

"An overdue breath of fresh air,"

Dr Lauren Turin

"Every parent should read this book.

It's chock full of pearls of wisdom." Dr Sadie Rutter

DEPRESSION PROOFING OUR KIDS

**How to beat the "blues" and raise
resilient children who grow up to
lead lives of fulfilment and joy**

MOLLY IRELAND

DEPRESSION-PROOFING OUR KIDS

**How to beat the 'blues' and raise resilient
children who grow up to lead lives of fulfilment
and joy**

by Molly Ireland

DEPRESSION-PROOFING OUR KIDS

Published by Molly Ireland

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ISBN 978-0-973-29928-1

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Illustrations by Jerome Van Rijn

<https://edenpark.co.nz/about/art-collection/jerome-van-rijn/>

Cover design by <http://vcbookcovers.com>

Proofreading, editing, typesetting, printing and binding by

PublishMe, New Plymouth, New Zealand

www.publishme.co.nz

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank my four incredible daughters, Isabella, Chiara, Emma, and Francesca, for making this climb with me. You have taught and continue to teach me so much.

I would also like to acknowledge my clients, who have trusted me with their pain and vulnerability over the years.

This book would never have been possible without you
all.



“Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light.”

Brené Brown

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About the Author

Molly Ireland is a certified Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) Master Practitioner, Instructor (NZANLP) and personal well-being coach (ICI). She specialises in the reduction of anxiety, depression and other mental health disorders. Since Molly's husband committed suicide in 2008, she has helped thousands of families find hope and healing.

She trains elementary, intermediate, and secondary school teachers to better support students and their families who are at risk of depression and other mental health conditions. She also works with people of all ages to transform depressive thinking styles and beliefs by helping them to re-write their personal and family 'stories.'

Molly lives in Wellington, New Zealand with her geriatric chihuahua. Her first book, *Facing The Dark: A Journey Into Suicide* was published in 2019.

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Introduction

Depression-proofing our children - is it even possible? Yes, but first we have to take back the power we've given away in thinking about it. We have to focus on the ways we think about depression and how we disempower ourselves and our families. We also have to think about how, often daily, we model depressive behaviours and dark thinking styles without realising it. We have to look at ourselves courageously and with great honesty. These are a few of the things depression asks of us.

I'm not a doctor, and this book is *not* about the treatment of depression. If you're reading this and are concerned about a young person (or anyone else for that matter) in your life, then I encourage you to get professional help right away. If you or someone in your life is a danger either to themselves or others, please seek professional help immediately. I have listed the free Australia and New Zealand helplines at the back of this book to help you do so. There are also some great resources there to manage depression.

What follows in this book is *not* medical advice. It does not vouch for or against antidepressants and the current medical view of depression. Fundamentally it is about the mindset we need and the things we can do to help children stay depression-free for life. It also attempts to provide something beyond that offered by the traditional medical profession. It focuses on the choices that you have in both thinking about and relating to depressive

episodes in yourself and others.

This is a book about preventing depressive episodes in the first place, or at least recovering from them more quickly when they start tainting our lives. I hope to help you relate to yourself and the young people in your care in healthier and more joyful ways. Following the depression-proof approach will help you and your children take back your personal power, both mentally and emotionally.

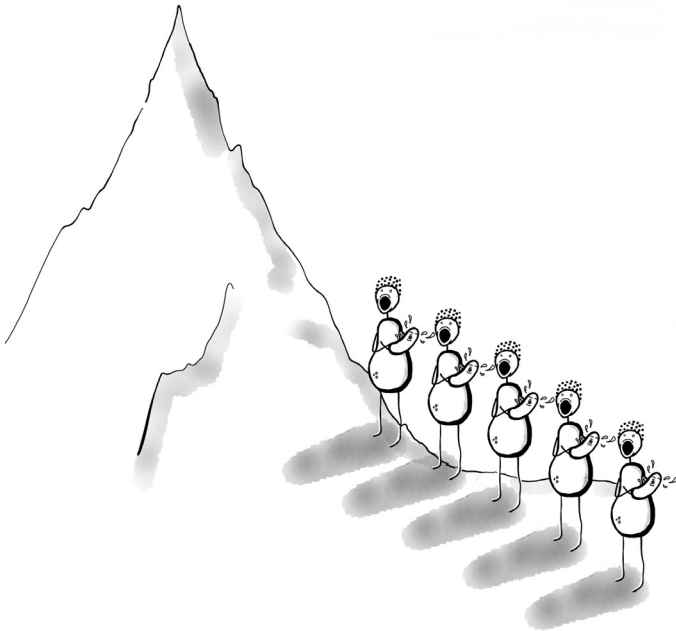
I do not attempt to cover all aspects of depression here. My intention is to give you back the power you have over this tremendously disempowering condition. I want you to understand that, regardless of which healing path you've chosen, there are ways you can relate to depression that are helpful. There are steps you can take as you heal yourself and your loved ones to help you assume control of your own destiny.

**“It takes a lot of love . . .
To keep your heart from freezing,
To push on to the end.”**

David Gray



SECTION I: THE PARENTING CLIMB



The Climb is Steep

Parenting is arduous, much like mountain climbing. And it's a climb for life. The good news is, however, that while the climb has many steep parts as well as downward inclines, it also has many plateaus and beautiful vistas that offer us a chance to rest, regroup and take in the scenery. And recharge we must, for, depending on our individual children, we know the climb can become difficult again at any moment, regardless of how old they are.

My parenting climb has had many dips, including my own depression, which started after the birth of my second daughter and became worse over time. When I gave birth to the twins, I was really in a bad way. One of the most important things I learned from my depression was to prioritise me. It was a hard lesson for me to learn, and I still stumble on it occasionally, but when I'm able to take good care of myself first and foremost, it transforms everything. As long as I remember to take in the beautiful scenery and relax into caring for me — especially when all my children are in a good place — then I can sustain the journey.

Up We Go

The day I became a mother changed everything. My body ached but my heart and soul were elated. In the moment of relief after she was born, I looked to the 'summit' in the distance.

The magnitude of the task seemed immense, and I felt somehow undersized, unprepared, and undeserving. She was freshly born, but I was worn out. And everyone said that the real work hadn't even started yet.

During each climb, I watched the morning sun settle on my daughter's folds, dips and elevations. I caressed their sleeping forms with my eyes, and the intensity of the love I felt elevated me and gave me a sense of purpose that strengthened and grounded me as I climbed.

Before becoming a mother, I'd never felt so much love. I didn't even know I was capable of it. My expectations for how I thought my children should turn out was my greatest enemy. And my greatest ally has been to meet them directly for who they actually are, not for who I wished or expected them to become. I was told the trip would be arduous but that it would go fast, really fast, and that I should "enjoy every moment." But I struggled to remember this advice during sleepless nights, tantrums, and worries about the decisions I'd made along the way. The sheer exhaustion of the quest overtook my ideals of what I thought it would and should be so many times that I finally abandoned them in the ashes of my ego. And it's wonderful that I did because in setting them aside, I have become an amazing mother, but not a perfect one. And for this I am grateful. My mistakes cracked my heart wide open, and now I have more love to give, not only to my own children but to all of humanity.

My children belong to me always and then again they

never have and never will. Holding this paradox firmly in both hands, I continue navigating the parenting climb in a way of which I am proud: a way that strengthens everyone I come into contact with. I often feel as if I'd created these children single-handedly. And they are fabulous. Coming to my senses, I realise that these feelings for the mountain's summit are imaginary, and don't have anything to do with me. But the truth is that I am, and will always be, a part of them. I made this steep climb with every one of my four girls. I know that all of our children belong to the universe, or in the words of poet Kahlil Gibran are, "the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself." They truly are the expression of a universal consciousness of which we are all a part.

Yet, the same blood does circulate in our veins. We're made from the same eternal stardust. When my four daughters used to ask me which one of them was my favourite, I would reply, "You are one of my limbs and I have four of them. My right arm isn't any more special than the left - it's just different - and I love you all." While this message was never satisfying, at least to them, it was as close to the truth as I could get.

Occasionally on this climb I still stumble, and when I do, a shadowy figure joins me from the other side of the mountain. My mother's fiercely critical face hits me before I can actually see her. She moves in my direction and, as she does, I notice that standing by her side is my grandmother, wearing the same expression. Moving

towards me with the same stride, purposeful and intent, they usher in swirling gusts of mixed emotion.

Parenting With the Generations

While the parenting climb consists of moments of great joy, appreciation, and certainty, it also delivers many that are the polar opposite. But even if we're a single parent, we're never completely alone.

We parent with the generations tucked securely inside us like dusty photographs lining the fireplace mantles of our living rooms.

Our mothers, fathers, and grandparents tag along on every parenting journey, regardless of whether or not they're still alive or if we want them to. Their struggles, beliefs and expectations stick closely to our sides, their voices go with us in profound ways, giving expression to our lives.

If we're happy to raise our children the way our parents did, then their presence can bring great comfort. If we'd like to do things differently, however, we need to know that the more we resist the influence of our parents, the stronger it becomes. Their impact can only be mitigated by courageously bringing them in closely to reflect on them honestly. We must connect to them with our hearts and express appreciation for those aspects of their legacy that we can embrace, forgiving them for what we cannot.

Without awareness of the ways our parents and

grandparents were both dysfunctional and supportive, we cannot fully depression-proof our children, parenting authentically as individuated selves. We will, instead, repeat the patterns of our genealogy, whether they be ones of joy or sorrow.

TIME-OUT 1: Parenting With the Generations

Pause for a moment and think about your mum and dad or the people who raised you. What were their beliefs about childrearing? Did they suffer from depressive episodes or anxiety? What new beliefs about your parenting or health and well-being do you want to embrace?





SECTION II:
THE DEPRESSION-PROOF
APPROACH

My Story

I believe with everything I am that we cannot give our children what we do not have. They cannot become what we ourselves resist. We cannot ask them to go places where we refuse to travel. To truly depression-proof our children, we must depression-proof ourselves.

On the 28th of May 2008 at around 11 pm as my four daughters and I slept, my husband climbed the hill behind our house in Wellington, New Zealand and hanged himself from an electricity pylon. This event changed my life and that of my daughters forever in an instant. I didn't know it at the time, but it also started me on a journey that has led me to you... right here and right now. And for that I am tremendously grateful.

I'm thankful to be here to share it with you because I know if I can pass on these learnings, and you can embrace them courageously with determination and a lot of self-forgiveness, you will not only become a much better parent, but you will become a significantly happier and more content person. If Charlie's death helps even one person to become a more fully realised version of themselves, it will not have been in vain. If, in telling my story, I can save one life and prevent the suffering that may have led him or her to take it, I will move on knowing that I've made a difference.

This book was also born from my experiences of dealing with my own depression as I struggled to raise four

daughters, and from living with Charlie for over twenty years. It also comes from losing my younger brother, Chuck, to suicide in 2021.

While these have all been life changing experiences for me, this book also comes from my work as a well-being coach in private practice in New Zealand, where I've been fortunate to support thousands of families in their recovery from depression, suicidal episodes, and other mental health conditions, such as anxiety disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorders, and borderline personality disorder.

For twenty years my marriage to Charlie was plagued by depression, which meant that he didn't function well most days and, on other days, not at all. My first book, *Facing the Dark: A Journey into Suicide*, chronicles my personal battle through his depression and my own, which also took root at this time.

It is only after many years of personal healing and reflection that I'm able to gratefully share what I've learned about depression and parenting. I am not a parenting expert. In fact, as shame researcher and sociologist Brené Brown says, "I'm pretty sure that that's an oxymoron." Nor am I a depression or anxiety expert, but I do know a few things about it and what I know can support you to raise resilient kids.

I've learned many things, including the destructive and insidious ways depression harms families. I've learned

what we can and cannot do about it. I've also learned that suicide is not a failure on anyone's part: those who choose it and those who fight hard to keep them from doing so. Instead, it's born from the profound recognition that life is precious, and that I'm not capable of meeting it in this way. The gap between myself and life widens to the point where I can no longer bridge the distance.

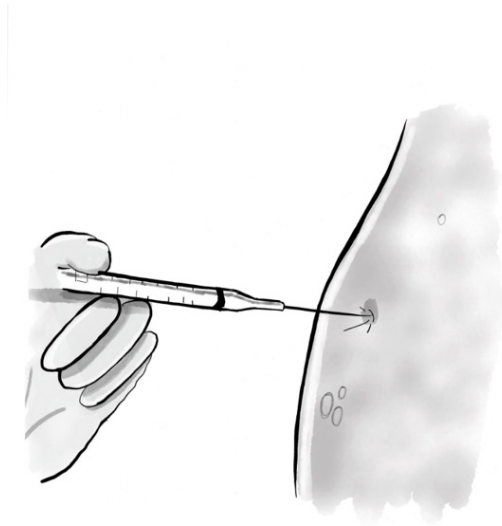
As you can tell, this book is a cumulation of my personal and professional experiences. And, in this way, my family's loss has been a gift. A gift that I am sharing with you in the hope that it will help make your journey a little lighter.

What is Depression-Proofing?

Becoming depression-proof is not something that just happens to us. It takes intention and effort. I created the Depression-Proof approach to help you with this. It's designed to support you and your family as you cultivate these five core Depression-Proof Strengths:

- 1. Optimism**
- 2. Emotional Intelligence**
- 3. Resilience**
- 4. Empowerment**
- 5. Communication**

Depression-proofing our children is different from rescuing them from suffering. Living co-operatively with children requires respecting *their* abilities to solve problems and reach their goals, regardless of whether or not we agree with them.



It's also about helping them discover ways to expand their own self-love and problem-solving abilities.

To help you depression-proof your children you need both **a new mindset** and a **set of practical tools** for authentically empowering your family. This will put you firmly in the driver's seat of your own mental health. It's a heart-based pathway for building resilience in children and our families overall so that we're able to rise again after life's inevitable setbacks. And it works whether or not you or your children are depressed. Furthermore, it doesn't mean that you won't feel down sometimes, nor would you ever not want to. This approach will help you re-evaluate your life to determine what is and what isn't working. This I know because I've depression-proofed myself.

I hope you will find it uplifting and encouraging because both are in short supply, especially when we're down.

How to Use This Book

The cornerstone of my approach is self-reflective and forgiving. Because I have experienced the amazing healing properties of regularly 'going within' as an integral part of effective parenting, this book offers inner **Time-Outs** to encourage you to stop and be with yourself wherever you may be. In our frantic society we can sometimes rush from day to day rather than savouring and living each one. This is especially true for busy parents.

My belief about traditional time-outs as a parenting tool is that they work really well for *adults* - not as a punishment but as a way to prioritise ourselves and regain balance when we need it most.

I don't believe that time-outs work very well with children, except perhaps in extreme cases when we've completely run out of other options. Time-outs are ineffective tools for changing behaviour because when we isolate children they interpret themselves as inherently bad ("*There's something wrong with me*") rather than understanding that their actions are the problem. Isolation only encourages children to repress feelings as opposed to finding safer ways of expressing them. Fundamentally, we're social creatures and when we're young can feel especially unsafe (emotionally and physically) when ostracised.

For adults, however, time-outs can be pure gold.

When my girls were young, I regularly imposed them on myself when I felt frazzled and unable to relate to them in loving ways. These precious moments to myself gave me the much-needed strength to keep going.

I hope you will use the time-outs provided in this book to help you reflect on many aspects of your journey to help you make it more rewarding and reflective. I also hope you will use them to be gentle on yourself and practice self-forgiveness when you need to. Only you can push the **pause** button. I know that if, as you read this and take time periodically to think about how it relates to you and your family, you will get more out of it. I truly believe that no other job here in Earth School is harder than raising resilient kids, and no other job is as rewarding, either.

The Basic Premises of the Depression-Proofing Approach:

1. *You've got to get your hands dirty and make mistakes.*
2. *You must let go.*
3. *As you parent your children, you parent yourself.*
4. *It's all in the repair.*
5. *Perfect families don't exist. But your own special version does.*

Getting Your Hands Dirty

One of the things I've learned is that depression asks that we turn inwards and reflect on what we need to change in our lives. It asks that we change direction in some way. If only we would listen. Mostly, however, we try to outrun depression's promptings; but I know from helping thousands of people recover that the only 'through' is 'in'. I like to refer to it as the big pile of poop in the middle of your life's road. We have to get our hands dirty if we're to shift it one bucketful at a time. The same applies if we're to support our children to grow and stay strong emotionally. We can't do this if we're not prepared to dig our way through that pile.

As parents, we have all sorts of tools to help our children, and there is no shortage of parenting experts out there ready to impart advice.

This book is different.

I believe that your parenting bag of tricks is already heavy enough and, while I'll give you practical support in these pages, my goal is not to increase the load you carry. Instead, my hope is that I can make your parenting journey a little lighter by giving you a guilt-free roadmap built on fundamental child-raising principles that are key to raising emotionally resilient children. Because one of the things I know is that no matter what you do, which parenting technique you employ or expert you follow, if

it's not done from a place of authenticity, humility, and great love, then your children will know, and it won't work.

Gaining From Depression

When I became depressed after the birth of my second daughter, all I wanted to do was to get rid of it so I could feel better; when we're depressed, our main focus is on purging the depression from our systems, but the depression-proof approach doesn't work this way. The human mind-body system, as the scientists now call it, hates to get rid of things and will resist loss with great tenacity. Instead, we like to increase our options through gains that enrich us in some way. You may have heard of the term 'secondary gain' that often accompanies long-term illness or psychological conditions. Even in suffering, this is the human system busy at work trying to gain some benefit or control over hard stuff. Regardless of whether or not you are gaining secondarily from depression (yours or another person's) it's critical that you don't try to force it from your system but instead think of it as a vital messenger meant to transform you so that you rebuild and heal. In translating depression's messages in this way, you're able to reassure yourself that in dissolving depression's grip, you gain something much more valuable in the process: wholeness and peace.

"You are not a drop in the ocean, you are the entire ocean in a drop."

Rumi

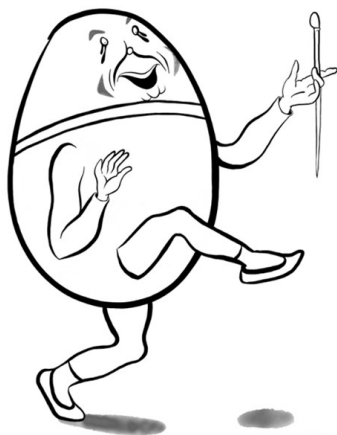
You Are Whole

To counter depression, we need to reclaim the innate wholeness that is our birthright. We need to regain our sense of unity, which does not and cannot come from anything outside us. It doesn't come from how we look, what we own or what we achieve. It just is. It's the fundamental truth of your existence, whether you realise it or not. It's important to remind yourself regularly that you are whole and complete. Just as you might gaze at a beautiful sunset over the sea, you are life turning back on itself to express this completeness. When you watch a sunset or any other natural phenomenon, you know instinctively that it is perfect exactly as it is in that moment, however it is expressing. There is nothing you could do or would want to do to make it any different. I adore what ancient Persian poet, Hafiz, says about this: "I wish I could show you when you are lonely or in darkness the astonishing light of your own being."

So, if we know this intellectually, what keeps us from experiencing wholeness in our everyday lives? What keeps us from applying this wholeness to ourselves as divine beings having human experiences? It's because the ego self doesn't buy it. It tells us that to *be* special we have to *do* special things — as defined by our small selves and society at large. To secure love and acceptance, we believe we must be more than we are; we must improve. And the ego is good at collecting proof to justify why this is so.

