-ordered lives become chaotic and overwhelming. Most parents, not just new ones, feel inadequate and unprepared. We suddenly find ourselves trapped with endless obligations, noise, anger, resentment, and financial pressure. And this isn't only when our children are young. When we have children, there is so much that can go wrong. In fact, giving birth can feel like we're just asking for trouble.

How do we react when things don't go our way? Like Chrissie and Dylan, we worry that we are at fault and become critical of ourselves: "I was beginning to feel that something was wrong with me. That I was

somehow missing an essential parenting gene or a software chip that dads need to have.” We often embark on a mission to fix things, to change ourselves, or, most likely, to change our children. We tell ourselves we need to “toughen up” or “get a backbone,” or “be authoritative,” or that they need to listen, to behave and follow the rules, to “learn a lesson.” However, while we may try to change ourselves, or usually our kids, the results are rarely what we seek.

But we can learn to parent in a new, healthier way. Instead of fighting difficult emotions, we can learn to respond with kindness and understanding—learn to respond to ourselves the way we would treat someone whom we love deeply. And, once we learn to tend to ourselves, we find that we can respond to our children, and our partners, with the same warmth and kindness. It is a common misconception that self-compassion is a form of weakness, but the research on the topic shows just the opposite. For example, imagine that your daughter comes home one day with a failing grade on a math test. How motivating would it be if you say to her, “I’m so ashamed of you. You are a total loser. You’ll never get into college.” How does that feel? You can imagine that she would become afraid of failure, develop “math anxiety” (as it is called), and be likely to give up on math entirely. What would it be like if she heard, “Yes, you failed on this one test, and I love you anyway. How can I help? How can I support you so you can achieve your best?”

In study after study, researchers are finding that people who are compassionate with themselves are less stressed, less depressed, less anxious, and have better coping skills. They have a better relationship with their bodies, are less afraid of failure, and have more rewarding relationships with others. We model self-compassion for our children so they can learn to treat themselves kindly when things are not going well. This then becomes a resource that they can call upon throughout their lives, helping them become more resilient and resourceful.

So, instead of blaming and criticizing ourselves (or our children or partners) when things go wrong, we can practice self-acceptance. In an MSC class that I was teaching, Lorraine spoke up: “I’ve noticed that when I give myself compassion after blowing up at my teenager, it can shift the day. Rather than fuming and raging for hours or days, like I used to do, and listing all her faults and everything she ever did wrong, I simply stop and say to myself, ‘Yup, difficult moment, let it go.’ And when I’m in a better place, it helps her as well. It has gotten me out of these ‘ruts of rage’ as I call them. You know, it’s funny, but my mother would hold on to slights for years, decades. Kind of amazing, isn’t it?”

And this isn't just about you. Self-compassion can be contagious. It's the foundation of compassion for others.

If you have been having a hard day, a hard time, a hard year, a hard decade, try this exercise:

Reflection: When You're Struggling

- *Think about a time when you had a close friend who was struggling with some aspect of parenting—something that happened, some misfortune, some failure or difficulty, some inadequacy. And, on the other hand, you were in a pretty good place at the moment. How would you respond to your friend in this situation? What would you say? What words would you use? What tone? Any nonverbal gestures? What would be your posture? Facial expression?*
- *Take a few moments to jot down your responses.*
- *Think about a time when you were suffering in some way around parenting. It could be something that happened—a misfortune, a failure, a difficult interaction, or a time when you felt inadequate. How do you usually respond in these situations? What do you say to yourself? What words do you use? What is your tone of voice? Are there nonverbal gestures?*
- *Take a few moments to jot down your responses. What do you notice? Are there differences?*

When we teach this practice in the MSC course, or when I use this with parents who want some support around parenting issues, most people are stunned by the difference between how they speak to a friend and how they speak to themselves. Maya, a struggling single mom who was a nurse, found that she used this practice when she would berate herself for not having a larger income: "I would never tell a friend she was a loser or a stupid idiot." Brandon used the practice to ease up on himself: "I used to guilt myself if I was tired at the end of the day and didn't feel like going out to play catch. Now I can find an activity that works for both of us, rather than feeling that I have to do everything my son wants to be a good dad." And Jess couldn't believe the difference between how she treated herself and a friend. "If I talked to a friend like that, I wouldn't have any friends. Hell, I don't even treat the dog like that! I say to him, 'What a good dog!' I don't say, 'You stupid bird-brained animal!' It's helped me feel more peaceful with my kids. And I'm nicer to them as well!"

