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MINDFUL WAYS TO A MORE PEACEFUL HOME

by Esther Jones



All families experience conflict at times. Not only is it normal, but if well held and contained by the parents, it can also be a healthy and fertile learning ground. Through our modelling, children can learn how to establish boundaries, advocate for themselves, deal with people who don't agree with them, and experience forgiveness and healing.

Unfortunately, for many parents, conflict and disagreements often feel far from healthy. Rather than inspiring our best selves, they trigger the most vulnerable parts of ourselves and become difficult and overwhelming. They can easily bring to mind our own hurtful experiences as children, or make us feel inadequate or powerless as parents. As a result, just when we're required to be at our calmest, we find ourselves totally out of whack, and unable to keep our cool. But, how we behave in these situations is massively important, and is frequently the turning point for how things play out. Do we escalate things, or do we help navigate them to safer ground?

When my son was younger, small conflicts would often lead to total communication breakdowns. I was still exploring mindfulness, neurodiversity and my own responses and, because I didn't understand why his emotions were so strong, I would often respond from a place of resentment and hurt. My own insecurities and worries were deeply triggered and consequently I was unable to give him what he needed and hold him in that space. This was like fuel to a fire, and the resulting meltdowns could be violent and prolonged, leaving the whole house exhausted and on edge. As I deepened my mindfulness practice and unraveled some of the beliefs that were gripping me in old patterns, I was able to learn from him. And, as he felt safer and more able to verbalise what was going on for him, I became better at holding the difficult moments with compassion and understanding.

Of course, only you can know whether the way conflict plays out in your house is normal and healthy enough, or whether it too easily spirals out of control, leading to resentment and regret. If you'd like to increase your resilience in difficult moments, read on for ways you can help navigate conflicts in your home more mindfully.



1

Watch out for automatic reactions

Whether you're jumping into an argument between siblings or answering a child who is angry with you, your first port of call is always to be aware of where your response is coming from. Notice what you say and do, and consider if this is a conscious choice made for the best possible outcome, or a knee-jerk reaction. If you look back on your response and wish you'd done something else, the chances are that you were on autopilot.

Apparently, the average person spends around 47 percent of their day on autopilot - that place where we essentially do things automatically and with little awareness. There is nothing intrinsically bad about autopilot. It's simply our brain's way of automising as many processes as possible to in order to maximise efficiency. It enables us to carry out tasks quickly without having to engage in the more costly effort of conscious thought. Driving, making our morning coffee, stacking the dishwasher. It's likely that you do these and many other things on autopilot.

However, the effects of autopilot become harmful when used in situations that call for us to engage the conscious mind. Autopilot in these moments has us activating well-worn patterns that are likely to come from a place of emotional overload and physical reactivity, and have little to do with consciously choosing the best way to respond to that particular situation.

So, if you want to shift things in your home, your first step is to simply to cultivate awareness of when you're on autopilot. See the next page for some hints on how to do this!



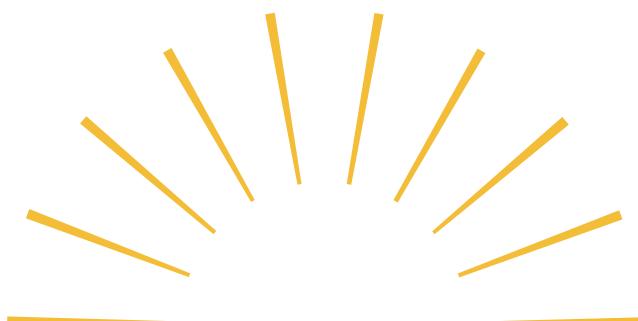
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Let your emotions inform you

It can be extremely hard to override autopilot because these automatic responses are so ingrained in us that they have worn deep grooves over time. And, because, when our conscious mind is not engaged and curious, it's often the emotions in the body that get to lead the way instead.