This is the voice of fear and limitation within us that must be countered, hourly at first, and then daily. When we identify too strongly with ego, our reality becomes separate and limited. We lose our freedom, our joy, our spark. Our essential wholeness shatters like an exquisite hand painted porcelain egg smashed against concrete. As our wholeness fractures into a thousand pieces, we start to define ourselves by all of those disparate, scattered shards. We forget the essence of that beautiful egg: its wholeness or how it originally was in its entirety.

So, how do we put Humpty Dumpty back to together again, as the nursery rhyme wisely asks? If all the king's horses and all the king's men, including all the doctors in the land, couldn't put Humpty Dumpty back together again, how are we going to? This book is about that process, both for you and your children. Because as you depression-proof your family, you depression-proof yourself.



Parent Yourself

We usually think of parenting as something we do out of love for our children and for their welfare. But what if I told you that we also parent for ourselves? Not that we are aware of it necessarily, but when we become parents we embark on a journey of self-growth that is unparalleled in life. In fact, parenting fast-forwards our maturation process like few other experiences. As prominent American social reformer, Henry Ward Beecher, said in the late 1800s, we begin to truly grow up when we become ‘parents’ in some way. Because as we parent another, we have the opportunity to re-parent ourselves. No matter how loving or lacking our own parents may have been in their care for us, once we begin to parent we can choose to use this transformative and sacred process to heal our old hurts and grow into more loving versions of ourselves.

In my chapter on The Learning Mindset, I will show you how the ability to stay focused on our own personal growth is one of the most useful and resilient practices we can hold for our children’s sake. But for this section, I’d like to plant the seed that you too benefit as much, if not more, from the love and care of a child. Then it becomes about catching how this may be true for you.

Giver of Care

When my girls were small, I used to hold them close to me and feel how in loving them, I was loving myself, too. I would allow myself to feel and absorb the strength of our connection deep into my being. When I was feeling low, I would imagine their sweet little faces looking up at me as I held them as babies. I would 'see' their perfectly-formed lips and mouths as I looked into their eyes; I would absorb the knowing that in seeing their perfection I was able to realise my own. Because without my own fundamental goodness, I would not be able to recognize it in them.

To become a parent means to become a caregiver - the giver of care - to another, usually a human being but not necessarily. When we parent from love, we protect and nurture our children into being. Every person needs care like this, regardless of his or her age, race or cultural background. But we usually look for this care outside ourselves, which is actually inefficient and often disappointing. To embrace the parenting journey as one of self-love and discovery, on the other hand, is a sure-fire fast track to joy.

In reframing parenting as both other- and inner-focused, I hope you will see how you can depression-proof yourself and your children. But to actually achieve this, you will need to be able to do one other thing: self-reflect.

Core Beliefs

The depression-proofing parenting philosophy has evolved over time but is based on five basic beliefs:

1. All children are divine and worthy of respect and love.
2. Children have everything they need to grow into the best versions of themselves. They're doing the best they can with the resources they've been given.
3. With love and support, children develop into the people they are meant to become.
4. I can either facilitate my child's growth or hinder it.
5. Through setbacks my children become strong and resilient. Therefore, I must not protect them from suffering but show them a way through it instead.

Error of Omniscience

One of the main obstacles to being able to depression-proof our children is what's called the error of omniscience. This is when we think we're able to fix our children and think it's our job as parents to do so. In reality, we cannot fix anyone except ourselves. When we commit this error we *think* we know what our kids are feeling and what they should do differently. We *think* we know better and think in terms of 'should' and 'if you would only...' This belief, according to Thomas Gordan, damages our relationships more than any other because it sends a very powerful signal: I don't trust in you. I know better.

Your Personal Parenting Philosophy

What is most important to you about parenting your children? What kind of parent do you want to become? Few of us explore our parenting style before we become parents. Then, after our children are born and we are worn out and exhausted, we tend to parent the way that we were parented: the good, the bad and the ugly. We tend to fall into becoming parents without deciding which core values will guide our decisions along the way. On the other hand, if we're clear about how we want to parent, then regardless of who advises us otherwise, or what kind of research is behind it, we can choose whether to accept it. In this way, your philosophy becomes your compass.

Reflective Parenting

At the heart of all good parenting is a good bond: a relationship between you and your child. We must tend to the relationship just as much as we care for the child individually. Without a connection with our children, they cannot feel our love and cannot be influenced by us in the ways we would hope. Strong relationships with our children are foundational to helping them become depression-proof.

Presence — or checking in and paying attention to success and setback — is key to strengthening the relationships we have with our children, especially how they

feel about themselves. We usually don't have to work at this when they're small because raising little ones is already a hands-on job that demands a very physical presence. But as our children grow, we need to pay attention more deliberately and in different ways. Older children require less physical but more emotional support, and we need to accomplish this so that our children can actually take it in. I will talk more about this later in the section on Communications.

I'm not a big fan of labelling parents or their parenting style, but I am an advocate of what is referred to as reflective parenting. Many of the principles in this book are based on what the research has found about this groundbreaking parenting approach and its connection to emotional resilience in children. Reflective parenting is a theory of parenting developed from the work of psychoanalyst Peter Fonagy and his colleagues at the Tavistock Clinic in London. Fonagy introduced the concept of parental **reflective functioning** (RF) or mentalising, which is defined as the ability to imagine mental states (feelings, desires, goals, and attitudes) in ourselves and others and is assumed to play a vital role in fostering our children's capacity for the same.

Reflective functioning is closely aligned to emotional intelligence (EQ), which is found to be essential for strong social connections at every age. But to imagine what it is like inside another human being, we must first understand what is going on inside ourselves. This is the heart

of the reflective parenting approach, and it involves the ability to step back from the immediate, intense experience of parenting to wonder what is going on inside ourselves and others. To wonder, in this context, means not to assume we already know. It means to maintain a sense of openness and curiosity. This is easier said than done because we automatically bring our preconceived notions — based on past experiences, relationships, family of origin, cultural background, and even where we were raised — to every aspect of our lives, including parenting. To be willing to wonder freely about what we find before us and remain open and inquisitive as to what it might mean, we need to slow down our automatic responses based on preconceived ideas about the world. According to the research, honest self-reflection is the best way to kickstart change to counteract our involuntary reactions. And then we must practice.

Reflective functioning, however, does not come naturally for everyone. For most people, it is a skill that we need to commit to, nurture and practice. The good news is that we don't have to be perfect at this. We just need an intention to move in a more reflective direction and then to be gentle with ourselves as we strive to get there.

Anything that helps you increase your reflective functioning is to be encouraged at all costs because it is closely aligned with every healthy parenting behaviour. An RF measurement is now incorporated in all paediatric healthcare provider training in the United States, in fact.

And the reason for this is that the research results show that reflective functioning is a strong predictor of a high-quality parent–child relationship (i.e. parental involvement, communication, parent satisfaction, limit setting, and parental support).



Defining Characteristics of a Reflective Parent

1. They make an effort to understand the inner emotional state of themselves and each child;
2. They see each child as having separate and unique emotions that are not necessarily shared by the parent;
3. They have strong relationships with their children based on awareness and mutual respect.

Staying in the Now

The **serve and return** parenting model, developed by Dr Phil Fisher and his team in Oregon, is a great way to become a reflective parent. It also helps encourage your child to explore, deepens your relationship, and begins to depression-proof them. And thanks to epigenetics, we now know that our experiences and our children's experiences actually shape their brains, so it is even more important that we understand how to be present with our children.

Based on what we know about how experiences shape our children's brains, the serve & return model of reflective parenting is useful as we look to depression-proof them for life. While this model was developed for young, pre-language children, it works for all children at every age. As our children grow, it just takes more finesse. Particularly when they begin to withdraw from us during adolescence, it takes more awareness to catch their 'serves', and more wisdom to determine which ones are critical to catch and which ones we need to let pass by.

Serve & Return

Serve – Is your child talking, looking, pointing at, or focused on something? Making sounds or facial expressions? Shaking their arms and legs? That's a Serve, inviting you to pay attention to what the child is focused on. Reflective parents receive the Serve by actively

looking out for them, eg. while eating breakfast or getting them dressed for the day. In this way, you'll learn what interests your child, strengthening your bond.

Return – Step two is to Return their Serve. This can be done in any way you wish as long as you acknowledge their focus, what they say and respond positively to it in some way. For example, you can say, “I see!” and smile and nod to let them know you see it too. You can hug your child, help them, play with them. You can pick up the object the child is pointing to, bringing it in closer.

Name it – As you Return a Serve, name what a child is seeing, doing, or feeling. You can name anything: a thing, a person, an action, a feeling, or any combination of these. In doing so, you help them make important language connections in their brain, even before they can talk or understand your words. If a child points to the banana they're eating, you can also point to it and say, “Yes, that is your banana!”

Wait – Giving your child an opportunity to respond is critical when returning a serve. Taking turns can be quick (from the child to you and back again) or go on for many rounds. Waiting is essential. Children need time to form their responses, especially when they're learning so many things at once.

Catch endings/beginnings - When a young child is ready to move on or to start another activity, they let us know. Catching this and following their lead, where possible,

is important. They might let go of a toy, pick up a new one, or turn to look at something else. Or they may walk away, start to fuss, or say, “All done!” When you share a child’s focus, you’ll notice when they’re ready to end the activity and begin something new.

As human beings we have a deep need to know that we exist. Another way of saying it is that we are connected to others and matter to them. A strong sense of care and belonging with just one other person can change everything. Regardless of our race, religious beliefs, competencies, or shortcomings, we must feel important to at least one other person. I love this line from the movie, *The Help*, based on Kathryn Stockett’s novel:

“You is kind. You is smart. You is important.”

The Help (2011 movie)

To me, this sums up our primal need to be seen, to be significant, and to see ourselves and others honestly and without fear. And the first place to start is with honest self-reflection. We must prioritise our healing so that we’re able to sit quietly in a dark room and hear the promptings of our inner voices. Because I have experienced the amazing healing properties of this simple, but not easy, task, I encourage you to stop reading and take advantage each parental time-out. So, let’s do that now.

TIME-OUT 2: The Miracle Overnight

What if a miracle happened one night while you were sleeping and you became the parent you'd always hoped to have? How would you interact with your children during good times and bad? How would your family be different? How would you be different?

Bust the Myth of the Perfect Family

Families are chaotic. They're perpetrators of some of the messiest and most unpleasant experiences we will ever endure. People are psychological rather than rational beings, and strong emotions are powerful and unpredictable. Things are not always roses and sunshine, nor should they be. Violent outbursts happen. We raise our voices and lash out, and so do our children. We get resentful, angry and afraid. We throw things when we shouldn't. We fall down the rabbit hole of conflict, self-pity, and righteousness. This is family life: all families. To have it any other way would be to cap our joy, love, and fulfilment, too. To really embody this at our core is an extremely powerful place to tune into. And when we do, we activate the most helpful response: lean into EVERYTHING that happens in our families. This doesn't mean we tolerate everything, but we do accept it as it is even as we work diligently to change it.

The perfect family does not exist: we must stop trying to make ours perfect. Instead, we need to fully accept the

one we have - warts and all. We need to fully accept every individual who makes it up, just the way he/she is, even when we know with every fibre of our being that things could be better... sometimes a lot better.

The fights that used to break out among my girls at times were intense to say the least. Usually, they would be ignited by one of the girls borrowing her sister's clothes without asking first. Despite repeated attempts to keep the twins from taking their older sister's outfits, nothing seemed to work. At times the frustration and vitriol that escaped from their mouths as they slammed doors and hurled insults in the heat of the moment would shake the walls. Nothing I did seemed to make any difference, except for three things:

- 1. Accept it and all of its dysfunction;*
- 2. Forget about the neighbours;*
- 3. Avoid joining in.*

Radical Acceptance

Parenting is painful, especially if we try to force and control it. On the other hand, it's exuberant and transformational if we stay centred in love rather than fear. Easier said than done, I know. In depression-proofing our children, it's helpful to approach family life with what the Buddhists have referred to for centuries as radical acceptance. If you were to ask me about my parenting

superpowers, this would be at the top of the list, along with **living at-cause** and trust — both of which I talk about in detail later.

Radical acceptance has been adopted and popularised more recently by Marsha Linehan, developer of Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), because it is so useful during times of conflict and distress. When we radically accept something we stop fighting it and stop trying to change the situation or any of the people involved. Radical acceptance is to completely and totally embrace a situation or person from the depths of our soul, with our hearts and our minds — without any judgment. Because when we stop fighting reality, we suffer less. This is not easy to do in the heat of the moment, of course, but I remember feeling deep pride in myself when I could stand in the moment - sometimes literally between my girls - and resist their temptations to draw me in to their opposing sides and, instead, breathe into myself and the conflict unfolding in front of me. An old Buddhist saying built on radical acceptance is extremely helpful: **“Pain is inevitable but suffering is optional.”**

Forget the Neighbours

Regardless of the chaos and turbulence family life thrusts upon us, one of the least helpful responses is to try and manage what goes on because we fear judgment from others. When we’re too focused on what the neighbours, the other people in the store, or our friends or own parents

might say, we cannot parent from a place of integrity and authenticity. This is why we need to think carefully before we intervene in family squabbles and ineffective patterns of interaction.

The important thing to remember is that you should not have a say in your children's relationships with other people, no matter how much you'd like to. This is not your job. And if you take it on, you will just deplete yourself and make it less likely that the situation will be resolved.

Don't Join In

When Charlie was low, I made a lot of excuses to my girls on his behalf in an effort to protect them from his depression. I would say things like, "Daddy's just tired right now, honey," or, "Daddy's too busy to help you right now," etc, etc, etc. This is a natural reaction as we try to protect our children from other people's poor behaviour and/or distress. Unfortunately, it doesn't work. In trying to protect my girls from Charlie, I exhausted myself and made it more likely that they would be upset by his behaviour.

I created the opposite situation to what I had intended, firstly, by pointing out the fact that their father was letting them down, and secondly by revealing my own negative feelings and judgment about how his depression directly affected me. Regardless of how nicely and calmly I would say things or how subtly I tried to hide my real feelings, I made the situation worse because I entangled my own

feelings with theirs instead of allowing them to experience it for themselves and endure the consequences of its reality.

Although it's imperative that we protect children from unsafe situations and dangerous people, we need to be very careful when trying to protect them from another well-meaning family member who is trying his/her best, even if he is not doing it in the way we'd like him to. Unfortunately, this is a natural first reaction and a deep-seated pattern I see, especially among mothers, in the families I work with. And I've never once seen it work in the way they want it to. In fact, all it does is create more conflict and pain. It undermines the relationship by failing to respect the boundaries of everyone involved.

TIME-OUT 3: My Personal Parenting Philosophy

Pause for a moment and think about your personal parenting philosophy. What are the core values you want to hold as you progress in your parenting journey? How are these different to what others expect of you?



SECTION III:
DEPRESSION-PROOF
ESSENTIALS

What is Depression?

One of the most important ways we can depression-proof our children is through our presence. Doing so effectively requires self-care, awareness, and some skill, which I will talk about in subsequent sections. But first, we have to understand what exactly depression is and how our current approach can be upgraded so that our entire families can receive the beautiful gifts healthy families offer.

So, what do the experts actually know about depression? Until the 1960s, it was uncommon for many reasons, but in the early part of that decade it started to become much more prevalent and today has become the common cold of mental illness, taking its first victims in middle school. In fact, not only is severe depression seemingly more common now, it also affects people at increasingly younger ages. If you were born in the mid-1950s, depression did not strike you until you were at least 20-25 years old. Eminent depression researcher, Dr. Peter Lewinsohn, found that for adolescents born in the mid-1970s the first severe bout of this condition took place as early as age 14. Another recent study of teens in the southeastern United States found that severe cases are now happening as young age 12. Because over three million young people have experienced at least one major depressive episode before they turn 17, the American Academy of Pediatrics now recommends regular depression screening for all adolescents over 12 years of age.

Medical doctors call it a Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) when it persists with two or more symptoms for at least two weeks. According to the medical ‘Bible’ — The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DM-5) — a MDD is diagnosed when a person suffers from the symptoms below. Mental health professionals use the DM-5 to diagnose, prescribe drugs, and talk to patients about mental illnesses and their associated risk factors.

Checklist for Clinical Depression

According to the DM-5, you have to experience at least five of the nine symptoms below on a daily basis to be considered severely depressed:

1. Depressed mood or irritable most of the day, nearly every day, as indicated by either subjective report (e.g., feels sad or empty) or observation made by others (e.g., appears tearful)
2. Decreased interest or pleasure in most activities, most of each day
3. Significant weight change (5%) or change in appetite
4. Change in sleep: insomnia or hypersomnia (over sleeping)
5. Change in activity: psychomotor agitation or retardation
6. Fatigue or loss of energy

7. Guilt/worthlessness: feelings of worthlessness or excessive/inappropriate guilt
8. Concentration: diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness
9. Suicidality: thoughts of death or has created a suicide plan

Unfortunately, all we really get from this list of symptoms is how depression manifests in people. It doesn't tell us how it happens in the first place, which we're only beginning to understand. We know that depression can start for any number of reasons, including major life changes and upsets, substance abuse, or chronic health problems. Unfortunately, this is not very helpful if we think about all of the people in the world who have lived through truly terrible life situations, including extreme examples of abuse and neglect, and have *not* become depressed.

We also know that aspects of our technologically connected, anxious, modern lives are increasing the likelihood that someone in our families will experience depression. We just don't know exactly which factors are the major culprits.

Depression in Young People

Depression takes many forms and can start at any age - from childhood through to old age - and is common in children and teens. In New Zealand, one in seven young people will experience a major depressive disorder and one in five will experience it before the age of 24.

Research has shown that children who are very sensitive or anxious are at higher risk of developing depression, as are children who live with primary caregivers who are also depressed. This has been my experience as well.

While Charlie experienced seven of the nine official symptoms for depression consistently for many years, children and adolescents tend to exhibit fewer, less obvious symptoms. Depressed young people often show heightened irritability or rebelliousness more than overt signs of feeling sad or down. They can also demonstrate a marked loss of interest in activities that previously gave them joy, which can be reflected in isolating themselves from everyone. Depression can also result in poor results and/or misbehaviour at school, but not necessarily. I've worked with many young people showing early signs of depression who excel academically and socially.

It's important to remember that it's developmentally appropriate for teenagers to be somewhat irritable with their parents and sleep longer as they begin to move through this important milestone of separation and independence. It doesn't mean they're depressed.

However, as parents, we need to be aware that anxiety and depression are key risk factors for suicide in young people, especially if they are feeling hopeless or stuck in the belief that things won't change. If a young person is self-harming or talks of suicide in any form, it's important to get help quickly. A comprehensive helpline list is provided at the end of this book.

Causes of Anxiety & Depression in Young People

Many things can make young people and children vulnerable to depression. Here are a few of the most common ones:

- Traumatic events in childhood
- Parental break-up or loss of a loved one
- Family history of depression
- Relationship break-ups or conflict with friends
- Social isolation
- Learning difficulties and lack of success at school
- Certain medications (stimulants such as Ritalin, and antidepressants and anticonvulsants)

There are many things that parents can do to help, which I will discuss in part two of this book, but one of the most critical is to start a conversation (where you do most of the listening) if you notice ongoing changes in a young person's mood. It's also important to support their emotional well-being by prioritising a healthy lifestyle at home, and reducing conflict and hostility, which are known to worsen both anxiety and depression in young people.