Most of us often find it easier to be kind to others than ourselves. But being kind to ourselves is a skill that we can learn. Kelly McGonigal, a research psychologist at Stanford, argues that our brains are wired to be critical of ourselves and compassionate toward others. The trick is to learn to turn our natural compassion inward as well as outward. But this can often be a challenge. Many people find that they can't start right off with compassion. If you never had it as a child, and your family never modeled it for you or treated you with compassion, it can feel awkward and foreign. It can be a process to develop compassion for yourself, so please be patient with yourself. If this is your experience, try starting with mindfulness and building toward compassion. Anton shows us one way this can be done.

Anger Management

Anton had a stressful job working for a tech startup. Money was tight, and his temper was hot. The long hours, constant travel, and lack of sleep were taking their toll on the marriage and his relationship with his kids. "When I get home, OK, I admit it, I'm irritable. I'm exhausted, totally fried, and I'm a bundle of nerves. I know I'm not pleasant to be with. I snap at my wife and yell at the kids. I have a hair-trigger temper. I know I shouldn't lose it, but they set me off."

"What are your thoughts about what triggers your temper?" I asked.

Anton was willing to reflect on what got him angry.

"I think it's the constant bickering. It's endless, ceaseless. My two boys, they are seven and nine, are constantly fighting, challenging each other, picking on each other. I just want some damn quiet when I get home.

"I put up with bickering all day and all night and all weekend at the firm." He smiled a genuine smile and laughed. "Ah, I'm constantly dealing with bickering boys. Yes, that's it. I hadn't seen the connection. No escape." He paused. "So, how are you going to help me? I'm a busy man. I want to fix this problem."

Anton was not going to be receptive to the language of mindfulness, and he would certainly be allergic to even the *idea* of self-compassion.

"Anton, I want this to be effective, and I don't want to waste your time. My suggestion is that we start with stress reduction. It will help you at work, at home, with your kids. And, it'll help with your health. I notice here in the chart that you have high blood pressure."

"Yeah, yeah," Anton acknowledged, "my doc wants me to relax and destress, but there is no time for that."

“Got it. Let me teach you something that you can do in three to five minutes. You can do it in a meeting, on the phone, at dinner, even driving. These practices can increase your well-being and improve your physical health.”

The following practice can help stressed-out parents find some calm in the midst of a crazy busy life. In this exercise, we bring awareness to the places where the body is “touching”—such as the eyes, lips, hands, legs, and feet. It is a way to shift attention away from the racing mind and to anchor and ground attention in the body. Research shows that bringing awareness to the body in turn helps calm the mind.



Touch Points for Stressed-Out Parents

- Start by sitting comfortably. No matter how frazzled, exhausted, or stressed you are, see if you can assume a posture of dignity. Getting in touch with your essential worth, that you are deserving, which is often lost in the fog of parenting, is a good way to “reset.”
- Let your body rest. Let your face relax, your shoulders drop, head, neck, and back come into an easy alignment.
- Take three or four breaths to let the body and mind settle. Come into the present moment.
- Notice the places where the body is “touching” and bring some kindness to each touch point—the eyelids touching, the lips touching, the hands touching, the sitting bones touching, the backs of the knees touching, and the feet firmly touching the ground.
- Find a comfortable rhythm, repeat the sequence, and bring some appreciation to each part—notice the eyes touching, the lips touching, the hands touching, sitting bones touching, knees touching, feet touching.
- You can note these points silently to yourself to help you keep focus.
- If your mind wanders and you get distracted, it’s not a problem. Don’t criticize yourself; just start again.
- When you are ready, take a deep breath, stretch, and find some movement in your arms and legs. Try to bring this focused, kind attention into your next activity.

