

## Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids Online Course

### Week 10: Healing your own triggers

#### Transcript

Hello, and welcome to Week 10 of the **Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids** Online Course. This is Dr. Laura Markham, and this week, we're talking about healing your own triggers.

What's a trigger? It's when a button gets pushed and something happens. We think of triggers as being triggers on a gun. You pull the trigger, and it causes the gun to fire.

With emotions we say, "I was triggered." By that, we mean that all these emotions deluged us, and we were overwhelmed by them, and maybe even that we took action. Just like the trigger in the gun is actually causing the gun to explode, maybe we even exploded, but at least we felt a lot of emotions internally.

You may also have heard the term "trigger warning." That's just a warning that we give to say that experiencing this audio, for instance, could bring up feelings that are very upsetting to you if you have those locked away in your emotional backpack.

Consider this a trigger warning. In this audio, we're going to talk more generally about how triggers work and how you can deactivate them. We'll talk about some specific triggers, like shame. The homework does ask you about your childhood experiences with your parents. If you had a hard childhood, that will probably bring up intense feelings.

How deeply you want to go into your childhood is completely your choice. But if you know that you do have traumatic experiences from your childhood, just be aware that as you experience this audio, it may make you think about your childhood—and that could be hard for you. Now, that doesn't mean you won't want to listen to the audio; it means you'll want to make sure you have support, so if it is hard for you, you can reach out to those sources of support.

Another way to think about the work in this week's audio is that it's about your growing edge. We all have a growing edge. It's whatever we're working on at the time, whatever's up for us.

Yes, it may be that you're emptying your emotional backpack, and there's stuff there from your childhood that you're just realizing. In this course – the **Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids** Course – those issues will arise, and by now, in week 10, you're probably noticing some of that baggage that you've been carrying around.

Writer Lu Hanessian says, “Unpack your bags, so your children don’t have to carry them.” That’s part of how I see the work this week. We’re looking at our old triggers. We’re trying to prevent old emotions from creating new problems with our children.

When we have children, you can count on all the areas where we are not fully healed to come up to get healed. It’s absolutely true. After looking at the relationships between thousands of parents and children, I’ve found that parents always end up working on their own baggage that they had not done until now, because their child somehow pushes those buttons.

Not all emotions that you feel are your buttons getting pushed. It’s healthy to respond with spontaneous authentic emotion to the experiences of our life. But what isn’t healthy is when our emotions overwhelm our ability to think well. That’s one of the hallmarks of being triggered emotionally.

There are three hallmarks. One is that we’re over reacting. Whatever happened that is triggering our reaction is too mild to justify how big our reaction is. Our three-year-old is defiant, and we feel like we had better crack down *now*, which is really disproportionate as a response. That’s the first hallmark. We respond more intensely. We overreact compared to what the situation actually warrants. Of course, when we’re in that moment, we don’t see it that way.

But that leads us to the second hallmark. When we think about it later, we realize that things look different. At the time, we thought it was an emergency, but looking back on it, it wasn’t an emergency. That’s the second hallmark that we were in fact triggered. Again, you can really only see it after the fact.

The third hallmark of being triggered is that we can’t think straight. We get hijacked by the emotion. Our emotions take over and our prefrontal cortex, the executive function of the brain, is no longer in charge.

That gives us the answer to a question you may already be asking, which is “What causes triggers? Why do I get triggered?” The clue is that the thinking part of the brain is no longer in charge. That’s the clue that the unconscious is in charge, that there’s some experience that has never really been integrated into the fabric of our understanding of ourselves and our lives, some experience we haven’t completely come to terms with, that we don’t own, that we don’t see as part of our lives.

Because that experience isn’t integrated, because it’s shut away from consciousness, because we haven’t come to terms with it, it isn’t under conscious control. So the mind can’t actually modulate how we interpret that experience, can’t warn us that it’s really not still an emergency—because it may be a very old memory that is still with us, but not fully integrated.

How does that happen? How could that happen? There are a couple of ways. First, in our early years, the brain doesn't make memories the way it does later, using the hippocampus. The memories seem to be recorded almost like a tape recorder so that two-year-olds and even three-year-olds—and certainly one-year-olds and babies—are recording what happens to them, and just taking it in, without really sifting through to see what might be true and what's not true.

The thinking brain is not yet really thinking. There's not a lot of frontal cortex there, so it's not actually evaluating the experience. So whatever happens to us in the first couple of years of life precedes rational thought, and precedes our ability to verbalize and therefore make sense of things rationally.

Those memories are mostly not integrated, which basically means that the verbal part of the brain has never had a chance to sift through those memories, tell the story about them, understand it verbally, and therefore, they're irrational, they're unconscious. They're not under the conscious control of the mind. Therefore, if something triggers them, they just can take over without us really understanding what's happening. We don't even know why we're reacting so strongly to something.

