

*An Aha! Parenting E-Work-Book*



***The Secret of the Full Cup:  
Nurturing Yourself  
While Raising Your Child***

*By Dr. Laura Markham*



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## How to be a happy vacation parent all year long

*"Dr. Laura, I'm great with my kids on vacation. But most of the time, I'm just so stressed out, my default is yelling!" -- David*

Vacations can sometimes be stressful: airplane flights, rushing around, extended-family dynamics, disrupted sleep schedules.

But if we pay attention, we can often structure vacations so that we as parents can slow down a bit and meet our own needs. We get a chance to soak in the sweetness of life, to feel more expansive. That breathing room lets us ease up about the little things, enjoy our children more, and strengthen our connection with them.

Naturally, kids respond by relaxing and cooperating more.

If only we could hang on to that relaxed, connected, "vacation" parent all year long!

We can. Or at least, we can come closer to it than we usually do.

I know, life (especially work life) gets in the way. We get over-scheduled, stressed out. Meeting our own needs is a challenge. Our kids can even begin to seem like a

burden. That's when the joy of having kids becomes elusive, and we find ourselves screaming inside *"This isn't what I signed up for!"*

But it doesn't have to be that way. It IS possible to reduce the stress in our lives so we can slow down and find more joy in parenting on a daily basis. I know, it's hard to be joyful when you can't remember the last time you finished a sentence without being interrupted. But when we find ourselves resenting our kids, it's usually a sign that we aren't taking care of ourselves. And whose responsibility is that?

Every one of us can get pushed to the limit and go over the edge. Since we're the grown-ups, it's our job to stay away from the edge. And that ability to self-regulate is impossible if we don't notice our own needs and emotions. We aren't doing our children any favors if we don't care for ourselves at the same time that we're caring for our kids.

What if your child is in crisis? All the more reason to put on your own oxygen mask first, so you can think straight. I'm not talking about running off to Tahiti by yourself. I'm suggesting that taking care of your own needs and feelings (which includes your body!) will allow you to feel so much better about life, and about your child, that whatever challenge you're facing will be much easier to solve.

You're not being selfish to meet your own needs. In fact, you owe it to your child. Her ability to regulate her emotions will depend on how well you regulate yours when you interact with her. If you can stay centered, you'll be more emotionally generous. Your child will respond with more cooperation.

Want more motivation? You owe it to yourself. Life is too short to spend it feeling stressed and resentful. We never know how long we have. Unless you're very lucky, you've probably known someone who died without warning at a relatively young age.

Ultimately, you're the one responsible for how you spend the life you've been given. On your deathbed, there won't be anyone else to blame if you've been unhappy. The secret work of adulthood is that we are all still growing up, and parenting forces us to learn to parent ourselves as well as our child.

So how can you nurture yourself, when all the hours in the day are already accounted for?

There are two keys.

**1. Change what you**

**do.** Don't assume you need a huge change. Instead, nurture yourself in small ways throughout your day, including while you nurture your child. (And if you do need a big change, you'll see what to do more clearly from that nurtured place, instead of just being angry.)



Just get in the habit of asking yourself every half hour "*What do I need right now?*" Then do it. If you're not emotionally generous to yourself, you can't be emotionally generous to your child.

**2. Change your attitude.** Life doesn't have to be perfect to be wonderful. And we don't have to be perfect to be more than enough. Stop beating up on yourself or holding a grudge against life. Instead, nurture yourself. And cultivate gratitude for the good in every single day. You'll feel more supported -- and find more support.

I wish I could be your fairy godmother and wave a magic wand to help you find that inner peace and balance. The bad news is, every magic wand we can access takes work. But that work -- bringing compassion to our own imperfect selves, slowing down to just feel this moment in our life, to be more present and find more meaning -- is what transforms us. This work isn't only for our children. It's for us.

The following chapters will focus on practical ways to de-stress and nurture yourself, so you can bring your best inner parent into your relationship with your child every single day.

**For today, just notice your internal barometer. 1 is depleted, 10 is a full cup. How are you doing?**

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**What do you already do to take care of yourself that helps you maintain a high level of well-being? List these things below and give yourself a pat on the back for each of them.**

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**What is one small thing you could do today to better support yourself?**

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**What is one thing you could change today in your attitude, to better support yourself?**

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**Do you feel stressed? List anything that you might be willing to change or cut back on, at least for now, so that you feel less stress in your life.**

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## 10 Stress Busting Strategies for Parents



*“I’m stressed, we’re rushing, and before I know it, I’m yelling. When I see the look on his face, I feel awful. He was just being a kid. And I was just stressed out.” -- Dana*

As every parent learns, you can't be a good mom or dad when you're stressed out, no matter how positive your intentions.

It's true that modern life creates a ton of stress, but it's also true that what stresses out one person may just roll off the back of another. So stress is partly what happens to us, but mostly our reaction to it. Each of us has a responsibility as a parent to manage our own stress.