Start to observe what happens in your body in difficult moments. Perhaps, in the case of a sibling disagreement, it's just some mild tension in the shoulders or a sinking feeling as you worry the morning is going to go off track. Whereas, if you're on the receiving end of a full-blown meltdown, you may even feel physically threatened, in which case your body is likely to go into full fight or flight mode. In this mode, the sympathetic nervous system is activated, adrenaline and cortisol flood your body, and your breathing gets faster and shallower. At this point, it may well be too difficult to override this powerful physical response and bring your conscious mind to the situation. But, these sensations, terribly uncomfortable though they sometimes may be, are key to recognising that you are triggered and reactive.

You can develop a deeper understanding of your body's responses by bringing your attention to physical sensations during the day. Choose moments when you have some discomfort or noticeable reaction but are not overwhelmed. Bring curiosity to how you're feeling and name the sensations—butterflies in the stomach? tense arms? Just notice how your body is responding to the situation. With practice and time, you'll spot the emotions in your body earlier and be able to make conscious choices in that space before they gather momentum. You may find that you are able to avoid many conflicts entirely by simply consciously choosing a different way to engage or respond in this moment.



3

Take a deep breath before responding

Deep breaths calm the nervous system, ground us back into the body and out of our panicky mind, and give us time to recentre so that we don't accidentally respond from that automatic triggered place. According to research, when we are triggered and our sympathetic nervous system is activated, it takes around 90 seconds for the body chemistry (all that cortisol and adrenaline) to complete its cycle. If we feed that chemistry with negative thoughts, we perpetuate it.

Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, talked about these negative thoughts as being a "second arrow". He said, "If an arrow hits you, you will feel pain in that part of your body where the arrow hit; and then if a second arrow comes and strikes exactly at the same spot, the pain will not be only double, it will become at least ten times more intense. The second arrow, fired by our own selves, is our reaction, our storyline, and our anxiety. All these things magnify the suffering".

So, if you find yourself feeling hurt, angry or reactive, some deep breaths can help you get through those intense 90 seconds whilst avoiding firing second arrows at yourself. Thoughts like "I'm a terrible mother", "no one listens to me", or "the evening is ruined again", will keep you in old patterns of anger and hurt. It is almost certain that the other people involved in the conflict are also running old scripts in their heads. You can be the one to shift things.

Calming breaths

Take a deep breath in through the nose, then exhale slowly through the nose, imagining yourself directing the breath down through your body. The in-breath can be spontaneous, whilst the out-breath should be more focused and intentional.

Remember—a calmer place is just 90 seconds away!



4

Practise real listening

It's so easy to jump to conclusions and assume we know exactly what's going on. After all, we're the adults and we've lived this situation a hundred times before. But, we can never know what's going on for another person unless we truly pay attention to them. Maybe the argument is ostensibly about helping out in the house or how one person has treated another. But maybe it isn't really about that at all. Perhaps there's resentment or hurt from something else that has erupted in this guise.

So, put your assumptions aside, and, if things are still calm enough and your child is comfortable, listen to what they have to say. Don't solve, deny, judge or defend. Just listen to them with an open heart and mind. Only do this if you are no longer reactive—so check in with your thoughts and emotions. If your nervous system is still running on automatic, let that play out first.

It's helpful to practise the art of real listening in your daily life with your children. It can actually be surprisingly difficult—our instinct is often to jump in with answers and suggestions and to try to solve things. But remember that your aim is for them to feel safe sharing their thoughts and feelings, and for you to gain a deeper understanding of what led to the conflict. You may well find that simply ensuring that everyone in the house is being deeply seen and heard is already enough to reduce arguments.



5

Take a self-compassion break

It's easy to be too hard on ourselves when things get challenging. So, alongside some deep breaths, try taking a little self-compassion break to help keep you calm and to stop you adding self-blame to the mix. Self-compassion involves being warm and understanding toward ourselves when we suffer or feel inadequate, rather than ignoring our pain or criticising ourselves. There has been a huge amount of research into self compassion in the last few years, and it turns out that people who are more self-compassionate are likely to be happier, less anxious and in better relationships than those that aren't.