There's another reason that memories or experiences or emotional feelings could be not yet integrated, and that's when things have happened to us in our childhoods – or really any time – that were too upsetting to us at the time, and we could not make sense of them, or we would not let ourselves experience them, because they were terrifying to us.

If we had a terrible experience with our parent, we might well not have been able to make sense of it, and we might have just tried to push it out of awareness. When something is pushed out of awareness, it's no longer under conscious control, and guess what? It can pop out without any conscious control, and later, when we look back, we'll think, "What was I thinking?" The answer was we weren't thinking; we were triggered.

You'll recognize what I'm describing here as the emotional backpack, where if we had a feeling, for instance, of abandonment when a parent died and it was just too much to handle, we actually felt like we might die ourselves if we actually let ourselves experience that huge loss, so we tried to push those feelings out of awareness – let's say – and they are unintegrated. But they become a trigger for us because the feelings are still there but no longer under conscious control. As the years go by and we work through things that happen to us, we're not really working through those feelings because they're stuffed away.

Let's think of it as a dark basement. Every one of us has a basement where we've put some things we don't want to look at. When we go down, it will feel very scary to us because it's dark down there and we know the stuff that's in there is there because it was too scary to deal with.

So, pretty scary to go in there, not comfortable at all, would take great courage to do, and none of us want to do it.

But here's the amazing thing. If you go into that basement, you'll see that as you shine your light on things that were pretty scary, they turn out to be nothing. In fact, you think something is a horrible monster that could destroy you and you shine your light on it, and it's just a shadow. As you shine your light, it just melts away, the way shadows do. They vanish in the light.

Of course, without a light, that dark basement filled with old terrifying things would still be pretty scary, so you're probably wondering, "What's my light? What light am I carrying now?" The answer is your conscious attention. Simply bringing your conscious attention to your emotional backpack and even to those old non-verbal memories from when you were a baby, simply bringing your attention to those experiences melts them away, because—remember—that's how emotion works.

Once we pay attention, once we bring our witnessing self, we've gotten the message that the emotions were trying to bring to us. Once we bring our inner witness and we experience the emotions, they do begin to melt away, and that's true even for those scary things in our backpack or in our dark basements.

You may wonder, "Those experiences when I was a baby, I can't possibly remember those." That's true. But here's the thing. You don't need to. You just notice the sensations in your body, and who knows where they came from. Maybe they're from last week; maybe they're from when you were six months old. It doesn't matter. Once you feel them, they begin to vanish.

Now, I'm making it sound simple. You just bring your conscious attention and the old feelings begin to go away. But those sensations can feel very strong. There can be pain that comes up in the body. Even when it's not pain, the emotions that we have locked away are locked away in the body. The body is the unconscious. Old emotions are experienced as sensations as they come up to be healed. They're experienced as sensations in the body, which are often experienced as pain.

I myself had an experience at a meditation retreat where I actually wondered if I was having a heart attack. That's how much it hurt in my heart. The pain in my heart was so severe that I thought, "Well, I have low blood pressure. I have had no problems with heart disease at all. There's no history of heart disease in my entire family. I know that I'm not having a heart attack, and yet, how could I be feeling this extreme pain in my heart?"

I sat with it. I breathed into it. I just breathed. I noticed the pain. When it got too intense, I would go back to my breath. But mostly I was able – I found – to just sit with the pain, and as I

experienced it, it changed. It became intense in different places. It was sharp, it was dull, and then it began to diminish.

I walked out of that meditation feeling lighter and freer. I have no idea what it was that I was experiencing. I had no words for it. I don't know when it got there. But I will say there was a palpable difference afterwards in how I experienced myself and my life just because I was willing to sit with it.

As I keep saying, triggers are emotions, and emotions are recorded in the body as sensation, so we don't have to get into the story of what caused that trigger to be there. There certainly is a story for why my heart hurt that way, but I didn't know it at the time, and I don't actually even know now for sure what it was. You don't have to know it in order to do that work and clear that out. All I had to do was pay compassionate attention to the sensations in my body, and that cleared it out.

But triggers are associated with belief systems, perpetuated by belief systems, and reinforced by belief systems. An example of a belief system is "People always leave me." That could certainly account for a pain in the heart, right? That's a belief system that could guide our behavior from out of consciousness.

It's not really what I'm talking about as a trigger because we don't necessarily find ourselves losing control emotionally in response to it. But it does move us out of our thinking mind and into some place where our behavior is being governed by the unconscious. We might find ourselves sabotaging relationships, for instance. If we think that people will always leave us, let's not get too close.

You can see how belief systems are an important reinforcer of our triggers. If you have a belief that children should never be rude to parents, obviously, you'll have a big emotional reaction that will be a trigger for you if your child is rude to you. Becoming aware of the belief systems that control your behavior from out of consciousness is important work, and again, when you notice those beliefs, often you look at them and say, "Wow. I wouldn't conclude that today. That's not a belief I want controlling me." But until you do that, while it's still in the unconscious, it will continue to run your behavior.