After all, do you want your kids to have the best of you -- or what's left of you?

A three pronged approach works best:

- Pare down the stressors in your life.
- Keep your cup full so that you have more internal resources to deal with the curve balls that life inevitably throws at you.
- Retrain your attitude so you notice as you slip into stress-mode and can make the choice to shift gears.

Here are ten stress-busting strategies that draw on all three of these ideas, that you can use starting today.

**1. Pay attention to breathing, calmly and deeply, as often as you remember, all day long.** Remembering to breathe may sound simple, but it will change your life. Late for an appointment? Breathe. Kids just dump their toys in the toilet?

Breathe. Taking deep breaths so you get more oxygen actually reduces the stress hormones circulating in your body.

Noticing your breath is like using a pause button. It brings you back into the moment, so you have a choice. Do you really want to get hijacked by the stress and end up yelling at your kid, or could you choose a better way to handle things?

Put post-its up all over your house and in your car to remind you, and when you see one, take 3 deep breaths. The practice will make it more effective when you have one of those inevitable stress-inducing moments.

**2. Pare down your schedule.** Much of the stress we feel comes from routinely over-scheduling. But that's a choice we make. We think it's helpful to squeeze more in, but it always costs us. Kids thrive on connection, so when we get too busy to just hang out and connect with them, they act out. Prioritize your kids and your relationship. Then drop anything else you can. Your house can stay a mess a little longer. Serve scrambled eggs and raw carrots for dinner. (Yes, that is nutritionally fine.) Your children need you in a good mood *much* more than they need you to cook.

**3. Sleep.** Sleep is an essential stress buster. Your body uses your sleep time to heal and restore a better biochemical balance. This is hard, because sleep often feels out of our control. But you can get more sleep, even if it means going to bed when the kids do. Just do it. Even a few days a week of this discipline will shift your mood.



**4. Move.** Exercise is the best stress reducer there is, after deep breathing and getting enough sleep. Twenty minutes of sweat inducing activity every day will cut cortisol levels, burn fat, and put you in a good mood. What more incentive do you need? Turn on the music and get your kids dancing with you!

**5. Cut your kid some slack.** You don't need to stress about every little miss-step from your child. The fact that Kevin clobbered his playmate or Kendra smeared poop on the wall doesn't mean they'll be psychopaths. Most childish behavior is developmentally appropriate. This is your baby, showing you in the best way he can that he needs your love and understanding. Most acting out can be cured by

your reconnecting with your child and getting some real laughter going between you, which heals both your stress. On those days when you're ready to tear your hair out, remember that moment when you first held your child in your arms, and how lucky you felt. You're still that lucky, and you can still feel that way. It's a choice.

**6. Postpone anything but love.** What about those times when you really do need to intervene to set some limits with your child? Go ahead. But first, remind yourself that it's not an emergency. You don't have to teach your child a lesson this very moment. In fact, all you have to do right now is keep everyone safe and return yourself to Calm. Anything you need to say to your child, you will say better once you're calm and able to re-connect with love. This eliminates the stress of feeling so pressured and powerless in that moment to say the right thing to your child (or, in most cases, to come up with the right threat!). It also prevents saying things you're sorry for later, so it makes you a more effective parent.

**7. Give up your perfectionism.** Sure, life is messy, but is that any reason to postpone happiness? You're more than enough, just the way you are. There are no perfect people, and there are no perfect parents. Trying to be perfect is a huge source of stress. It tightens a vise around your heart. Loving yourself – really feeling your love for yourself, even though you aren't perfect – may be the single most important thing you can do to de-stress and help your child thrive. Practice positive self-talk. Find ways to nurture yourself. If you simply have to evaluate yourself as a parent, never judge yourself by your child's behavior, but by your reaction to it. Only love today.

**8. Count your blessings and cultivate optimism.** Every time you start to feel negative, find as many things as you can to be grateful for, and really feel that gratitude. Research shows this practice reduces stress and improves health and happiness.

**9. Find support.** Parenting is the hardest job there is. We ALL need support, someone we can vent to who won't judge us or try to fix us. If you need more of that kind of support in your life, find other parents with whom you feel comfortable and start building new friendships. Listen to parenting audios that soothe and inspire you. Find yourself a parenting coach with whom you can check in occasionally. Even the simple act of writing in a journal has been proven to be an effective way of supporting ourselves and coming to peace with things that bother us.



### **10. Find spirit in your life.**

This can mean a higher power, but it doesn't need to.

Just step away from the distractions and find the quiet that inspires you to connect with your deepest wisdom. For some of us, it's as simple as a walk in the woods

or gazing at the stars. Your kids benefit from quiet time in nature too. We all need to reconnect regularly with the miracles that make life worth living.