Environment & Our Genes

The latest research shows that our early childhood shapes our personalities, psychology, and our biological responses to the world much more than was once thought. For years, renowned medical intuitive Caroline Myss has been saying that our “biography becomes our biology.” We now know thanks to epigenetics, an emerging area of scientific research, that the genes we’ve inherited at birth are not set in stone. Beginning in utero and continuing throughout our lives, they are heavily influenced by our environment and how we respond to that environment. As psychologist Dr Nicole LePera says, “There is an awakening going on right at this moment,” which overturns old beliefs about “faulty genes” becoming our fate.

Over the past decade, epigenetic studies have given us amazing insights into how we are able to change, regardless of our genes. This means that our lived experiences actually affect and change the expression of our genes, tipping the nurture vs nature debate on its head. We now know that *both* powerfully create the beings that we become. In other words, our lives change us at the cellular level.

This means that harmful experiences, such as malnutrition, exposure to chemical toxins or drugs, and toxic stress before birth or in early childhood are not forgotten by the body. According to Harvard University’s Center on the Developing Child, “These experiences are built

into the architecture of the developing brain through the epigenome.” And these “biological memories” “affect multiple organ systems and increase the risk not only for poor physical and mental health outcomes but also for impairments in future learning capacity and behavior.”

Fortunately, recent neurological research on the brain’s plasticity, or its ability to change and grow new neural connections for life, suggests that even if we were exposed to harmful environmental factors as children, there may be something we can do about it later on in life, even in old age. In other words, our brains never stop being able to learn new things and heal from injury.

Our Genes Are Not Our Destiny

So, if our inherited parental genes only provide a potentiality for how we could develop, how do our genes influence our health? Epigenetics has found that the actual *experiences we encounter* will determine how our specific genes biologically express throughout our lives. This helps to explain why someone with a genetic pre-disposition to a condition will not necessarily suffer from it. A way to understand this is that nature forms the foundation of our bodies and nurture becomes the walls and the roof, protecting this foundation - or not. The research shows that epigenetic modifications occur in brain cells and that repeated activation of specific brain circuits through interaction with the environment facilitates these epigenetic modifications. This is why

good maternal and foetal nutrition, combined with positive social-emotional support of children through their family and communities, reduce the likelihood of negative epigenetic modifications that increase the risk of later physical and mental health issues.

These new understandings have huge implications for how we think of depression and whether or not we're stuck with it. The reality is we have more power over it than we ever thought was possible. The good news is that we are not doomed to repeat our parents' or other family members' depressive tendencies. But we have to re-wire our thinking about it.

Depression Isn't a Disease

Unfortunately, many people still believe that depression is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain, and this is what most antidepressants seek to address. But this has been proven to be an untrue, if persistent, belief. Certainly, it is true that there is a reduction in the quantity of certain neurotransmitters (such as serotonin and norepinephrine) in the brains of depressed people when they're tested, but the research clearly shows that these dips in neurotransmitters are actually the *result* or *effect* of depression, not the initial cause.

And while we now know that our genes aren't fixed, we also know that most depression isn't caused by genetic factors, either. A University of Colorado team of medical researchers spent ten years studying 620,000 individuals

to find the gene or a set of genes for depression. Their conclusion, which was released in March 2019, was that there was no correlation between the risk of depression and 18 specific genetic links. In other words, there is no known gene for depression.

In fact, the UC team of researchers said that, “It is extremely unlikely that we failed to detect any true associations between depression phenotypes and candidate genes.” (*Border et al*). Furthermore, “We conclude that it is time for depression research to abandon historical candidate gene and candidate gene-by-environment interaction hypotheses.” This is a powerful finding with widespread implications for sufferers because what it shows us – whether or not we want to listen – is that depression is not genetic. Epigenetics then tells us that even it were, we could still do something about it.

One of the ways we know that depression is not genetic is the rapid speed at which it’s taken hold in society and continues to expand exponentially since 1945. If you were born after this date, then you are 10 times more likely to suffer from depression than if you were born before this time. According to researcher Martin Seligman, who has studied depression for decades, “Thirty years is much too short a period for a shift in genetic vulnerability to depression.” Even if we take into account significant under-reporting, genes still don’t change that fast, so we have to look to other factors to explain it.

One of the most dangerous things, I believe, is to think of depression as a genetic disorder because then it becomes a fait accompli with nothing we can do about it other than medicate ourselves. We become trapped in this belief as much as we do in the condition itself. I understand why some healthcare practitioners want people to believe otherwise, but the benefits of knowing the truth far surpass the risk that people may blame themselves or others. In fact, there is so much we can do to help ourselves or a depressed child feel better. In the next section, I'm going to show you how to do this. But first, we need to understand how brain chemicals work.

Changing Your Mind Changes Your Chemistry

Our thoughts affect our bodies. In fact, biologist Bruce Lipton, who has studied the impact of belief on human biology for decades, says, "The moment you change your perception is the moment you rewire the chemistry of your body." Basically, he's found that when we are stressed, anxious or depressed, the composition of our blood changes, thanks to our brain chemicals. And this composition is different from when we stay focused on more uplifting or peaceful thoughts. Lipton has been advocating epigenetic understandings to argue against genetic determinism for years, which he calls "a gross distortion of the truth of our biology."

We also know that our beliefs impact our immune system. Optimism is linked to better immunity to illness while depressive thinking is linked to reduced immunity. The

scientific literature has demonstrated again and again that thoughts affect neurotransmitters, the chemical messengers that allow the brain to communicate with different parts of itself and the nervous system. Neurotransmitters control virtually every one of your body's functions, from feeling happy to modulating hormones to dealing with stress. Therefore, our thoughts influence our bodies directly because the body interprets the messages coming from the brain to prepare us for what's coming.

Psychological stress or fear, for example, affects our levels of dopamine, epinephrine, and norepinephrine. These neurochemical changes prepare the body to deal with perceived danger in a number of important ways, such as raising blood pressure to allow faster speed and response times. However, chronic elevations in these chemicals suppress the immune system, which puts us at risk of a whole host of other things.

Clinical depression is often described as a chemical imbalance in the brain.

It's talked about as if it were a disease over which we have no control. We now know that this is entirely untrue. As mentioned above experts now believe that low serotonin levels in a depressed person's brain are actually the *effect* of depression and *not the cause*; serotonin drops in the body *after* we become depressed not beforehand.

So why do we persist on calling depression a biological condition rather than an unhelpful or erroneous thinking condition?

This 'disease' label was initiated primarily as a way to de-stigmatise the condition for sufferers. If depression has biological roots, instead of ones that we can actually control, then people are less likely to judge and categorise sufferers as having weak dispositions. It becomes just like any other biological disease, such as diabetes or cancer: out of our control.

While we can understand how the 'disease' label became linked to depression, this way of thinking about it has a major flaw: If depression is a disease, and I'm not in control, then that means I can't do anything about it, either, except mask it with a pill.

Of course, the pharmaceutical industry doesn't necessarily want us to de-bunk the depression-as-disease idea. The longer depression is called a disease, the more pills we pop, and the more money they make. I have no intention of discrediting antidepressants because I believe they can be a lifeline in times of real distress and that it's up to each individual to decide for themselves whether or not they're a good option. But I also believe that the facts about them must be heard. We must also encourage deeper conversations about depression, over and above the brief GP consultation window where prescribing pills is the norm because it's the fastest way to 'help' patients.

After the birth of my twins, I started taking Sarafem (fluoxetine) for post-natal depression, which helped me survive a very difficult period in my life. However, I wasn't aware of how arduous it would be to get off them. It took me a decade to free myself from their addictive hold. This is something that anyone considering antidepressant medication should be aware of and discuss with a medical professional.

Antidepressants are addictive and should be considered carefully in conjunction with emotional, behavioural, and interpersonal therapies that have shown to be effective. Antidepressants also impact some people really badly and have been linked to an increase in the likelihood that a person will commit suicide, particularly if they are young. Antidepressants should be taken only as part of a larger regime to retrain our brains and break bad habits as we heal. They should never be a replacement for making the changes we need to make in our lives and getting substantive psychological and well-being support.

Unfortunately, instead of building resilience and learning new coping mechanisms, most people resort to antidepressants as the easiest, most affordable option and, largely, leave it at that. To me, this is the biggest problem with antidepressants: they keep us from doing the harder, but ultimately more rewarding and effective work of creating lasting joy in our lives. Drugs mask the pain so that it's more likely we will continue to ignore depression's promptings to change aspects of our lives that are

not working well. They can keep us from growing and empowering ourselves to lead fulfilling and happy lives.

“Depression is a learned behaviour with biological consequences.”

Dr Martin Seligman

‘Doing’ Depression

So, if depression isn’t a disease, and it’s not caused by our genes, what is it? Researchers, exploring depression’s behavioural roots, are beginning to have a few answers. According to Dr Martin Seligman out of the University of Pennsylvania, after studying depression and optimism in young people for forty years, “Depression is a learned behaviour with biological consequences.”

What he is saying is that depression starts in the mind and finishes in the body. It begins with anxiousness and excessive rumination over events and outcomes that we don’t like. It’s a perceptual filter that, like any strong emotional response, hijacks our rational minds and changes our physiology, including our brain chemistry. When we use a negative bias — a pessimistic spin — on events for long enough, over time this forms well-worn neurological pathways that become entrenched in our body-minds.

New Zealand-based Neuro-Linguistic Master Trainer and

author of over 20 books on human potential, Dr. Richard Bolstad, likes to say, “We get good at what we practice.” I’ve certainly seen this in my own life. If we practice less useful ways of interpreting events in our lives for long enough, negativity becomes entrenched in our brains and biologically changes us. The one thing that’s crystal clear among all professionals is that the longer we’re depressed — or the longer we ‘practice’ depression — the harder it is to recover from it. And this makes a lot of sense when we understand how the human brain actually works.

Imagination

When it comes to knowledge and imagination, Albert Einstein said it best: “Imagination is more important than knowledge.” In saying this he didn’t mean that knowledge was unimportant, but just that imagination is more so. And this is understandable if you think of a lemon.



Stop what you’re doing right now and think about a lemon... maybe a slightly sweetish Meyer lemon, in

fact. Those are my favourite. Imagine it's a hot day and you'd like a glass of refreshing lemonade. Now, pick up a large, juicy, bright yellow lemon, and cut it in half. Feel its slightly knobby skin. See the juice burst out and watch it drip down your hand. Now, hold the lemon up to your nose and breathe in its beautiful lemon fragrance, and even stick out your tongue and taste its distinct and tart lemony flavour.

If you have followed along and imagined this lemon for the past five-ten seconds, your mouth will actually produce significantly more saliva (.25 grams, in fact) than before you started imagining it; all with a lemon that's not even real. This is because your body responds anyway! Your subconscious mind, which largely runs your physical body, doesn't care if something is real or not; it reacts physiologically, regardless.

This is a crucial concept to grasp for understanding learned human behaviour of any kind, including depression and anxiety. Because when you wake up in the middle of the night and start to ruminate about your greatest fears, your body doesn't care that you're just thinking about imaginary scenarios; it will flood your system with cortisol and other stress chemicals anyway. And if you worry or catastrophise vividly for long enough, you can throw yourself into an 'amygdala hijack' — or into the fight or flight response — just by misusing your imagination.

Depression is Learned

We know that to feel depressed a person must repeat certain thought and behavioural patterns over time. The fact is that people who 'do depression' will do it in predictable ways. In other words, people practice depression in pretty much the same way.

And this makes a lot of sense if you think about it. If you've ever closely watched people who are feeling down or 'blue', they have many mannerisms in common, such as down-turning the corners of their mouths and diverting their eyes away from people to make less eye contact. They also tend to hunch their shoulders and withdraw from interpersonal and intimate contact with others. When you see them, they look as if they're folding into themselves. They're retracting their energy field. And the worse the depression becomes, the more extreme these behaviours become.

I saw this phenomenon firsthand as I watched Charlie die over many years. In his early 30s when I met him, Charlie had a tendency to put a negative bias on even the most neutral events. At least that's how I saw it. If I was unwell on holiday and couldn't leave our hotel room, for example, as happened in Prague, he would somehow interpret my poor health as personal, and his body language would reflect that: his shoulders would hunch as he seemed to physically droop. He would say things like, "Oh, well, I guess that's our whole vacation shot",

even if I was only in bed for the first of the five vacation days, which is what happened in 1991.

Holocaust survivor, neurologist, psychiatrist, and author of *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl, also found this to be true when he researched the difference between people who became depressed and those who didn't when enduring the same wretched concentration camp conditions during WWII.

What Frankl found has enormous implications for us today. As the Dachau camp psychiatrist, the doctor in charge of the mentally distressed for many years, Frankl observed that camp internees, even in the face of great despair and suffering, who held themselves upright and smiled quietly when the guards weren't looking and stayed connected to others and better times were much more resilient. He also found that these select few were also able to carve out some semblance of meaning for themselves even in a dire situation. He found that they regularly tapped into memories of close, loving relationships or imagined that they were with their loved ones or at earlier, happier times in their lives. In these ways, some people were able to emerge from horrific circumstances with their well-being intact. But more on this later. First let's take a time-out.

TIME-OUT 4: Observing Depression

Pause for a moment and think back on someone you may have known who was feeling low. What did you observe about them?

What did you feel from them that may have not been obvious?

How does your body feel when you're down? If you were watching yourself being depressed, how do you do it?

We're Powerful but NOT at Fault

The fact is that we have to practice depression for it to penetrate deep within our consciousness. So, this means that we can learn to be depressed. This doesn't mean that it's our fault. Not at all. This is crucial. We aren't aware of what we're doing because, just like any other emotionally aroused feeling, depression narrows our vision and puts us in a kind of trance-like state where all information or experiences that don't fit with our depressed world view is excluded. This is confirmation bias and is important to know when interacting with depressed people. We don't do depression on purpose. It's not our fault. It takes root over time. It's the effect of repeatedly explaining life events in certain ways.

Fortunately, we're now beginning to understand why some people succumb to depressive episodes and

others do not. And what we know is that it is not based on a chemical imbalance, genetic predisposition or the severity of a disruptive life event but, instead, on how we interpret it and how we've interpreted previous setbacks along the way. In other words, depression is not event-based. It starts as an **explanation to ourselves** and feelings of anxiousness are often the first signals.

Depression's Link to Anxiety

Depression is often linked with anxiety, and there is good reason for this. In Victorian times depression was called nervous exhaustion, which gives us clues to its roots. Research shows that depressed people have two to three times higher cortisol levels in their blood than those who aren't experiencing depression. Cortisol is the stress hormone that our brains release to counteract lives that are under stress, anxiety and on high alert, or in fight-or-flight mode. Doctors don't know why this is the case, but it appears that depression starts with chronic worry and anxiety, and then, at some point, morphs into despondency and low energy. It's like the person gives up and loses hope and succumbs to more traditional depressive symptoms.

Contrary to what their physical bodies sometimes communicate to the outside world, the entire system of a depressed person is actually amped up and on high alert. When this goes on for long periods of time, the body-mind starts to deteriorate. This is why it is so effective for

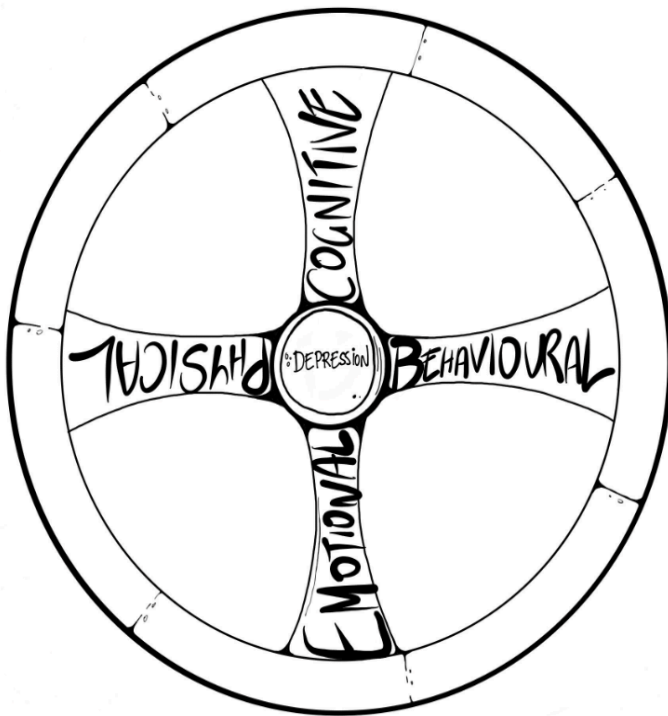
anyone experiencing depressive symptoms to learn to switch off their inner voice, which is usually critical and threatening. It is essential that they learn to relax and breathe. Practicing meditation and mindfulness, in fact, can be a very effective counterbalance to this condition, especially for young people.

Depression is Multi-Faceted

Depression is fuelled by a number of complex and inter-related factors. When we're depressed, we have more than just one problem; we have a mixture of four different ones, all of which must be addressed directly.

The Four Spokes of Depression's Wheel:

1. **Behavioural** — we are passive, helpless and indecisive
2. **Emotional** — we feel sad and worthless
3. **Physical** — we eat and sleep sporadically and our energy is low
4. **Cognitive** — we have trouble focusing, think anxious thoughts, focus on life's hopelessness and society's inadequacies overall.



Depression's Loop

It's important to realise that there is a cycle to depression that must be maintained if we're to carry on in its shadow. The key elements that keep it alive are ***introspection*** and ***inactivity***. Both of these make thinking clearly difficult through sheer exhaustion and emotional arousal and, in doing so, they change the way our brains work.

Excessive introspection is a type of rumination in which we play out experiences or difficulties over and over again in our minds, much as a cow chews its cud in the paddock. It eats grass and then brings it back up again from the first of its four stomachs to re-chew it again and again. When we spend time hashing and re-hashing out negativity in our minds, it can throw us into a trance state, in which we can't interpret the outside world as it actually is. This then creates more stress or arousal, which perpetuates the loop.

Psychotherapist and therapist trainer Mark Tyrrell says that in working with this condition for many years as part of his UK-based company, Uncommon Knowledge, understanding depression's loop is critical to breaking its cycle.

Inactivity is another core element of depression that is maintained by this cycle. When we spend long periods of time introspecting about things we don't want to happen, we carry this into our sleep, which, in turn, makes it difficult to sleep well, which makes us not feel like getting

out of bed the next morning. We then wake the next day feeling tired and less likely to exercise, eat healthily, contact friends or do anything else that will help us feel better. In this way, what starts as excessive rumination impairs motivation and keeps us from doing things we enjoy. So, relaxation and good sleep are vital to keeping ourselves depression-free.

“Depression affects not only how we think, but also our immune system, our sleep patterns and the natural processes the body and mind use to stay in good physical and mental order.”

Mark Tyrrell

Depression and Sleep

As mentioned earlier, a depressed brain is really a stressed brain. When we're stressed, we're more likely to resort to all-or-nothing thinking, negative biases and catastrophising, which in turn, makes it difficult to think clearly, and leads to even more over-introspection. This then disrupts our sleeping patterns, increasing the amount of time we spend dreaming each night.

In fact, we've known since the 1950s that depressed people dream up to three times more than those who aren't depressed. Joseph Griffin of the Human Givens Institute gives us a clear understanding of how depression affects us physically through the research presented

in his *Origin of Dreams* book. What he found was that dreaming actually flushes out unresolved emotions for our systems, but it comes at the cost of deeper, slow-wave sleep time, which is when the body-mind system truly rejuvenates.