Obviously, today in this one audio, we're not going to heal all of the triggers that you're carrying with you, all of the belief systems that operate from outside consciousness that cause you to do things you later regret, or all of the emotions that burst out unmodulated because they're out of conscious control. But what we CAN do is help you begin to notice what those things are in your life—and also, more important, give you some tools so that when they do come up, you can work with them.

Remember every time you notice your experience and you shine the light of conscious awareness on it, the feeling begins to melt away. It stops controlling you. Having the tool to be able to notice when the emotion is happening and work with it is the key to beginning to empty your emotional backpack.

I'm often asked whether you can ever finish emptying your emotional backpack. I think of this as an onion. You're peeling the layers of the onion. There will be tears. You just keep peeling. Over time, the onion gets smaller and smaller, so there are a lot fewer bumps in the road because it's just not so big, and you don't get triggered nearly as often. There are not nearly so many tears.

Does the onion ever go away entirely? There are people I greatly respect who say no, who say that it's just not realistic to think you could ever not be triggered, and maybe that's true. My own experience is that nobody triggers me anymore except my own mother, and I'd say that's pretty good because it means that at least the triggering is where it belongs, with the relationship that began it—and in the rest of my life I'm able to actually use my thinking brain and my heart to have the kinds of relationships and interactions I want!

Will I someday work through that so that even my own mother doesn't trigger me? Well, she triggers me a lot less than she used to, so maybe so. Maybe that's where we're all headed. I don't know if you ever get there, but I would say this. As you do this work, you'll find that you stop getting triggered at your children, or at least that you don't get hijacked by your emotions when your children push your buttons.

It's a tremendous amount of work to get to that point. Also, we all start from different places. It's like some of us begin the race and we have the perfect tennis shoes – we're running on air practically – and this time around, we got the body that allows us to run fast as the wind. Others of us show up for that race with heavy boots and backpacks on our back and a body that really was not built for speed, and we do the best we can. There's no comparison here.

I guess what I would say about peeling the onion is just do the work as it comes up. Here's your inbox. Whatever comes to your inbox, that's what you're supposed to be working on. That's the job you have. You don't look and say, "Oh. I have the wrong work here. Somebody else is supposed to do my work," or "Why can't I have their work?" Well, you may say, "Why can't I have their work?"

But the truth is we don't know why each one of us comes into life with the burdens we have. That's a question that I leave to the spiritual masters to answer. All I can say is that we do the work that we're given, and we do it as well as we can and as bravely as we can. As we do that,

we peel the onion, we get triggered less often, there are definitely fewer tears and fewer bumps in the road.

As you go, you'll see it. You'll see that things work so much better. Things that would have set you off a year ago, no longer set you off. You'll look back a year from now and you'll be amazed at how different it is. Will you still get triggered? Sure, but not like you do now.

Why do we work on our triggers? Because we become more aware of when we're most likely to get caught in negative patterns, and we start to build ideas for what we could do instead. We start to build in prevention for ourselves to support ourselves, so we don't get hijacked, just as we might build in support for our child so that they can master a new hurdle themselves or learn to regulate themselves better.

Let's actually look at a trigger that you have. Think about something your child does that drives you completely crazy. It shouldn't be too hard to find something your child does that drives you crazy. Consider what might give that behavior so much power. Why is it so upsetting to you?

Maybe, for instance, it really pushes your buttons when your child is defiant, and if you think about it, you realize that when you were little, if you were defiant, you would have been punished, maybe even hit.

Maybe what drives you crazy is when your son hits your daughter, and when you think about your own childhood, you realize that your big brother always beat you up, and your parents never intervened.

Maybe you always get upset at bedtime. Does that need to be a trigger? You're exhausted. We're all exhausted by the time we're putting our kids to bed. Does a trigger even need to be involved? Probably. Because otherwise, you might get annoyed at your child, but you wouldn't lose it, so there's some underlying belief there or some feeling that is getting triggered.

Maybe the underlying belief is that your needs don't matter, that they'll never get met, and by the end of the day, you're just so done meeting other people's needs and feeling that ache of all of those needs pressing against you that are not getting met.

Notice that when you're triggered by your child, your child is just pushing the button. Your child is not actually creating those feelings. If you're feeling disrespected or abused, those are old feelings.

A child cannot abuse you. A child is a child. It's our job to be the grownup and provide limits and a safe holding environment for their big feelings. If you're feeling abused by your child, I'm here to tell you those are old feelings that are being triggered by your child in the moment.

I know if your child hits you, it's very upsetting. But I submit to you that part of that is old upset, and it comes from earlier in life where somehow you were either hit or in some other way, maybe emotionally, you were abused.

If we can let ourselves feel all those old emotions – of how alone we felt, how hurt, how sad, how taken for granted – they no longer control us. We won't go into fight or flight with our child when our child behaves in a certain way. We'll be free to set limits in a reasonable way and guide our child with empathy. We'll actually be able to see our child's point of view.