**Any one of these ten strategies will change your life. But you can only take on one thing at once. Which one thing will you tackle first?**

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**List the first steps you need to take to begin. Circle what you will do today. Put the other steps on your calendar.**

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## Let's Get Physical:

### 15 Easy Exercise Ideas for Parents and Kids

*"Don't look at it as exercise — instead, play games and have a ton of fun! The main thing is just to get outside every day and do something you think is fun. You can play sports like soccer, basketball, or badminton. You can play games like freeze tag or ride a bike or do running races with your friends or family. You can go on hikes with your family or go swimming or paddling. Do lots of different things, and again, focus on having fun, and doing it often." – Leo Babauta*

You're a parent, so you don't have time to exercise, right? I can relate. But moving our bodies is a basic part of self-care. We can't nurture our kids with



emotional generosity unless we nurture ourselves at the same time. And we aren't fully nurturing ourselves unless we figure out a way to get physical.

We all feel a lot more energetic when we move and stretch. It changes the chemistry of our bodies so we're happier, more relaxed, and our

bodies are healthier. We not only look better, we feel better -- and so we "act" better as parents. Exercise is the best stress reducer there is, after deep breathing and getting enough sleep. What more incentive do you need?

If you can motivate yourself to go out running, or to the gym, and you can leave the kids with your partner or trade off with a friend, you've got it covered. But if you're like the rest of us, you need to find fun ways to be active while you're WITH your children. Luckily, you have children to be active with, so you have a head start!

Kids love it when you play physically with them. It's a terrific way to add some connection and fun back into a relationship that too often deteriorates into correction and conflict. You don't need to tell your kids this exercising is for you --

they'll assume it's special family time! And if your child is spending too much time staring at screens, this is the best way to get her up and moving.

The secret is setting aside the time. Even ten minutes a day outside together is a great start during the week. On the weekend, you can plan an outing. Before you know it, you'll have worked up to 20 minutes daily, with an hour on weekend days. Sure, you'll skip some days. But if that's more exercise than you're getting now, read on.

Simply put your "Let's Get Physical" time on the calendar. Then, choose a fun activity that requires physical exertion. When you find something you love doing, do more of it. Soon you'll have a whole repertoire of family physical activity that makes you happy.

For instance:

- Put on music and dance with your family.
- Use your little one as a football; run her around the rest of the family into the end zone. Your kids will love it.
- Take a soccer ball outside and take turns chasing each other as you dribble the ball. Kids love the soccer practice.
- Play tag or frisbee with your children.
- Join your kids on the monkey bars. Great upper body workout! Who cares what the other parents think?
- When you're confined to the house, play "Take off each others' socks," wrestling, or chase games. (Anything that gets your kids laughing. That's a huge bonus, because you're helping them evaporate any anxieties they're carrying around.)
- Take turns being the leader and have the rest of the family follow, doing jumping jacks, sun salutations, situps, or invented moves.
- Keep any bubble wrap that comes your way in a bag at the back of your closet. On a rainy day, pull it out for a Bubble-Wrap dance party!
- Get work-out DVDs from the library, or watch on YouTube, and exercise with your kids.

For outings:

- Load the kids into the car and drive to the track at your local high school in the evening or on the weekend when it's empty. Let the kids ride their trikes or bikes around the track, while you walk or jog.

- Join the local Y or pool so you can swim all year. Just put floaties or other floatation wear on your child, hold him in one arm on your hip, and swim with the other arm for a terrific workout.
- “Baby & Me” yoga classes will help you keep good form while you get your stretch on.
- Listen to your favorite podcasts while you walk briskly with your little one in a carrier or stroller.
- Take family pride in how far you can park from your destination and walk. ("Is this a two block day? Let's go for it!")
- Let your exercise time double as social time by walking with a friend and her child; the kids will entertain each other.
- Chasing your toddler all over the playground? Instead of resenting it, get a pedometer, and work up to 10,000 steps a day.
- If your child is old enough, bike or roller blade together. One dad I know took up skate boarding with his 10 year old.
- Want to get an older child moving? Do a charity run together.

When you're working outside the home:

- Walk or bike to work (If it takes an extra 15 minutes each way, that's a small price to pay for so much exercise.)
- Use the stairs instead of the elevator at work.
- Walk around your office while you're on the phone. Use a pedometer and keep trying to increase your daily steps.
- Stand up to work whenever possible.

You won't believe how much ten minutes of movement daily will lift your mood. And when we feel good, it has an almost magical effect on our children. We have a lighter touch, and a sense of humor. We don't get triggered as easily. All of which makes our kids happier and more cooperative. So think of this as "we" time-- bonding time with your family that gives you huge collateral benefits.

You're also getting your child hooked on an active lifestyle, which is a great counter-balance to all that screen-time in our lives. Kids who are physically active into the preteen and teen years are 75% less likely to be overweight when they're grown.

If you do this every single day, you'll all start looking forward to it. Way to nurture yourself and your child at the same time!