A self-compassion break for challenging moments

Place your right hand over your heart and say these three phrases to yourself:

- "This is hard right now"
- "Everyone has difficult moments"
- "May I be calm"

This technique introduces three new threads to the moment: acceptance of what is (so we stop fighting the moment), the knowledge that suffering is universal (it isn't just us!), and wishing ourselves well (rather than berating ourselves). You can play around with the language until you find three phrases that resonate deeply with you. As you use this more frequently, you may find that just the soothing touch of the hand over the heart is enough to calm and comfort you.



6

Relationship first (let go of being right)

You may well believe that you're right, and you may well be! But, when people are heated and reactive, it's no time to be trying to get the upper hand. Listen to anyone arguing and you'll notice that everyone just gets more entrenched in their positions. And the more it goes on, the less open each party is to hearing the other one. So, the need to be 'right' actually ends up both perpetuating the argument and being a hindrance to communication. Not listening or refusing to compromise can create more defensiveness and anger.

It's far better to nurture the relationship, so it is easier to work things out together later. You can do that in good faith once everyone is calm and in a frame of mind to listen to each other. So, depending on the situation, you might agree that you can see their point of view or accept that they have some valid points, and that you'd be happy to sit down and talk it through with them. Then, when you do sit down, just make sure to practise real listening, so you are genuinely open to hearing what they have to say.



7

Imagine yourself holding the space

I love Heather Plett's analogy of holding space (in her book, *The Art of Holding Space*) and I've found it extremely helpful for cultivating my own abilities to hold on tight when things get rough. Holding space for our children means containing whatever is happening for them in a safe, compassionate and non-judgemental way.

This is a particularly helpful way of seeing things if you find yourself in the role of peacemaker for an argument between siblings, for example. I would imagine myself actually holding the physical space of my arguing children in my arms. It was often a huge mental strain, but holding them in this way would keep me focused and calm, and reduced the likelihood of me getting reactive and accidentally escalating things. You might also call on the imagery of staying calm as a storm rages around you, and the more dysregulated other people are, the more essential it is that you try to stay grounded.

This act of imaginary holding also gave me valuable insight into how much energy and effort was actually required of me and how vital it was that I was nurturing myself too. It's essential, after holding space for conflict, that you take some time to rebalance. It can just be a moment by yourself in your bedroom, acknowledging the effort you made, and honouring whatever your body needs in this moment. You may need to scream into a pillow, shed a couple of tears, or just take some deep breaths.



8

Keep your cup filled

If you notice that you're always on a short fuse and particularly reactive, it may well be that you're not meeting your own needs. It's easy for parents to fall into the trap of making themselves lowest priority, but that can lead to serious burnout and a big reduction in our capacity to accompany our children in their needs.

Think about what nurtures you and how you can include these things in your life. A few simple things can make a huge difference. If you have a tendency to get too busy to take time for yourself, you could schedule this time into your diary. Taking care of yourself should be the cornerstone of your day, not an optional extra!

Things you include could be:

- coffee with a friend
- time to journal in the morning
- spending time on a hobby
- walks in nature
- meditation
- treating your senses (a long bath, scented candles, listening to music...)
- a nap
- reading

Make sure you are also taking care of yourself by getting enough sleep and exercise, and eating nourishing food. If you ever feel guilty about keeping your own cup filled, remember that modelling how to meet your needs is also a great example to your children (see the next point).



9

Remember that you are modelling

In difficult moments, it can be really helpful to remember that you have the opportunity to model to your child a different way to manage conflict. So, whilst there may be an old entrenched voice inside that tells you you're backing down, being weak, losing authority, not being the parent etc, there can be another, more empowered, voice that reminds you that you are modelling how to stay calm, how to hold space compassionately, and how to take care of yourself too.

It's easy to lecture children about ways they should behave and what is best for them, but unless we embody these values ourselves our words are likely to fall on deaf ears, (which is fair enough really).

So, imagine that every time there is a disagreement or argument it is also an opportunity to model. Don't worry about being perfect. It's enough for your children to see that you are doing everything you can to learn new ways of responding and engaging. It may not seem like it at the time, but they will certainly appreciate the effort you are making to change, and it will encourage them to know that they can change too.

And, if you sometimes get things wrong, just be honest, cut yourself a little slack and model a heartfelt apology.



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