Now, we're going to take that trigger that you've identified, and we're going to do two things with it. We're going to look at the emotions, and we're going to look at the belief system or the thoughts behind why you're getting triggered. If you're triggered, it's probably safe to say there is anger involved. When we feel threatened, usually there's anger.

Let's say that what's upsetting you about your child's behavior in this case is defiance. It makes you livid, and it just makes you want to slap your kid. Now, there's nothing wrong with anger. We're designed to get angry to protect ourselves. It's part of the fight, flight, or freeze response. Fight is literally fighting for our survival, and we get angry when we feel threatened in any way.

Obviously, your child being defiant does not threaten your survival. But on some level, it does. On some level, it communicates to you that there's a threat to your authority, and it's an emergency, and you go right into fight.

Often, there's a cascade of thoughts you don't even notice that are assumptions about the way the world should be and the way that your child should be – thoughts like, "She can't say that to me. I'll show you. We're going to nip this in the bud," and maybe other thoughts from your childhood, like, "Wow. When a child talks to a grown up that way, it's an emergency. Somebody's about to get hit," and you feel quite anxious.

Of course, now, even though you're in the parent role, you still feel quite anxious, and it brings out your inner child who will do anything to stop this emergency. Of course, since your child is creating the emergency with his or her defiance, you, at that moment, will do anything to shut your child up. You might really want to do something quite rash, quite physical that would really hurt your child and that you would be very sorry about later. But at that moment, you're enraged, and it feels like an emergency, so you lash out.

Now, because you're working on yourself and really reflecting on how your actions are linked to your feelings and your thoughts, you know how to manage those feelings. You know to stop, drop them, and breathe, to just notice what's going on for you, and to resist taking action, because any action that your fight response tells you to take will only lead to bigger problems.

This is working on your triggers 101, because every time you don't get hijacked by those feelings and you don't buy into "This is an emergency," you're building mental muscle – prefrontal cortex to be exact – that allows you to pause and not get hijacked in the future.

Every time you resist acting on the anger and instead breathe and notice it, you're bringing more awareness to that trigger, and you're emptying your backpack, so the trigger has less power over you.

You're actually building different neural wiring. You're decreasing the size of your amygdala – the alarm system in the brain – and increasing the size of your prefrontal cortex, which regulates you and helps you choose action that is in accordance with your values and your higher-level thought.

But here's an important point as we think about how to work on our triggers. Many parents respond to this information by biting their tongue and pushing the anger down inside, saying to themselves: "I'm not going to get angry here at this child." That just adds to the weight in your backpack.

You're not trying to stuff the feelings. You're not trying to repress them because you know better. You know that repressing emotion does not make them go away. You're already feeling rage at that moment. You can't just make it go away by telling it to.

The only thing that does is close off your awareness of it. When you do that, you're pushing it down in your backpack and you're putting it out of reach of your conscious mind, so you can no longer control it, and it will pop out again later in ways that you really are not happy about because you're not actually regulating yourself. You're just stuffing the emotion away – like in a closet – and it's going to come bursting out and flatten anything in its path if it's anger.

Luckily, there is something else that you can do to get rid of your anger. That something else, unfortunately, is to go through the anger. I say "unfortunately" because it's daunting. Who wants to feel that anger? "Ugh, ugh, ugh."

But when you begin to actually sit with your anger and let yourself feel the sensations in your body without getting stuck on the storyline of what a terrible child you have or what a terrible person or parent you are, if you can resist the storyline and just notice the sensations in your body, what you'll find is they begin to melt away.

That's because they're designed as a message. Our body is so beautifully designed to give us messages about what we need to do. If somebody was about to hurt you, naturally, you would protect yourself. That's how your anger is designed.

Once you get the message and you feel it and you make a decision about what is the most appropriate action to take, then you've received the message, and the anger or whatever the other feeling is melts away. It begins to evaporate. It no longer controls you.

I said we would take some examples and look at how we can work with our triggers. We've been talking about how most of the time when we're triggered, we'll be feeling anger, and how as we are willing to sit with the anger, it changes. Let's actually do that. Let's look at how that would look in practice.

There's a common practice taught by meditation teachers about how to be mindfully with an emotion. There are four steps to this process that are often referred to as RAIN. The four steps are: Recognizing the emotion, Accepting the emotion, Investigating the emotion, and Non-identification, or not identifying with the emotion.

Let's look at how it might work to apply the RAIN process to the emotion of anger that we're feeling. First, we need to recognize that we're feeling it. We may be ashamed that we're feeling anger at our child. Maybe we think, "Dr. Laura told me I shouldn't be getting angry at my child." That's not what I'm saying.

You didn't create that anger. That anger is there like your arm or your leg. What matters is what you do with your anger, and that you DO have control over – although it may not always feel like it – just like you have control over what you do with your arm or your leg.