**How can you make being physical part of your daily life – even with kids?**

**Print out this list and put it up on your refrigerator, where you'll see it daily, and can add to it.**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_

**What can you do to move your body more, when you don't have kids in tow?**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

## 5 Ways To Nurture Yourself while Nurturing Your Child

*"Usually our ideas of self-care are something you do, child-free, to care for yourself. But what if this form of self-care isn't possible? Self care can be as simple as taking deep breaths while you are sitting with a screaming child. Having a cup of tea while you read your child a book... I really like this idea of self-care because it doesn't make having kids and self-care mutually exclusive. I do go out to dance classes and yoga on my own, but when I can't or don't, I crank the music loud at home and do my own dance class." – Deborah Purcell*



The #1 Resolution of parents everywhere? Be more patient. But having to summon up your patience is a signal that your cup is already dangerously empty. Will-power only takes us so far. The real job is keeping your cup full so you can handle the inevitable little disasters of daily life, when your child falls off the swing or poops on the floor or bashes his brother.

Self-care is essential not only to remain patient, but also to experience the joy and delight that is present -- not always noticed -- in every day with our children, even the tough ones (days and kids!).

Children love our joyful presence. They respond by becoming happier and more cooperative. By contrast, when we're stressed, children feel like it must be their fault, and assume they're not good enough. They get anxious, or defiant.

No matter what our child does, it's our response that determines the weather in our home. If you're finding yourself frequently resentful, depleted or exhausted, if your mind chatter often includes negative thoughts about your child, or if you're yelling at your child on a regular basis, you may be suffering from what I call SAP Disorder -- Sacrificing yourself on the Altar of Parenthood.

That's when we forget to give ourselves the loving attention we need. It isn't good for us to feel deprived. It kills our natural joy. And it isn't good for our kids, who end up with a resentful, negative, impatient parent. (Guess whether that helps them behave better.)

Does that mean you should tell your child she can forget about getting her needs met, that it's about time your needs came first? No, of course not. Parenting is about nurturing your child, which means noticing what she needs and trying to make sure she gets it.

But we can only be the parents we want to be if we learn how to parent ourselves. So monitoring our own moods, and returning ourselves to a state of feeling good -- or at least calm -- is one of the most important responsibilities of parenting.

That can seem impossible, when at any given moment there are so many demands on your time. The solution is to tend to ourselves as well as we can each moment of the day, just as we do our child. To honor both our needs and theirs. How?

**1. Make it a habit to tune into yourself as often as possible throughout your**



**day.** Just take a deep breath and let it flood your body with well-being. Breathe in calm, breathe out stress. Imagine you're breathing into your heart. Noticing your breath helps you be more present with yourself, an essential form of "attention" that we all need. Every time you tap into that conscious attention, you're taking over from the subconscious patterns that autopilot us most of the time, which lessens their hold on you. That means you're less likely to get hijacked by big emotions.

**2. Every time you notice you're getting resentful or irritable, stop.** Ask yourself "*What do I need right now to stay in balance?*" Then, give it to yourself - whether your child is there or not. (*Five minutes to sit on the back steps and listen*

*to the birds? A glass of water? Five minutes of dancing?) If you can't do it right now, make a date with yourself for later. (A bath after the kids go to bed. Trading shoulder massages with your partner. More sleep tonight.)*

**3. Notice the challenging times of day and find ways to nurture yourself through them.** It's your life, and you're in charge, whether it feels that way or not. Letting yourself feel victimized doesn't help your kids. For example, does bedtime drive you crazy? Make a plan to make it better, whether that's sharing more responsibility with your partner, starting earlier, posting a schedule with photos that you make with your kids, getting more sleep yourself, or enjoying a cup of tea while you read to your child.

**4. Consciously parent yourself.** Did you know that it's your job to be your own parent? If you're old enough to have a child yourself, your parents are off the hook. It's your responsibility now. Talk to yourself like someone you love. Nurture yourself through the hard times. Acknowledge all your efforts in the right direction. No, you're not perfect. You don't need to be. You deserve all the tenderness you would shower on a newborn baby. Giving that love to yourself will open your heart – and transform your parenting. There is nothing more healing.

**5. Be more present and don't postpone joy.** Soak in the beauty and happiness of every moment you can. Stop rushing and revel in your child's laughter, the sweet smell of his hair, her joy in mastering something new. "Smelling the roses" is what makes parenting worth all the headaches. It replenishes your spirit. It inspires your children to connect and cooperate. And it cures SAP disorder.

