

Mother Nurture

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Letting Go

By the end of the day, I feel frazzled and chock full of pent up feelings and thoughts. I don't want to let all that out on my kids or my husband - and I hate it when I do - so do you know any ways to get rid of this stuff without exploding?!

It's really normal to feel like you describe. A mom is dealing with so many feelings and needs and wants in her children and partner that the stress builds up over the course of a day. Plus many women have been taught in various ways to keep a stiff upper lip and not to say anything that seems like a complaint -- which just keeps things bottled up and festering.

Of course, it is important to be able to say what needs to be said to your husband or to your kids or to other people. But it's always also helpful to be able to let go of painful feelings, thoughts, stress, or tension entirely within your own mind. Plus, you can adapt these skills for your children, from the age of preschoolers onward, which will be very, very helpful to them.

Here's a summary of practical methods for letting go - and you can learn more from the other recent columns on our website, www.NurtureMom.com.

Relaxing Your Body

It is almost impossible to be upset when your body is relaxed. Try one of these relaxation skills, even in the middle of a challenging situation:

- Breathe slowly and deeply while imagining that tension is leaving your body with each breath.
- Try to inhale and exhale for the same amount of time (e.g., inhale for a count of four, exhale for four). Imagine that the breath is going in and out of the region of your heart. Meanwhile, recall or think about things that give you an appreciative, grateful, loving feeling. (For more on this simple but powerful technique, check out the books from the HeartMath Institute in Santa Cruz.)
- For a young child, a little trick that will help her breathe deeply is to ask her to exhale fully and then hold the exhalation for a couple of seconds - when she inhales, she'll naturally take a big breath.
- Deliberately relax certain trigger points, such as the jaw muscles, pelvic floor, or the "third eye" between the eyebrows.

- Recall or imagine a very happy, peaceful scene.

You can deepen your capacity to relax when the fur starts flying by practicing relaxation techniques at calmer times, like right before bed:

- Systematically put your attention on each major part of your body, starting with your feet and working up to your head. If it helps, think a phrase like "relax," or "locate a point" for your left foot, right foot, left ankle, right ankle . . . all the way up to your scalp.
- Tense your muscles for about five seconds and then relax completely.
- Imagine that you are v-e-r-y heavy, sinking more and more deeply into your bed
- Imagine that your hands are very warm, like holding a cup of hot cocoa (this one is especially good for insomnia)

For kids, bedtime is a great time to train them in these techniques, since they'll put up with more mumbo-jumbo to keep you in the room. The point is that you will initially take them through some of the methods above, and then over time you will expect them increasingly to use the methods themselves at night -- as well as during the day, in real-life situations.

Releasing Painful Feelings

Yes, life has its share of suffering, and we are certainly not suggesting that you resist difficult feelings or suppress them. Instead, we're talking about simply helping them on their way.

- In a way that's safe, vent - and there are a variety of options. You could really let it rip about how you feel in a letter that you'll destroy after it's written; perhaps burn it in a ritualistic way, scattering the ashes far and wide, letting all the feelings go as you do so. Or tell a trusted friend, with the crucial intention of getting it off your chest and getting rid of it, rather than getting more worked up. Or imagine ranting and yelling inside your own mind. Or yell out loud while in the shower, on top of a mountain, underwater, or while driving a car (stay in control of the car!!!).
- Sense the feelings draining out of your body, perhaps as if there were tiny valves at the tips of each finger and toe.
- Exhale the feelings with each breath, visualizing them as smoggy clouds leaving your body.
- Imagine the feelings being swept away by standing in a cool and refreshing stream on a beautiful, sunny day
- Imagine putting the feelings into a jar and tossing it into a river to be carried off to the sea, or placing them on a rocket ship blasting off to be burned up in the sun.

Saying Good-bye to Negative Thoughts

With this method, you get on your own side and argue against needlessly negative, limiting, or inaccurate thoughts, beliefs, expectations, and assumptions. On paper or in your head, you need to talk to yourself - and it's the opposite of crazy!

A structured approach is to treat the thoughts that make you (or a child) upset as propositions that may or may not be true, and then list three or more ways that they are totally wrong. Try to see which of these classic mental errors might apply: treating a small problem like a big one, regarding a temporary situation as permanent, underestimating your own abilities, overestimating the scale or the likelihood of the challenge, or forgetting about resources in your world.

For example, if an 8-year-old is afraid that bad guys could break into your home, together come up with a list like this one: *All our windows and doors are locked. Your bedroom is next to ours. I'm a real light sleeper. There's never been a burglary in our neighborhood. We leave a light on. Crooks look for easy targets, not houses like ours. The dogs next door bark at anything, and they'd sure scare a burglar away. Besides, we're not rich, and burglars go where the big jewels are: we don't have anything they want!*

Or for an adult, suppose that childcare has fallen apart yet again for a mother, and she has to take a day off of work to deal with it, and she's got a dreadful feeling it'll never work out. To feel better, she could remind herself that: *There are lots of childcare situations out there, and one of them has to work. I've found decent childcare in the past, and I'll find it again. Meanwhile, maybe my mom can take care of my daughter for a few days. Time will pass, and we'll get through this. The important thing is to keep going, to love my sweet girl, and be loved by her as well.*

You get the idea. This method works best when you do it in a structured and determined way. Give it a try!

(Rick Hanson, Ph.D. is a clinical psychologist, Jan Hanson, M.S., L.Ac., is an acupuncturist/nutritionist, and they are raising a daughter and son, ages 15 and 17. With Ricki Pollycove, M.D., they are the first and second authors of Mother Nurture: A Mother's Guide to Health in Body, Mind, and Intimate Relationships, published by Penguin. You can see their website at www.nurturemom.com or email them with questions or comments at info@nurturemom.com; unfortunately, a personal reply may not always be possible.)