This is a very practical and grounding practice that can be used in the midst of daily life. The order can be reversed as well, as many people like to start with the feet touching the ground. Maria finds it helps keep her steady when she is trying to make dinner and her children are fighting

for her attention. Richard uses it at the end of a long day when he is tired and the chaos of his four kids playing grates on his nerves. He was looking for a simple practice that would help him keep it together when his three-year-old spilled his milk all over the kitchen table. When the inevitable accidents happen, rather than yelling at his son to be more careful, he spends a moment noticing his feet touching, knees touching, sitting bones touching, and so on, until he can say to himself, “This is a mess, life is full of small messes, if you have kids you have messes. It isn’t the end of the world.”

Food Fights

The next week, Anton reported the following challenge. “I’ve been too busy to practice, and I got distracted by the constant food fights at home.

“The kids are fussy eaters, especially the youngest. All he wants to eat is plain, boring white food. I hate that. I’m sick of rice, pasta, chicken, white fish. It drives me crazy. And my wife caters to him, and then we fight. Not good. So my wife makes white fish with white pasta and I forgot, I put some pepper on the dish before bringing it to the table. You would think it was a tragedy. The end of the world! Samir refused to eat it. I was not in the mood for defiant behavior. I’m sick and tired of how picky he is.

“‘Go to your room without dinner,’ I yelled. But my wife gets in the middle. ‘Let me scrape it off; he just doesn’t like pepper,’ she pleads.

“I yell at her to stop spoiling them. She yells back. So I take my plate and eat dinner in the living room watching TV. Everyone was mad at me. I’m the bad guy, at home and at work. Tell me, what is so bad about a little pepper?”

“What does your son say?” the therapist asked.

“He says it burns his mouth,” Anton responded.

There was silence.

“Look, Anton, I understand that your intention is to raise children who are respectful and well behaved. But I wonder, how would you respond to being forced to eat something that burned your mouth?”

“I don’t want him to be soft; I don’t want a wimp for a son. I won’t tolerate a spoiled brat. And my wife just indulges him.”

I didn’t want to get caught in a struggle with him, so I tried another angle. “I get your point. So many parents and children fight about food. Almost as much as couples fight about who takes out the trash.”

Anton laughed.

“And I know you are busy. I don’t want our session to devolve into a discussion of the merits of pepper. I’m interested in you. What is happening for you? If we put the pepper aside, what is happening for you?”

“Can’t dinner just be peaceful? There is constant fighting at work, constant bickering. Why is there always a problem with everything? Nothing is ever good enough!” He paused. “I guess this is the story of my life.”

“I think we hit something big. Let’s stay with this for a few minutes.” Anton had begun to get curious about his reactions. The Touch Points practice was allowing him some perspective and over time was helping him slow down enough to notice where his mind was going, but could he learn to bring some kindness to himself?

Sometimes it is good to combine or layer practices, just as we add some layers when it is cold or we are in a place with air conditioning. I suggested the following practice, irreverently called What the Hell Is This? These two practices, in combination, help us sort and manage difficult emotions. Once we begin to develop some friendly curiosity about our experience, compassion can follow. This practice is an adaptation of a classic Zen koan called “What Is This?” It was originally designed as a way to work with anger and worry. The following version is specifically for parents.



What the Hell Is This?