We're not trying to get rid of emotions here. We're trying to have a different relationship with our emotions, so they don't hijack us, so we're more aware of them, so we notice the emotion when we start feeling it rather than after we've already reacted and done things that we're not happy about later.

When you notice that you're angry, if you have the luxury of sitting down while you're angry to meditate on it, great. You can apply the RAIN process then. But let's say that you couldn't do it in the heat of the moment – that's usual – and later, you go back and you sit down and you're still feeling upset, and now, you're going to apply the RAIN process.

The first step is to recognize what you're feeling. "Oh. I'm feeling anger. I'm livid at my kid." You don't have to parse this. Maybe you're livid. Maybe you're furious. Maybe you're simply annoyed. You don't have to nail exactly the right word, but you have to acknowledge that you're feeling it. Recognize it; that's the first letter of RAIN, R. You recognize that that's what you're feeling.

The second step is Acceptance. It's hard not to blame ourselves when we're feeling enraged at our child. We know they're just kids. We know that he wouldn't have hit his sister if we had been

right there to help when they started fighting over the toy. We're partly even blaming ourselves. But then that makes us more angry, and because we're defensive, we feel even more angry at our child.

It's okay to feel whatever you're feeling. You didn't ask for this feeling, you didn't create the feeling, so really, the only thing you can do is accept the feeling. When we push feelings away, when we refuse to accept them, guess what? That's when they go into the emotional backpack.

So first, Recognize what you're feeling, and then Accept it, as hard as that might be, and try to drop the blame. When you're accepting it, you're just accepting that that's what you're feeling. You're dropping all that extra baggage of blaming yourself for feeling it.

Step three of the RAIN process is to Investigate the feeling. That's an interesting idea, because usually, we would run away from our anger. In this case, instead of running away from it, we sit with it, and we recognize that we're feeling it, we accept that we're feeling it, and we even look at it.

Now, that doesn't mean you're analyzing it – “Hmm. I'm not as angry today as I was at my daughter yesterday.” When I say we're investigating it, it's less about analyzing the feeling and more about noticing what it feels like. We're not focusing on what our kid did that was so wrong, and therefore, we're justified in our anger. We're not blaming ourselves for being angry. We're simply *noticing what it feels like to be angry*.

Where do you feel it in your body? What does it feel like in your body? Does it feel like an explosion pressing on the inside of your chest? Does it feel like your throat is tight and strangled? Do you feel like you can't catch your breath? Maybe you just want to lash out and your hands are balled up into fists.

As you notice those physical sensations, just breathe. Just stay with the feeling in your body. Just notice it. Just breathe. Then what you'll notice is that it changes. Suddenly, you're crying, and you realize that what was under the anger, what was driving the anger, was actually your sadness. Or that tight feeling in your throat gets worse and worse and that feeling that you can't breathe gets worse and worse. Suddenly, you're feeling panicky, and you realize what was behind the anger was fear, or maybe it was helplessness.

All of our anger has other feelings behind it, and as you sit with it, you'll notice that it changes. As you sit with it, the message is received and the feelings transform, and you're able to go to a deeper level. As you do this, you're actually excavating your trigger, and as you sit, what you'll notice is that the anger begins to go. It was so strong a moment ago, and now you're not even feeling angry. You may still feel sad, but the anger has melted away.

As you see that happen and as you see even the sadness and the fear begin to melt away, you realize all these emotions, they're always arising and passing away. They come and they go, and you aren't in charge of them. You actually don't control them.

Sometimes you can change your thoughts, and that will change the feelings that come up – meaning, if you think your kid is a brat, you'll be more angry at him than if you think, “That is a child who's hurting, who needs my help.”

But, really, we don't choose our feelings. We all have feelings, and in fact, we all have thoughts that we don't choose. Some of them are positive and some of them really don't serve us. They arise and then they pass away. That's not who we are.

I get it. You got angry. You yelled at your kid. But you were also kind to your child – the same child – this morning. You also were up with him in the middle of the night when he had an ear infection.

Your yelling at your child or your being angry is not all of who you are. It's a small part of who you are, and over time, you can learn to not even act on that anger. But the anger will probably always arise, as we've said.

That leads us to the fourth step of the RAIN process that meditation teachers teach, and that's “Not identifying” with the feelings. If these feelings are always arising and passing away, they don't have to define you. You don't have to let the fact that you got angry at your child define who you are.

It was a temporary state of what I would call forgetting, where you got hijacked by emotion. You forgot how much you love your child. You forgot your intention to show up in the world with love.

In fact, I would argue that when we get triggered, we forget who we really are. Emotions arise, they pass away. Identifying with those emotions is what gets us into trouble, because then we get hijacked.

But not identifying with the emotions means we don't get swept away. That isn't us. We just think, “Oh. There's that anger again. Okay, I know what to do with this. Stop, drop, breathe, resist acting.”