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**Set your phone to go off every hour. When it goes off, check in with yourself. Ask "What do I need right now?" What did you learn from this exercise?**

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## As Simple As Breathing

*"Make a habit of bringing your awareness to your breathing frequently throughout your day. Our breath connects us to feelings of peace and contentment. Take a minute to deepen your breath from shallow, tense chest breathing to relaxed, deep belly breathing. When you feel totally overwhelmed, stop whatever you're doing, close your eyes if possible, take three deep breaths, and let your body and mind relax." -- Jan Marie Dore*



We all know that it's those times when we're stressed that we're more likely to snap at our child. It's impossible to be emotionally generous when we're tense. That's because we're already half-way to fight, flight or freeze, so any childish behavior pushes us over the edge. But life with children will always include childish behavior,

and life in the modern age is full of triggers that make us stressed.

Of course, those triggers, be they tantrums or traffic jams, don't actually make us tense. We make ourselves tense in response to them. It's a choice. It may be hard to believe, but it's entirely possible to breathe deeply and feel at peace during a traffic jam -- or even a tantrum.

The easiest way to remind yourself to let go of tension is to breathe. Just breathe. Noticing our breathing brings us back into our body, back into the present moment, back into balance. Wise teachers through the ages have observed that the moment between perception and action is where we have the choice not to get hijacked by our automatic emotional response. That pause to breathe gives us a choice about how we respond.

In fact, if you want to change your relationship with your child, this is one of the most powerful levers you can pull.

When you start to lash out, for any reason, just Stop. Drop your agenda (just for the moment.) Breathe. If you can calm yourself down before you respond to your child, you'll find that the entire interaction is different. Soon, you'll find that your relationship with your child has been completely transformed.



Today, I encourage you to stop and breathe throughout your day. Every time you're upset. When you find yourself in traffic. When anyone in your house begins a meltdown. (Especially you.)

Sometimes when we bring more mindfulness to our bodies, we begin to release stored-up tears. If this happens for you, welcome those tears. You're bringing more spaciousness to your life by healing those old hurt places.

Breathing seems so simple that you may find it hard to believe its power. But as Sam I Am said about Green Eggs and Ham, *"Try it, try it, and you may!"*

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**Try this. Put up stickies all over your house and on the dashboard of your car. Whenever you notice one of these stickies, stop whatever you're doing and take three deep breaths. Notice how you feel before and after those breaths. What changed?**

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## 5 Steps to Get Re-energized

*“There is a vitality, a life-force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and be lost.” -- Martha Graham*



Raising a child takes so much out of us that we often sacrifice most everything else that's important to us. But if we don't stay connected to what keeps us energized, we run dry.

What lights your fire? Maybe you're passionate about painting, or you go crazy if you can't garden. Maybe you need to be around other adults for at least part of every day so you can talk about politics or parenting theory instead of legos and lollipops. Maybe you crave silence and stillness.

It may seem impossible, while you're parenting, to find time for your personal passions. And it's true that most of us don't get the privilege of spending most of our time on those passions while our children are small. Kids require a lot of our time. And there's always that small matter of putting dinner on the table.

But on the other hand, parenting is a marathon, not a sprint. We need to find ways to re-energize ourselves along the way. One sure-fire way to re-energize

is to tap into the passions that fuel you on a deeper level. Here's how.

**1. What energizes you?** If you don't know, sit quietly and ask yourself *“What would inspire or energize me right now?”* Then listen for the answers. Watch for

them as you go through your day. Jot them down on a list -- "**What energizes Me.**" Don't be surprised if what you're drawn to as energizing is very simple. It may be that right now the grand passions you once had sound exhausting, and what would inspire you is a hot bath with no one touching you, or sitting in the sun for ten minutes in silence. That's fine. Listen to what your soul needs now, today. That may well be different next week. Just start where you are and write what comes to you.

Then consider each item on your list. How can you work this into your life, even in small ways? Schedule it. Do it! Appreciate it, even the very small steps!

Watch what you need change over time, as you attend to yourself.

**2. Start small.** Is there a way to tap into whatever makes you passionate, even while your child is young? Maybe you can't write the great American novel this year, but can you write a little in a journal every day while he naps, just to enjoy the act of writing? Maybe you can't perform at a nightclub on a regular basis, but can you practice once a month with other musicians? Maybe you can't start a restaurant yet, but can you incorporate your passion for food into life with your children by cooking together? Or maybe now that you're a parent, what you're really passionate about is supporting parents. Your life as a parenting coach may be a few years away, but is there a forum or babywearing group you could participate in?

**3. Go for process, not product.** The point isn't adding something to your list, but replenishing yourself. So forget about being productive; enjoy the creativity, discovery, and communing with your deepest inspiration that gets your juices flowing and connects you to something deeper and more vast. For today, start by tapping into that deep reservoir of creativity that replenishes you. Maybe that just means sitting in silence in nature. Soak it in. Listen to the song your heart sings when it's full. Over time, just follow where that song takes you.

**4. Create the healthy habits that will energize you.** In addition to whatever lights your fire, think about what healthy habits would energize your body, mind, and soul. How can you work those into an already-overflowing life? The only easy answer is to make them part of your routine. If you have to remember to take your vitamins, you won't do it most of the time. If you take them with breakfast every morning, you'll do it automatically. If you crave time to write in your journal, how about making that a routine while your child does homework, or while you're nursing the baby?

