



**A SHORT COURSE
IN MINDFUL CBT
FOR PARENTS**

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Introduction

As rewarding as raising kids can be, the hard parts often crowd out the reward, especially when our kids are having a tough time. There are no real breaks from the mostly thankless work of parenting, and it's easy to feel like you're doing it wrong or not doing enough.

I created this short course to give you a bit of support as you parent. Nothing can take away the pain of seeing your child struggle, but there are tools that can help you to manage the mental and emotional toll of parenting. The same skills your child is learning in *The Mindful CBT Workbook for Kids* can also bring you relief.

In the pages that follow, I'll guide you through the basics of mindful Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT). You'll learn how to work with your thoughts so they don't mislead you. You'll discover how to reinforce desired behaviors for both yourself and your child. And you'll see how mindful awareness makes it possible to keep your balance, even when life goes sideways.

Some of the topics in this course are directly for you, while others are designed to help you support your child. In the end, anything that helps you will also help your child, and vice versa. I hope these practices help you and your family find more joy and peace.

Understanding Our Reactions When Our Kids Struggle

When our kids are having a hard time, it can affect every part of our experience—what we think, how we feel, and what we do. Sometimes these reactions are helpful, like when we're concerned about our child and we take steps to help them.

Other times, though, we might feel overwhelmed and struggle to find effective ways to respond. At these times, the **CBT Triangle** helps us explore the connections among our thoughts, feelings, and actions, and it can also help us make sense of our reactions.

For example, one of my kids went through a period of intense anxiety. One morning, she woke up crying and saying she couldn't go to school. I felt my own sense of panic and found myself reacting in ways that made it worse. My CBT Triangle is shown in the figure on the next page.

You can see how these three sets of responses all hang together:

- My feelings made sense, based on the stories my mind was telling me.
- Those feelings, in turn, led to more distressing thoughts.
- Together, these thoughts and feelings led me to take a confrontational approach with my daughter.
- My actions caused my daughter to respond with more anxiety and a refusal to get out of bed.
- Since my actions weren't helping, my upsetting thoughts and emotions were amplified.

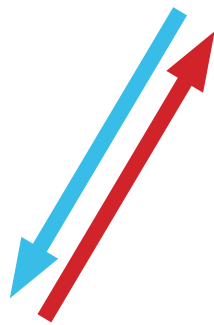
Think about your own reactions to the difficulties your child has had. How would you describe your thoughts, feelings, and actions? Think about how those three responses fit together.

Seeing these connections is the first step toward making positive changes. We'll begin with how to change unhelpful thought patterns, the cognitive part of CBT.

Thought:

If she doesn't go to school, her anxiety will get worse and worse.

What kind of CBT psychologist lets his daughter avoid school?!



Feeling:

Anxiety

Anger

Shame



Action:

Becoming insistent with my daughter:

"You have to go to school!"

Shifting Unhelpful Parenting Beliefs

As you pay attention to what your mind is telling you, you might find that some of the things it says make you feel bad about your parenting. Common self-critical thoughts include:

- “I’m a bad mom.”
- “Other dads would do a better job.”
- “A better mom would have things under control.”
- “I’m a terrible dad for losing my patience.”
- “I should go to every single one of my child’s events.”
- “I can never put my own needs ahead of my kid’s.”
- “I’ve damaged my child.”

Most of the time, these critiques are both unfair and untrue. They might *feel* true, but the facts don’t support them.

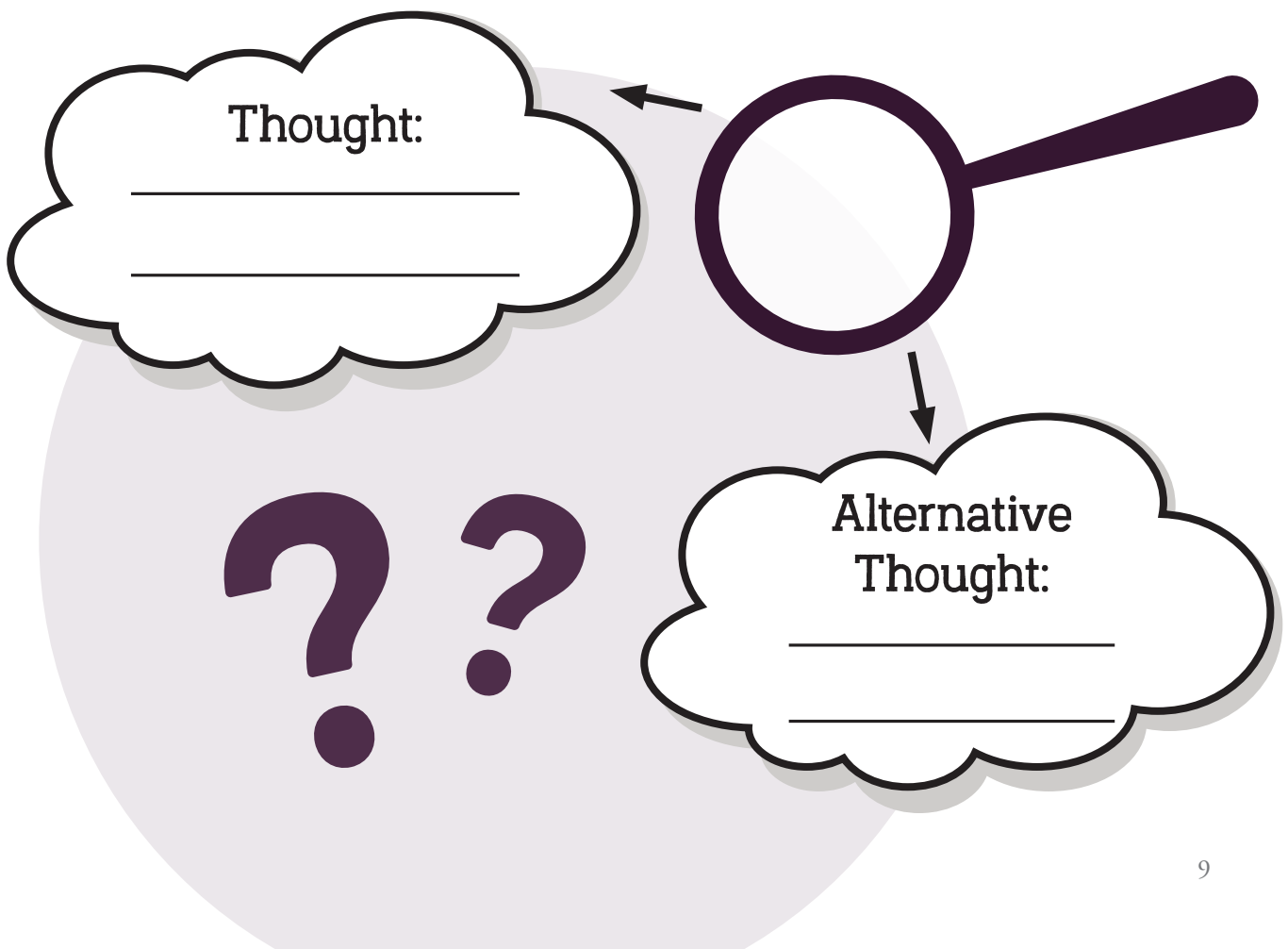
Mindful CBT helps you take a closer look at what your mind is telling you to see if it’s right. For example, when I went through a long sickness that led to depression, I thought my kids would be better off with a different dad.

That way of thinking made me feel terrible about myself and didn’t motivate me to make any useful changes. In my depressed state, it even made me wonder if I should end my life to clear the way for a better dad for my kids.