You can see how useful the RAIN process is for any emotion. We simply recognize what we're feeling. Instead of stuffing it down, we accept it. We just accept it without judging ourselves. We investigate it – not by analyzing, but by noticing. As we notice, we really take in the experience

of that emotion, the sensation of it in our body. We notice what it feels like in the body, and then it begins to shift, to change, to diminish, to evaporate because we've gotten the message.

Now, sometimes there's a decision that should come out of this. Sometimes there's action we need to take based on this message we've gotten. But taking the action while we're in the grip of being triggered means we will be acting from fear, and acting from fear never gets you to a place of love.

Once you've done the RAIN process – recognized the emotion, accepted it, experienced it, investigated it, and not identified with it – then you'll find you're not in the grip of the emotion so much.

You might also give yourself a little time, and at that point, you can think more clearly and you'll be able to figure out “What do I want to do to address this situation?” Every time you do this process, you're reducing the power of that trigger. You're peeling more layers off the onion.

As you start to notice your triggers and what upsets you, and you start to investigate those emotions that come up, you're probably at some point going to notice shame. Most of us are not really aware of shame. In fact, we do everything we can so as not to feel it. But most of us do carry shame from our childhoods.

What is shame? Shame is a belief system that we're not lovable, that we're somehow deeply flawed so that we're not lovable. Of course, that triggers us because any time we get evidence that we've messed up in some way, we feel like we're not lovable, and if we're that unlovable, then we're in danger.

To heal our triggers, we have to take the courageous leap of being willing to actually acknowledge the feelings of shame we carry with us. Let me go into a little more detail on this. We feel shame when we've messed up, and there are experts who think that a small amount of shame can be healthy, that when we've hurt someone or something shame can motivate us to do better. But I disagree with that, and maybe it's just a matter of definitions.

Shame is not guilt. Guilt: sure, when you feel guilty about something you've done, you're moved to make amends, to repair it, and that's terrific. But when you feel shame, you feel publicly humiliated, like everyone must be able to see how completely worthless you are and will turn away from you.

Brené Brown, who is an expert on shame and the author of the book *Daring Greatly*, describes shame as a fear of disconnection. When we feel shame, we fear that we're so flawed that we're not lovable and that people will disconnect from us.

In his book *Parenting From the Inside Out*, Dan Siegel describes shame as the physiological result that comes when we're moving toward something, we've got the accelerator on, and our life force – I don't think he'd use that word, but it's what we're going for – is moving toward something, and then all of a sudden, the brakes get applied. The physiological reaction to that is shame. I think the reason for that is we're getting told that what our life force is doing is not okay. It's like a little warning that says, "No. No. That's not okay."

In small amounts, it's unavoidable to have that happen with a child because you're constantly saying to your child, "Oh, no. Don't do that. I know that's where your life force is taking you, but you can't do that – either for your safety and wellbeing or for someone else's or because it'll break the property that you're holding, or whatever."

Certainly, we're always asking our kids to put on the brakes, and that's why empathic limits are so important. Because if we're asking our child to put on the brakes, and we're doing it in an empathic way that affirms our child's life force and why he or she wants to be doing whatever they're doing, then the child feels that momentary glitch where they have to make a choice between what they want at that moment and something they want more, which is that connection with you.

They willingly choose to say, "Okay. I guess I can follow my special adult's lead, my parent's lead. I'm not afraid of disconnection because as my parent put the brakes on for me, my parent remained connected to me. There is no threat of disconnection, and my parent staying connected to me must mean I'm not a bad person to have wanted this other thing. I'm still lovable." That's why empathic limits work.

But when limits are set without empathy, they create shame because there's a threat of disconnection. When we set limits without empathy, we're disconnecting from the child. When you were a child and you did something that your parents wanted to stop, they set a limit, and no matter how much they loved you – and I'm assuming and hoping that they loved you very much – they almost certainly did not know how to set a limit empathically, so you experienced a threat of disconnection. The normal physiological reaction that you had, to having that correction, would have been shame.

Probably, as I say, small amounts of shame are inevitable. We transform them, we are able to rise above them as children, if we feel our parent's empathy—because that maintains the connection. There's no fear of a broken connection.

That means that conventional parenting approaches, which are based on disconnection, do create shame. When our parents implied that something we did wrong was so serious that they might stop loving us, then we really felt the shame. Of course, our parents never said that directly – we

hope – and our parents never actually thought they would stop loving us. But they thought that to teach us a lesson about how to behave, they had to show us their displeasure.

All conventional punishment is based on something called love withdrawal. Even timeouts are symbolic love withdrawal. We put the child away from our loving presence, which makes it clear to the child that if we wanted to, we could permanently banish him, which, of course, might well mean death to a young child and thus, the terror of disconnection.

Shame develops when a child feels conditionally loved. On some level, the child realizes that this is a serious situation for him to be in – not his misbehavior; he’s already forgotten what misbehavior caused his parent’s reaction. What’s serious to the child is that his life could be in danger because somehow he is too flawed to ensure his parent’s love and protection. In fact, if he’s that flawed, maybe the whole tribe of humans will cast him out.