- Start by sitting comfortably, finding a position you can assume without strain. As always, it is fine to lie down.
- Take a few moments to ground and anchor your attention. Try Touch Points for Stressed-Out Parents or Ego Glue for Parents as a way to start.
- Bring your attention to what you are experiencing right now in relation to parenting.
- It could be anger, self-doubt, worry, sadness, or fear. See what it is for you.
- Notice what you are feeling with a warm curiosity. If it gets too intense, return to feeling the body touching or being with the breath.
- If you like, put a hand on your heart, noticing what is present with kindness, with interest, and without judgment.

Anton came in the following week and reported on his insights.

“Well, I practiced What the Hell Is This?, and it helped me get a grip.

I found I could do it in three minutes. I realized that I was getting really intense and rigid about food. Really holding on. For me, it wasn't about pepper. Of course it wasn't about pepper. But it was the story behind it. It's the principle of it. I'm working so hard, busting my ass, putting up with all sorts of shit so my kids can have a better life, and what do I get? The lack of gratitude pains me. And then I start to spin out. I start to worry that they don't respect my authority, that my colleagues at work don't respect my authority, that my wife doesn't respect my authority, and I go into a sort of rage. I worry that I'm not a good parent. I'm not around enough. That my kids will reflect badly on me. And suddenly, I'm having all these battles in my head—with everyone. The kids, the wife, the colleagues. It was huge."

"Sounds like you could see what was happening underneath the story," I noted.

"Yes, exactly," Anton responded. "And I found myself saying, in a voice that was new for me, 'Anton, it's just pepper. It isn't a tragedy.' And I realized that I don't like garlic. And I hate beets. So I could relax a little. We all like some foods and don't like others. It doesn't mean much of anything. It was just a thought. I didn't have to let it spin out of control." He paused. "Maybe, just maybe, you've helped me avoid a heart attack."

What shifted for Anton was that he was able to see that he was spending his precious time with his children getting into fights about inconsequential things. In fact, he realized he was getting in fights with almost everyone in his life. It wasn't productive or effective for him to constantly lead with anger. His colleagues were avoiding him, and his family didn't want to be around him. By bringing some mindful curiosity to his behavior, he understood that his knee-jerk anger was interfering with his ability to enjoy his children. When he stepped back about his son not liking pepper, he could acknowledge that he didn't like certain foods either. Once he could allow that he had certain preferences, and that wasn't the end of the world, he could let his kids be kids and smile at their likes and dislikes, making room for them to be human. As he practiced, he began to get in touch with humor and inner resources he didn't know he had.

You may also want to try combining the practices if it is one of those days when you need a little extra help. Dylan added *What the Hell Is This?* on days when his wife was away and his patience and reserves were low. "It feels like adding some more extra-strength glue or getting some reinforcement troops to come and help hold down the fort—guess we're watching a lot of old movies these days," he smiled. Chrissie added this practice when she had a hard day with Jenny. "It feels like combining them gives me a little more space or some more daylight. And if it's a 'single parent' week,

it feels like a friend is there for me, saying ‘OK, girl, now what is happening here?’ It slows me down and helps me feel less alone.”

I Can’t Adult Today

Alex entered my office one day wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt that announced, “I Can’t Adult Today.” It turned out that her external appearance reflected her internal state: “I was sorta keeping it together until my third child was born. Now I joke that she’s a career killer. Once upon a time I was a lawyer, but that was a long, long time ago.” She paused, noticing her choice of words. “Do you think I’ve been reading too many children’s books?” she joked.

“So, I was trying so hard to do it all. Function without sleep, keep everything going, get the kids to daycare. But it wasn’t working. I couldn’t keep it up. I started taking naps at my desk. My friends at the office were really supportive. ‘Alex, you just need to lean in,’ they would say. Forget that. As they say, ‘I just need to lie down,’ she laughed.

“My third is only six months old, and I have a three-year-old and a seven-year-old, and I’m so tired I can’t see straight. My oldest wants to do youth soccer; not sure how I’m going to fit in all the practices and the games. Can’t believe that I’m about to become a soccer mom.”

“Not what you envisioned?” I asked.