**5. Work what energizes you into your life.** Schedule in a tiny bit of what

energizes you, every single day. You may have to let other things drop off your list. That's ok. You'll have more energy to tackle the laundry on the weekend, for instance, if you keep yourself inspired daily.

You'll be amazed at the power of allowing yourself to live more fully. The Aha! moment is that balancing your needs with your child's by keeping yourself energized also makes you a better parent!

This works best in small steps. You don't have to be able to see the end of the path, just to take the next small step. **What small step can you take today?**

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**What energizes you?**

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**What can you do to work that into your life?**

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## If You Don't Feed Your Hungry Heart, How Can You Feed Your Kids?

*Everybody's got a hungry heart." - Bruce Springsteen*

*"We don't talk enough about how not having a tribe affects us as parents.... I have the fervent hope that we start talking about the exhaustion, need for community and help that we parents need." - Jennifer*



Parents carry the heavy burden for society of raising the next generation of human beings. The problem is, in our modern culture they carry it with very little social support. I know you feel a fountain of love for your child, but you can't keep all that love flowing if you don't get some love yourself. And it isn't appropriate for children to take care of parents

emotionally. We all need connection and affection from other adults, and without that supply of love, we end up with hungry hearts.

That's not good for you. It's not what you want to model for your child. And you having a hungry heart just makes you resentful or needy toward your child. (Guess if that makes him behave better.)

Kids can't, and shouldn't, meet all our needs for connection. Every parent needs to find ways to connect in mutually nurturing adult relationships.

While it's true that meeting the needs of our children can take all of our time, there is always a way to savor adult connection. How?

**1. Take a walk with your partner or friend**, carrying your little one in a sling, pushing the stroller, or letting the little ones kick a ball or play tag along the way. How about every evening at sunset? Agree in advance to make this quality time by

setting aside ten minutes for each of you to really listen to each other without taking anything that's said personally, or trying to solve anything. Just keep breathing deeply to "be" with your loved one, whatever he or she is saying, and say "*I hear you.*"

**2. Hire a young mother's helper** to play with your child every Friday evening so you and your partner can have a picnic dinner in the bedroom. Lock the door.

**3. Trade babysitting with a friend** so each of you gets time off each week. Use that time to have a festive lunch with your partner, get a manicure with a friend, or find intellectual connection by enrolling in a class at the local community college. Or -- here's a radical idea -- just take a nap!

**4. Find a "listening partner."** This idea, originally pioneered by the folks at HandinHandParenting.org, is that you make a standing date to connect, usually by phone, with another parent. This gives you a safe place and a nonjudgmental, non-problem-solving partner so you can take turns exploring your issues with your child and releasing your own emotions. It's fine to "vent" but make sure to pause and welcome the tears and fears that are lurking behind the anger. Once you feel those more vulnerable emotions, they evaporate -- and so does the anger.

**5. Let more love in.** Life is too short for you to be stressing over a bad relationship. If you're feeling stressed about your relationship with your partner, make working things out a priority. While it's true that some relationships have no future, it's also true that we take our baggage with us to the next partner. Why not schedule an appointment for couples counseling, or get your hands on my audio "[I've Got Your Back](#)"?

**6. Join or start a regular playgroup with like-minded parents** so you can connect while little ones play. You don't have to agree about everything to find this helpful.

**7. Get out of the house.** The job description of young children is to explore and take things apart to see how they work. If you stay home with them, they'll tear your house apart. Be sure to get out daily, even if you can't get them out of pajamas. You won't have deep discussions with other adults with your kids in tow, but at least you can make small adult connections at the park or library or hardware store.

**8. If you work outside the home,** make it a point to connect with your colleagues a bit. It will make your worklife more rewarding and can be a happy antidote to feeling like all you do is meet customer needs by day and children's needs at night.

**9. Join an online forum**, like the one that's part of my [Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids Online Course](#). You'll still be discussing parenting, but getting support from other parents who aspire to conscious parenting can make all the difference in the world in how connected and supported you feel.

**10. Prioritize love.** Every day, make sure you have a juicy connection with another adult. Call a friend or sibling. Write a letter of gratitude to someone who mentored you. Be sure your romantic partner knows how much love and appreciation you feel for him or her.

Anything that nurtures you and keeps your heart open gives you more love to share. As four wise men once said, *"The love you take is equal to the love you make...All you (really) need is love."*

**List three things you can do this week to support yourself by connecting with other adults. What is your plan to do them?**

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## Want to Feel More Alive?