Thus, we get to the public nature of shame where we feel somehow as if we’re embarrassed in front of all human kind. Everyone is staring at us. We’re ashamed. We’re in shame.

In primitive cultures, being banished from a tribe meant that you were not protected, and if you got hurt or sick, you would not be taken care of, and you would almost certainly die. That’s even for adults. Banishment was a very big deal.

For children, can you imagine what a big deal being banished by humanity would be? They certainly would not survive, and that’s why shame exists. It’s a big warning signal to us. “Uh-oh. Don’t continue down that track. If you do, you could be banished. You could be disconnected.” That’s why Brené Brown says it’s a fear of disconnection.

Shame, that feeling that we aren’t good enough in some profound way, is experienced as a threat to our survival. It’s so powerful and scary that we push it out of awareness, and, of course, guess where it goes? Into the emotional backpack.

We do everything possible to keep our shame invisible, stuffed down, out of our conscious awareness, and we hide our shame even from ourselves. We also try to hide it from other people. We work so very hard to be good girls and boys to hide our secret fear that we aren’t worthy of love, that we’re broken. You know that feeling that you’re faking it, that you could be found out and exposed as a fake? That’s shame. No matter how hard we work, we feel like we don’t deserve.

But every so often, especially when we feel like people around us are judging us, or when we know we’ve acted so badly that everyone would judge us if only they knew, then we’re overcome with the shame that comes bursting out of the backpack. We feel ashamed. We feel worthless. We feel terrified. Why? Because this must mean we’re not worthy of being alive.

Shame feels awful, and it doesn't make us behave better. It doesn't make us correct our mistakes. It just terrifies us.

That's different than when we feel guilty for doing something wrong – let's say, something big like lying to our partner. When we feel guilty, it's because that action conflicts with something else that's important to us, such as, in this case, our caring for our partner and our desire for a close intimate relationship or thinking of ourselves as a good person. Our guilt says to us, "That action isn't something I want to do. That's not who I want to be." Our guilt can make us choose a different course of action.

But shame doesn't do that. Shame says, "I'm a bad person." Shame makes us feel like we're deeply flawed, that there's something very wrong with us, something that is not fixable by a different choice next time.

Shame is so scary to us that we can't even take responsibility for what we've done wrong. Have you noticed that when your child feels shame, she blames everyone else around her, and she can't bear to talk about what she might be able to do differently next time?

That's why we have to be so careful when we correct our children. Definitely, they have to know when a behavior is not okay—AND they have to know that there is never a threat of disconnection.

Brené Brown says shame makes us hide, not take healthy risks, not realize our full potential. John Bradshaw, who wrote *Healing the Shame That Binds You*, says, "Toxically shamed people tend to become more and more stagnant as life goes on. They try to be super human (perfect, and controlling) or become less than human (losing interest in life or stagnated in some addictive behavior)."

Of course, you know having been through this entire online course that sometimes your triggers are actually caused by shame from your childhood. Pretty scary, huh? All that is bad enough, but as parents, shame is even worse because as with all of our other feelings, our children pick up on our shame.

You can imagine how this happens. We're so afraid that there's something wrong with us that when our child does something wrong, our own shame is awakened. So we over-react. Instead of supporting our child, we disconnect from him. We begin to see him as an object to be controlled, instead of our beloved child to whom we're connected always as their nurturing parent. Instead we blame and shame the child. We might even say, "You should be ashamed of yourself."

Think of yourself as a child. When your parents withdrew their love in those moments of anger and punishment, you didn't understand why you were misbehaving; you just knew that you

couldn't control those big emotions, so you broke the rules or acted out. You wanted desperately to earn your parents' love, and your parents might have made it clear that it needed to be earned, because it was conditional love, because that was the only love they knew how to give, or they thought that was the right way to do it to teach you to be a good person.

But you knew you would never be perfect enough to earn your parents' love really, because you couldn't be perfect. So you constructed a good self, which you try hard to be, and you pushed that bad self deep down inside and tried to hide it from everyone. That's why shame gives us the sense that we're faking it—because we know our real self is not perfect. We think it's no good. But once those parts of the child are repressed, they're out of conscious control, so they pop out, and we misbehave even more.

Punishment always creates shame in the child, and the shame is in the backpack, and we don't acknowledge it because it feels so terrible, so we don't work through it—so our shame gets transmitted to the next generation.

But you don't have to perpetuate the shame that you absorbed in childhood onto your children. In fact, this entire course is helping you not to do that, because the way you heal your shame is by integrating those experiences that developed the shame. Since shame is the opposite of unconditional love, any time we notice our own feelings of not loving ourselves, we're encountering our shame, and we have an opportunity to heal it.