Through the metaphorical language of our dreams, we create imaginary experiences whose patterns in some way reflect our lives closely enough to create the same emotional reactions so we can work through them. If, for example during the day, you worried about what someone said to you, feeling as if they were rejecting or criticising you in some way, that night you may have an anxious dream where someone throws a rock at you as you try to run away. This dream is your system's way of trying to complete the loop of emotional arousal that was initiated by that experience. And the more we ruminate over the negative happenings of our days, the more dream time is required to clear this emotional energy out.

Basically, dreaming is not a restful activity. It's called 'paradoxical sleep' because the brain's waves during REM are similar to when we're awake. Remember the lemon? The brain actually doesn't care if something is real or not. As far as your brain is concerned, your dreams are just as real as what happens to you when you're awake. During dream time, the brain kicks into action to flood your system with adrenaline and other stress hormones. The neurotransmitter serotonin diminishes as we dream, so a depressed person will wake up

the next morning with even lower levels of this important feel-good hormone.

Over-dreaming, as well as exhausting your hormone and energy supplies, makes it harder for your body to repair and re-balance. As you try to flush out the day's unfinished emotional business, you spend more time in REM, and less time in deep, restorative sleep. This then makes it harder for your body to produce the hormones you need the following day. You feel exhausted and the cycle repeats itself.

Physically this cycle lowers our immunity to infection and even increases our sensitivity to pain. Psychologically this can translate into feelings of anxiety, hopelessness, and a sense of entrapment. In understanding depression, however, we can't just look at its physical and mental implications, we also have to turn our gaze to the spiritual.

Depression and Loss of Meaning

Depression fills us with hopelessness over hope, resignation over curiosity, and self-blame over self-love. It zaps us of our essence and the very life force needed to function and fulfil our purpose on Earth. Depression is also a cry for meaning and significance, speaking persistently and honestly about our spiritual, as well as our emotional, well-being. If we do not fill the meaning gap in our lives and live by our inner promptings, then the darkness waiting in the wings may move in and try

to fill that hole for us. And fill it, it will, but not with what we want.

It's no wonder that life can feel pointless when we're depressed, especially if it goes on for some time and our systems become depleted. It's like raising a white flag on life itself, and we start to give up. Children seem to take years to reach saturated levels of depletion, but for adults, life can lose its lustre within months when we're exhausted and see little point in carrying on. It's as if we start moving through our days like a robot or a cardboard cutout of ourselves. We find that what used to be meaningful isn't anymore. What used to make us smile doesn't any longer. What used to make sense is now somehow confusing and pointless.

One of the key things I've noticed about helping people through depression is that as they begin to step away from the exhausting and endless rumination inside their heads, they start to relax and unwind. In doing so, they create space to reflect on what's important in their lives, and they can begin to find what's missing. As a practitioner, it's like leading an excessively thirsty person to an oasis in the desert for a long glass of water: at first, they can't seem to drink enough of it when they get there.

Depression is a severe loss of energy or a state of nervous exhaustion that affects our entire body-mind system. Humans aren't designed to deal with ongoing worry. We're only meant to experience threats to our systems in short bursts, such as when we lived on the

African savannah and needed to escape from a lion that was about to eat us. Unfortunately, the type of ongoing stress that we're bombarded with today in the form of often mindless consumerism and the commodification of life itself seems to strip life of all meaning. It's no wonder so many of us become depressed.

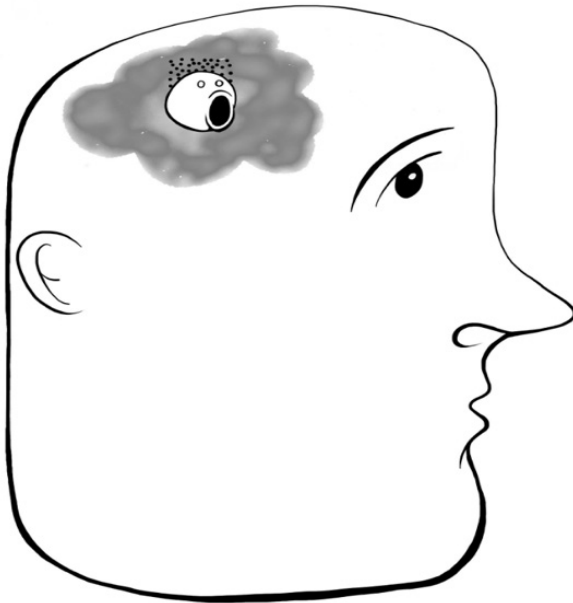
The Depressive Voice Inside Our Heads

While depression isn't actually a 'thing', it is really useful to see it as separate from who you really are. I like to tell my clients that you aren't your depression, you just happen to be doing it right now because you're listening to that voice in your head that often says these sorts of statements:

- "This always happens to me!"
- "Who'd ever want to talk/be with someone like me?"
- "I've never been any good!"
- "There's just no solution to this problem!"
- "I just can't get over the past!"
- "Everything is ruined!"
- "There's really no hope/future!"
- "Something bad is about to happen, I can just tell!"
- "Nothing good has ever happened to me!"
- "What's the point?"

It's critical that we're able to catch our internal depressive voices quickly and intervene with other options. But until we're able to recognise what our depressive voice is saying, we can't change it. I used to play a game with my girls when they were little where we would count and convert the number of 'downer' statements we made during the day. Each night at the dinner table we'd talk about what Downer Dotty (that's what we called her) would say to us throughout the day. They became vigilant about noticing less than helpful internal expressions and would often catch me saying them out loud, which they absolutely loved to do.

Children pick up this exercise really quickly.



Depression's Stickiness

We are not the same person we were yesterday, and nor are our children. Even if we're with the same people, eat the same foods, and watch the same TV shows, we're always changing. Our feelings are not what we felt yesterday, even if they seem the same. Every cell is constantly renewing itself. Every experience is filtered through the new me every morning as I wake.

The problem is we are unaware of this reality, don't believe it, or don't live from this place, especially when we're depressed. The depressed mind identifies with a hopeless version of itself because it perceives today's situation to be exactly the same as yesterday's. But it's not the same, and it takes training and a certain tuning into the non-changing part of us to realise it.

In reality, the only constants in life are grace and love. The rest is in constant flux, especially feelings and experiences. According to the 90-second rule, a feeling allowed to its fullest expression doesn't last more than 90-seconds. Something important to remember when you're at the receiving end of the next temper tantrum. According to Jill Bolte Taylor (neuroanatomist and author) who is credited with this discovery, when feelings like fear and anger last longer than this, it's because we are doing something to keep them alive. Our thoughts keep re-stimulating the original chemical reactions. And this is what most humans do because we've never been taught otherwise.

The fact is that the feelings we experience are always changing, and to enjoy good mental health, we need to notice how they change and how they're different, even if those differences seem infinitesimal at first. The best way to get our children to understand this fact is to talk about this state of flux and then model it in our own lives. We also need to teach them how to relate to themselves as healthy, emotional beings.

Don't Hold Onto Clouds

Think for a moment of how the wind pushes all clouds away, whether they be white and fluffy or dark and stormy. This is how we are meant to experience our lives as well, especially our hard times and the dark feelings that accompany them.

Unfortunately, we practice the opposite. We try to hold onto those clouds if they feel good and push them away if they don't. But whether we push them away or try to hold them tightly, the outcome is the same: they become stuck inside. Neither strategy works. Pushing dark clouds away only slows the wind of change and the possibility of a better tomorrow. It is also really important not to identify with any of our feelings because they are not who we truly are. They are just passing clouds, here in this moment and gone the next, but only if we allow them to keep floating past.

Depression deepens and becomes ingrained in our consciousness when we make the erroneous assumption

that our depressed thoughts and feelings are the same as yesterday. This is entirely untrue, and we need to stop and reflect more deeply as to how they are different, even if we can only notice those differences in small degrees. The more we practice noticing the way each month, day, and moment varies, the more present we become and the more we realise that time is just a continuum of constantly refreshed and unique experiences. We don't have to fear it. This is one way we can become unstuck from depression's grip.

Catch Change

While everything around us is changing, it's helpful to tune-into the eternal 'I' or the perceiver of all this change: the one who doesn't change. If we can identify more with the 'watcher' of our experiences, instead of the feelings or interpretations of those experiences, then we can find safety and calm within complexity and chaos, and life begins to feel more hopeful. A Course in Miracles is one source that teaches us in detail how to do this.

Depression narrows our focus and reduces our vision as to what is possible if we identify with it. By noticing the differences between who we were yesterday and the new version of ourselves today, we're able to recognise that we *are* the timeless, eternal presence of our True Selves, and not the emotions or experiences of the Ego Self in the moment. The more we can recognise the fleeting nature of our feelings, even the ones that seem to have

been around for a while, the faster they will disperse just as clouds do in a strong wind.

Kiss the Boo-Boo

Here is a formula for depression-proofing yourself and your child, which forms the basis of healthy emotional regulation. I consider it magical because, when used, it really does change everything and help us heal. You can use it anytime for yourself and others who may be hurting. I've taught it to thousands of people, and it's truly life changing if you practice and apply it. It takes a bit of finesse to get the timing right or to know when to move from step to step, but with practice you will become good at it.

There are four steps to support healthy emotional expression. I call it the Kiss the Boo-Boo formula because it is instinctually and automatically performed by every responsive parent when their child stumbles and skins their knee at the park, for example. But this formula works for every kind of hurt, not just physical ones or little ones, but all the big, emotional, complex and terrifying ones, too.



Step 1: Stop everything else. When I see or feel hurt or upset in myself or my child I stop immediately (put down my phone, turn my body towards and make myself fully available).

Step 2: Fully feel it! Acknowledge it. Say to yourself or the other, “Aw, that hurts. Ouch.” Really see and make space for the boo-boo; spend time with it. This is where you fully indulge the hurt or ‘turn up the volume’ on it. At this point if you’re doing this for your child, they will start to scream louder because you’re giving them permission to do so. This is a good thing, even if it doesn’t feel like it at the time. Yes, you are making it bigger by fully allowing it in that moment, so that you can accomplish the next step. Most people at this stage do absolutely everything except allow it fully: they distract, deny, minimise, rationalise, etc.

Step 3: Apply love and kiss the boo-boo. When the screaming starts to diminish, this is when you apply love and ultimately trust that you or the other person will recover. Say to yourself or child, yes you are hurting, and I love you. Both of these are true. You could even say, “Well done” for feeling all of that. Unconditional love applied generously and fully at this stage of emotional expression heals everything. Ultimately, it’s the only thing that does, says Harold Becker, spiritual teacher and founder of the Love Foundation. Carl Jung’s total faith in it was captured when he coined it “unconditional positive regard.”

Step 4: Put it down. This is where you put the kettle on, as they like to say in New Zealand. At this point, you trust yourself or the other and the healing process so much that you intentionally and courageously put it down and move on. You say to your child, “Okay, off you go. Enjoy playing on those monkey bars again.” We’re not meant to stay stuck in hurt forever. Remember the 90-second rule? Staying in it or carrying it into the rest of our days or even the next hour is unhealthy; it is stuck-ness and is a common way people practice depression. Remember that feelings are just clouds, waiting to be seen, acknowledged and then blown away.

To really heal or hold space as another heals, **you cannot rush this magic formula** because if you skip any one of these simple steps or don’t do them fully with a fully loving mindset, it won’t work as well.

So, for instance, if your friend has just learned that her partner has left her and when she tries to talk you keep texting your daughter to pick up groceries, then you’ve shortchanged the healing potential of this experience. Or if you stop and see the hurt but decide it’s so minor that it’s not worth talking about because you didn’t like him anyway, then you’ve judged instead of applied love in step 3. And if you decide that it’s the worst thing that ever happened to her and try to make her feel better by taking it on yourself and repeatedly talking about it rather than listening to her, then it will be more difficult to let it go.

You can see that in this way, little things matter hugely. This, again, is something we need to practice. It first starts

with awareness, then a commitment to trying them out and, finally, as you do, reach for trust in your ability to help heal yourself or others.



Letting Go

Just like those dark, depressive clouds which we effortlessly float past us, we must model for our children the ability to let go. A life free from depression asks this of us. But this is often the most difficult step for people who have practiced depression and anxiety. It was for me.

We must constantly navigate our ways through transitional periods from the time we are born until we die. Over fifty years ago, American-German psychologist Eric Erickson outlined at least eight developmental phases that every human being must traverse, including infancy and the dependency of childhood, the potency of youth, middle age, the independence of health, and ultimately, the self... and life itself. What Erickson describes clearly is what we all know: Life continually requires us to let go of the past, the old, particularly the old self that we built our identities around during each developmental life phase.

Tolerating Uncertainty

Increasing your ability to tolerate uncertainty will help you let go. On the parenting journey, fear can hold us back, especially in uncertain times when things feel beyond our control. But it's not the external situations (our children's bad behaviour or difficulties) that dictate whether we respond with fear or trust. It's how we relate to those situations that either zaps us of our personal empowerment or hands it back to us.

By itself uncertainty is neutral, like the weather or the next important insight. It all depends on what we do with it. Becoming a source of strength gives us a sense of safety and security during times of change. Without this inner trust, we're left to flop about in the sea of change in fear and self-doubt, which can lead to all kinds of mental health issues.

Depression's 'Door'

As you can see, there is a 'doorway' you must enter to become depressed. And the science on optimism is one of the most important bodies of research discussing patterns of depression and what makes us susceptible to it. For the past few years, I've taught school teachers how to identify early warning signs of depression in their students, and the understanding of this research, particularly how personal explanatory styles can be accurate predictors of it in the future. This is critical for families to know. The reason is that when we can identify children prone to negative explanatory styles, we can help them change to more optimistic and resilient ways of interpreting the world. In doing so, we are able to depression-proof them for life.

TIME-OUT 5: Turning Towards Upset

Pause for a moment and think about a time when you were really upset. If you could have stopped and fully turned towards it and fallen into it when it arose instead of resisting it in some way, what would have happened? What if you'd applied unconditional love and maybe even pride in yourself for being with your upset self fully in this way before letting it go? How would you have felt?

Learned Helplessness

Learned helplessness occurs when we decide that, over time, something is pointless, so we give up trying. At the University of Pennsylvania (UPenn), psychiatrist Dr. Martin Seligman ran a series of experiments with dogs who were administered light electrical shocks as a bell was rung. What he found was that even when the environment changed and the dogs could escape the shocks, they didn't because they had already learned that it was futile to do so. But other dogs who hadn't gone through his initial classical conditioning part of the experiment, easily and swiftly moved away from the electrical shocks. They hadn't learned or practiced giving up.

Seligman then undertook a similar experiment on rats, who exhibited the exact same patterns of learned helplessness. Those rats who were taught a method by which they could escape the electrical shocks managed to do so, but those who weren't taught the technique so they failed to escape the shock would lie down on the bottom of their cage and give up.

These experiments are important for human beings, especially as they relate to depression. Through additional research, Seligman found that the way people view negative events in particular has an impact upon whether or not they feel helpless.

If your son comes home from school after not achieving on a maths test, for example, the way he explains

the event to himself powerfully contributes to whether or not he continues to keep working at maths in the future. There are different ways he can explain the event, which may seem minor to the untrained ear, but actually have profound implications for how his relationship with the entire world of mathematics will unfold in the future. If he, for example, explains it as, “I’m just not good at maths,” because, perhaps, this isn’t the first time he’s struggled with the subject, he is far more likely to give up than if he downplays the issue and says, “I didn’t study very hard for this one because it wasn’t very important” or, “My maths teacher is useless, so that’s why I didn’t do well.” The first way of explaining this event leads to a greater likelihood that he will fall into learned helplessness patterns in the future, with maths, anyway.

With repeated perceptions of ‘failure’ we draw conclusions about our capabilities that are closely aligned with patterns of learned helplessness. What Seligman found was that over time the way we explain the happenings in our lives will determine whether we become prone to learned helplessness and depression in the future.

Dr. Seligman and his University of Pennsylvania team of researchers have published over 35 scientific and scholarly studies dating back to the late 1970s on learned helplessness and explanatory styles. And what they found is that the way people explain the causes of events that happen to them, both ‘good’ and so-called ‘bad’, can be used to predict depression, achievement,

and health, with a pessimistic style predicting poorer outcomes across all three of these indicators.

Explanatory Styles

A person's primary explanatory style stems from how he or she habitually interprets the meaning of life's so-called bad or good events over time. A 'bad' event is just an event that we don't want to happen, such as losing a sports match, underperforming on a school exam or losing a close friend. 'Good' events, on the other hand, are happenings that we're pleased with because we wanted them in the first place, such as winning an important game, making a new friend, or securing a new job.

People who are anxious are more likely to explain neutral events as threatening or dangerous in some way. People who are depressed are more likely to explain neutral events as negative and downplay good events. Depressive explanatory styles strip life of its sweetness and joy by explaining good things away somewhere on the continuum of it's "no big deal," to it's "downright awful."

Every person has a primary way of explaining the 'why' of how these things happen. But so do families. According to the research, children adopt their personal explanatory styles from what they see modelled by their primary caregiver and what they witness in their families growing up.

Meaning-Making Machines

We are meaning-making machines. This is how we direct our energy and resources, keep ourselves safe, and understand the world in which we live. Everything has a meaning for us, which is subjective depending on our life's experiences and even our mood that day. The culmination of these meanings combined over time form our dominant explanatory style, which can be uncovered by listening carefully to how we explain good or bad events. We naturally want an explanation for something when it doesn't go the way we anticipated, and vice versa.

When people habitually see the causes of bad events as stable, global, and internal ("It's going to last forever", "It's going to undermine all that I do," and "It's me who's fundamentally flawed"), and if they see the causes of good events in the opposite way, Seligman's team say that their explanatory style is pessimistic or depressive. They use the term pessimistic because a style that projects ongoing bad events far into the future (**stable**) and across everything (**global**) captures the essence of pessimism. When individuals see the causes of bad events as unstable, specific (**and external**) and see the causes of good events in the opposite way, they say the style is optimistic or non-depressive.

EXPLANATORY STYLE	MEANING..
INTERNAL OR EXTERNAL	"IT'S MY FAULT." "ITS SOMEONE ELSE'S FAULT."
GLOBAL OR SPECIFIC	"MY WHOLE LIFE IS RUINED." "THAT WILL BE BAD FOR THIS PART OF MY LIFE."
STABLE OR UNSTABLE	"IT WILL LAST FOREVER." "THINGS WILL CHANGE OVER TIME."

In a meta-analysis of 104 studies involving 15,000 subjects, Sweeney, Anderson, and Bailey (1986) reported that certain explanatory styles both for good and bad events were correlated closely to depression. In 1988, another researcher found that among those studies of high statistical power, the explanatory style for bad events was closely linked to depression in every instance.

In Seligman's University of Pennsylvania team studies of pessimism across time and cultures, they found that the same explanatory style concept that predicts individual differences in depression, achievement, and health can

also be used to study the ups and downs of nations, their leaders, and those leaders' appeal to their constituents. In his book, *Learned Optimism*, Seligman talks about the research they conducted on the optimism levels of American presidents by studying presidential speeches. What they found was astonishing: 27 out of the 29 winners of the presidential race were graded as more optimistic (based on their predominant explanatory styles) than their unsuccessful opponent.

Pessimism or Realism?