When I thought about it more carefully, I realized that my mind was misleading me. It was true that my kids would benefit from having a dad who was more energetic and engaged, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t the right dad for them! What they needed was more of *me*, not a replacement dad. That realization gave me extra motivation to keep finding ways to heal so I could be more present in their lives.

Your thoughts might not be as dark as this example, but they can still be false and unhelpful when you're feeling like a lousy parent. You can find more useful ways of thinking through a simple three-step process:

1. First, just **notice** what you're thinking. It's often helpful to write down the thought so you can see it more objectively. It can be freeing simply to realize that a thought you've bought into is just a mental story.
2. Next, take a closer look. Is the thought 100 percent **true**? Look for actual *evidence* that supports it, rather than taking the thought at face value. It might be accurate, which is helpful to know, but there's a good chance that it's not true, or not the whole story. Consider whether there's any evidence *against* the thought, being as objective as you can.
3. Finally, ask yourself if there's a **more accurate** way of thinking. You don't have to trick yourself into believing something that's overly rosy and optimistic. In the example above, the alternative thought I found was, "It will be good for my kids when I can be more active again." I wasn't telling myself I was the Most Amazingest Dad in the Universe, and I also wasn't abusing myself with exaggerations about my badness. Just find a truer alternative. Notice the effects this thought has on your feelings and your actions.



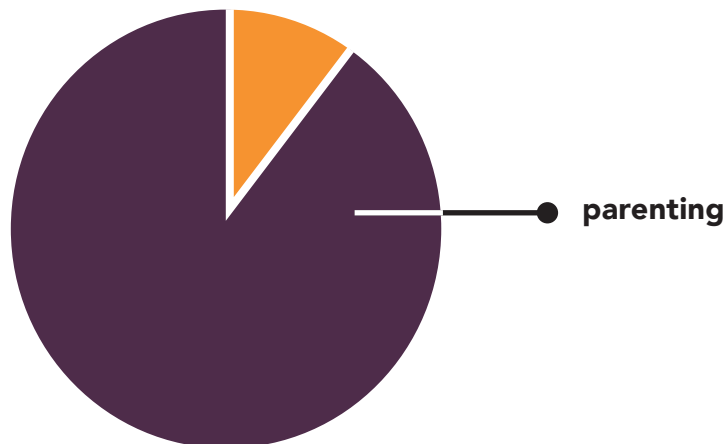
Why Is My Child Struggling?

One of the most loaded questions for a parent is, "Why is my child struggling?" The mind is often quick to answer with accusations about your shortcomings: *I wasn't there enough for him. I gave him too much independence. I was too strict with her. I wasn't strict enough. I was too demanding. I didn't expect enough from her.*

No matter how you're parenting, you might believe that your child is having a hard time because of you. It can be devastating to think that you're the cause of your child's pain.

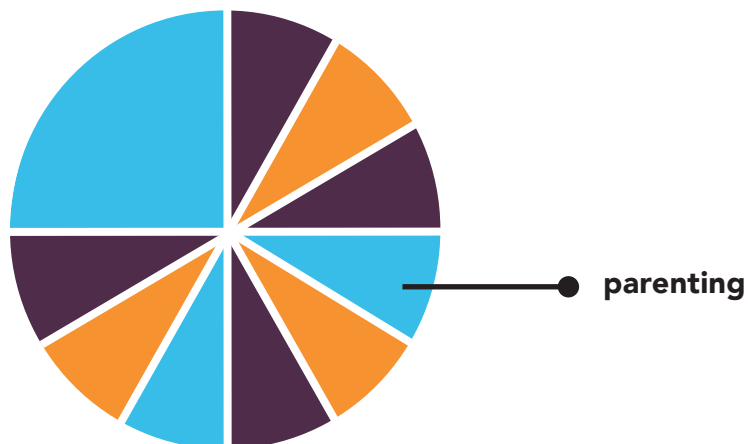
Parents often assume the "blame pie" for their child's difficulties looks like this:

Parents' Typical Explanation for Their Child's Struggles



However, the real story probably looks more like this:

Likely Explanation of a Child's Struggles



Common factors that contribute to your child's well-being include:

- **Genetics.** The genes we carry can be a risk factor for mental and emotional difficulties. Before you blame yourself for the genes you contributed, remember that you didn't create those genes!
- **Peers.** Your child's friends and other peers play a bigger role in their well-being as they get older. Even kids with the most supportive parents can't sidestep the challenges they'll face from other relationships.
- **Parents.** It's true that parents can have an impact on their kids' mental health. For example, studies show that children tend to do best when parents provide a lot of love and acceptance combined with a good deal of supervision and boundaries. But parents' behavior is clearly not the sole determinant of children's well-being, especially within the range of normal, imperfect parenting.
- **Society.** There has been a dramatic increase in mental health struggles among young people over the last couple decades. Social scientists are still trying to understand all the causes of this uptick, including the role of social media.
- **Personality.** Every person is a unique blend of traits, and certain traits are linked predictably to conditions like anxiety and depression.
- **Humanity.** Last but not least, it is in our nature as human beings to struggle at times. We can't spare our kids from some amount of pain, as much as we would like to.

As you're considering why your child is having a hard time and how to help them, take care not to overlook factors outside of you. Examine your self-blame thoughts carefully. You'll probably discover that your slice of the blame pie is a lot smaller than you imagine.

Identifying Core Beliefs About Yourself

The thoughts you have about your parenting don't come from out of the blue. They arise from your **core beliefs**, which are deeply held assumptions about yourself, other people, and the world.

For example, if you generally believe you're not good enough, that belief can lead you to blame yourself when you run into a problem. You might also worry that you won't be able to solve it. On the other hand, with a core belief like "I am capable," you'll be less likely to blame yourself and more likely to see yourself as someone who can cope with the challenge.

Core beliefs are like the roots of a plant. Roots are usually not visible, but you know what they are based on the plants they produce. You can discover what your core beliefs are by looking at their "shoots and leaves"—that is, the types of thoughts you often have. Do they tend to be self-critical? Optimistic? Hopeless?

Core beliefs can be useful shortcuts for making sense of the world and helping you know what to expect in life. However, negative core beliefs often provide a distorted view of things.

Where Do Core Beliefs Come From?

Core beliefs are thought to develop during childhood. Young people who are prone to having a lot of negative emotions are more likely to develop negative core beliefs, as they experience life through the filter of difficult feelings. Single events, such as a trauma, can shape core beliefs, as can the day-to-day things kids go through, such as having a highly critical parent.

How Can I Build Better Core Beliefs?

Existing research suggests that you can't make unhelpful beliefs vanish, and it can be stressful trying to make sure you always think "the right way." But it's possible to lessen the impact of negative core beliefs and strengthen more helpful ones. Here are several ways to address negative core beliefs.

- Start by simply **identifying themes** in your negative thoughts, such as, "I never do anything right" or "People can't be trusted." Seeing your core beliefs helps you see *through* them.
- Look back on your life for **evidence for and against** your negative core belief. It's a similar exercise as what we did for individual thoughts, but it covers a wider range of experiences.
- Practice more helpful thoughts **on purpose**, even before you have a negative thought. For example, remind yourself first thing in the morning that you don't have to be perfect today, before your mind fills with fears of making a mistake.
- See what it's like to **just shrug off** specific thoughts that come from your core belief, without giving them a lot of time or energy. It's as if you're saying to the core belief when it reveals itself: "Ah, it's you again. Nice try—I'm not falling for that!"

When you start taking your negative thoughts less seriously, you begin to develop a different relationship with your thoughts—a key part of practicing mindfulness, as we'll see next.



