

Chapter One

Step 1: Put on Your Own Oxygen Mask First

“Nothing has a stronger influence psychologically...on children than the unlived life of the parent.”

—Carl Jung

CONFESSIONS OF A SELFISH MOTHER

To my friends and neighbors, my life seems pretty crazy. “You’re doing too much,” people tell me constantly. I write a blog, and I of course wrote this book. I run the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley. I give several talks a month about raising happy kids, and I teach a parenting class, which I love doing. I’m active on committees at schools and our church. I try to pick up my kids from school several times a week. I’m fortunate that my work hours are flexible, which means I do a lot of my work at, um, 4:30 in the morning.

I think the key to staying sane (and healthy) as an involved working parent is actually to do more rather than less: more for yourself, that is. I try to go to the gym several days a week, even though the classes I like best are occasionally during prime family time. I try to spend a good deal of time with my friends, with and without the kids, eating out, sharing belly laughs and soulful confessions. I paint and I read for pleasure. I go on meditation retreats. I might be doing a lot, but I am often wildly happy by any measure.

The only time that I don’t do so well is when I let the balance shift too far toward taking care of my children’s every need before my own. I get strep throat whenever I am run-down. When I was trying to finish writing this book, I wasn’t getting enough sleep (if I wake up at 4:30 a.m. to get my work done, I have to go to sleep when the kids do), and I’d been to the gym only twice in a few weeks. I’d been working a lot, so I was always trying to maximize my time with the kids. To get back on track, I knew I needed to spend more time with my friends than I had been, and I needed to have some downtime— without the kids—doing something that nourished my soul. If I didn’t? In addition to the strep throat, I started to feel fried and snippy with the kids. So instead of making the most of my limited time with Molly and Fiona, our interactions were colored by how quickly I became irritated with them because I was so tired and stressed. What I

needed to do was trade time with my children for “me time” to exercise or hang out with friends.

Doing this seems pretty selfish, especially for someone who is so wholeheartedly committed to my child-rearing project. Am I selfish? Should I be working less and spending more time with the kids, or working more in order to provide greater economic stability? Should I be making more and bigger personal sacrifices for my children? Would my kids benefit from more time with me? Would they be happier or better prepared for adulthood if I joined them riding bikes at the local elementary school instead of painting on Sunday afternoons? Is it narcissistic to even think that my children’s well-being improves with each additional minute they spend with me?

I know the answers to these questions: my own personal happiness, nourished by the time I take for myself, benefits my children. I’ve read the scientific studies that prove this.

So out with the guilt, and in with the joy. This chapter will tell you why it is so important that you put your own oxygen mask on first— why you should take care of your own happiness before you try to teach your kids the skills they’ll need to be happy. Along the way you’ll get a tour of the rest of the book and a lot of tips for how to be happy yourself.

This chapter is also about that other thing that is so important to take care of before you take care of your kids: your marriage, if you’ve got one, or your relationship with your children’s other parent, if you’ve got that. The quality of a marriage is a huge component of parents’ happiness, and it can have a huge influence on our children. So much so that more than half of this chapter is dedicated to getting along with your co-parent.

Fix your marriage, you say? But aren’t you single? It’s true: all the science-based advice given below related to keeping a marriage strong didn’t work for me, and believe me, I tried. I thought that I could fix my marriage through the sheer force of my own will. But I couldn’t, and now I know that no amount of effort would have fixed it.

So some of you are probably thinking that you shouldn’t take my advice about marriage because it didn’t work for me. The great thing, though, is that all of the advice in this book is based on scientific research, not my opinion. Which is good, because actually I’ve failed at a lot more than just marriage. Come to think of it, I have failed at least once in just about everything I espouse in this book. For example, there are long periods of time in my life when I’ve failed to practice gratitude (Chapter 4), and when I’ve neglected my friendships (Chapter 2). I spent my childhood as a perfectionist and

fixed–mind-set thinker (Chapter 3). I’ve been too permissive in my parenting at times; other times I’ve been too bossy (Chapter 7). I twice chose terrible child care for my children (Chapter 9). I have made a lot of mistakes as a parent.

Which is why I’m a big fan of social science. I have learned and grown as a person and a parent by mining all this research for ways to correct my mistakes. Often what I’ve found is that the research points me in a direction that is totally different from the path that I was on before, or backs up something I thought I knew but just wasn’t sure of. One of the most important things I’ve learned? Take care of yourself and your marriage first. Before you start worrying about raising happy kids, get yourself—and your marriage if you’ve got one—to a happier place.

WHY PUT YOUR OWN HAPPINESS FIRST?

Our own happiness as parents influences our children’s happiness in a variety of ways. Extensive research has established a substantial link between mothers who feel depressed and “negative outcomes” in their children, such as acting out and other behavior problems. Parental depression actually seems to cause behavior problems in kids; it also makes our parenting less effective. It bothers kids to see their parents upset and unhappy, and kids’ bad behavior expresses this. Depressed parents are also less effective in their parenting, so they are less likely to correct bad behavior in constructive ways. Depressed mothers tend to be less sensitive and proactive in responding to their children’s needs, and they are less likely to play with their children in emotionally positive ways. The children of mothers who are chronically depressed—those whose feelings of sadness and despair persist—perform worse on tests of school readiness, they use less expressive language, and they have poorer social skills. And it isn’t just depression. Anxiety in mothers (something I’m prone to) is associated with increased anxiety in children.