It's important to look at how as a society we normalise depressive thinking styles. It's good to be discerning and even sceptical, at times, but not when it becomes our primary life filter. As a culture, and on the whole, New Zealanders tend to favour neutral to more negative explanations of events, for example. Most Americans, on the other hand, are more stubbornly optimistic, but this has dropped dramatically since the 1950s, when both countries habitually and consistently used significantly more optimistic explanatory styles. Post-1950s was a time of rapid growth and high spirits in many parts of the world, and this impacted how cultures, families, and individuals explained what happened to them.

Today, our unfettered optimism has been capped for a number of reasons, including the belief that positivity is naïve, depicting the hallmark of a person who is uninformed or hasn't a clue about what's really going on. We

really don't want to be wrong at anything, so we under-punch events or situations so that we don't come across as too rosy-eyed or idealistic. For years, there have been TV ads for a leading eye exam business in New Zealand that highlight the ability to see situations clearly or else you will look stupid and make mistakes. This fear of being wrong or too simple-minded is well-entrenched culturally, prompting Kiwis to become more 'realistic': a concept that usually includes a healthy dose of pessimism.

But another reason to be suspicious of optimism is because we don't want to be let down by false hope. What if it doesn't turn out the way we thought it would? What if we're disappointed? What if we tell our friends about it, and it doesn't happen? What if they talk about us behind our backs? New Zealand's 'tall poppy syndrome' — a cultural tendency to be suspicious of success — is another mitigating factor keeping more optimistic explanations in check. In fact, talking situations up might make us a target for envy or criticism.

Socially, at least in New Zealand, it's as if we've somehow decided that optimism is unsafe and has to be reined in lest it gets the best of us and leads us astray. It's like we're all living on a short leash, so we don't get too carried away. I see this phenomenon hard at work, particularly with Kiwi teenagers, who go to great lengths to play up their shortcomings and setbacks. Many youth tell me that they criticise themselves and downplay their accomplishments just for their friends and that they don't

really believe it. While this may be true, it's important to remember that we get good at what we practice, so we need to stop and take a closer look at what we are, as New Zealanders, practicing every day. Society as a whole has an important role to play in how our young people adopt certain explanatory styles, but it's our families who play the most influential role in how we tend to explain our lives' events.

Family Explanatory Styles

Just like nations and individuals, families adopt their own dominant explanatory style for good and bad events, which is passed down through the generations. My grandfather often explained setbacks as "just his luck." When his third business failed, for example, he wasn't surprised at all. He told me, "This always happens to me." Sometimes we can notice our family's dominant explanatory style by listening to how everyone explains holiday delays at the airport when a flight is cancelled or when we can catch ourselves making Murphy's or Sod's Law references.

Children are heavily influenced by the explanatory styles of their parents. In fact, it is rare for a child to have a radically different explanatory style from their primary caregiver. When things go wrong, it's a great opportunity to listen carefully how your family explains it. Listen for positive or negative explanations from different family members about why it happened, its likelihood to happen

again, and who is responsible for it. Specifically, you want to try to hear if their explanations are:

- **Stable or Unstable:** Are the impacts going to continue on for a while, or are they momentary e.g., likely to disappear quickly?
- **Global or Specific:** Affect many aspects of life or everything, including everyone's mood, or just one limited aspect of our lives?
- **Internal or External:** A result of "my error" or fault, or someone else's, including hard luck, the airline's, God's, etc.?

If we find that our families have more negative explanatory styles there are a number of ways to intervene. In the next section, I talk more about a few of these ways. The good news is that the more positive explanations you use in your own life, the more everyone around you will, too. It is critical to have a conversation about how we explain both setbacks and successes at home. This worked well with my own daughters. When I explained what I saw happening and told them that I was going to try and change my own style, they began to follow suit, much of the time without even realising they were doing so. Your example is a powerful tool for transformation.

TIME-OUT 6: Explaining Events

When something goes to plan, or exceeds our expectations, we naturally come up with reasons to explain it. Think back to a time when something went well. How did you talk to yourself and others about it? Did you allow yourself to turn up the volume and really celebrate it, or did you minimise it in some way?

Over-Parenting's Link to Depression

If certain explanatory styles are like the doorway into depression through which we must traverse, over-parenting expands the opening so that it's much easier to get through. Because of this, it's really important to look honestly at not only the quality of our parenting but also the quantity. And we want to do so without making ourselves feel guilty!

Psychologist Martin Seligman says that the boom in parenting books and experts has left many parents feeling insecure and lacking.

As a result, parents sometimes get the idea that their children's happiness is their responsibility, so they try and protect them from all pain and setbacks. This is completely counter to why I'm sharing these insights, so if, while reading these pages, you start to notice guilt creep in, it's important to be both firm and gentle with yourself to stop it.

One of the basic premises of the depression-proof approach is that we are all doing the best we can with the awareness and skills that we have. Guilt plays no part in building a depression-proof life. Learning, however, is central.



TIME-OUT 7: Parenting Guilt

How much of a role does guilt play in my parenting?

How can I practice self-forgiveness, daily if necessary?

How can I set the intention to keep reaching for improvement without feeling regret for what I wasn't yet aware of?

Being Honest About Our Over-Parenting Tendencies

Do you stand close by when your children do their homework? Do you find yourself guiding your kids in one direction or another – “Pick up this, clean up that, sit up straight, finish your homework, study hard, say thank you”? Do you spend considerable time during the day thinking about your children’s success, such as will they make the sports team or school play, and will they get into the top-notch college you’d like them to? If you recognise yourself or answer yes to any of these questions, as I did for a time, then read on because the implications of this unhelpful parenting style are huge.

In this section, I want to explore one way depression finds fertile ground in our children because it is one of the greatest threats to our children’s future mental well-being: our tendency to over-parent.

You’ve heard the terms helicopter parent or tiger mum bantered about, and I don’t think categorising parents in this way is helpful. I truly believe that every parent is doing his or her best with good intentions, even if he or she has limited skills. Because of this, I don’t think judgement of any sort should play a role in how we see ourselves or others as parents. Judgement only makes the parenting climb more arduous and makes it harder for us to parent effectively. Regardless of whether it is true or not, fundamentally finding fault with parents is unhelpful,

in my opinion. In fact, anything that encourages guilt in parents should be avoided at all costs. The climb is hard enough already.

We do, however, need to take an honest look at what the research shows in terms of parenting styles and habits and how they impact our children. We all want to love our children as much as possible and protect them from danger and the worst of society. We want to give our children every possible advantage in this increasingly competitive world. But often, in justifying these facts, we over-parent them, and this can backfire in major ways.

A sizeable collection of research in recent years shows a clear connection between over-parenting and mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, as children get older and try to make it on their own. In fact, there are no fewer than six large scale bodies of quantitative research conducted since 2010 which show a significant link between over-parenting and depression and anxiety in young adults.

One study, conducted by researcher Neil Montgomery, a psychologist at Keene State College in New Hampshire, found that overprotective parents had a lasting impact on their child's personality by prolonging childhood and adolescence and encouraging irresponsibility. Approximately 300 first-year college students were surveyed, and those with parents who over-parented, as measured against ten key variables, were less open to new ideas, less tolerant of others' actions, and more vulnerable, anxious, dependent, and self-conscious.

A 2016 study from the National University of Singapore published in the *Journal of Personality* indicated that children whose parents were consistently intrusive, had high expectations for academic performance, or who overreacted when they made mistakes, tended to be more self-critical, anxious, and depressed.

In addition, the journal *Cognitive Therapy and Research* published a 2017 study, which found that helicopter-style parenting can trigger anxiety in kids who already struggle with social issues, and depression in older young adults. Two additional pieces of research conducted that same year corroborated these findings, too.

With such a robust body of evidence suggesting a strong link between depression and over-parenting, we need to take notice.

What is Over-Parenting?

What is over-parenting and how do you know if you're doing it? There are many factors that come into play when we parent our children, including their temperament and tendency towards sensitivity and fear. In other words, there is no right or wrong answer here: no rule book, which makes our jobs as parents both creative and challenging at times. There are certain beliefs and behaviours that are unhelpful, however, if we want to raise children who are depression-proof.

Any parenting style based in fear is unhelpful. Over-parenting is based on fundamental beliefs that our children are weak and in need of strong guidance or else they will go astray and fall into dysfunction. This core belief then leads to many different behaviours that are designed to overprotect and overmanage our children's affairs, even as they move out of childhood and into adolescence.

Now let's look at your beliefs about child raising. It is very easy to skim over this section without really looking carefully at the heart of our beliefs about the fundamental nature of our children. Stop for a moment and think about the questions below. The first answer that pops into your mind, without analysing it, will be the most accurate as to what you really believe.

1. *Do you think that children are primarily born as a blank slate?*
2. *Do children need a lot of structure to be responsible or successful adults?*
3. *Are children fundamentally vulnerable and needy?*
4. *Do you agree with the statement that children require strong guidance?*
5. *Are you fearful that your parenting will cause your children to be dysfunctional in the future?*
6. *Are you — or your parenting skills — somehow to blame when your children fail?*

7. Do you feel judged by other parents or society at large for your parenting choices?

If you said yes to many of these questions then you are not alone! You are also much more prone to taking too much responsibility for your children's lives and thereby to over-parent. When we reflect on our answers to questions like these, then we're able to start to challenge them. In doing so, we can better understand our tendencies as parents to be too involved, or not involved enough, in the lives of our children.

Both over-parenting and under-parenting have serious consequences, but, according to the research, as long as the child has his/her basic needs met and feels secure, over-parenting carries a far greater long-term risk.

How Were You Parented?

How we were parented is another important barometer of whether we will over-parent our children. Alongside beliefs, how protective or smothering our parents were towards us as we grew will set the benchmark for what we believe is acceptable in raising our own kids.

TIME-OUT 8: Personal Space

Did your parents respect your personal space as you grew?

How did your parents react when you had emotional outbursts or less than positive emotional expressions?

Did your parents offer advice, even when you didn't want it?

Were you allowed to make your own mistakes?

Good Intentions, Poor Outcomes

According to the Gottman Institute in Seattle, Washington, which has been studying what makes good and bad human relationships since the 1960s, over-parenting can be defined by three common types of parental behaviour:

1. **Information seeking behaviours** — This is about needing to know your children's daily schedule and where they are at all times. This is often justified with good intentions: helping them make decisions, and being informed about grades and other accomplishments.
2. **Direct intervention behaviours** — This is jumping into conflicts with kids' friends, teammates, roommates, romantic partners, and even teachers and managers later on.

3. **Autonomy limiting behaviours** — When parents try to prevent children from making mistakes, they attempt to control their lives and fail to support their decisions and their children's growth and autonomy.

It's relatively easy to know if we're over-parenting or not. Basically, the yardstick is this: If your children are able to do something themselves (regardless of cleanliness or aptitude), and you do it for them instead, you're disempowering them and over-parenting. You're robbing them of the ability to become confident and resilient. This doesn't just include making their lunches for them, when they're able - if not always capable in the way we'd like it done - it also includes trying to solve problems or upsets for them by over involving ourselves in their personal decisions and affairs.

Let's look at a few more common examples where we as parents have important decisions to make as they relate to over-parenting:

- Daniel comes home from school with a less than satisfactory mark in English. He is clearly upset because he felt he had really worked hard to improve his grade. You begin to feel upset too, and start to feel agitated, frustrated (fill in the blank) as you try to help him find solutions. He begins to quiet down and you think you've helped him feel better. In reality, you've made it harder for him to come to his own conclusions about the experience because you've muddled the situation with your own feelings.

- Daisy comes home after a sleepover birthday party crying because the girls kept being mean or leaving her out. You become upset listening to her pain and frustration and begin to think about calling another mum to see what really happened or if her daughter is upset too. Or maybe you attempt to take away your daughter's upset by telling her about your own experiences of feeling left out when you were her age. Either way, you're filtering the experience through your feelings and making it harder for your daughter to feel her own. You're increasing the confusion around the situation by becoming embroiled in it.
- Sophie misses every shot at her netball game and is clearly distraught as she comes off the court. You try to make her feel better by reassuring her that she didn't play that badly after all and, maybe during the car ride on the way home, you offer to get one-on-one coaching to help her boost her skills. Either way, you've not used the Kiss the Boo-Boo formula or reflected her actual experience of her performance nor have you allowed Sophie to manage her own feelings.

These are really common over-parenting traps. The reality is that, although they may seem insignificant, they're actually sending very powerful messages to our children, such as:

- 'Bad' feelings shouldn't be tolerated or accepted.
- 'Failure' is scary and something to be avoided.

- ‘Upset’ feelings are not okay. I need to help you with them.
- I need to protect you from your upset feelings.
- I don’t really trust you to manage life’s inevitable ups and downs on your own.
- I know better than you do how to live your life. I know better than you do how you feel.
- Trust me, not yourself.

While we don’t intend to send these messages, we send them nevertheless: loud and clear.

Parents who favour this style communicate to their children in subtle (or not-so-subtle) ways that they won’t be safe unless an adult is there looking out for them. When these children inevitably go out on their own, they are not prepared to meet life’s daily challenges. This inability to find creative solutions and make decisions on their own can cause a great deal of worry since their protector is no longer around to help them. They don’t develop adequate self-belief and confidence because they weren’t allowed or encouraged to practice. It was all too risky or time consuming.

If children aren’t allowed to learn the skills to function independently, or if they’re held to perfectionist or unattainable standards, then they become a breeding

ground for heightened anxiety, depression, low confidence, and low self-esteem. Another issue is that if kids haven't learned to navigate failure, they can develop an overwhelming fear of it and become worried about disappointing others. Finally, if we don't let our children have the freedom to learn about the world and discover their purpose and what makes them happy, they will struggle to find happiness and live a balanced and fulfilled life.

We must allow our children to discover who they are for themselves—their weaknesses, strengths, goals, and dreams. We can help them succeed, but we must also let them fail, which is definitely harder. Importantly, we need to role model how to rise over adversity and try again. Learning what failure is — learning in action — how it feels, and how to bounce back from it is a key aspect of growing up depression-proof.

But They Asked for It?

Most children from comfortable upbringings, at one point or another, begin to expect that their parents will take on the hard work for them. In other words, you will solve their problems and take on too much emotional and physical responsibility for their difficulties. They are not doing this maliciously, they have just gotten used to having too much support, and this makes it easier for them to dodge what is required in becoming an empowered and responsible adult. And the journey to self-sufficient and responsible adulthood is not always easy or smooth sailing.

We know this is the case when we hear our daughter say during a moment of distress, “What should I do, Mum?” If our children are asking for your input automatically during setbacks or struggles, then this is a signal that you, as her parent, could be doing and have done too much for her, or you are not doing this any longer, but she’s still trying it on anyway. The very worst thing we can do at this time is give her our opinion or well-intentioned solution. But for many of us, it is difficult to refrain. We have practiced solving her problems as a way to try and move her out of distress for so long that we convince ourselves that this is the best way to keep the peace. In reality, it’s a way of dealing with our own discomfort of feeling her upset and, well, she asked for it. If we cannot stop ourselves, however, we do her an enormous disservice. Starting when our children are in kindergarten, we need to begin pulling back from being too involved in helping them with challenges. The research on this is crystal clear.

In a 2021 study out of Stanford University in California, associate professor Jelena Obradović and her team observed parents’ behaviour when kindergarten-age children were actively engaged in playing, cleaning up toys, learning a new game, and discussing a problem. The children of parents who more often stepped in to provide instructions, corrections or suggestions or to ask questions – despite the children being appropriately on task – displayed more difficulty regulating their behaviour and emotions in the future. These children also performed worse on tasks that measured delayed gratification and

other functions, including skills associated with impulse control and the ability to shift their attention between competing demands.

These Stanford researchers distinguished between structured and unstructured tasks to see if the type of task the child was engaged in made a difference to how much parental involvement was helpful. They did this by observing each parent and child separately. Using video recordings, the interactions were broken down second by second and evaluated. This allowed Obradović and her team to identify subtle shifts in how parents engaged with their children. And they found that, regardless of the type of activity, parental intervention affected children differently depending on whether the child was actively or passively engaged in the task. Children who experienced adult involvement when they were actively focused on something fared much worse in terms of self-regulation later, but those who were passive or not engaged benefited from parental help to get them back on task. So teachable moments, the researchers found, do have their place. But it makes sense to limit this involvement to when a child is not paying attention or half-heartedly paying attention and/or breaking the rules in some way. At other times, kids need to be left alone to direct their own learning so that we become their witness.

“Parents have been conditioned to find ways to involve themselves, even when kids are on task and actively playing or doing what they’ve been asked to do,” stresses Obradović. Unfortunately, this parental over-engagement

comes at a cost to kids' abilities to control their own attention, behaviour and emotions. On the other hand, when parents let kids take the lead in their interactions, children practice self-regulation skills and build independence. Overall, engaged parenting helps children build cognitive and emotional skills, but over-engagement, particularly when children are on task and working it out themselves, makes our children more susceptible to anxiety and depression in the future. Finding the right balance between the two is a critical aspect of depression-proofing our kids.

TIME-OUT 9: Overprotecting Our Children

Pause for a moment and think about a recent incident where you felt a strong need to protect your children from someone or something. What triggered it? How did you behave? What messages did you send in doing so?

“They fall and by falling are given wings to fly.”

Rumi

Setting Boundaries

Becoming conscious of our over-parenting tendencies leads us to one of the essentials of the depression-proof approach: respectful boundaries. When we do not know our boundaries or they are not or clear or strong enough (without becoming rigid), we set our children up for the same, and they become more susceptible to mental health issues later on.

But it's not good enough to know our boundaries; we have to act on them and, importantly for our children, we have to be clear about them and express them freely and consistently. Children need to know that they can trust themselves, and they learn this by watching you trust yourself and by receiving your trust in them. Your foundational trust in their abilities to make good decisions as they grow also helps them on a broader level trust life itself as an expression of optimism and hope for the future... or the opposite: depression.

One of the hardest things as a parent for me to learn was to be able to watch any one of my daughters suffer and not to take it on myself. When my oldest daughter's long-term boyfriend cheated on her with another girl, she was devastated for months, and I had to allow her to go through that process without trying to take it away from her or wanting her to snap out of it too quickly. To be able to hold our children in hurt without making it about us is the greatest, most precious gift we can give

them. As I repeatedly reminded myself, we can hold their hands through something, but it's theirs to handle. This is something we need to start practicing when our children are young.

Defining what our boundaries are is the first step. We need to set personal boundaries that are physical, mental, and emotional. We also need to set boundaries with regard to our belongings and, precious, our resources, the most important of which is our time. Physical boundaries involve not allowing others to criticise our bodies or 'fat shame' anyone else in the family, for example. We also all have a need for time by ourselves - or time-outs - which are important to protect, and to notice when we've not protected this important need. Mental and emotional boundaries need to be set to include what media we will consume, how much time we spend online, what behaviours we will tolerate from others, and how we will spend our spare time. There are many areas where boundaries can be set. It's up to each of us to decide which ones we want to stand by and which ones we're prepared to be flexible with.

At the end of this section, there's a Time-Out which will help you examine your boundaries to see where they may need bolstering. If you've not practiced setting boundaries in the past, then starting to do so can be challenging and even a little scary at first. But remember we get good at what we practice. And your body is your friend in this regard because boundaries are closely linked to our intuition and inner voice that is constantly telling us

what is and what isn't okay for us. Asking our body to guide us is a feeling, not a thinking, job, so switching off your mind while you do so can help you tune in to yourself. As you reflect on your boundaries, if you notice that you start to think about how they will affect others, then you've slipped into the territory of the mind and need to return to the body's sensations.