Practicing Mindful Awareness

Take a moment to notice what is actually happening right now. What does this moment consist of, beyond the mind's worries, hopes, memories, and endless mental stories? As you pay attention to the present, allow yourself to open to it. Receive this moment just as it is, rather than pushing it away or chasing some imagined "better" situation. This is your reality right now. This is it.

These simple instructions capture the essence of mindfulness: **being in the present with acceptance of what is**. It might be surprising that something so simple could actually improve your life. (Believe me, I was very skeptical at first.) But there are few things more powerful than letting yourself really be *in* your life. Lots of good things follow from practice in mindful awareness.

- **Your thoughts stop being the main event.** When you can feel the difference between being in your mind and in the moment, it gets easier to recognize thoughts as thoughts instead of getting lost in them.
- **Life becomes easier to manage.** Most stress isn't about this exact moment; it's about things you anticipate. When your focus is right here, you find that you can handle anything that's happening right in this moment.
- **You don't have to control everything.** It's exhausting to always try to bend reality to your will. With mindful awareness, you can find true rest by letting life be life.
- **You can find more joy and beauty.** Being in your head all the time is like sleepwalking through life. When you come home to yourself and to what's actually happening, you wake up to life in all its richness and complexity.
- **Your relationships improve.** More presence can deepen your connections with others as you offer them more attention and acceptance.

How to Practice

There are two main paths to mindful awareness. Formal practices like meditation are probably the more familiar path. There are many ways to meditate, but the most common is to sit quietly and notice the sensations of the breath.

Your mind will keep generating thoughts, of course, so your attention will drift away from the breath. When you notice that your attention has wandered, gently come back to the breath, again and again.

The other approach is to practice mindful awareness in your daily life, no matter what you're doing. Choose an activity in which you'll be more present and give it your attention. Let it take as long as it takes instead of rushing through it.

When you feel an internal resistance to what's happening, see what it's like to let yourself stay open, rather than pushing away your experience. Receive your life as it is.

Mindful awareness can also facilitate behavior change, as it helps you notice the forces that shape your actions.



Increasing Desired Behaviors

The behavioral part of CBT is based on simple principles of learning and behavior. One of the fundamental tenets of behaviorism is that actions that are *rewarded* are more likely to be repeated. You can see this principle at work everywhere you look:

- People go to work because they get a paycheck.
- Dogs perform tricks to get a treat.
- A child cleans her room so she can play video games.

On the other hand, behaviors that are *punished* are less likely to be repeated:

- Getting a ticket makes you less likely to speed.
- Being shocked teaches a dog not to go beyond the invisible fence.
- Getting detention makes a child less likely to act out in class.

Patterns of reward and punishment shape your actions more than you might realize...and not always for the better! One of the most common dynamics of punishment and reward is the *short-term* benefit of unhealthy behaviors and the *long-term* benefit of healthier ones:

- The immediate pleasure of drinking alcohol versus the delayed suffering of a hangover
- The transient relief from putting off a task versus the long-term costs of procrastination
- The quick reward of a huge meal versus the later discomfort of heartburn

The trick to acting in line with your longer-term goals is to get on the right side of rewards and punishments. The following are the two main ways to accomplish this aim.

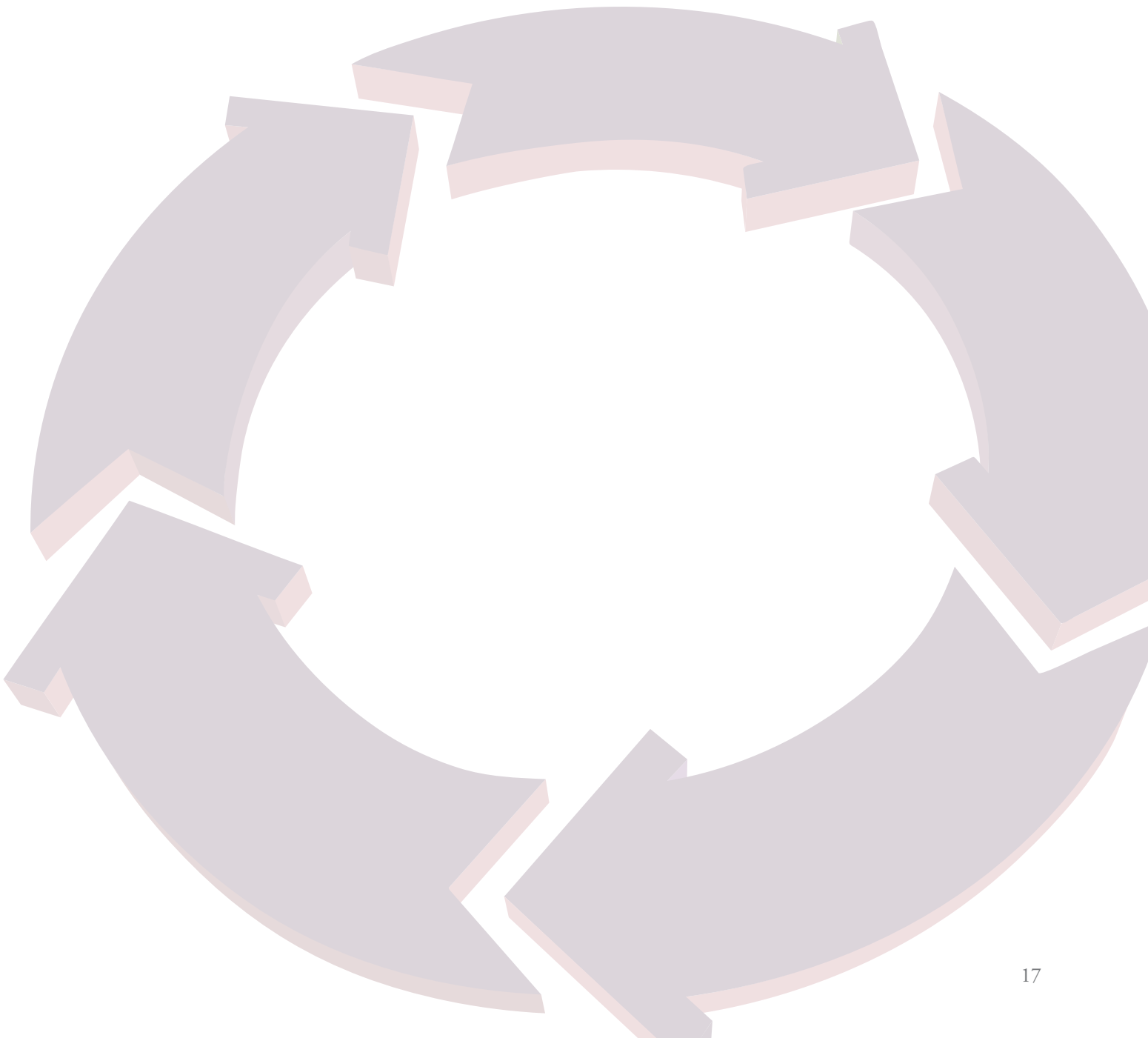
Make the Beneficial Behavior Easier

Lower the “cost of admission” to the behavior you’re trying to increase. For example, break it into small steps so it’s easier to get started. The feeling of accomplishment you get is a reward that will keep you moving toward your goal.

Make the Unhelpful Behavior Harder

Raise the cost of the actions you're trying to avoid. For example, keep cookies out of the house if you're trying not to eat them. If you get the urge to eat cookies, it's easy to grab them if they're right in your cabinet. But if there are none in your house, you're probably not going to go to the trouble of driving to the store to get some.

