



CHAPTER 5

MANAGING ANGER AND DIFFICULT EMOTIONS

It seemed like the unsolicited advice started pouring in the moment I announced my pregnancy. I got everything from “Sleep when the baby sleeps” to “Don’t eat sushi” to “Don’t let her take out student loans when she’s in college.” Thanks, everyone.

Through it all, there was one piece of advice that really stuck: Call everything a phase. Baby isn’t sleeping? Just a phase. Kid throws tantrums every day at 4 p.m.? Phase. Teenager only speaks in grunts? Phase. Doesn’t matter what the phase is or why it’s happening—teething, a growth spurt, or Saturn going retrograde—the point is it won’t last forever. If the problem is just a phase, then it has an ending and we can get through it.

This advice helped immensely when my daughter got sick when she was 11 months old. She was barely eating or sleeping—totally miserable. My husband and I felt awful and at a loss as to how to make her comfortable. My panic was intense, and I felt overwhelmed with fear. It felt like she would never be healthy and none of us would ever sleep well again.

And then she got better. Everything went back to normal. Until the next time something came up. And the time after that. My habit is to assume the worst, and I get overwhelmed with fear that feels like it will last forever. My mindfulness practice lets me see that my fear, too, is just a phase.

Our emotions and moods are actually very much like these phases our kids go through. Just like we don't ask for and can't control growth spurts, teething, puberty, or tantrums, we don't always ask for and usually can't control our emotions and moods or those of our children. But with mindfulness, we can remember to notice these emotions, know they won't last, and be kind as we experience a tantrum or meltdown (theirs or ours).

In fact, difficult emotions are really only difficult because we've decided we don't like them. We actually make it harder on ourselves because we don't want to feel this feeling just as it is. There's an overwhelming sense that this moment shouldn't be like this. It's natural that we prefer some emotions more than others, just like we are bound to like some of our children's phases more than others. But none of our emotions are inherently bad. Some are just more challenging or further from what we expected in that moment.

Practice: Name That Emotion

We can make emotions less overwhelming simply by naming them. By identifying and acknowledging our emotions, we can reduce their power over us.

1. Wherever you are, find even the smallest opportunity to pause and take a breath or two.
2. Notice what's happening in your body and mind without needing to change anything or blame yourself or anyone else for it.
3. Feel your feet on the floor. Notice every part of you that's in contact with something else.
4. Gently inquire: "What am I feeling right now?"
5. You can name any emotion or combination of emotions or just consider any word or sound that remotely represents your current state.
6. Once you have even a tiny sense of the emotion you're experiencing, see if you can be curious about how it feels in your body.
7. Explore how those sensations change. Notice how easy it is to get caught up in thoughts of the trigger or the consequences, and then come back to your physical experience and the label itself.
8. This exercise isn't about figuring out or analyzing why you feel this way—it's just about noticing, feeling, and caring for this moment as it is.

Applying the Practice

You can do this exercise on the fly or during a time set aside for reflection.

This is one of those “the more you do it, the more you’ll keep doing it” practices. In the heat of an argument with your children, see if you can pause, check out what’s happening in your mind and body, and name the emotions. That pause can make all the difference between fueling the fight and being able to gain some perspective. Try to incorporate this technique throughout your day with different moods and emotions, not just when things are challenging.

Sharing with Kids

We know that kids model our behavior, so the more we gently acknowledge our moods and emotions, the more they will, too. They can see that it’s okay to feel however they feel and that they don’t have to react when emotions are really powerful. It’s also helpful to be vocal about your emotions. You can tell your kids, “I’m feeling sad right now” or “I’m so happy to see you, and I also had a really rough day. How about if I lie down for five minutes, and then we can play?” That communication not only normalizes those feelings and builds emotional vocabulary, it also lets your kids see that they don’t have to take your moods or emotions personally.

With little kids, have them name, draw, or act out their emotions. You might even make a habit of asking the family, “What are you feeling right now?”

Common Obstacles

I get it—no one likes feeling bad. Yet this exercise isn’t about making you feel bad but rather about acknowledging the feeling that’s already there and then choosing how you want to relate to it. If you hate the emotion, then you’ll just feel bad about feeling bad. If you ignore the feeling, it usually comes back stronger than ever.

If you ever start to feel overwhelmed, open your eyes (if they are closed) and come back to the feeling of your feet on the ground or the experience of your senses.

Practice: Taking Care of Feelings with a Mindful SNACK

Are you one of those caregivers who always has a snack in your bag, car, purse, and office, just in case the kids get hungry and cranky? Have you ever rummaged through your bag to find your wallet and out tumble three granola bars and two juice boxes? We know those snacks come in handy when our kids need sustenance. This practice is all about giving ourselves a little bit of nourishment, too: a snack of mindfulness.