So if I fail to put my own oxygen mask on first (by not getting the sleep or exercise I need, for example) and I become depressed or chronically anxious, my children may suffer. There is also compelling evidence for the flip side of this equation: when I do what it takes for my own happiness, my children will reap the benefits.

The first reason this is true is simply that kids mimic their parents, especially when the kids are younger. Children imitate their parents’ emotions as early as six days old; it is one of the primary ways that they learn and grow. So if we model happiness—and all the skills that go with it—our kids are likely to imitate what we do. If I model key

happiness habits such as kindness and generosity, for example, my daughters are more likely to become kind and generous.

And because research shows that people's emotions tend to converge—we become more similar emotionally the more we are together—it follows that the happier I am, the happier my children will be. My friend and colleague Dacher Keltner (we run the Greater Good Science Center together) and his colleagues conducted an interesting series of experiments that show that people in close relationships become more similar to each other over time. The researchers documented that the emotions and emotional reactions of friends and lovers actually become more alike over the course of a year. Moreover, it is the person with the least power in a relationship who becomes more emotionally similar to the other. This is why parents who tend to explain things optimistically tend to have kids who mimic their explanatory styles—as humans, we're wired for mimicry. Another study attempting to determine how much shared genetics account for the similar emotional outlooks of parents and children came up short: although the study did find that happy parents are statistically more likely to have happy children, it couldn't find any genetic component. Like those of roommates and lovers, the emotions of children and parents can be very similar, but not because the people involved are cut from the same cloth, so to speak.

Emotions in general are just plain contagious (more on this in Chapter 5). A political scientist from the University of California, San Diego, and a Harvard sociologist have recently documented that happiness is particularly contagious. Their conclusion, which is based on an analysis of people's social connections over twenty years, is that our happiness depends in part on the happiness of the people we are connected to. Having happy friends, neighbors, and siblings who live in close proximity to you (as adults) increases your odds of being happy. In other words, the positive emotions of one community member spread readily to others.

So I say, take the advice of the airlines: put on your oxygen mask first and then help those around you. I'm not saying don't help those around you; I'm saying that should you become faint from lack of oxygen, you won't be much good to anyone at all. Speaking for myself, I've found that a certain core of peace and centeredness is necessary before I can really be engaged in raising happy, compassionate, and confident children.

HOW TO BE HAPPY

Realize that true happiness lies within you. Waste no time and effort searching for peace and contentment and joy in the world outside. Remember that there is no happiness in having or in getting, but only in giving. Reach out. Share. Smile. Hug.

—Og Mandino

Scientists have recently had a lot to say—handily explained for you in this book—about what it takes to find true happiness and meaning in life. Although the focus of this book is on children and how to teach them the skills they need for happiness, most of the same principles apply to adults. It is never too late to become a happier person, even if you had an unhappy childhood yourself. Although we scientists once believed that there was a “happiness set point”—that no matter what we do, we mostly stay or return to about the same level of happiness throughout our lives—we now have compelling evidence that this simply isn’t so. Consider, for example, that the happiness level of adults in one large study changed significantly over seventeen years for fully 25 percent of the participants. Ten percent of participants’ happiness levels changed by three points or more on a ten-point scale. So happiness is better thought of as a collection of habits rather than a genetically endowed trait.

There are lots of ways to increase your happiness, and some aren’t necessarily better than others. My blog readers once incited a heated debate about whether or not it is better to, say, save the planet or take care of women in a shelter than it is to spend time on yourself in order to re-center and rejuvenate. I am all for altruism as a route to lasting happiness, and I spend a good deal of time volunteering; Chapter 2 covers the hows and whys of finding happiness through helping others. That said, I tend to see the parents around me giving and doing for everyone else first before taking care of their own needs. Here are some simple things you can do this week to get a little more oxygen.

Go out with your friends and have a few laughs. Our well-being is best predicted by how connected we feel to other people. Do we have lots of friends? Know our neighbors? Are we close to our extended family? Care about our co-workers? People with a lot of social connections are less likely to experience sadness, loneliness (duh), low self-esteem, and problems with eating and sleeping.

So to bring on some lasting happiness, we need to nurture our social connections over the long haul. But a date night or a poker night or a girls’ night out can—not surprisingly—bring us instant happiness as well, and I’m not talking about the kind you imbibe. The laughter we share with our buddies (or anyone, really) literally changes our

body chemistry by retarding that pesky fight-or-flight stress system. A good guffaw—or even a little giggle—causes our heart rate and blood pressure to drop and our muscles to relax.

Because laughter is contagious, hang out with friends or family members who are likely to be laughing themselves. Their laughter will get you laughing, too, although it doesn't even need to in order to lighten your mood. Neuroscientists believe that hearing another person laugh triggers mirror neurons in a region of the brain that makes listeners feel as though they are actually laughing themselves. For more information about how social connections build our happiness foundations, skip straight to Chapters 2 and 5.

Have your kids or partner give you a massage or a pedicure. There really is such a thing as a magic touch. Like laughter, being touched in a positive way can also trigger biochemical reactions that make us feel good. Getting a massage or being touched—even just briefly—by a loved one can increase activation in the orbitofrontal cortex, a part of the brain where we feel pleasure. Touch also reduces the cardiovascular stress response and decreases our levels of stress hormones such as cortisol. Touch is essential to our physical and mental well-being; without it we wither and perish.

So a massage is a very appropriate and highly recommended happiness booster, not just a frivolous luxury. Dacher's research shows that touch is the primary language of compassion, trust, love, and gratitude. It promotes the release of oxytocin in our systems, which will make us feel more bonded to the person giving the massage.

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