“Nope. I wasn’t going to be a stay-at-home mom, no way. I was going to be different from my suburban, boring, cookie-baking, apron-wearing mother. Ha. I wish someone would bake me a cookie,” she said wistfully. “I’ve taken a leave from work. And now I’m feeling so angry, resentful, and discouraged most of the time. Am I depressed, or is this what being a mother is about?” she asked plaintively.

Alex is hardly alone. For many of us, the overwhelming stress of parenting young children is hard to foresee and even harder to handle. Especially in hard times. Money is tight for many families today, and there are other pressures, including the responsibility for aging parents.

Reflection: What Is Overwhelming for You?

Take a minute and reflect on what is stressful for you right now, in addition to parenting young children. Are you worried about:

- Health issues?
- A recent or impending loss of a job?

- *An ill parent or sibling?*
- *An unsafe living situation?*
- *A recent loss or death?*
- *Conflict at work?*

Write down what else you are dealing with.

Rarely are we just dealing with the stress of parenting. It is usually parenting plus the stress of all the other things that life throws at us. No wonder you feel exhausted and overwhelmed.

“Sometimes being a parent mimics the signs of depression,” I suggested and asked Alex to tell me more about what she was going through.

“I’m often irritable and grumpy,” she explained, “and I snap a lot at the kids. Hell, I just snapped at you! And I’m crying a lot, more easily than ever. I was reading to Alyce the other night—she’s the oldest. And I’ve been waiting to read her *Alice in Wonderland*. We just started the book. I’ve been looking forward to this; I was a huge reader when I was a kid. So I start the first chapter and I read about Alice falling down the rabbit hole. They say Lewis Carroll was a drug addict, and clearly he was on *something* strong when he wrote it, but it felt so real this time. I was reading about Alice falling and falling and falling and I started to cry. When I was a kid I thought it was so cool, and I kept looking for rabbit holes so I could discover another world. I wanted to escape the one I was in. But the other night, it seemed terrifying to me. My daughter noticed I was crying and asked if I was OK, and I felt I had to lie and protect her from my sadness—‘Oh, it’s nothing, just the sniffles.’ But it isn’t. The reason I’m here today is that I’m in free fall. I’m worried that I’m falling into a bottomless pit and that I’ll take my family with me.”

Am I Depressed or Is This Parenting?

In times of exhaustion and foggy—what Alex calls “parenting brain”—mindfulness and compassion can help us get a grip and get some balance. Therapist and mindfulness teacher Sylvia Boorstein has one of the best explanations of mindfulness and compassion that I know. She calls it “awake attention to what is happening inside and outside so we can respond from a place of wisdom.” And if we know what we are feeling, we are less likely to lash out in anger—or fall down a rabbit hole.

One of the most important uses of mindfulness and compassion with

parents is helping us deal with difficult feelings. It helps us find the possibility of a pause between a challenging situation, such as a child refusing to eat, and our usual conditioned response—yelling, threatening, or punishing. We can use that pause to collect ourselves and consider a different response. Rather than strike out when we are tired or frustrated, we can take a moment to try to respond from a place of wisdom instead of reactivity. Working with these difficult feelings in mindfulness practice can help us recognize a feeling as it begins, not days, weeks, or years later. Turning toward difficult feelings can help us not lash out at our children or partners, not ignore these feelings out of fear or shame.

In the following practice, the body provides a way to ground and anchor difficult feelings so we can work with them effectively, with some more perspective, rather than becoming overwhelmed. This practice can help establish greater balance during the storms of parenting.