Use the SNACK acronym to notice and take care of and nourish your current emotions, whatever they are.

Stop: Pause, take a moment, and breathe.

Notice/Name: Explore what's happening right now and give it a name. You might inquire: What's alive in my mind and body? What emotions are present right now? What do the emotions feel like? Where do I feel them? This exercise builds on Name That Emotion (page 59) and the Body Scan (page 10).

Allow/Acknowledge/Accept: You don't have to change anything that's happening. Just see that it's happening and that it's okay. You can accept the situation, your thoughts and feelings, and yourself just as they are.

Care/Compassion: Take care of your feelings. Instead of hating your emotions or trying to get rid of them, what would it be like to truly care for them? Imagine actually holding that fear or that anger the way you'd hold your children if they had a bad dream.

Kindness/Knowing: Instead of thinking, "I'm just an angry person" or "There's something wrong with me," try thinking, "This emotion is here right now, and it's okay." Kindness allows us to let go of judgments and the need to make this feeling go away. Knowing is seeing that this emotion won't last forever and that it doesn't define you.

Applying the Practice

Like the Name That Emotion practice on page 59, this technique should be used when things feel fine in order to practice for when things aren't so great. Notice the sweet moments with your kids, as well as the rougher ones. Start to pay attention to which emotions are connected to certain actions and behaviors and use that understanding to communicate with your family about your needs and theirs. However you feel, see if you can let your emotions come and go, being curious about them without getting caught up in the story behind them.

Sharing with Kids

When exploring this exercise with smaller children, ask them to describe their feelings using colors, shapes, or animals. Let them give the emotion a name. Have them draw a picture of Crabby, the grumpy crab. Or ask them how Gus, the sad walrus would walk. What face would a scaredy-cat make?

Regardless of your child's age, the point is to encourage kind, curious exploration of all feelings, to promote the idea that all feelings are always valid. Even if we don't like our emotions, we don't have to beat ourselves up about them. We can see that feelings don't last and that they don't define us—they are just visiting for a little bit.

Common Obstacles

Sometimes you just can't tell what you feel. That's fine. Mindfulness is not about getting the right answer—it's about noticing.

If your emotions are ever overwhelming, take another deep breath, open your eyes if they're closed, and connect to your senses. Remind yourself that you are safe and that this is just another phase.

Practice: All the Space in This Place

Becoming a parent is a dramatic event, no matter how it happens. For me, there was one surprising aspect of being in labor that's stuck with me through the years. I learned that no matter how intense the contractions are, the body gets a break between them—a state of rest. But if the mind is panicking about the next contraction, or is still stuck on the last one, you don't get that much-needed rest.

This exercise is all about noticing the spaces in between the emotional activity. Big emotions often feel like they are constant and will last forever. But if we can look a bit closer, we can see that there are actually spaces to rest.

1. Although this technique can be done as a formal activity, it works better if you start to get curious about what's actually involved in emotions and what they feel like as they are happening.

2. Explore how the emotion feels in your body. Notice how often it changes, even subtly. It shifts and gets stronger and weaker.
3. Notice the spaces in between your emotions. No matter how angry, sad, or frustrated you are, there is always a space in there where you don't feel that emotion or you focus on something else. Notice that even in the worst moods, you still get a few breaks.
4. See if you can rest in those breaks. Take a breath and notice when the emotion feels less powerful.
5. It's important to remember that this practice is not about denying the feeling or trying to make it go away. Nor is this exercise about figuring out why you feel this way. The goal is to just be with the emotion as it is and look for places to rest.

Applying the Practice

This exercise is helpful for changing how we relate to our moods. When you feel like you're stuck in anger or overwhelmed with frustration, it helps to see that those moods and emotions aren't constant. Then you can choose which parts to focus on and identify with.

Parenting has so many ups and downs and everything in between. This technique encourages us to look for the breaks, not just the chaos. Focusing on the spaces in between emotions is also helpful for when we get into a negative pattern, perhaps even calling ourselves bad

parents. We aren't bad—we're just having a rough time right now.

Sharing with Kids

Kids of any age feel overwhelmed by their feelings, too. Encourage them to notice what the emotion does, how it changes, moves, and shifts. You might ask: “What do you feel in your body right now? Where did the sadness go?”

Common Obstacles

It's difficult to step back and observe the emotion rather than get caught up in it. That's where consistent practice can be so helpful. The more you practice observing your emotions, the more you can see that they change and shift and that you can find space between them and from them.