You can also understand your child's behavior by identifying the patterns of rewards and punishments that are shaping it, both in the long term and the short term. The skills they're learning in their workbook are based on these well-tested principles of behavior change.



Finding Peace When Life Is Stormy

One of the most powerful aspects of mindfulness is the peace it offers even when life is difficult. You can find grounding and stability in the middle of life's storms.

When the rain is pouring down and the wind is fierce, you can be like a mountain that stays true to itself through the storm. You're not a leaf blown this way and that. Instead, you are rooted in the earth's foundation.

It's not easy or automatic to find unconditional peace, but it doesn't require years of practice. It's available when you become the observer of your experience. It's as if you take a half step back from your thoughts and feelings, and just watch what is happening.

This part of your awareness that witnesses everything, including your internal experiences, is like the stage in a theater. The scenes changes from day to day and moment to moment, with different costumes and sets. But there's a constancy to the stage. When you act as the Observer, you watch what is happening on the stage without becoming a part of the drama. You remain in the audience, watching what's unfolding in your awareness.

Metaphors like mountains and stages can point to something true about mindfulness, but nothing can take the place of an actual encounter with mindful awareness. It's best to practice being the Observer when things are fairly calm. If you try it for the first time when everything is hitting the fan, more than likely you'll be too overwhelmed to shift your perspective. Build the practice now so it will be available to you when you need it the most.

You can start by watching your thoughts as they come and go. Begin by taking a nice easy breath in and letting your eyes close (after you've finished reading these instructions). Take a minute to feel where you are—the points of contact between you and what you're sitting on, how your body feels, what emotions are present. Then, let your thoughts take center stage in your awareness. Notice what your mind is doing, keeping that bit of distance between you and your thoughts so you can observe them.

Acknowledge each thought as it arrives, as if you're saying, "I see you. And you. And you..." Allow all thoughts to be as they are, without making any of them "worse" or "better." This stage is open to all actors.

Feel what it's like when the attention gets captured by a thought versus when you're more in the role of the Observer, keeping that sense of perspective on these mental events.

When you're ready, take one more easy breath in and out, and let your eyes open.

Being the observer of your thoughts can be really helpful as you're doing cognitive work in mindful CBT. When you can watch your thoughts, they lose their power over you, because it's easier to recognize that they aren't facts. They're just things the mind makes up.

As the observer, you can find that peace is always right here. You don't have to go looking for it somewhere else or try to manufacture it, because it's a part of you.



Enjoying Mindful Moments with Your Child

Think of one of the best memories you have of being with your child. Picture where you were and what you were doing. Imagine how you felt. Whatever was happening, you probably were right there at the time, really doing what you were doing. You weren't multitasking or rushing to get on to the next thing. Your attention was focused on the present.

We all have spontaneous moments of true presence with our kids, but you don't have to wait for these moments to arise on their own. You can enjoy more times of real connection through practicing mindful awareness.

Bring a light touch to the intention of being more present with your child. Let it be fun and easy, rather than a serious chore that you're intent on doing the "right" way. You can also drop any specific goals for how you're "supposed" to think or feel about the experience. Aiming for a certain outcome takes you out of the moment and puts you at odds with what's actually happening. Allow the time with your child to be exactly what it is. Even if the interaction takes an unpleasant turn that you weren't expecting, receive what is happening instead of resisting it.

Keep in mind that "receiving" and "accepting" don't mean that you're passive or that you don't intervene with your child when you need to. Part of acceptance is accepting when you need to change things. You are still an active agent in your life, even as you're dropping mental and emotional resistance to certain experiences.

Make sure to consider other important factors as you're facilitating moments of mindfulness:

- **Put aside common distractions.** This includes work, email, reading, and smartphones. Make it as easy as possible to be present.
- **Notice your child's physical appearance.** Look at their face, hair, eyes, hands. Listen when they talk, and take in their nonverbal behaviors, too. See them as if for the very first time.

- **Observe your internal states.** Notice what you're feeling and thinking from one moment to the next, and the sensations in your body. Stay in touch with yourself while you're offering your presence to your child.
- **You'll often find that your mind is elsewhere.** At any given moment, you may be thinking about what to make for dinner, that email you need to write, tomorrow's weather forecast, an annoying text from a loved one, and so much more. You can open yourself up to these mind-wandering experiences too, because they are also part of the moment! Then gently bring your attention back to what's happening right here.

See how your child responds when you give them your time and attention. When you're more available to them, they'll find it easier to settle into their time with you because they sense that you don't have to rush off. Enjoy!



Embracing Uncertainty

One of the most powerful facets of mindfulness is becoming more comfortable with uncertainty. Easier said than done, right?

When you care about the outcome, uncertainty creates an internal tension that the mind really wants to resolve. It's trying to do you a favor by making sure things go well for you so you'll be okay.

You want to know a new business venture will succeed. You want reassurance that your kids will be safe. You'd like to know that your life will go well.

But life is inherently uncertain. It's not scripted like a movie you've already seen. You have no idea what will happen next.

Not knowing the future can be terrifying, but it can also be exciting. No one knows how things will turn out! This very unpredictability is what makes life *alive*. We have no idea what the future will look like, including the good surprises ahead.

You probably didn't foresee the best things in your life. I had no idea I would meet my future wife while we were studying abroad in Strasbourg, France, nearly three decades ago. I couldn't have known the opportunities I would find when I left academia.

Choosing with Uncertainty

One of the hardest parts of uncertainty is all the choices you're faced with—and not being clear what the best option is. Sometimes the decisions can be a matter of life or death, such as choosing different medical treatments, or deciding when to remove a loved one from life support. The uncertainty in these decisions can be agonizing. What if you make the wrong choice and regret it for the rest of your life?

The best you can do in these situations is to embrace the uncertainty. *Yes, it's unclear what's best here. Yes, I could make the wrong choice. It's possible things could turn out badly.* That's the very nature of it.

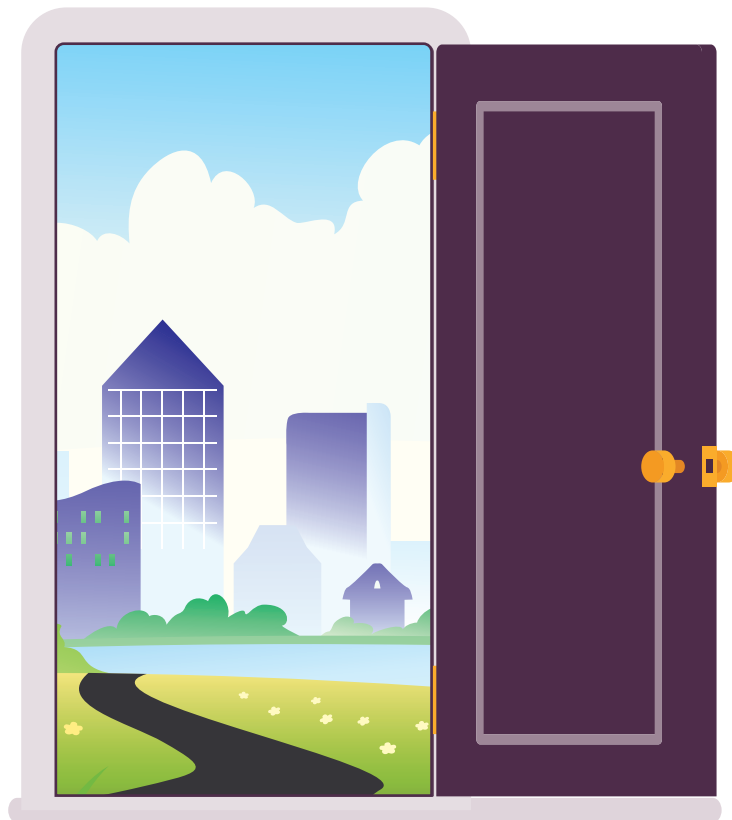
You don't have all the information you want. You can't see the future. No one knows exactly what you ought to do. Still, with all these unknowns, you get to make the choice.