The Winds of Parenting

- Start by sitting comfortably, or lying down, eyes either closed or half open. Spend a few moments listening to the sounds around you, noticing the touch points in your body, or being with the comfort of your breath. Whichever “anchor” you choose, let this be your home base, a place of rest and comfort.
- Notice any tension, discomfort, or tightness in the body. No need to fix anything; just notice what is present.
- Check in on the “weather” in your internal landscape. What are you feeling right now? Are there feelings of anger . . . sadness . . . disappointment . . . anxiety . . . fear?
- Return to the anchor of listening to sounds, touch points, or the breath. Then watch, see which “winds” carry you away. Make this the object of your attention.
- Notice where the feelings are residing in your body. Tune in—is there tightness in your chest? Are you clenching your jaw? Is there tension in your shoulders? Is there a pit in your stomach? Does your head ache? Is your pulse racing? Bring a kind curiosity and interest to whatever you are feeling and noticing.
- Be gentle with whatever feelings or sensations you notice. Parenting stirs up a lot. Notice if you start to berate or criticize yourself. Have you started to think about what’s for dinner? Notice what takes you away.
- Try bringing the warmth of your hand to the place where the feelings are most intense. Invite this place to soften and relax. You might want

to try breathing into the discomfort. Don't struggle or resist. Just notice the feeling and allow it to be.

- Sometimes just becoming aware of the emotion in a friendly and curious way can help. If you start to feel overwhelmed, distracted, or agitated, simply return to the anchor of the sounds, touch points, or breath.
- Notice any judgments or criticisms you add on, then let them come and go. Don't feed them or get behind them; they will pass.
- When you are ready, take a breath, find some movement in your fingers and toes, arms and legs, and open your eyes. Try to bring this kind curiosity into your next activity.

When Alex tried this practice, she reported that her response was complicated: "Sometimes I'm having so many feelings I feel blown around. I just feel so overwhelmed at times. And then at other times, I look at the baby and she is just beginning to smile and I feel so happy. And then other moments, I'm crying. And then other times I'm just bouncing off the wall."

Sound familiar? This is the territory of being a new parent. Alex had had the same experience with her first two kids, but now, she said, "It just feels like it's exponentially more. And sometimes I feel disoriented. 'Where am I? How did I end up with three kids? What day is it? Whose life am I living? This is my life!?! Huh? Can I take a break from all this and go to a tropical island?'"

A friend once said to me that parenting is like driving in the dark. Things look different, you're not sure where you are, and you can only see a short distance ahead of you. For Alex and maybe you too, it can feel like losing the life you had—and you may not like that feeling. But, as Alex noted with chagrin, "I can't tell anyone, I can't say that, 'cause people will just tell me I should be grateful that I have three healthy kids. And then I feel guilty and ungrateful. A first-world problem."

It doesn't help to beat yourself up, and it's not self-indulgent to think about it, talk about it, and work it through. As psychiatrist Dan Siegel says, you have to "feel it to heal it," and "name it to tame it." In other words, the only way to manage difficult emotions is to allow yourself to feel them and to know what feelings you're experiencing. This is particularly important for people like Alex, who says, "Growing up, we weren't supposed to feel much of anything. And we certainly couldn't talk about it." Likewise for Dylan, who was generally scolded to just stop being sad or angry or whatever painful feelings he was having. We can get so caught up in trying to parent well and making our children our priority that we often don't allow

ourselves the time to accept and identify our emotions. Here is a simple practice of labeling that can help.

Naming Difficult Feelings

Labeling feelings is a well-researched meditation practice. In 2007, J. David Creswell and colleagues found that in the process of labeling what we are experiencing, we deactivate the alarm center of the brain (the amygdala) and activate the prefrontal cortex, which is often called the brain's control or CEO center. It helps us move out of a place of reactivity and upset into a place where we can reestablish balance and perspective. In an essay, Matthew Lieberman compared this practice to hitting the "snooze button" on an alarm clock. And what parent wouldn't want to hit the snooze button?