Once you've identified your boundaries, then you need to communicate them clearly and regularly in your close relationships and begin practicing holding on to them. This is never a 'one and done'. Boundaries worth setting are also ones worth repeating.

I've personally found that boundaries are a powerful way to navigate some of the tougher parenting decisions that we need to make, particularly as our children enter adolescence. I have always been an early to bed kind of gal, falling asleep most nights before 10 pm. But when my daughters started going out at night and limits needed to be set for how late they could stay out, one of the core factors in determining this was my need to get a good sleep. My boundary was that I needed to get sufficient sleep or I wasn't able to show up the next day for myself or others in the ways that I wanted. As a result, the negotiated settlement that we reached was impacted by this very important personal boundary. They had to respect it. This was one factor that we had to balance, just as we had to consider what was really important to them. Inevitably, they clashed at times, but overall

we became adept at finding solutions, usually through compromise, that we could all live with.

“If you want to do something, but I’ll be a nervous wreck because of it, then it’s a no-go,” I would tell them. They would then need to find another way to get both our needs met. In this way, I allowed my boundary of maintaining my peace of mind at all reasonable costs to help me navigate key parental decisions.

Overall, to shape and protect our boundaries, we must see ourselves and our children as separate souls who will not always get things right but are here to learn and grow. As Khalil Gibran says more poetically, your children “though they are with you, they belong not to you.” As parents we are the “bows from which our children as living arrows are sent forth.”

So, the question is are you a strong and stable ‘bow’ from which your children can soar, or are you trying too hard to be the arrow as well? This question is really worth reflecting on because, as you can see, the research finds that the implications are enormous.

TIME-OUT 10: My Boundaries

Tune in to your bodily sensations for a minute and feel where and when you need to say no. How have you avoided listening to your intuition and then acting on this in the past? What do you need to shift or change to make yourself feel safe and secure as a parent in your relationships?



SECTION IV: MAP OF THE MOUNTAIN



You First

If we care about our kids then we must care about ourselves. There really is no separation. The heart of depression-proofing our children is that we are all in this together. So, the next time we see a kid having a tantrum and a parent really struggling, we can flash them that smile that says, without a trace of judgement or shame, I feel you; I'm with you.

The best depression-proofing map to use for high level parenting and overall effective family functioning is an inside-out one. In other words, the centre of the map is prioritised and becomes the hub of your family terrain. And **YOU** are that hub. Yes, that's right. You, as the centre, hold all the bearings and the heart of the compass or the values that your family follows. Just like the planets orbit the sun, your children orbit you as parent. When focusing on yourself as the sun and doing what is needed to make your own sun shine brightly, you're able to spread your love and influence outwards to the farthest reaches of your solar system.

Unfortunately, most parents do the opposite. They put their children at the centre of the universe and relegate themselves to the outer reaches. But this only increases the likelihood that we will over-parent our children and make them more susceptible to a wide range of mental health issues, including depression. The truth is that everything radiates out from **you** as the parent and the

environment you create for your children. Not the other way around.

Loving yourself is the first and most critical step to seeking happiness and fulfilment. And the research shows that fulfilled, happy parents raise happy, fulfilled children. They also raise more successful and accomplished adults. In fact, the research shows that how happy you are affects how happy and successful your children will become.

Extensive research conducted over decades has established a powerful link between depressed mothers and “negative outcomes” in their children, such as acting out and other behaviour problems. Parental depression seems to initiate behavioural problems in kids. It also makes our parenting much less effective. And this isn’t due to genetics.

So, taking care of yourself is the least selfish thing you can do because it’s a pathway to fulfilment and high performance in work and in life for your children. And, just as importantly, it’s a gift to everyone around you. It’s hard being around people who are needy and unhappy. We often feel drained by their presence because depression and anxiety are both highly contagious.

Self-love and acceptance become essential for living a depression-proof life: one of the pillar foundations of this approach. Your job is to develop yourself, increase your own incomplete self-love and overcome your own

issues first because when you do this you create the best possible parenting environment for those you love.

You Are the Sun. Your Children Are the Planets

Most parents, however, are far less committed to their own self-development than they are to their children's. "Please help my daughter with her anxiety," a mother will say to me. But when I enquire about her own anxiety, because I know how contagious it is, she will admit to it but doesn't want to commit resources or time to working on herself. We cannot, however, change the fact that the planets orbit the sun; it's not the other way around. We cannot truly support our children in the ways we wish if we don't put ourselves first. Sure, we can help our children cope with difficulties and learn new skills, but unless we ourselves are prepared to change our own ingrained beliefs and behaviours, we cannot fully depression-proof them.



Parenting from Presence

“Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity,” said French philosopher Simone Weil. She gave us this understanding in *Gravity and Grace*, published posthumously in 1952. She also went on to say that when we practice paying attention to even the smallest and most minute aspects of our lives, we reap the deepest rewards of our humanity. Weil reminds us that where we put our attention is incredibly important.

This is why another foundational part of the depression-proof approach is presence: your awareness and availability. In other words, your undivided time. This is the thing I regret the most in raising my girls. All those days I packed in too many activities or chores, or spent hours trawling through research for my next book. All those opportunities to be present for them that I let pass by because I wasn’t aware of what I was doing and didn’t realise how important it was. Regardless of how available we have been for our children, we can be gentle on ourselves in this area, and increase our presence when it matters most going forward.

Unfortunately, presence seems to be a rare commodity today and is getting even more challenging as the stressors on families grow. We’re so distracted. Our society has become so mind-dominant that we are constantly interacting with others while our minds are focused elsewhere. And people can tell, especially our children, because, at

least up until the age of about 10, they are usually relatively free from distractions and are more heart-based, having had less time to get into bad habits.

So, this is a critical component of depression-proof parenting: when we decide to interact with our children, we need to do so ‘cleanly’. We need to set down our cell phones and switch off thinking about what to cook for dinner and really focus on the child before us and what they need in that moment. This doesn’t mean that you spend 24/7 focused on your child, nor would it be beneficial to you or them if you did. Instead, it means that when it matters most, and when you decide you’re able to, that you turn your full attention to that present moment and hold space for them. More about this in Tackling the Climb section.

Ultimately, parenting from presence means that we become more aware of when we are distracted and not fully present for others, including our children, and communicate this fact and work to find moments when we can be. In doing so, we radically transform our relationships with our children.

Your Relationship is the Solar System

If you are the sun around which your children’s planets orbit, your relationship with your child is the solar system. It’s the air they breathe. When the relationship is poor, each breath becomes laboured, whether we’re conscious of it or not. When the relationship is strong it fills them up

and enables them to go great distances resiliently. Your relationship is a foundational element in helping your child become depression-proof.

Just like any other good relationship in your life, staying connected and kind are key to enabling it to grow. The relationship you build with your child needs to become a bond of great strength, force, and significance that helps transcend all life phases and emotional shifts. To achieve this, it needs to be based on these fundamentals:

1. *History (time spent together)*
2. *Mutual respect*
3. *Emotional safety and trust*
4. *Continuity and consistency*

“Trust is the foundation of our humanity, and the fuel for navigating and creating the future.”

Judith Glaser

Parenting From Trust

During our parenting journey, one of the most helpful things we can do is to turn our doubt and uncertainty into trust. This is because trust changes reality. When you feel blocked, what’s your typical reaction? Do you move towards thinking, “Ugh. Why me?” or do you stop and ask, “What is my life trying to tell me right now?”

That latter is a much better question. How we as parents

respond to the difficult moments in life is largely how our children will, too. The difference between these two reactions is the difference between depression or joy, between trust and fear.

Trust is an optimistic state of mind that is based on the expectation of positive outcomes or of a cherished desire. To me, trust is one of the most life-affirming qualities we can cultivate in ourselves and our children. People feel confused and afraid, not because of outside forces, but because they are not trusting enough and haven't yet practiced turning unease and overwhelm into a sense of strength through hope. Now more than ever, hopeful expectations, or trust, as I like to refer to it, can become an essential resource that we renew every day to enrich our families.

More Than an Emotion

Most people think of trust as a precious commodity to call upon in rough times or reserve for lasting friendships, but it is much more than a mere emotion. University of Kansas psychological researcher, CR Snyder, discovered, after spending his entire adult life developing his seminal hope theory, that when we trust we actually activate specific pathways in the brain; hope is a cognitive process rather than an emotional one. When we are hopeful we generate the motivation and the specific steps required to reach our goals.

Snyder's robust body of research over 30 years also found that being hopeful generates well-being, and, I believe, is essential for depression-proofing our families.

When we trust another person, especially our children, to do the best they can in every moment, we are sending powerful signals that begin activating their minds to find ways so that they can prove us right. In other words, when we trust someone, and communicate that fact, the other person will work hard so as not to let us down. The power of expectations within close relationships, especially those between parent and child, cannot be underestimated. Children, in particular, will work tirelessly to live up to our expectations, so setting the hopeful ones that we would like them to work towards is critical.

Uncertainty and upheaval test our ability to trust. Trust gives us more control over how life unfolds every day and is a powerful source of strength that we are able to tap. But to tap trust's enormous power, it's not enough to *hope* that things will work out; we need a steadfast commitment to it to deal with the uncertainty in life overall and parenting in particular. That commitment must come in the form of practice and a refusal to accept fear or doubt when trust and hope are more useful responses.

Change is the only constant in life and is often a trigger to switch over to auto-pilot and fear in an effort to control that change, which can quickly lead to anxiety, insecurity, and low expectations or hopelessness. An alternate path is to embrace uncertainty for its creative potential

or the life-giving properties of renewal and the wisdom it reveals. This path leads to an ever-expanding life with greater fulfilment and security, a strong sense of self, and a steady process of awakening. Trust is at the heart of this path. But for trust to be effective, you must grow it beyond wish fulfilment or a wish and a prayer. You have to make it a tangible force that guides your thinking and feelings on an everyday basis so that it becomes a powerful, transformational force that you strengthen over time. Much like you might go to the gym or out for a run to exercise your body every day, you need to exercise your trust muscles, too.

I learned how to strengthen mine when I was a little girl growing up in Alaska where I was forced to face my greatest fear: wolves. I'll never forget the day I turned seven, and my mother announced I was to walk alone from my family's log cabin to the bus stop for the first time. I begged her to drive me, but her response was a cool, "No, Molly, it builds character". Neither of my parents succumbed to the over-parenting trap. By walking these long distances in the dark every day for years, I developed an awareness of something bigger than myself and realised that I could be safe, regardless of what changed around me. In doing so, I practiced trust in myself, the wider Alaskan bush, and the darkness itself. But more than this, I learned to trust life.

Trust Buckets

Imagine yourself on the parenting climb I described in the beginning. One of your most important jobs along the way is to make sure you're well hydrated. First and foremost, you need water, both literally and metaphorically, to endure the arduous quest of parenting and come out alive. In my experience, 'water' is the essential elixir, or the trust that you build up with your children. Every day you have the chance to top up your trust or drain it away and waste it.

Relationships are built on filling the 'trust buckets' we share with another person. Every word, every interaction, every deed either tops up or depletes the levels of trust in the buckets we carry. When we say, and then do, what we say we will, again and again, we fill our buckets over time. When we love another and freely express it in ways the other person can appreciate, we keep our mutual buckets full to brimming. When we listen without distraction, judgement or having to be 'right', we reinforce trust, too.

Unless we've been consistently abusive or negligent, usually by the time our children reach pre-adolescence, just through the daily process of caring for them, our trust buckets are healthy and mostly full. This is a good thing because in a very short time, our trust will be truly tested and holes will become obvious. During adolescence, we will be forced to rely more heavily on the trust built up with

our children, and we will need to replenish our buckets much more consistently and consciously. I will show you how to do this in the next section. But first, spend a few minutes exploring the role trust plays in your life right now.

TIME-OUT 11: Trusting in Life

How are you supported by life itself?

How often do you tap into this sense of trust when you need to?

How can you bring more trusting moments into your personal life?

**“Hope and fear cannot occupy the same space.
Invite one to stay.”**

Maya Angelou



Parenting From Trust

As children, we were all born with the natural inclination to move towards perfect well-being. I love this snippet from a poem by well-being blogger, Sarah Blondin:

Not long ago, for example, you knew how to dance when your heart wanted to...

Not long ago, you knew how to sing when the sky opened... and the sun asked you to.

Not long ago, you knew how to cry when water would rise within you.

Not long ago, you were but a seed... happy to be blown by the wind...

Not long ago you knew how to be as you were... as you ARE.

Parenting from trust is a lot like living from trust. It doesn't just happen; it is a choice, one we practice returning to sometimes daily. To live from trust takes courage, commitment, and a fair bit of practice. When I trust as a way of being in the world, I do not allow my personal fears, or any collective ones, to tarnish the way I see the world and interact with it. It doesn't mean that bad experiences won't happen to me; it just means that whatever does come my way, I know I will handle it with composure and strength or, even if I don't, I'll find some way to repair it and move on. When I live from trust, the outside world

doesn't get to choose how I feel about myself. This is non-negotiable. It doesn't get to tell me what is wrong or right. This is my job. And, it's from this place that resilient children are made and inoculated from depression.

The fundamental bedrock for raising children who know and value themselves are parents who live from these principles first. Parents who embody and operate from high levels of trust, rather than fear, raise courageous, robust, and happy children.

TRUST...

THE HEART AND ART OF PARENTING

When you parent from trust, you...

Trust that your children are perfect as they are.

Trust that your children are an exquisite expression of themselves.

Trust that your children are safe and healthy.

Trust that your love for them is timeless and without condition.

Trust that your children will push you out of your comfort zone.

Trust that your children will challenge and annoy you.

Trust that your children will embarrass you and let you down.

Trust that your children will break your heart.

Trust that your children will make mistakes.

Trust that your children will learn from them.

Trust that your children are always trying to do their best.

Trust that your children will find their own levels of prosperity and success in life.

Trust that your children will unearth meaning and purpose for themselves.

Trust that your children don't need to be better in any way.

Trust that, no matter what your children do, they are not what they do.

Trust that, no matter how your children behave, they are perfectly themselves.

TIME-OUT 12: Trust As a Parenting Superpower

Do you use trust as a parenting tool or do you tend to use more fear tactics?

How do you think parenting from trust will change your relationships, including those with your child/ren?

How can you bring more trust to your family life?

Self-Worth and Self-Esteem

No discussion about childhood well-being is complete without addressing the issue of self-worth. In the 1980s the self-esteem movement took the United States and then later the entire world by storm with enormous implications for parenting. Since then, much of it has been discredited because it was too simplistic, focusing on building our children up with false and empty praise at the cost of actual achievement.

Rather than encouraging our children to feel good about themselves through effort, the self-esteem movement relied too heavily on just propping children up with platitudes in the hope that they would then go on to do successful things. Martin Seligman in *Optimistic Child* stresses the fault in this approach when he says, “The feeling of self-esteem is a byproduct of doing well.” In

other words, we have to do good things first, then we can feel good about ourselves, not the other way around.

But regardless of where we stand on self-esteem's chicken-and-egg debate, the fact of the matter is that we all must find some way to feel worthy and, because of this, automatically search for justification of our worthiness. As meaning-making machines, we actively try to find explanations of our value by tying it to certain abilities or talents, usually early on in our lives by about the age of about three, when we begin to see ourselves as separate beings. In these early days our self-image is around personal descriptive qualities such as our names and physical attributes. You might overhear a three-year-old, for example, telling a new friend, "I am Rachel. I have brown hair and brown eyes and a baby sister." Rachel will typically describe herself in concrete ways without any judgment attached to her descriptions. By age four, however, this begins to change and Rachel will begin to emphasise how high she can swing, how well she can colour, or how fast she can run. These self-concepts are now comparative in nature and begin to be attached to judgments about what is desirable and not.

As Rachel does, we decide our value by aligning our worth to certain qualities that we believe come naturally or skills we've acquired. These decisions form the core of our identity, and we don't even know we're doing it. Some of the most common qualities that we choose to tie our identity to are intellect/intelligence and sporting prowess,

or physical ability. I'm valuable and worthy because I'm smart is a common self-worth peg for children who tend to do well academically at school. I'm valuable and worthy because I can score goals is one that is more common for sporty children who've had some success in this arena early on. Other common pegs are the popularity/sociability and the creativity/artistic ones. Even the entrepreneurial peg shows up in children from ambitious families who can't justify any other one for themselves.

It is common for siblings who have multiple talents and options for self-worth categorisation to select primary pegs that differentiate them from their brothers and sisters, especially from those of the same sex. And even though our pegs may change as we grow and new talents and abilities are added to our personal repertoire, we tend to think our self-worth is fixed because the pegs we tie them to don't change that much. We only have so much intelligence, physical and artistic potential, and life is just about making the most of what we've been given. We believe that our traits are fixed and our talents, too, even if we work hard to develop new skills; there is only so much we can do.



The Self-Worth Steed

So, if all of this happens early on in our lives without us even realising it, does it really matter what we build our self-esteem around as long as we build it around something? The answer to this question is that what we build it around is hugely important because it lies at the core of how we feel about ourselves. It is one of the most important choices we will ever make, and it all happens without our even realising we made it. I liken this choice to having a wild stallion loose in the plains before becoming domesticated by life. Then we have to decide how to tame him, in which direction to point him, and how to tie him up so he doesn't run away or get carried away.

As a child, I tied my self-worth steed to the 'smart' peg. As the oldest child who did relatively well at school, this

seemed like the logical choice. The only problem with this peg is that, like all the others, it's extremely fragile. There was always someone smarter than me, and this realisation made me feel bad each time I came face to face with it. There was a boy in my fifth grade class who was especially annoying in this way. No matter what question the teacher asked the class, he always seemed to know the answer, and if I knew the answer, too, his was always better. As I grew, my 'smart' peg evolved into a 'good judgement' and 'mediator' peg until eventually it morphed into the 'caring mom' peg — someone who was a good mom and compassionate towards my family. Unfortunately, there was always someone who I deemed to have better judgement and was a better mom as I defined it: more selfless in their love for their families.

Most pegs we choose are like tying up our self-worth steed using string rather than a thick, braided rope in the hope that it will hold strong against the force of life's inevitable experiences, especially our comparisons to others. Self-esteem is inherently comparative in nature. In our young minds we believe we can only be valuable if we are somehow exceptional — or better than almost everyone else.

Inevitably, we encounter someone we perceive to be more skilled and our steed breaks the string and bolts from his peg, and we're left questioning our identities and what value we are as human beings.

And this same fragility applies to absolutely every peg, bar one: the learner.

The Learner Identity

The learner is the only identity that is strong enough to take us through life depression-proof because it is based in the experience of living, rather than the outcome. It is, in the words of Lebanese-American essayist and author Nassim Taleb “anti-fragile.” This means that the more you stress or challenge it, the stronger it becomes. The learner peg for self-esteem is beyond resilient, beyond robust. Things that are resilient and robust are shaken or tested and stay the same, but things that are anti-fragile get better and stronger the more they are tested, as Taleb’s work shows. Imagine if you build the core of your identity around the concept that the more you are challenged the more you learn, the stronger you become. The more mistakes you make, the better you are. The more you fail, the more you succeed. The more often you fall, the higher you’re able to soar. This is what the learner peg allows us to do if we can embrace it fully and help our children move closer towards it.

The Growth Rope

The good news is that as we become conscious of our decisions, we can understand that the old self-worth choices we’ve made can actually be changed so that we value ourselves for our openness to learning and to trying to become better versions of ourselves. Our pegs can be modified and integrated into a rope that thickens,

grows, and strengthens as our self-esteem steed pulls and tests it against life's challenges.