MINDFUL THINKING

Do you ever feel like your mind has a mind of its own? That when you're trying to prepare dinner or listen to your children's stories, you drift into daydreams, judgments, and worries? *Does this food have too many chemicals? What if he talks too much at school? If the economy keeps getting worse, what will we do? I have so much work right now. I feel so old. Why am I the only one who takes care of this? Other parents can handle this stuff better than I can. I wonder what's on TV?* Although estimates vary, we can assume that we have approximately 50,000 thoughts per day. It's no wonder our minds can't stay focused on just one thing!

One of the most persistent myths about mindfulness is that you're only doing it right when you stop thinking entirely. Not only is that assumption untrue, it's virtually impossible. Mindfulness isn't about getting rid of thoughts—it isn't about getting rid of anything. Mindfulness is just about seeing what's alive in this moment, exploring it with compassionate attention, and then choosing whether we want to continue considering what we've noticed after we've acknowledged it mindfully. Being mindful of our thoughts means that we're not preoccupied—we're aware that we're thinking. Mindfulness enables us to see when thinking is helpful and when the mind is just in its own spin cycle.

Thinking only becomes a problem when we get so caught up in it that we lose sight of what's happening right now. We either miss the present moment because we're stuck in memories, plans, worries, or daydreams, or we can't accept the present moment because we're trapped in judgment, anxiety, comparisons, and expectations of how things should be different. Thinking happens. Our task is to be responsible for how we act on it.

Here, "be responsible" means to be able to respond. That's what we want to do with our thinking and the rest of our experiences: respond mindfully in a way that promotes our well-being and our focus on the present moment. Research shows that mindfulness helps practitioners gain some perspective on and distance from endless thinking or rumination, which leads to less self-referential thinking, less mind wandering, and less of a feeling that the mind has a mind of its own.

So how do you actually practice mindfulness?

One way to practice mindfulness of thinking is to just watch the thoughts come and go. Rather than getting caught up in the content of the thought, see if you can simply observe your own thinking mind. Watching your mind work is like sitting on a bridge and watching cars go by—you just notice the thoughts (how many, how fast, different colors). Whenever you notice you've

been caught up in one of those thoughts, pause to see it, acknowledge where your mind has gone, and then gently, without recrimination, come back to what's happening right now: this body, this breath, these thoughts coming and going.

That sounds great, but what do you do if your thoughts seem inescapable?

Sometimes, we get stuck on a particular thought. Instead of trying to get rid of the thought, hating it, analyzing it, or judging ourselves for it, explore what's happening in this moment of feeling stuck by doing a quick meditation like the One-Minute Breath Meditation (page 20).

Take a few deep breaths. Feel your feet on the floor. Acknowledge what it's like to feel stuck in the thought. Let go of the content of the thought, and notice what's happening in your body. Notice any areas of tightness, tension, heat, or tingling. Chances are, deep emotions are associated with the thought. Kindly explore them and where you feel them in your body. As gently as possible, try to sit with these emotions and sensations, without needing to make anything happen. Notice how strong or weak the thoughts are. If you get caught in the story of the thought or feel overwhelmed, come back to the feeling of sitting and breathing. Notice how the thoughts and feelings change as you observe them.

As you explore the moment, you can see that this thought, however powerful, is just a thought. It's not a fact. You don't have to believe it right now (even if it comes back again and again). You can even ask, "Is this thought actually helping me in this moment?" The purpose of this question isn't to analyze the content of the thought but to ask about the nature of the thought and to recognize your ability to decide your relationship to the thought. If you can see that the thought isn't helpful, you can choose to repeatedly turn your attention back to your body and breath.

Although turning your attention away from a thought isn't easy, it can be extremely empowering. You see that you have more say over your thoughts than they have over you.

What you might find is that thoughts act like kindling for emotions, particularly painful ones. Your kid draws on the walls with permanent marker, and you lose your temper. After you settle down, you feel relatively okay . . . until that thought comes back up. *How could he do this? I told him not to play with those markers! What if he never gets better at listening? Am I just a bad parent?* And then you feel the anger all over again. Awareness of your body and your breathing acts as an antidote. No, mindfulness won't clean the walls, and it won't make your children better at listening. But being mindful will allow you to be

gentle with yourself, your mind, and your children when you most need to.

For most parents, worries and fears are part of the job. Our minds run away with us, but mindfulness lets us choose which thoughts we want to listen to, and it allows us to see which thoughts are helping us and which ones are just causing trouble. We get to be responsible for what we think. Some thoughts are very much like those kids on the playground or in detention that you don't want your child associating with—bullies. The good news is that, like bullies, these thoughts thrive on attention. If we call these thoughts what they are (“There's another nasty thought some part of my brain thinks I should believe”) and consciously choose kindness and attention to our bodies and senses, those bullying thoughts lose their power.

Just like footprints in the sand, the hormonal outbursts of a teenager, or the attention of a toddler, thoughts can come and go if we let them.