Hitting the Snooze Button

- Start by sitting comfortably, eyes either closed or slightly open. Or lie down if you prefer. Take a few soothing breaths, just letting yourself settle.
- Spend a few moments connecting with an anchor—this could be the touch points of your body, the sounds around you, or the comfort of your breath.
- When you are taken away by a feeling, simply note what that feeling is. Do this with warmth and compassion. For example, note "fear, fear, fear." Don't agonize about getting it exactly right.
- See where you feel it in your body. No need to fix it. Allow it to be.
- Notice the attitude you're bringing. Are you chastising yourself when you notice "anger, anger, anger"? Are you telling yourself that you're a bad parent for having this feeling?
- Allow a large spectrum of feelings to be acceptable. All feelings are welcome. See if you can label with kindness, acceptance, and warmth.
- If the feeling becomes too intense, and you start to feel disoriented or overwhelmed, simply return to your breath, the touch points, or the sounds around you.
- There is no need to analyze the emotion. No need to create a story around it. Don't delve into the history. You don't need to say, "My mother was angry with me, I'm angry with my kids, this will never end."

- Label it and let it go.
- Bring as much kindness and compassion as possible. If you feel that negative feelings don't deserve compassion, note this as well.
- Be open to pleasant feelings and label these as well.
- Alternate between labeling the feelings and grounding with your anchor.
- When you're ready, take a deep breath, find some movement in your fingers and toes, arms and legs, and stretch. Open your eyes if they've been closed.
- Try to continue to be aware of your emotional reactions as you transition to your next activity.

The next time I saw Alex, she was wearing bright-green socks that read "Parent in Training." I couldn't help joking that her clothes were very articulate. She laughed along with me: "I know this is very silly, but a friend gave them to me. And she just gave me a onesie for the baby that says, 'I'm a Baby. What's Your Excuse?'" They help me laugh and feel that I don't have to have my shit together all the time. It takes some of the pressure off. And I guess I beat myself up thinking that I should have an excuse if I have a bad day or I cry or have a tantrum. Sometimes it's just hard and I miss grown-up conversation. I'm thinking of Parent in Training as a new job description."

I was reminded of a comment from a Zen master, that "life is just one mistake after another." I think the same is true of parenting. It's on-the-job training. We're constantly making mistakes. We're constantly falling down. We weren't taught to do it. And our culture rarely helps us parent. No wonder so many parents feel alone and depressed.

"The 'Spooze Button' practice worked for me," Alex reported. "I'm feeling less agitated and hating myself a little less when I have 'bad feelings' or I get angry at the kids. I feel like I have this archaic image of what a mother should be. That I shouldn't yell. That I shouldn't lose it. That I should be loving and kind 24/7. That every damn dinner should be made from scratch. And that the kids should have homemade cookies when they get home." She shook her head. "This gives me a little space, a little latitude between my mom with her immaculate home and perfect meals and me, with my mess." As Alex learned to be kind to herself, paying attention to her own feelings and tending to her needs, she turned to some practical measures as well to ease the daily external pressures of the stress imposed by the kids. She found that driving the kids around town like some "underpaid chauffeur" was taking its toll.

“Generally I’m feeling better—on some days, I should add,” Alex reported. “But the kids are still themselves. And they aren’t about to become peaceful Zen masters. The constant fighting is wearing me down. I looked into adoption, but it’s not that easy,” she joked.

There are mindfulness educators who teach that children, by learning to take a moment, focusing on their breath, and noting their emotions, can learn not to lash out at others. One of my favorite stories about what mindfulness is comes from a kid. His school launched a program to teach the kids mindfulness and compassion, with very positive results. When asked to describe mindfulness by a reporter, this boy responded, “It’s not hitting someone in the mouth.”

This is the practice we developed for Alex’s family. It’s a bit of a riff on the old car game of noticing license plates from other states or naming what you see—trucks, billboards, birds, or cows and horses if you are in the country. While the labeling portion works best for children who are verbal, younger children often like to feel the breath.



Mindfulness and Compassion in the Car

- At home, perhaps at bedtime, help your child find his or her breath.
- One way you can do this is for both of you to put your hands on your child’s chest or belly to feel the breath rising and falling. With young children, it is often easiest to feel a hand on the belly.
- Some children like the image of the belly rising like a balloon. See what images work well for your kids.
- If (when) an argument starts while you are in the car, try out the following suggestions, adapting them as you see fit.