An old dog really can learn new tricks, as my 15-year-old chihuahua, Jose, shows me nearly every day. This is because human beings are the ultimate adaptive machines, which is at the heart of what makes us so dangerous to the rest of the flora and fauna on Planet Earth. Even though he's often misquoted, Charles Darwin said that it's not the species which is the strongest or the smartest that dominates, it's the one that can change the fastest to meet changing circumstances. In other words, the most flexible.

So, if we can consciously choose to alter the peg to which we've tied our self-worth steed, then it makes sense to choose wisely and find one like the 'learner' that is sturdy and will carry us through good and bad times alike, withstanding our comparisons to others and self-criticism. There may be other pegs to which we can tie our identities, but I personally haven't found one that works as well.

The pegs your children have tied their self-esteem horses to need to be altered. This is a foundational principle behind the strategy for depression-proofing kids. I will show you how to use this awareness to have conversations with your children that will change their lives. But first, we need to stop and think about the identity with which we currently identify.

TIME-OUT 13: Identity and Self-Worth

I am a valuable and worthy person because...

I have tied my self-worth to the following qualities or skills...

Do I know what my children are tying their self-worth to?

How can I encourage them towards a different realm that expands the identity they've tied their self-worth to?

Developing a Learner Mindset

Over time, learners develop certain qualities that distinguish them from others. They value, for example:

- Curiosity about the unfamiliar, becoming comfortable outside their comfort zones;
- Seeing the world as the ultimate classroom - I call this Earth School;
- People who have gone through hard times and come out the other side;
- Experiences for how much they teach us;
- Setbacks and successes because both can teach us many things;

- The journey over the destination;
- Celebrations of works in progress as opposed to perfection.

But it's not just what learners value or focus on that's important; what they don't waste time on is equally significant. Learners don't, for example, compare themselves to others in the same way as other identities tend to. In focusing on learning they generally avoid comparisons because being a learner is an all or nothing proposition. You're either learning or you're not. A continuum of how much we learn in any given situation is not terribly significant. Learners also don't ruminate on achievement as much as the actual process and how much they had to learn and grow to get there. They are team players and more inclusive because they don't feel threatened by others to the same degree as other identities. Anyone can be a learner because it doesn't require specific cognitive or physical traits. There is also room for many learners. Yet it's still unique and special because no two learners will learn in the same way.

Psychologist Carol Dweck researched how praise impacted children. When given a choice of puzzles to complete, she found the majority of the kids praised for their intelligence wanted the easier puzzle; they weren't going to risk making a mistake and losing their status as 'smart'. On the other hand, more than 90 percent of growth mind-set-encouraged kids chose a harder puzzle.

With all this going for it, a learning mindset is something that you want to encourage in yourself and your children. The main way to do this is to become a learner in your own life and then talk about it openly and frequently.

One powerful way to do this every day is to go around the dinner table every night and have everyone share: “What have you learned today?” My father used to ask me this question when I was a kid. When he was home, I remember working hard to remember something that I’d learned each day just so I could share it with him. To this day, I attribute these experiences for my passion for trying new things and my love of knowledge.

Establishing an appreciation for growth and learning in children is valuable for many reasons, and, as mentioned in the last section, an extremely strong anti-fragile peg to attach our self-worth to. The other great thing about the learner mindset is that it promotes authenticity and values vulnerability, both of which are incredibly powerful parenting tools as we depression-proof our kids.

Forget Happiness. Focus on Capability

As we become grounded in a learner mindset, we must overcome one of the main pitfalls of the 1980s self-esteem movement: the focus on happiness at the cost of capability. While happiness is always worthwhile, it should not be the goal. It’s really just a by-product of

being capable and accomplished. So, you could say that happiness is best thought of as an *effect* of living a life true to ourselves and in sync with our unique skills and ambitions. If we focus too much on making children happy, we unknowingly sacrifice it by sending messages to them that it is more important than the skills and capabilities that get us there. In other words, it is totally counterproductive. This 1980s self-esteem experiment where parents, teachers, and coaches of young people all focused on boosting children up and making them feel good about themselves created a generation of young adults who feel entitled and disillusioned by life because they missed one key thing: happiness requires hard work. And, often this means that we are uncomfortable in the process because we are being stretched.

Sometimes parents are so busy propping their children up with overblown praise and encouragement that their words lack depth and authenticity, and eventually the child realises it. Consequently, this fall from a false sense of self-esteem is a long and often painful one. For example, if my daughter receives a low mark on an exam paper, and in my desire to keep her feeling good about herself, I say, “Don’t worry, honey. The teacher was probably in a bad mood when she marked your test,” I miss a valuable opportunity because I’m overly focused on her happiness and comfort rather than on what this setback is trying to teach her.

Now, there’s nothing wrong with happiness overall, and,

as stated, it will happen anyway if you stay dedicated to depression-proofing yourself. Research shows that happiness is a tremendous advantage in a world that is obsessed with performance. Happy people, on average, are more successful than unhappy people both at work and at home: they earn higher salaries, secure prestigious jobs, are more likely to get married, and once they do, report greater satisfaction within that marriage. All of this we know, so we don't want to demonise happiness. We just don't want to focus on it too much at the cost of what it takes to get there.

Forget Achievement. Focus on Effort

But even as we help our children strive to become capable, we as parents also have to help them forget achievement and focus on the *effort* they expend to get there. It's not really accurate to say we need to forget it altogether, nor is it even possible. It's more that when parents overemphasize achievement, the cost to their children is high. Research shows that they are more likely to have kids with high levels of depression, anxiety, and substance abuse compared to other kids.

Catch Success

So, what do we do instead? We focus on recognising 'success' as it pertains individually to each child and in each situation. In other words, success doesn't look the same for every child, and it doesn't look the same in every situation or the same at different times in their lives.

A neuro-diverse child's success will look totally different to that of his brother. It's completely relative, not an absolute. From this vantage point, we can genuinely encourage our children and help them build habits of resilience, such as determination and hard work. This requires that we have a benchmark of where our children start from and can recognise how they are advancing from that original point. In this way, we pay attention to small steps along the way to what looks like success to them. Then we encourage them.

Unfortunately, most children do what most parents do: set goals for success that may or may not be applicable or realistic in any given situation. For example, what we hope to achieve in maths may not be what is possible for us in English.

Children and adults alike also tend to set goals for themselves that are not clearly thought out, so they become unattainable. This then becomes a potential recipe for hopelessness and resignation or worse, limiting self-identities, which can carry on for life. "I'm just no good at maths" was one that many children develop at school. I certainly did. It wasn't until I got to my mid-30s and someone sat down and explained simple algebra to me that I felt competent. This stemmed from lack of support and understanding in high school that achieving straight As in maths was not an option for me, at least at that time in my life. I needed a smaller goal. Instead, by being too focused on success as the school teachers and my

parents defined it, I wrote it off altogether and missed many years of practice time and dedication. As soon as I could, I dropped maths like a hot potato.

The current model of schooling, unfortunately, spends most of its time stressing children out to achieve more and not enough time helping them define their own success by understanding their strengths and weaknesses. In this way it becomes a fundamental failure of feedback, not only on the part of the teacher, but also as a failure to encourage children to undertake their own self-assessment. Ultimately, this sends unconscious messages that anything less than excellence or perfection is an undermining failure. We forget that education is a process: a journey of self-discovery and self-confidence. Thankfully, this is starting to change.

When we unconsciously communicate to our children that what they achieve at school, or in any area of their lives, is not good enough, we damage their connection to their own worth and their motivation to keep trying. Yet, when we overpraise and do not help them to self-assess and keep improving, we set them up for failure and a dead-end sense of entitlement. Striking this balance is challenging but worth being deliberate about.

I encourage my parents to hold space for their children to celebrate every small accomplishment, even 'achieved' ones if that means success for that particular child. Not in an over-the-top way, but in a manner that honours their effort as much as their result. When we do this, we can

still ask questions of our children and encourage them to strive for more. In this way, we are teaching our children that peace and happiness are their birthrights, too, and that these are very much part of their success.

Steve Jobs died an unhappy billionaire at the age of 56. A few of his last words can be a reminder to us all:

“If the house we live in is 300 square meters, or 3,000, the loneliness is still the same.”





SECTION V:
TACKLING THE CLIMB

**“What you do speaks so loud that I cannot hear
what you say.”**

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Communication Triggers Neurochemistry

All communication is chemical. According to Judith Glaser of Conversational Intelligence, “Conversations are not just a way of sharing information; they actually trigger a neurochemical soup that makes us feel either good or bad.” Then we go on to translate these good or bad feelings into words, sentences and stories. This means that our conversations either produce feel-good chemicals (dopamine, serotonin, or oxytocin) or feel-bad/fear-based ones like cortisol, norepinephrine, and adrenaline. This is because we’re hardwired to protect ourselves from harm regardless of where it comes from or how real it is. Even during casual conversation, we may feel ‘threats’ to our safety, ego, or sense of self-worth that make us less able to communicate effectively.

The Brain’s Smoke Detector

Our brains are sensitive to threats in the environment and even passing comments from a loved one or co-worker can throw you in to what’s been called the amygdala hijack. This is when the brain goes on lock-down and into self-preservation mode. This mode is the birthplace of anxiety in the short term, planting seeds for depression in the longer term. When anxiety is triggered it makes it very difficult to think and behave rationally and calmly. It also makes it harder to remember things. Trauma specialist Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk calls this the brain’s smoke detector because it’s responsible for detecting

fear and preparing the body for an emergency response.

Everyone is susceptible to an amygdala hijack, but sensitivity to it varies by person depending upon many factors, including past experiences. Children who are raised by a parent who spends large amounts of time in amygdala hijack tend to be more sensitised to ‘threats’, big and small.

The words we choose have a big impact on whether we or the person we’re talking to feels safe or threatened. But our delivery of these words is just as critical as the actual words we use. Often, when we’re stressed or feeling worried or under pressure, we’re more likely to engage in black/white thinking, and we’re more emphatic and less flexible in our speech. We tend to raise our voices and/or speak more assertively. Sometimes we even wave our arms around excessively to increase the effect. When one or all of these things happen, the person on the receiving end can get thrown into amygdala hijack: his or her rational brain begins to shut down, and he or she is usually unaware that it’s happening.

Good communications is a cornerstone of the depression-proof approach because it is critical to your relationships and how people feel when they interact with you. It’s also important for the relationship you have with yourself. While self-talk is a topic for another book, we will focus in this section on what it means to use communications for maximum depression-proofing impact. We already know that who you are and the relationship you

have with your children are foundational elements for depression-proofing. Your communication is the most practical tool for achieving this. It's the 'how', you could say, of the overall approach. If we're honest, however, learning communications skills doesn't exactly sound exciting at first, but relationships will always be hampered by the quality of our communications and true depression-proofing is impossible without some skill in this area.

Personally, I cannot think of a more urgent task in this age of social media and AI. Our standards of communication seem to have plummeted in recent decades.

It's easy to get into bad habits that perpetuate anxiety and depression in our lives. One of the most powerful ways we reinforce anxiety is through how we communicate both with ourselves and others.

Conversations are key to all good relationships because it's during both easy and difficult talks that we fill our mutual trust buckets. There are key concepts that are worth mastering as we depression-proof our children, and they become especially critical as our children move into their teenage years and become more conscious of our 'flaws'.

Because of this, we need to drill down into how we communicate with our children and each other. We need to look at the *real messages* we send our children and not just the ones we think we send or would like to send. We need to look at how we listen to our children and how

we expect them to listen to us. We need to look closely at the advice we give when we try to help them solve their problems because good communications helps us mitigate over-parenting.

The Filters We Use

What happens in the brain when we communicate or receive messages or, broadly speaking, information from the outside world? In a nutshell, our brains take in information from our senses (sight, touch, hearing, taste, smell) and run this information through a series of filters which delete, distort, and generalise the data based on many different things: our personalities, history, values, beliefs, biases, education, upbringing, expectations, agenda, etc. Then the brain makes an internal representation of this newly filtered information, which then impacts our state of mind, physiology, and ultimately our behaviours. This is how communications influence our thoughts, and our thoughts transform our biology.

Our Bodies Do Most of the Talking

Much of the information we receive into the filters of our brains when communicating comes from, often subtle, body movements or positions and facial expressions. While some people are more attuned to these subtle messages than others, we cannot underestimate the power our bodies have to either communicate what we want or do not want during conversations.

Whether we realise it or not, we are constantly ‘reading’ each other in these ways:

1. Facial Expressions - We deduce how someone is feeling from their facial expressions. Someone’s smile activates the smile muscles in your own face, while their frown activates your frown muscles, according to research by Ulf Dimberg. We internally register what another person is feeling by experiencing it in our own body. Smiling is so important to social interactions that we can discern whether someone is smiling even if we can’t see them!
2. Eye Contact - Research shows the eyes really are the windows to the soul: you can predictably tell someone’s emotions from their gaze. Eye contact is the crucial first step for resonance, a term psychologists use to describe a person’s ability to read someone else’s emotions. It’s also important for creating a feeling of connection. Make and maintain eye contact when you’re giving someone feedback.
3. Voice/Tone - From infancy, we are acutely aware of the voices of people we consider important, and the way we feel about another person shifts the way we speak. The tone of our voice, more than the words themselves, gives away how we feel. In fact, new research shows that we can often predict someone’s feelings primarily from their voice.

Imagine for a moment that you are my son, and you walk

into my office to tell me about an accident you had on your bike. You don't feel valued from the moment you enter the room as I don't seem to be taking you seriously because I fail to stop what I'm doing and check that you're okay, even if I ask if you're okay with my words.

Instead, my body carries on working, contradicting my words. But you instantly read my body language and facial expressions and interpret those as me thinking it is insignificant, which is not at all what I mean to communicate. My lack of empathy through my lack of eye contact is more revealing than the words I'm using in this instance. If I had been more aware of how I was communicating without speaking, I would have stopped what I was doing as you entered the room and turned my body and full attention on you for a moment. Without saying a word, I would have communicated a very different message: "I see you're upset. You're important to me, so for this moment all of me is available to tell you that." If I wasn't able to do this in that moment, I could have reinforced my commitment to the relationship to my son by asking for a moment to finish up what I was doing before giving him my full attention.

American essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson alluded to the whole-body nature of communications when he said, "What you do speaks so loud that I cannot hear what you say." Emerson takes us into the universal truth that we cannot separate who we are from what we do, nor can we separate out what we physically say from

how our bodies communicate it. Yet, despite its enormous influence, body language has been a severely neglected form of human communication.

Emerson's timeless, universal truth is relevant, regardless of age or developmental stage. However, for young people, our 'body speak' is even more critical than the words we use because they are vastly more tuned into the more subtle ways we communicate than adults who are juggling multiple demands and have practiced ignoring or overlooking the inconsistencies and mixed messages of other adults.

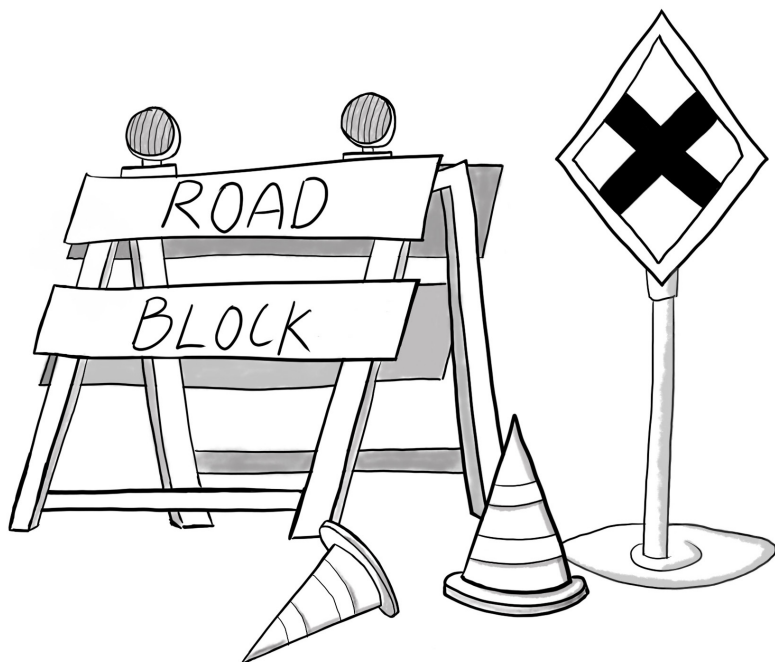
As we get older, we tend to think that our words carry more weight than our bodies, which we largely ignore, and, while words do become more impactful, we will always default to a person's body language over their words as the more honest expression of who they are as a person and what he/she actually believes.

How much our body language accounts for the total amount of information transferred to others ranges anywhere from 60-93%, depending on your age and which piece of research you believe. Before the age of 18, body language falls at the highest end of the spectrum, making it the number one way children 'hear' us. Dr. Scott Alders in his 2015 study among adults says that it can "account for more than 65 percent of human communication." In understanding the actual message being sent beyond the words, it accounts for as much as 83 percent.

Other prominent researchers in the field believe that body language is not only primary to what we receive from others, it's also more reliable because it carries more emotional data and, therefore, is more influential on our relationships. It also communicates authenticity — or lack thereof — in social interactions more clearly than verbal communications.

Regardless of the actual numbers, body language is an incredibly significant way we communicate with others, especially young people, yet it is one of the most often ignored forms of communication we have at our disposal. In our fast-paced, digitally hypnotised society, consciously using our bodies to communicate what we want to share is an untapped resource for many of us. It is also one of the ways we sabotage our communications and our relationships without our even knowing that we're doing so. Overall, in the depression-proof approach, body language is integral for success.

Showing our children we love them is a whole-body affair. Where our attention is and how we hold our bodies during conversations dictates how they receive or fail to receive us. I can hear the objections pouring in as I write these words: That's great, Molly, but I don't have time to do that every time. And I would say that you actually don't have the time not to. The good news is, however, that not every conversation requires your full attention and focus in this way. But when it does, using your body is a powerful way to communicate your true intentions.



Roadblocks

If communication is about exchanging messages, then ensuring that the message we send is the one we want to send is paramount. Unfortunately, wires become easily crossed, particularly when someone is upset, or we are in conflict. This is when heightened emotions can hijack our rational minds and obscure the actual messages we're trying to convey. This is why, in calmer moments, it's worth looking at the common roadblocks we use that don't work. It's not that anything is wrong with them inherently, it's just that they don't help us or help them to support the relationship and get the change we desire.

Through the depression-proof approach, we're attempting to help our children move past setbacks and learn to solve their own problems. We want them to become more empowered, emotionally intelligent, and resilient in the process. If these are our goals, then using any of the common communications roadblocks below is counterproductive, particularly when our children are upset.

12 High Risk Parenting Responses

1. Ordering/Commanding
2. Threatening
3. Moralising
4. Advising or solution finding
5. Lecturing
6. Blaming
7. Labelling
8. Analysing
9. Praising
10. Reassuring or Deflecting
11. Probing or Interrogating
12. Diverting

Ordering or Commanding: “Just keep quiet about that here. I’m trying to work.”

Threatening: “Well, if you carry on complaining, you’ll be in even worse trouble.”

Moralising: “You’re old enough now to...” “You should be able to... by now.” “You’re not a baby anymore.”

Advising: “Okay, here’s what you should do...” “If I were you, I would...”

Lecturing: “Yes, I was reading just last week that the research on this is....”