Guarding Against Hindsight Bias

One word of caution: watch out for **hindsight bias**, also known as “Monday morning quarterbacking.” A quarterback’s split-second decision looks brilliant when it works and moronic when it doesn’t. Once we know how that decision turned out—say, an interception—our minds impose that later knowledge on what the quarterback “should have known” before he threw the pass.

In the same way, your mind will probably try to rewrite the past when you know a decision led to a bad outcome, saying you “should have known” how things would turn out.

Remind yourself that you only knew the information you had at the time, not what you learned later on. Otherwise, your mind will second-guess every decision that doesn’t turn out well and convince you that you chose poorly.



Dealing with Anxiety About Your Child

When your child is going through a difficult time, it's a perfect setup for you to feel anxious. You want nothing more than their health and happiness, yet you can't really know how things will go for them (more uncertainty), much less control their well-being.

Unfortunately, our own runaway anxiety isn't helpful when our child is struggling. Your anxiety can add to your child's stress and lead to tension between the two of you.

But there are effective ways to deal with your anxiety so you can feel more at ease and stay effective as a parent. They fall into three categories that I call *Think, Act, and Be*.

Think: Cognitive Practices to Shift Your Thoughts

We've already covered the first component of *Think Act Be*. When your anxiety is ratcheting up, ask yourself what your mind is telling you. It might be predicting that things will get worse and worse, or that your child will never be happy again. I know my own mind can quickly go to scary places when I'm worried about one of our kids.

Start as always by noticing what the story is. Then ask yourself if it's definitely true or if things might turn out differently than you imagine. You don't have to force yourself to believe the new way of thinking! Just be aware that there are other alternatives. Over time, this exercise can start to loosen the mind's grip on anxious expectations.

Act: Behavioral Practices to Release Anxiety

Take constructive action on something you can actually control. For example, if you're concerned about your child's happiness, do one of their favorite activities with them.

You can also do something kind for yourself as an act of self-care, such as making a nice meal for yourself or going for a walk with a friend. Remind yourself to let go of all the things you can't control. If it's not in your power to change it, it's not your responsibility.

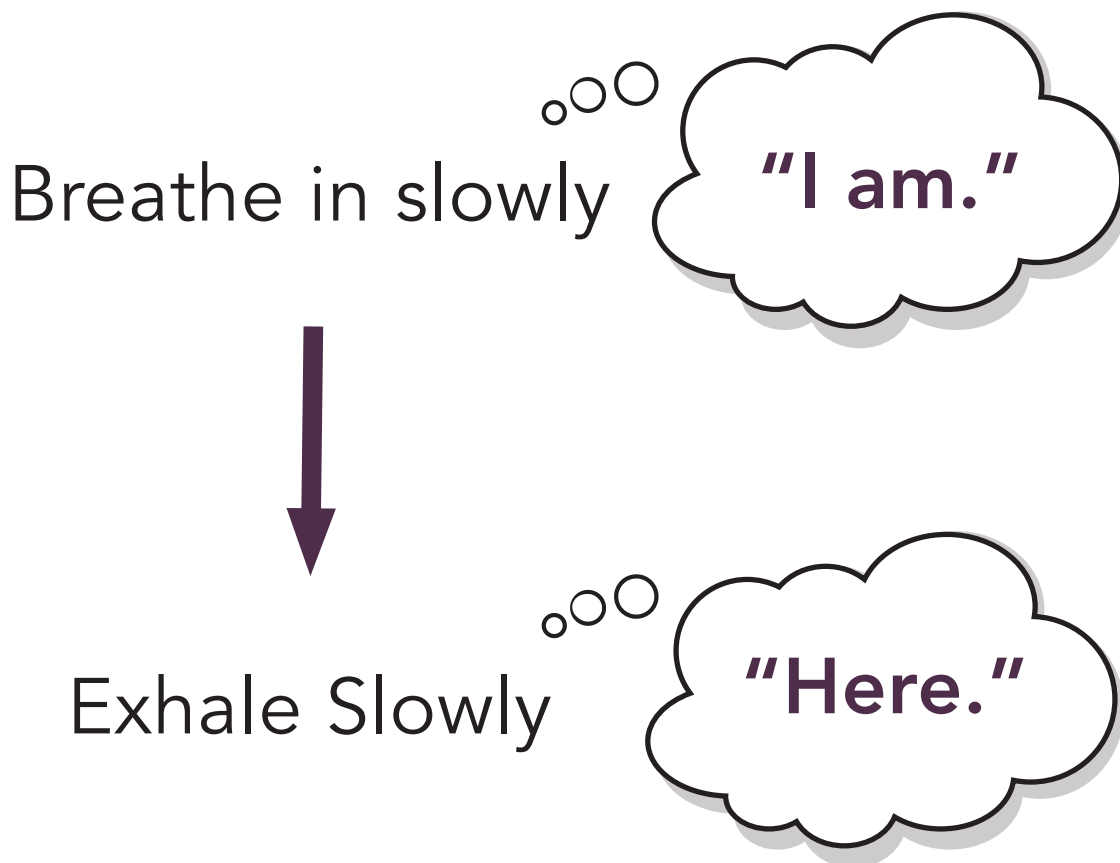
Be: Mindfulness Practices to Rest in the Present

As we've seen, mindfulness can transform your experience of distressing thoughts and physical sensations. Dwelling in the present draws your attention and energy away from frightening fantasies about the future.

This simple exercise can bring you back to yourself when you're feeling overwhelmed.

1. Breathe in slowly as you silently say to yourself, "I am."
2. Exhale slowly as you say to yourself, "Here."
3. Repeat this two-part statement, paired with the breath, a few more times: "I am here." This simple declaration grounds you in your body and in the present, allowing you to release fear about the unknown.

One of the kindest things you can offer yourself when you're highly anxious is self-compassion. It's a gift both for you and for the people in your life.



Building Self-Compassion

When someone you love is hurting, you probably respond automatically with love and concern. You hurt when they're in pain, and you'll do whatever you can to help them feel better.

But most of us have a different reaction to our own pain. We often respond with criticism and blame instead of kindness, and we feel all alone in our struggles.

Withholding self-care in these moments is especially unfortunate since you are the person in the best position to show yourself compassion. You know yourself inside and out, and you're always with yourself.

Fortunately, self-compassion is a skill you can learn (and help your child practice).

You can understand what self-compassion looks like by thinking about what you would do to ease the pain of another person:

1. **You validate their feelings**, saying things such as "That's so hard" or "I would be upset, too!"
2. **You let them know they're not alone** in their struggles, that what they're going through is a normal part of being human.
3. **You try to ease their suffering**. You don't want to leave them in their pain, so you extend yourself to offer some relief.

These three elements reflect the essential parts of self-compassion.

Treat Yourself Kindly

Start by offering yourself some understanding. Let yourself know that your struggles make sense. There's nothing "wrong" with you for hurting right now. It's okay to have exactly the experience you're having. When you hear the voice of self-criticism rise up, choose instead to go easy on yourself.