The following scenario was common in Alex’s family:

“Mommy, Mommy, Alyce pinched me.”

“Alyce, stop it.”

“She kicked me.”

“Did not.”

“Did too.”

“STOP IT, NOW. I’M DRIVING” [said with increasing anger]. “I can’t break up this fight. Do you want me to get into an accident?”

“But she hit me!”

“If I have to pull over and stop the car, everyone is in BIG trouble!”

Alex tried to adapt the Name It to Tame It practice when driving. This is what it often looked like:

“Mommy, Mommy, Alyce pinched me.”

“OK. guys, everyone find your breath.”

“Ah, Mom, she pinched me.”

“I heard you. We are trying something different.”

“But it hurts. I don’t want to find my breath. This is STUPID.”

“Let’s try being quiet for 30 seconds. Try hands on the belly.”

“I don’t want to.”

“This is SO DUMB!”

“I’m MAD.”

“Great, let’s try naming it. So far I hear Stupid, Dumb, and Mad. Any other words?”

“But it hurts.”

“Keep those words coming. We have Stupid, Dumb, and Mad. We have Hurt. Let’s keep going. What else do we have?”

“This is unfair.”

“And we have Unfair. Now we have Stupid, Dumb, Mad, Hurt, and Unfair. Anything else?”

“This is boring. I hate this. This is for idiots! This isn’t a GAME!”

At this point, Alex’s kids would often be laughing. Sometimes they would shout out what they were feeling. But usually the fighting would stop and Alex would be able to drive. She found that having healthy snacks in the car cut down on the fighting as well.

One important caveat is to keep the naming warm and kind and to keep a sense of humor. Yes, we all get mad, think things are dumb and stupid, and feel hurt. This is part of what the self-compassion researchers call common humanity. While the kids sometimes protested about the practice, Alex found that it interrupted their fighting and got them laughing.

So, the next time you are driving to soccer practice or to school and the kids start fighting, try some mindfulness and compassion in the car. And play around with it to see what works in your family. There isn’t one right way to do it. Try to have some fun with it.

The practice can also set the stage for learning about how to manage

difficult emotions. It is a natural opportunity to hear another's point of view, to listen to what someone else is feeling and experiencing, and to communicate your own needs and desires. And on a good day it can open the door to learning about negotiation, compromise, and even forgiveness. While it may appear to be a game that gets you to soccer practice without a splitting headache, it can also serve the larger aims of teaching cooperation and communication. You might want to think of it as a secret or hidden ingredient, like the grated zucchini that you surreptitiously fold into the chocolate cupcakes.

Reflection: What Works for You?

As you've watched Chrissie, Dylan, Anton, and Alex learn to bring some self-compassion to their daily struggles, what do you think will work for you? Spend a few moments reflecting on what you've learned and how it can help you stay afloat. What would you like to incorporate into your daily life? Could you use the Self-Compassion Life Saver for Parents when your children are being impossible? Would you like to learn to sit with emotions that get evoked when the kids fight and learn to accept them even with they are painful and difficult? Are you dealing with a stressful situation in your family or at work? Do you want to try labeling the confused emotions so you don't feel that you are moving through a parenting fog? And how about being kind to yourself as you learn these new skills? And why not be kind to your family by helping them tone down the chaos by using the same tools?

Of course there will be challenging moments that will arise, but think of these as tools for life. We are working on building a core of self-compassion that will help you be resilient and learn to navigate whatever life throws your way—without going under. “On a good day,” Alex said, “and mind you those don't come that often, but sometimes when I go down a rabbit hole I learn something. I've started to say to myself, ‘Alex, this is a new hole. It's a new world. Get interested. What's happening here? What the Hell Is This?’ And that helps me keep engaged and curious, at least for that particular rabbit hole. And it helps me not freak out as much,” she smiled, “at least until the next one.”