### Take the Stone Out of Your Shoe

*If you have the time to whine and complain about something then you have the time to do something about it." -- Anthony J. D'Angelo*

Our body sends us constant signals about what's not working in our lives. Often, we ignore that information. We smother it with our little addictions to make ourselves feel better (comfort food, facebooking, shopping, lattes.) But that's like having a blinking light on the dashboard of your car and responding by pulling the wires out so the light stops blinking. It isn't exactly sustainable. Your car will eventually break down.

You can't be emotionally generous toward your child when your energy is being sapped by things that make you anxious or weigh you down. That stone in your shoe may seem small, but it's wearing you down, hobbling your full aliveness -- and your relationship with your child.

What if you just paid attention to those little annoyances, and addressed them? Even if each one takes a week or a month to clear up, think how much better your life will be in a few months.

How do you know what you need to clear up? If it makes you feel bad inside, or "act bad" outside, it's draining you. For instance, if you frequently find yourself in a bad mood at the same time of day, find a way to change what happens. Listen to the message your gut is sending you. Can you respond by caring for yourself, while being respectful of others? This might mean you:

- Start the bedtime routine half an hour earlier so you can stay more patient.
- Have your partner or friend take the kids all Saturday afternoon so you can finally tackle a project that you've been putting off, like making your way through that pile of bills and paperwork. (Be sure to approach the pile with gratitude so you can zoom through it.)
- Change your mornings so everyone leaves the house in a good mood. (Wondering how? [Here are some ideas.](#))
- Change your routine so you aren't keeping playground company with a parent whose approach bothers you.
- Stop fighting with your child about a particular issue and work out a win/win solution that meets your needs -- and his.

If you're like most parents, you have a long list of things that are sapping your energy. Why not pick one, and make a plan to make it better? Just take it one step at a time, and cheer yourself on.

Every time you resolve a long-standing problem, throw something away, cross something off your list, or remove a negative influence, you're casting off a burden. That gives you more energy to do what's really important, whether that's staying patient with your child or nurturing yourself. You won't have as many breakdowns in your life. And you'll probably find you feel a whole lot more alive.

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**What one thing is really bothering you? If more than one comes up strongly, list all of them. Then circle the one you're ready to tackle now.**

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**Acknowledge that this is not an easy fix, or you would have already fixed it! List three steps you can take to move toward a solution.**

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2. \_\_\_\_\_

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3. \_\_\_\_\_

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## How to Transform What's Draining You

*"Looked at from a spiritual standpoint, our discomfort in any given situation provides a signal that we are out of alignment with spiritual law and are being given an opportunity to heal something." -- Colin C. Tipping*

In the last section, we talked about getting rid of what drains you so you feel more energetic and alive. But what if you've found a whole list of things you don't like and can't eliminate? Maybe, for instance, your children—or at least some of their behavior!

Kids aren't "perfect" any more than we are. Your baby resists diaper changes, your two year old runs away from you in the park, your three year old only likes white food, your four year old shrieks when there's a tag in her clothing, your five year old wets the bed....And we haven't even started with your finances, body, or love life. How can you "feel good" when life has so many obstacles?

The bad news is, life is not perfect. Sure, there are transcendent moments, but most of the time, our days are filled with small hurdles. The good news is, you get stronger and learn invaluable lessons from overcoming those hurdles. Life, especially life with children, transforms us for the better, if we let it.

The even better news is, life doesn't have to be perfect to be perfectly wonderful. The secret is in your attitude. If you don't like that and want to fight with life, be my guest. There are certainly times when each of us needs to rant about the unfairness of it all. But there's wisdom in accepting things we cannot change. And there's growth in finding ways to appreciate what's good about where we find ourselves.

Life is too short to spend it armored with resistance. Even if you want to change something, you'll be more effective from your centered, loving self than from your irritated, fearful self.



The paradox is that when you can find a way to more love, how you experience the situation will change. In fact, sometimes that change in ourselves makes us so much happier that we might look back in gratitude at the difficult circumstance that spurred us to change. (Really!) Here's how.

### **1. What do you find unpleasant?**

Do you find it excruciating to take your child to the playground and push the swing? Find a way to make it fun for yourself. Connect more with your child, or use it as a sort of moving meditation. Do you find diaper changing unpleasant? Use this time to look into your baby's eyes and tell her how adored she is. Or just stop fighting with your toddler and change his diaper standing up.

**2. Notice the times each day that stress you.** (Bedtime? Getting out of the house in the morning?) Write out a routine for that time of day that works for both you and your child. Post it, complete with photos for your child. Keep refining it until you can enjoy it stress-free. Make sure you include something you LOVE doing, whether that's the bedtime snuggle or a family hug/blessing in the morning before you head out the door.

**3. Accept "faults" as foibles by cultivating a sense of humor and affection** about them. Research shows that couples who have been happily married for a long time have learned to see each other's faults as endearing traits. What would it take for you to accept your child's challenging behavior as just another endearing part of this wonderful small person you love so much? For example, you could see your child as stubborn, or you could appreciate that he never gives up, and learn to work with that. Cultivate a sense of humor, an awareness that she's still growing and changing, a commitment to seeing things from her point of view, and an appreciation that weaknesses are the flip side of our strengths.