See Your Shared Humanity

You might feel all alone when you're overwhelmed with difficult feelings. But I guarantee that whatever you're going through is a common part of the human experience. Your troubles aren't really *personal*; you just happen to be the person going through them right now. Remind yourself that life is hard at times for everyone and that, even in this very moment, countless others are dealing with similar stress, loss, worry, confusion, or anything else you're facing.

Find an Open-Hearted Equilibrium

Your practice in mindful awareness can transform your relationship with painful experiences, as we have seen. Even if the pain continues, you can suffer less by being the Observer of your difficulties and letting go of the struggle against what's happening. Breathe and let go of resistance, allowing reality to be as it is right now.

These steps are always available to you. And if you forget to be self-compassionate, you can be kind to yourself about *that*, too!



Cultivating a Growth Mindset

One of the most self-compassionate things you can do is to recognize that you're still growing.

When you make a mistake or don't succeed at something, you don't have to see it as a final judgment of who you are. Rather than telling yourself, "I guess I'll never be good at that," you can say, "I'm still learning."

Fixed versus Growing

Acknowledging to yourself that you are always learning is called a **growth mindset**, according to psychologist Carol Dweck. She contrasts a growth mindset with a **fixed mindset**, where you see your current abilities as all you'll ever have.

With a fixed mindset, you see yourself as a machine, which doesn't naturally get better and better. A four-cylinder car doesn't evolve into a six-cylinder car.

No matter how much "practice" a car gets, it doesn't get faster or better. Its abilities are set when it comes off the assembly line.

But you're more like a plant than a machine. Plants develop over time, given the right conditions. A seed sprouts. A tiny sapling grows. Plants get bigger and stronger, and may eventually bear fruit.

It's easier to see the potential for growth in kids, who are changing all the time. Babies learn to talk and walk, toddlers stop falling down all the time, little kids learn how to read.

But it's harder to see your own ability to keep growing, as if your development ended when you became an adult. This limited perception of yourself is reinforced if you stop yourself from trying new things, which leaves you with the assumption that you would have failed if you'd tried.

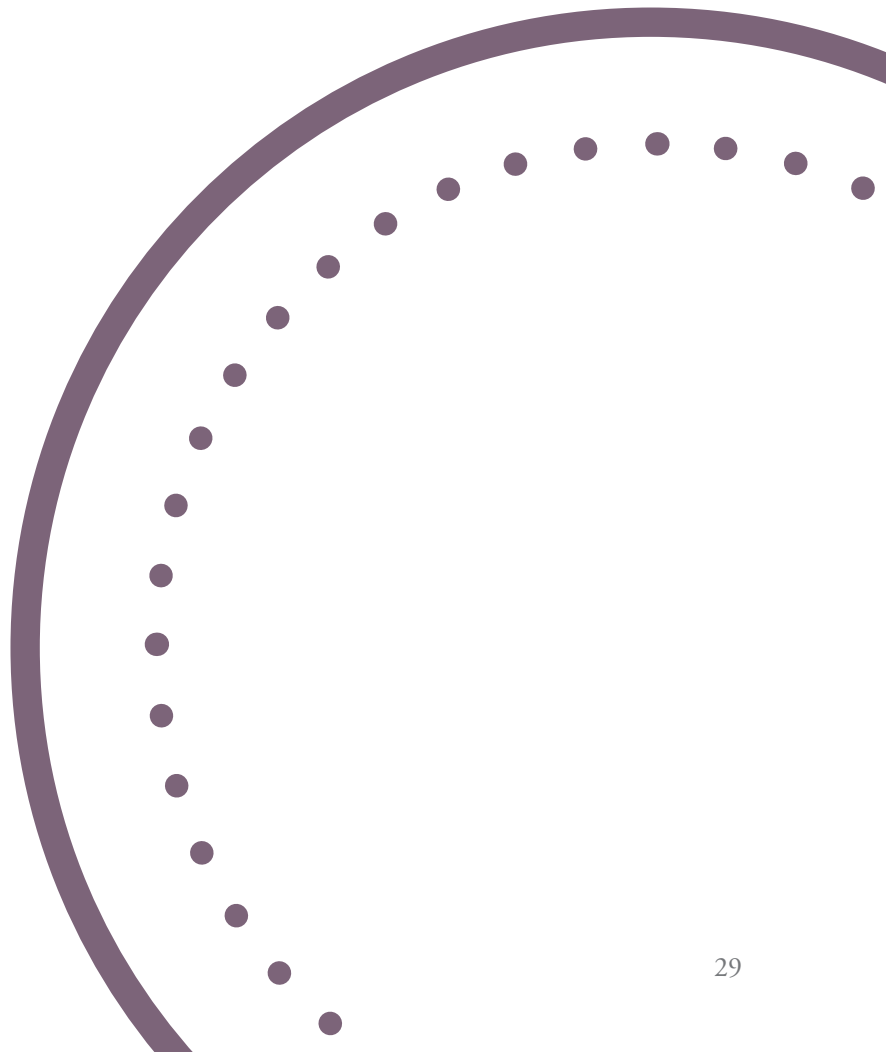
Perfect in Your Imperfections

Part of a growth mindset is seeing that your current limitations are not a personal failing. Seeds and babies are limited, too, but they're still perfectly whole. There's nothing deficient about a baby who can't walk, and you're still whole even as you have areas where you'll continue to grow.

Think about your own reaction when you've failed at something. Do you often react with a fixed mindset, seeing yourself as not "the kind of person" who can do that? Or do you expect to get better as you learn and grow?

If you tend toward a fixed mindset, take heart: **Your mindset itself isn't fixed!** You can grow your growth mindset with awareness and practice.

Remind yourself that you're still learning, and that who you are today is not the final version of who you are becoming.



Reducing Unhelpful Family Responses

If you have a child who's struggling, you want to do what you can to make things easier for them. This impulse often leads to **family accommodation**, in which family members change their behavior to try to ease the child's distress.

For example, parents might avoid talking about certain topics that trigger their child's anxiety, or family members might leave their shoes by the door because a child has obsessive fears about dirt and contamination. You can probably think of ways your own family has made accommodations.

While these behaviors come from a place of love and compassion, research shows that they tend to make things worse for everyone. Rather than providing lasting relief for your child, they learn that they can be okay only if their family makes these adjustments.

Eventually, the accommodations lead to stress and tension, as family members start to resent having to shape their actions around the child's distress.

Rewards and Punishment

However, it's not easy to break the cycle of family accommodation. Both the child and their family find short-term rewards when the child's distress is reduced—the child by feeling less upset and the family through the peace the accommodations can bring.

Initially, it can be punishing for all parties when the accommodations stop and your child's distress becomes a pain point for everyone in the family.