That's why I'm always urging you to look at yourself in the mirror and love yourself; because it's so powerful. You either experience love, which transforms you, or – and this is just as valuable – you experience not love. Your feeling that you're not lovable. That's shame. As you experience it and breathe through those feelings, they begin to evaporate.

One of the reasons this is so powerful is that eyes really are the window to the soul. When you look in your own eyes, you see your deepest, truest, most vulnerable self, and you know that shame is a lie, and the shame begins to lose power over you. Every time you do that, you're actually surfacing any old shame that's in your backpack and you're healing it.

I've also included a daily inspiration that is designed to help you heal shame. It's called Healing Shame. Watch for it in the daily inspirations. You can do it as often as you want. As long as you feel something, some shift, as you do the process, then it's valuable to you, so just keep doing it.

You may have noticed we haven't talked about your own parents very directly. That could be a course unto itself, and this was a one-hour audio. But it is helpful to think about the effect of your own relationships growing up with your mother and father, and how that might be affecting you now in your life.

If you had a traumatic childhood, I urge you to get a counselor who you feel comfortable talking with and begin to get support as you talk through these memories. They can help you by holding the light as you go into those dark places.

If you had a more routine childhood – not that any childhood is ever routine from what I can see, but if you had a childhood that was not traumatic – you can probably do this work yourself, and I do urge you to do the work of just noticing the affect your childhood has had on you.

There's an interview that's called the Adult Attachment Interview that I used to give to parents when I was in grad school. In fact, I trained people to give this interview to parents, so I gave it a lot.

This interview is very interesting because it consists of a certain set amount of time and certain set questions. At the end of it, when you score it, you can tell with a very high degree of certainty, you can predict whether this person's child will be securely attached. Eye-opening, right? Because you can use it even before the child is born and make an accurate prediction.

But here's the amazing thing. That interview can change. Of course, the experiences that happened to you in your life don't change, but the way you talk about them does. The way you think about them does. The way you understand them does.

If you go into therapy or if you simply do a lot of work on yourself, or, I believe – although I've never seen research on this – if you develop a mindfulness practice like meditation, what happens is that you change. You understand the story of your life differently through reflecting on it. Your way of showing up in the world changes, and therefore, your way of parenting your child changes, and therefore, your child will have a different attachment security.

In other words, you will become a more responsive parent, so your child will trust you more, trust your responsiveness more, trust that closeness more, and feel more allowed to be fully wholly himself or herself with all of their emotions and feelings and needs.

I bring up the Adult Attachment Interview simply to show you how when we come to terms with our own childhood relationship with our parents, we show up differently in the world and with our own children.

Part of that is that we heal our triggers. The wounds that we have from childhood, we heal them, simply through reflecting on them and being willing to look at them and to dust off those places that don't feel so good.

Throughout this course, I have urged you to let your child have his or her emotions because that's what's healthy. I've also urged you to notice your own emotions and to let yourself have

those, as well – not to act on them necessarily, but to let yourself feel them. If they feel too dysregulating, don't hesitate; get yourself support, a counselor, who can work with you.

This audio today has been about healing your triggers. I hope what you've gotten from this is there's no way out but through. You do have to feel it to heal it. You do have to notice the feelings, accept them without taking action, and love yourself through them, and then you'll find you're able to tell a new story about what happened, to understand things differently because you're less charged about it.

Before we close today, I want to address the idea of forgiveness very briefly. I feel this is necessary because many people think that to heal from their childhoods, there needs to be a process of forgiveness of their parents or other people who were unkind to them or wronged them in some way.

There is an understanding in psychology, as well as in most religions, that walking around feeling angry at someone is bad for us – maybe bad for the other person or the relationship, but mostly bad for the person who is still angry about something that happened in the past. We're told that nursing that anger makes us bitter and unhappy, and that for our own good, we should let it go and forgive the other person.

I personally think this is backwards, because forgiveness is a byproduct. I don't want you to burden yourself with this idea that you're supposed to be forgiving your parents. Absolutely, come to terms with your own childhood. That's where your own freedom lies. That's how you free yourself from your triggers. That's how you are happy. That's how you show up with your child in the way you want to.

Once you do that, once you grieve the childhood that you deserved and didn't get, you'll find that forgiveness comes easily. It's a byproduct of doing your work; not a place to start. That doesn't mean we're blaming your parents. I'm sure your parents did the best they could with the information they had and the emotional adjustment and psyche they had, based on their own childhoods. It takes great courage to interrupt that cycle – as you're doing – to step forward and say, "I'm going to change things starting now by changing myself."

The bottom line is that no matter what happened to you in your childhood, once we're old enough to have children, 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. It's not easy, right? In fact, it's the most creative work there is – creating love where there wasn't any before. I personally believe that that work is our purpose here.

Thank you for joining me today. Thank you for your commitment to your own growth, to your child's well-being, and to choosing love. This ends Week 10 of the **Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids** Online Course. This is Dr. Laura Markham of AhaParenting.com.