**4. Redefine Productivity.** Become a recovering perfectionist. Perfectionism doesn't make you closer to perfect. It just lessens the love you feel, the love you give, and the love you inspire in others. If you try to "do it all," what matters most will probably fall off your list. Most of what's on your to-do list won't matter next year, or even next month. But those moments that make your heart melt with your child will matter for the rest of her life, more than you can imagine. Move them to the top of your to-do list, let go of your self-judgment, and learn to say No to lesser things.

**5. Find the silver lining.** Does your son do well at school all day but get ornery or melt down when you pick him up? He feels safe enough to bring all his pent-up emotions to you for healing at the end of the day, and he's learning how to handle

his emotions in a healthy way from your empathy. Is your daughter strong-willed? You won't have to worry about peer pressure! There is always something to be grateful for, even in the hardest times.

The real silver lining is that you're lucky enough to have this emerging human entrusted to your loving care, and every time you act with love you're stretching your own heart to let more love in. Ultimately, loving our children is what heals us. And that's what transforms everything.

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**Can you reframe one thing that is really bothering you? State that one thing.**

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**Now, reframe it. Is there a way this could be a good thing, or a good thing could come out of this?**

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**Is it possible for you to use your sense of humor and gratitude to see this differently in the moment? What mantra could you use?**

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## The Secret of the Full Cup

*"Dr. Laura, I know I can't raise healthy kids if I'm always flying off the handle, but do you have any tips on staying centered with two kids? I just don't have time to do the things I used to do to take care of myself, like going to the gym. I'm so tired all the time!" - Emily*

*"Dr. Laura, I'm great with my kids on vacation. But most of the time at home, I'm just so stressed out, my default is yelling!" - David*



These comments sparked the ebook you've just read.

I hope this ebook has inspired you to notice your own needs and take better care of yourself. I'm not suggesting that you binge on cookies or go on vacation without your children. The bottom line in parenting is that our kids depend on us to regulate them emotionally, which means we have an obligation to regulate ourselves emotionally. If a cookie will help you do that, by all means, go ahead. But my hope for you is much more profound.

My hope is that you'll find habits that support you in staying more peaceful and centered. If you can use your love for your child as your motivation to do the hard work of learning to regulate your own emotions and moods, you'll be giving your child a

tremendous gift. But the gift to yourself will be even greater, because you'll end up happier and more emotionally healthy.

The bottom line is that once we're old enough to have kids, we're responsible for

who we've become. If we had a rocky start or a bad hand of cards, it's up to us to find a way to heal those wounds and play the heck out of that hand. The only way to do that is to love ourselves unconditionally.

Not easy, right? In fact, it's the most creative work there is: Opening the door to let love in, where there wasn't any before. I personally believe that work is our purpose here.

Just like our children, we can only "act good" when we feel good inside. And while cookies and bubble baths have their place, what we really need is something much deeper: an internal "parent" to love us unconditionally so that we can discover our own unshakable inner happiness. That's the biggest secret of keeping our cup full.

And that is my wish for you: That you find a way to offer yourself all the love and nurturing you so deeply deserve. There is no reason to wait. There is nothing that has to change for you to love yourself deeply. I know you have faults and have made mistakes -- join the club. That's why it's called unconditional love!

If you take nothing else from this book, please seize this Aha! Moment. YOU are more than enough, exactly as you are.

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**Go back through this workbook and review your notes. What are your most important take-aways? What will you do differently?**

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Dr. Laura Markham trained as a Clinical Psychologist, earning her PhD from Columbia University. But she's also a mom, so she translates proven science into the practical solutions you need for the family life you want.

Dr. Laura is the author of the books **Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids: *How to Stop Yelling and Start Connecting*** and **Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings: *How to Stop the Fighting and Raise Friends for Life***, which continue to rack up five star reviews on Amazon, as parents attest to the power of her relationship-based approach. She is the mother of two young adults, who are proponents of peaceful parenting and her biggest fans!

The founding editor of [AhaParenting.com](http://AhaParenting.com), Dr. Laura also serves as a parenting expert for Psychology Today, The Natural Parent Magazine, Mothering.com, Pregnancy.org, Girlie Girl Army, SheKnows.com, and several other websites. She makes frequent TV and radio appearances and has been interviewed for hundreds of articles by publications as diverse as The Wall Street Journal, Real Simple, Newsday, Men's Health, Redbook and Parents Magazine.

Dr. Laura's relationship-based parenting model has helped thousands of families across the U.S. and Canada find compassionate, common-sense solutions to everything from separation anxiety and sleep problems to sass talk and cell phones. Join over 100,000 other parents in receiving parenting tips from Dr. Laura right in your email in box, by signing up for free on any page at <http://AhaParenting.com>.