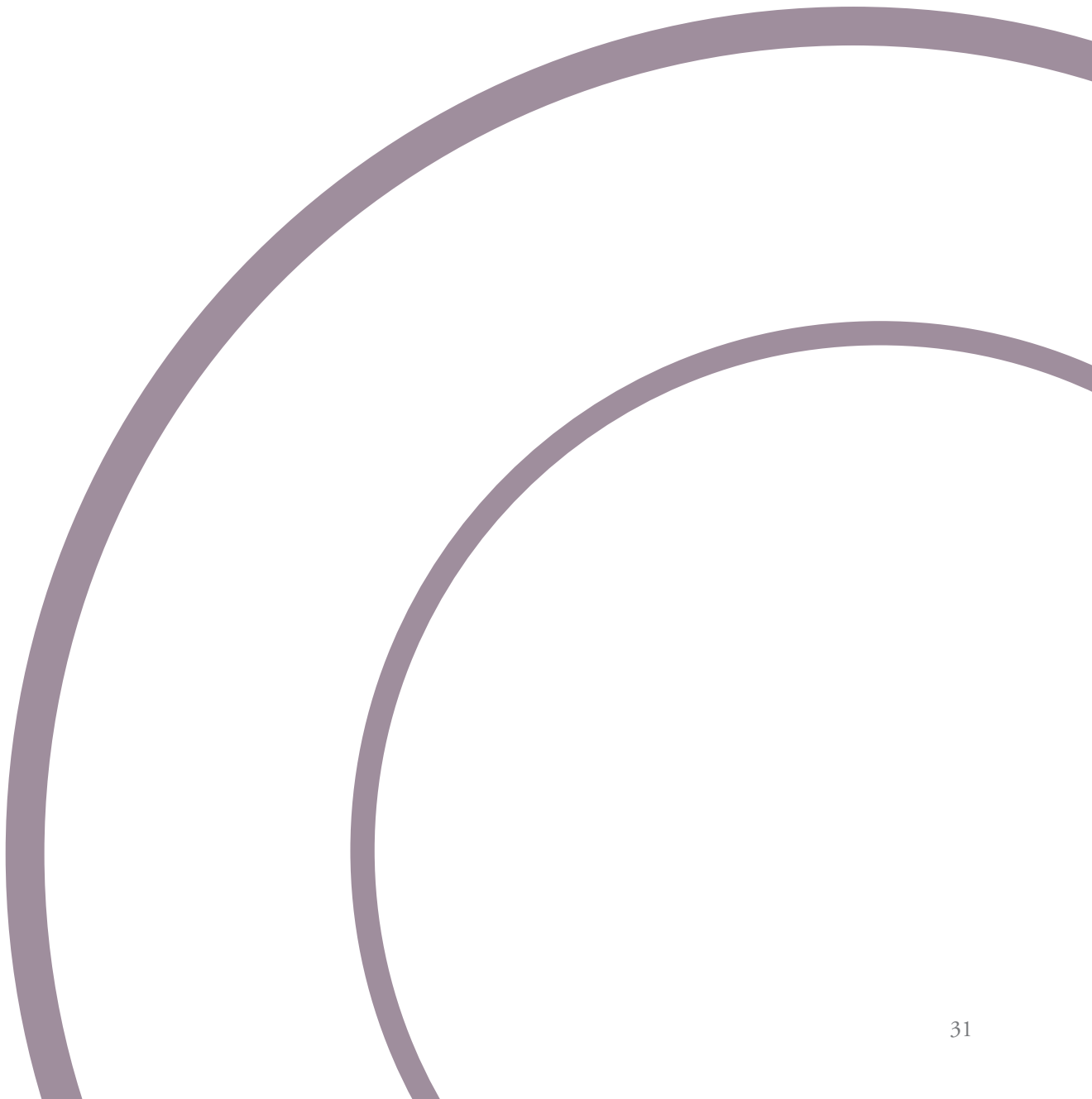
Finding Balance

The challenge for us as parents is to be loving and compassionate while at the same time avoiding accommodations. You probably had a lot of practice with finding this balance when your child was a toddler: "I know you're upset, but we have to get in the car now." "I'm sorry you're so sad to leave the pool, but we need to go home and make dinner."

You can bring this same spirit to helping your older child who's dealing with things like anxiety, validating their feelings without offering short-term fixes that don't help in the long run.

If you're already doing a lot of accommodation, you can talk openly with your child about how it's not in their best interest. As you prepare to gradually stop accommodating, you can help your child to develop the skills for handling their challenges (such as the practices in *The Mindful CBT Workbook for Kids*).

It's often a good idea to consult with a family therapist who understands the things your child is dealing with. They can offer ideas and support as you and your family adjust to a new relationship with your child and their struggles.



Encouraging a Coping Focus

A common part of family accommodation is giving reassurance. When a child is anxious or worried, it's a natural impulse to want to let them know that everything will be all right. You'll be even more inclined to offer reassurance when they're clearly asking for it.

For example, your child might be afraid that no one will want to play with them at recess, and so you might tell them, "Of course kids will want to play with you!" These kinds of reactions can help our kids feel less anxious in the moment.

However, reassurance often feeds the cycle of anxiety and worry. When our child's mind sends up a worried "What if...?" we try to squash the worry with reassurance: "No no, that won't happen." But what does the mind do? It comes back with more worry: "Yes, but *what if...?*"

From "What If...?" to "If..Then"

Every worry actually contains two fears: 1) something bad is going to happen, and 2) I won't be able to handle it. We usually focus on the first fear, telling ourselves or our kids that things will be okay.

But on some level, the mind knows that nothing is guaranteed. Even if what it's worried about is extremely unlikely and has never happened before, it could happen this time. It's not outside the realm of possibility.

This means your reassurance is at best a temporary fix, like feeding a dog when it begs for food. The mind learns to keep coming back for more reassurance when it's anxious and doesn't find longer-lasting peace.

It's often helpful to shift the focus from the first fear to the second, which also isn't based in fact. In reality, we can handle the problems we face.

See what it's like to guide your child away from "What if...?" thinking and toward "If...then" when they're anxious. Help them see how they would find a way through the bad thing they're worried could happen.

You might let them know that their fear is unlikely to come true (fear 1) without promising that everything will go the way they want it to: "I really don't think that will happen."

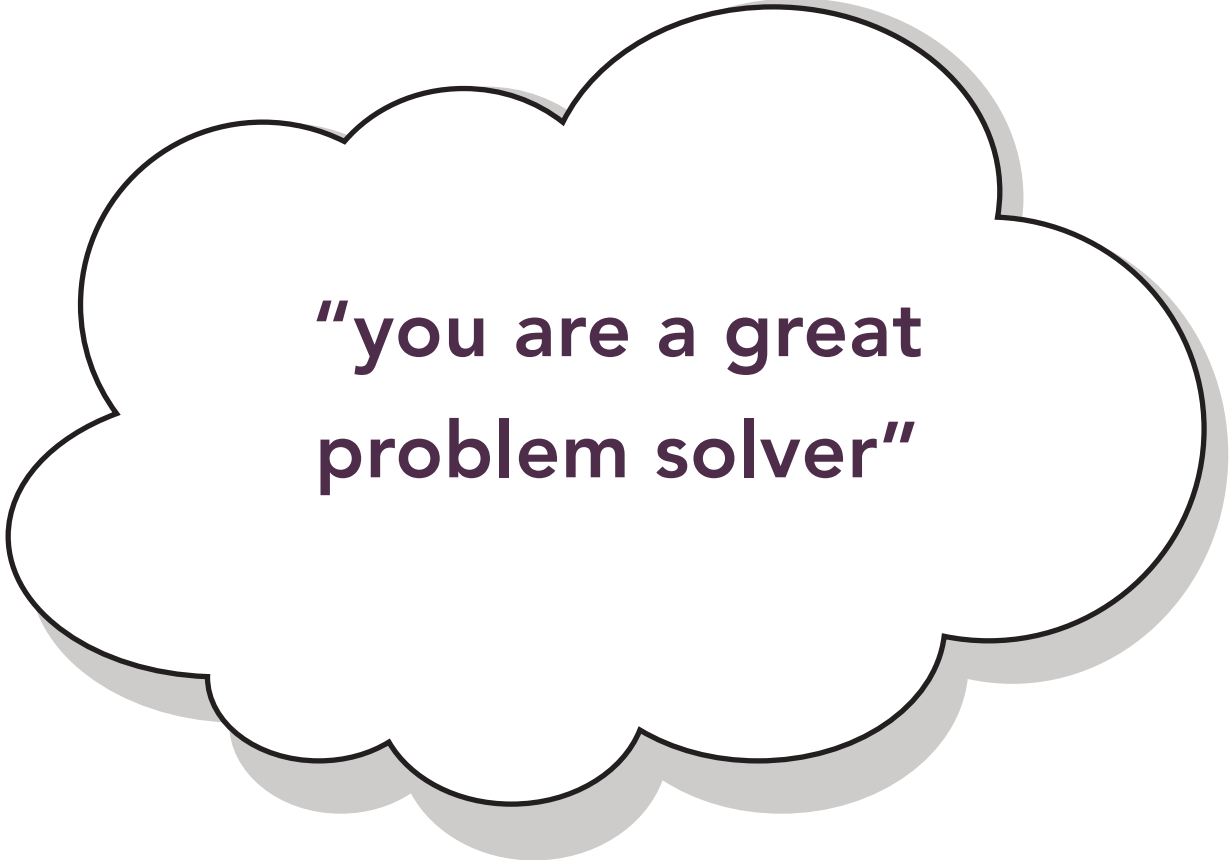
Then, address fear 2 by exploring with them how they would deal with the feared problem:

- What options would they have for solving it?
- Who could they ask for help?
- What similar challenges have they handled already?

A coping focus is good for adults, too. When you find yourself worrying, remind yourself that you are a great problem solver. It's not as if your life has been all rainbows and roses. Think of the many problems you've already lived through and taken care of.

You can handle the difficult things that come your way. Even if you're momentarily overwhelmed, you will find your way through, just as you always have.

The same strength that has brought you this far can carry you through whatever else you face.



**"you are a great
problem solver"**

Practicing Assertiveness with Your Child

One of the best ways to raise assertive kids is to model assertive behavior. Still, it's not easy to be assertive. A popular misunderstanding confuses being assertive with being aggressive—that to assert oneself is to “show them who's boss.”

But assertiveness is a more challenging goal, because it requires us to *balance* our needs with those of the other person. You meet as equals, respecting their rights as well as your own.

The following elements can help to shape an assertive conversation with your child when you need to talk through a challenging issue with them.

Focus on Facts

Express things you've observed directly, rather than making assumptions and inferences or reading intention into their actions.

For example, say that you noticed they left their bike out in the rain rather than asking why they don't care about their belongings.

Understand and Validate Their Feelings

Invite your child to share their thoughts and feelings about the situation. Give them time and space to express themselves, and ask them if there's more they want to say.

Reflect back to them what you heard to make sure you understand. Let your child know that their feelings are completely valid, even if you disagree with their reasoning or disapprove of their actions.

Be Clear About the Boundary

Let your child know the rule or limit that you want them to respect and why it's important to you. For example, remind them that you expect them to put their bike away because it cost a good deal of money and you don't want the rain to damage it.

Approach this part of the discussion with the goal of partnering with them to find a solution. That means you want to bring them along with you if at all possible, rather than making them feel bad about themselves or hopeless about pleasing you.

It might help to imagine how you would want a loved one to let you know that you had done something they didn't like.

Collaborate Toward a Solution

Finally, work toward a solution in the same spirit of partnership. Consider both your perspective and needs as well as your child's, based on what they shared with you.

Aim to respect their feelings and your own. You're working together as equals—not that you have the same role or power but that you are both full human beings with needs and rights.

Working on assertiveness with your child might seem laborious at first, and more complicated than just controlling kids through a show of force. But with this style of parenting, you'll be creating an open channel of communication that you and your child share and that will continue throughout the years.

How Can I Help My Child?

There are many ways to help your child when they're having a hard time. Some good options include:

- **Talk with your child about their mental health.** Check in to see how they're doing. Speak openly about any concerns you have, listen closely, and reflect back what you heard to be sure you understand. Let the tone be somewhat light, rather than alarming your child with a sense of urgency or panic. Your equanimity in these discussions will pave the way for an open, ongoing dialogue.
- **Find them a therapist.** Therapy can be invaluable for your child. A good therapist can not only help your child but can help you to support your child's work in therapy. Ask your child's pediatrician for a recommendation, or see the Resources section for searchable databases.
- **Go to therapy yourself.** If you're having a hard time dealing with your child's difficulties, finding your own therapist can be extremely helpful.
- **Balance love and understanding with clear expectations.** Research shows that an "authoritative" style of parenting tends to be most effective. Your child will benefit from validation and support coupled with firm limits. (For more, see the section on Reducing Unhelpful Family Responses.)
- **Help your child complete their workbook.** Talk with your child about how much they want you to be involved as they work through their workbook. For example, they might want you to be available only if they have questions and ask for your help, or they might want you to go through it with them page by page.

- **Encourage them to spend time outdoors.** A growing number of studies shows that spending more time outside has all kinds of health benefits, from better physical health and social connections to greater mental focus and less anxiety. Beware of excessive screen time and social media use, which can get in the way of outside time and accentuate as negative social comparisons.
- **Safeguard their sleep and diet.** Sleep is foundational for your child's overall well-being. Help them keep a regular sleep schedule where they go to bed and wake up at about the same time each day. Encourage them also to eat a healthful diet low in processed foods and high in fruits and vegetables. (I know this can be challenging.) Research studies show that sound nutrition plays a key role in both physical and mental health. For example, the so-called Mediterranean diet has been shown to prevent and treat depression.
- **Be present.** Even one supportive relationship with a caring adult can be tremendously protective for young people's emotional wellness. Go beyond physical presence to offer your child your full attention whenever possible. Their connection with you can help them to be resilient when they run into challenges.

Resources for Parents and Kids

Psychology Today Therapist Directory

psychologytoday.com/us/therapists

Find a therapist in your area, either for you or your child, with this online directory. If you don't find a good fit with someone you can see in person, teletherapy may be an option.

Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies Therapist Directory

findCBT.org/FAT

Search ABCT's online database to find a therapist who specializes in CBT. Not everyone who uses CBT is listed, but those who are tend to have a solid background in the approach.

International OCD Foundation

kids.iocdf.org

The IOCDF provides lots of helpful articles and links for parents of kids with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Their search feature can help you find a therapist who specializes in the best-supported OCD treatment.

Anxiety and Depression Association of America

adaa.org

The ADAA's website offers lots of information for kids and adults with anxiety and depression.

The Waking Up App

wakingup.com

There are many apps that will introduce you to the practice of mindfulness, and Waking Up is my favorite. It offers an extremely clear introductory course as well as hours of thought-provoking interviews and talks. There are also meditations for kids. Scholarships are available for those with financial need.

Insight Timer

insighttimer.com

For a free alternative, try Insight Timer, which offers thousands of hours of guided meditations that address issues like stress, anxiety, and trouble sleeping.

The CBT Deck

bit.ly/The_CBT_Deck

I created a card deck of daily practices to make it easier to build helpful habits and boost well-being. Each card in the deck offers a specific practice in mindful CBT. Use one card per day to practice the essentials of Think Act Be.

The CBT Deck for Kids and Teens

bit.ly/CBT_Kids

I developed a version of the card deck for kids and teens with my older daughter Ada, who found my first deck helpful when she went through intense anxiety and panic in elementary school. This deck features a larger format and color illustrations on each card, and builds on the skills from *The Mindful CBT Workbook*.

Mindful Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

bit.ly/Mindful_CBT

This book describes the power of integrating mindfulness and CBT, including how to use the practices in your everyday life. In addition to my experience with people I've treated in therapy, I also share my own struggle with a long physical illness and subsequent depression, and how mindful CBT helped me.