Blaming: “There’s no one but you to blame for this.” “It’s your own fault for....” “If you hadn’t done x, y wouldn’t have happened!”

Labelling: “There’s always one complainer at the dinner table, isn’t there?”

Analysing: “I wonder if you’re really saying that because of what your sister did to you last week?”

Praising: “Well good for you for being sensitive enough to be aware of that problem. Someone who’s that sensitive will also be able to... (stop bothering us now)”

Reassuring: “Hey, don’t worry about it. It will all come right eventually. In fifty years, who will worry?” or “I didn’t really like that friend of yours anyway...”

Probing: “How long has this been going on? Why didn’t

you bring it up before now? Do you always worry so much? Does this sort of thing always happen to you?"

Diverting: "Yes, that reminds me of what I had to do as a kid..."

Maybe you recognise a few of these roadblocks? We all have our favourite go-to responses when we're busy, distracted or upset, too. I know that for a while I was an expert at Analysing and Reassuring as a way to help my daughters feel better, and it never worked. Not once. My heart was in the right place, and I meant well, but my approach was woefully inadequate and usually only made things worse.

TIME-OUT 14: My Communications

In thinking about my last few conversations with someone when they were upset, how did I respond? What is my go-to communications roadblock? Which ones have I practiced and how can I become more aware of my responses in the future?

Holding Space

The foundation of depression-proof communication is the ability to 'hold space' for others. I have used this principle as a guiding intention for my own parenting climb, and, when I can achieve it, I find it brings enormous benefits to all of my relationships.

To hold space means to leave aside our personal agendas and mental clutter and step into a shared loving space of awareness when we interact. This then becomes a meeting of the person and the situation they find themselves in head on, removing all 'shoulds' or desires for things to be different.

In privileged moments of love, delight, bliss, and creativity we have all experienced a space where we are completely absorbed in what we're doing. A space when we stop trying to control anything. Sometimes we can even feel the reverence and the space all around us and a deep gratitude moves in. When we do this with the intention to honour the situation in which we find a person without trying to change anything, we 'hold space' for them. In my experience, this is the greatest gift we can give to another.

Holding space powerfully communicates:

- "You are not alone."
- "I see you."
- "I hear you."
- "I accept you exactly as you are."

When we hold space for children, we deliberately nurture them with love and appreciation. But more importantly, we communicate this love and acceptance powerfully, planting these seeds to germinate.

In this section we look at the key skills for holding space:

- Rapport
- Mirroring
- Listening reflectively

“Let silence be the art you practice.”

Rumi

Rapport

If there were a magic bullet for depression-proofing our children, it would be this one. When we are successful at creating rapport with our children, they feel loved and accepted, and so do we. In this powerful state of mutual physiology, we demonstrate love and care, strengthen our bond, and resolve conflict. Yes, it really is that amazing and influential!

Rapport is the feeling we have when we are really loved and acknowledged, and it is foundational to holding space. Rapport is the feeling we have when we feel heard and understood. It is the feeling we have when we know someone just really gets us. It is so powerful, in fact, that without rapport we cannot form meaningful relationships with one another in the first place. Without rapport we may be trying to support our children, but they will resist us. In fact, we will feel resistance from another person, meaning that rapport is lacking.

Good rapport is at the heart of every good conversation and missing from the ones that go astray or end up in conflict. I used to have these latter conversations when I was busy, which was often. At those times, one of my daughters would come to me with a problem. I understood that she was upset because maybe her friend gave her the cold shoulder at school that day. Instead of building rapport, I would usually carry on working when she came into my office, yet I convinced myself I was listening to her. And from this less than present state of mind, I would say unhelpful sentences such as, “Don’t worry about it. Your friend was probably having a bad day.” Or maybe I’d say something like, “Oh, well. I didn’t really think that friend was a great friend to you anyway.” Then, catching me completely off guard, my daughter would storm from my office, yelling how I never listen or that I “just don’t get it!” Maybe you can recognise a similar scenario in your life. At the time, I would know that the conversation hadn’t turned out the way I wanted it to, but I’d just put it down to adolescence or my daughter being overly emotional. I hadn’t a strong enough understanding of rapport and what had taken place.

If we don’t cultivate rapport, we are doomed to repeat these kinds of conversations with our children, and the consequences of doing so over time are huge, even if we don’t recognise it in each moment because they don’t directly tell us. But what they will do is stop coming to us and our relationship will suffer. Eventually, if we interact in this way for long enough, they will stop sharing what really

bothers them. They could bottle up tough feelings and become isolated, which is counter to depression-proofing them. Furthermore, their own communications skills will falter, and so will their relationships, because they won't know how to support others.

Rapport Is Now

Good rapport requires that we are singularly focused in the 'now' - the present moment - and stay there for as long as the conversation needs us to be. But being in rapport is beyond time or familiarity. After a few minutes of talking with a person, we can feel the presence of rapport even with a stranger. History doesn't matter. Presence and a quiet acceptance do. Best-selling author and spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle perhaps would say that rapport is an abiding 'presence' rather than a passing experience. This is because it doesn't exist in the past or the future the same way that our relationship does. In each now moment, we are either in rapport or we've fallen out of it. It is true, however, that if our relationships are strong enough, we jump into mutual rapport more quickly, even in times of stress or conflict. But rapport is not dependent on a good relationship. It's much bigger than that.

The Mind's Mirror

We even know where in the brain rapport originates thanks to a team of Italian neuroscientists. In the early 1990s, Giacomo Rizzolatti and his team discovered what are called mirror neurons, a type of brain cell that lights

up when we follow another human being closely. Mirror neurons are a type of brain cell that respond equally when we perform an action and when we witness someone else do the same action. They noticed that when we see someone smiling or hear them laughing, a certain part of our brains light up, and we feel like doing the same, which we will do automatically unless we stop ourselves.

Basically, these neurons create a mirror-like reflection in our brains and the feelings are part of that package. When you stick out your tongue, for example, and your baby does the same, or when you open your mouth to feed your toddler, and they do so too, you know your mirror neurons are firing. Without necessarily describing it this way, you are sharing a now moment in which the two of you feel close and mutually appreciated. Another way of saying this is that you've slipped into a kind of natural entrainment with your child, and in this powerful state, you're able to influence and lead them where you want to. So much so that the use of rapport should come with a warning label: do not use to control or coerce others against their will. This is unethical.

Why Rapport Is Important:

- It enables our children to learn complex social skills;
- It creates feelings of empathy and understanding for others;
- It helps them feel loved and appreciated;

- It deepens their relationships;
- It increases their ability to co-operate;
- It facilitates conflict resolution and problem solving;
- It is an incredible way to express your love for them!

The good news is that we've been creating rapport with people our whole lives, starting with our parents. Since day one, we've been practicing. Our brains are wired to find connection through what we see, hear, and feel, but if we want to use it to depression-proof our children, we need to become more focused on it to use it intentionally. We also have to realise that everything met with resistance is just a sign that we don't have enough rapport with the person — at least in that moment. This is a powerful reminder to re-focus on building it.

The next section outlines two categories of tools you can use to build rapport: verbally and non-verbally. Let's start with the non-verbal ways we can do so.

Mirroring

Getting into rapport with others, particularly children, is a whole-body affair. Mirroring is the non-verbal aspect of it. All effective parenting interactions contain patterns of what NLP calls mirroring: a process of offering back to people portions of their own non-verbal messages and behaviours, just as a mirror does. This is so they can become aware of them. Mirroring is a way to hold onto

feelings and beliefs without your judgment or attaching any of your meaning to them. It is the non-verbal equivalent of agreeing with another. When we mirror effectively, we feel good and so do they.

Broadly, you mirror all the time. Mirroring includes behaving appropriately - like not swearing in front of your grandmother but doing so freely with your friends. Dressing appropriately for occasions is another example of mirroring on this scale. So is matching our table manners and body postures to the formality or informality of the situation and the individuals present, e.g. not swearing at the dinner table when Grandma is present.

The bits of your children's behaviour that are worthwhile mirroring include body position, gestures, breathing rhythms, facial expressions, and voice tone, tempo, and intonation patterns. Matching some or all of these will help you interact with them more harmoniously and persuasively. Mirroring more intentionally helps us stay connected to people even when we disagree with them. In fact, by mirroring it's possible to completely disagree with what someone is saying while still remaining in rapport. The message that gets delivered to them then becomes: "You're not what you believe or what you say; you are much more valuable than that."

Mirroring is a skill that, firstly, we need to be aware of and then we need to practice. To mirror effectively you must be able to distinguish between a person's visual and auditory cues, which are sometimes subtle. To learn

how to mirror is useful when we take the time to watch other people interact. Watch children playing; observe people talking in cafés, meetings, and parties. Any time you are near people who are interacting, notice how much mirroring is going on. Then notice how the quality of interaction erodes when mirroring is absent.

After a short period of time, you will know that people instinctively mirror one another, particularly when they are feeling positive towards one another. Then you can start by mirroring just one aspect of your child's behaviour while talking to them. Turn towards your child and subtly match his/her body position, height to achieve eye level, and/or particular posture. When this is easy, add another inconspicuous piece, like their facial expression or even the rate of their breathing. Pretty soon, you'll be mirroring like a pro and over time you will notice how this improves the quality of your communications with your child and ultimately your relationship.

The more you practice, the more aware you will become of the rhythms that you and others generate with gestures and breathing patterns. If you get the opportunity, be sure to notice the degree to which couples, in particular, slip out of mirroring when they disagree, in contrast to how reflective of each other they are when feeling in sync. Notice in your own experiments with mirroring that once you've mirrored someone enough so that rapport is established, then the two of you are connected almost like magnets. When you move, the other will tend to move.

I use this to help people change. If I'm talking with a depressed person, I begin talking at their rate (usually slow), sitting in a similar (slumped) position to them, and so on. Then, once I've acknowledged their depression verbally and non-verbally — so that rapport is established — I gently begin to adjust my own voice, position and breathing back to normal. Most people will follow me and start to feel better even if they aren't aware of it.

Mirroring Is Not Mimicry

Many people believe that mirroring is the same as mimicking, so they are reluctant to do it because they think it will offend people. Culturally, we have strong restraints about copying others. These beliefs are so strong that this tremendous means of learning is often denied us from a young age. "Don't be a copycat!" we are chided. If we detect someone mimicking us, we feel that they are likely to be making fun of us and we are often offended. Mirroring is not mimicry, though. Mimicry is an exaggeration of behaviour. Mirroring is the subtle, behavioural reflection of unconscious and meaningful communications that we offer another human being out of generosity and kindness.

When it comes down to it, rapport is simple. Your goal is to mirror enough of the other person's behaviour or tone so they get the sense that you understand them, and discreetly enough so you don't distract them. Though mirroring might feel somewhat awkward when you first

start practicing it, its value in achieving and maintaining connection makes it more than worthwhile.

TIME-OUT 15: Feeling Loved

Think of a time when you felt totally loved, or a time when you felt highly valued by someone. See if you can remember a specific time, a specific moment when you felt that way. If you haven't found one easily in few minutes, invent a memory (it will work perfectly anyway). Remember the lemon?

*As you recall that time seeing what you saw, hearing what you heard, feeling physically your body. Answer this question: **For you to feel loved or valued like this, does someone need to:***

- 1. **Show** you they love you (look at you in a certain way, buy you certain things, take you certain places)?*
- 2. **Tell** you they love you in a certain tone of voice or with certain words?*
- 3. **Touch** you in certain ways?*

Which of these three things is absolutely necessary for you to feel loved? Which one is so important that even if the other two weren't happening, you'd feel loved just with that? Usually, it just takes one of these strategies. When you know this about yourself, you can find it out

about another person you care about. Then you can ensure that you're able to send the message to them in this way when they need it most.

Mirroring With Words

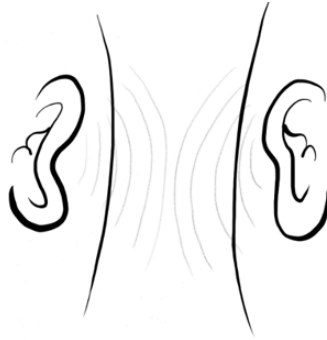
In addition to non-verbal mirroring, we can also build rapport with others by modifying the words we use and the volume, tone and/or pacing of our words to match the other person's. Customer-service experts have known for a long time that if they can train their staff to mirror their customers' volume and speed of speech, for example, they significantly improve the results they generate and the quality of their service in terms of how satisfied their customers feel afterwards. If a disgruntled customer is talking loudly and aggressively, for example, and the customer service staff is using an exceptionally soft and gentle tone of voice, there will be no rapport. The customer will become even more upset and dissatisfied because they won't feel heard or understood. So instead, we need to teach our staff how to mirror some of the intensity of the disgruntled customer while staying calm and collected because in doing so the customer will start to model that behaviour as they feel that the staff is taking their frustrations seriously. There's a risk to every exchange if we're too calm, too soon; it may make things worse.

Meet Them at Their Bus Stop

This same example applies to an upset child. If your child is distraught and crying about something, you first must acknowledge this upset before you can lead her somewhere more empowered. You first need to build rapport with her, and the place to start is by matching her volume and tone of voice. This doesn't mean that you start crying or shouting too; it means that you use enough volume and intensity in your own voice to enable her to recognise that you're with her: you care. In doing so, you communicate to her, "I understand you and am taking you and your issue seriously". Once she gets this message, then you can begin to quiet and/or slow down your voice and soften your tone to reflect a calmer state of mind, something we don't usually do unless we understand the importance of building rapport to connect. It is in these everyday moments that we either build and strengthen our relationships or we erode them.

Psychologists John and Julie Gottman from the University of Seattle have conducted experiential research over at least three decades on how rapport is the foundation of what keeps relationships strong between married couples. In fact, they've learned so much from watching couples interact that within five minutes of listening to them in conversation, they can predict whether a couple will stay together with 94% accuracy! Within 83% accuracy they can predict how long it will take a couple to break up if they're going to do so.

Overall, their research found that couples who stay together are highly aware and responsive to one another, particularly when one of them is *bidding for attention* in some way. 'Bids' are basically comments or gestures from the other person to elicit a response in the other. "Isn't it a beautiful day today?" or "Look at that cloud formation!" In unsuccessful relationships only about 50% of such bids are responded to for one reason or another. The Gottmans found that couples who stay together use five positive/agreeing/affirming comments to every one critical or negative comment. Yes, you heard it - 5:1. And even if we may be better at this with our partners, if we parent using a corrective 'lens' or style because we believe our children are blank slates and need it, then we won't get this balance right. In fact, the research shows that most parents use five corrections to every one affirmation with their kids. This has enormous implications for our relationship with them in the long run.



Listen To Me!

As much as we need food and water, we need people to listen to us. Someone to pay attention to not only the words we say but, more importantly, our feelings underneath those words. Brown University neuroscientist Seth Horowitz says, “Hearing happens all of the time when we take in sound around us. Listening happens when we really intend to understand another person.” In other words, it’s an active sport.

But it seems that the more we don’t listen, the more we don’t hear, and the more frantically we long for it. If I could change one thing in the world it would be for us all to become better listeners. Even 25% better would radically change our world.

We need to be heard, yet most of us are poor listeners and we don’t understand we’re that bad because, even if we have learned a few skills, we don’t commit to using them. A study of 8,000+ people employed in businesses, universities, hospitals, military, and government

agencies found that virtually all respondents thought that they communicated as effectively as or even more effectively than their co-workers. Research, on the other hand, shows that the average person only listens with about 15% efficiency. In a 10-minute conversation with a spouse, child, boss, colleague, or friend most people only listen to about 2 ½ minutes of what they hear. Just like those who rate their driving skills better than they really are, most people believe they are better listeners than they are. This bias is a significant contributor as to why we don't work to improve. Another contributor is that we have an inner narrator who comments constantly and thinks about its response, rather than whole-body listening to the other person. Another barrier is that people often equate good listening with not saying anything/ not talking and just using simple verbal cues, such as mmm-hmmm. While this can be helpful, good listening demands that we demonstrate or prove that we've heard the other and not just sat there passively.

Reflective Listening

Good listening to truly hear is integral for depression-proofing your family. It's especially important for building rapport and making people feel cared about and valued. You can think of reflective listening as the verbal part of building rapport. You may have done this many times before, and you can greatly improve your ability to do it better and more consistently when it matters most. Unfortunately, as the world's most commonly taught

communications skill, reflective listening is also often the most poorly understood and executed. So it takes intention to use it and practice to get good at it.

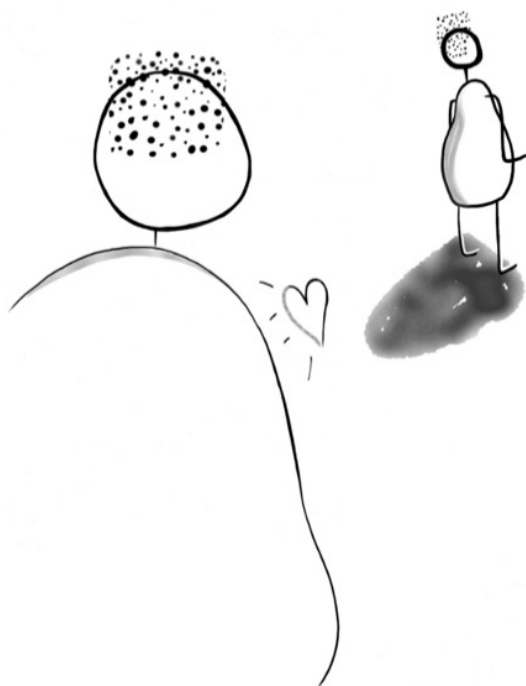
John Gottman's research on couples identified that reflective listening was the most powerful response offered by people in successful relationships when the other person is unhappy. In other words, when you detect that your child has a problem or something or someone is bothering them. There are times when we all are in a relatively peaceful state of calm and don't need someone else to demonstrate that they've heard us to the same degree as when we are upset in some way.

So, what is great listening? It's especially beneficial when we listen so as to reflect back to the person or mirror what we think we hear and what we think they feel. Yes, we need to make a guess. This kind of deep listening transforms our relationships because it is based on two essential elements of this approach: focus and acceptance.

When we listen in a reflective way, we are fully focused on what the other person is communicating, both with their words and their whole being. We're often, however, too distracted, especially with children. This means that no real listening is actually taking place. But even if we fool ourselves into believing we're listening, the other person knows exactly what's going on. Even if he doesn't say a thing, the fact of the matter is that he knows that he's not your number one priority at that moment. So a

singular focus on the person talking is a foundational element to reflective listening. Another important element is acceptance.

You will be amazed at how miraculous your relationships become when you pay attention. When we listen reflectively, our undivided attention is entirely on the person and on the conversation. This means not only hearing what is being said but also noticing how it is said. It involves paying attention to the tone of voice, body language, and facial expressions. This kind of attention consistently given to your children will help them blossom.



Listen with Your Heart, Not Your Head

The number one key to improving all your relationships is to pay attention, but the second key is to fully accept what is being said without any judgment. Good reflective listening asks that we listen with a genuine open mind. We must minimise any expectations or rationalisations we may have about what the other person is saying. This is particularly challenging in our close relationships when we've usually heard the other person saying the same thing repeatedly over time. It is at this point that we must remind ourselves that even if they seem to be stuck and in the same place as before that every moment is new and every person has the resources they need to shift. To truly listen with an open mind requires a kind of sacred neutrality on our part as well as a kind of unconditional loving regard. It asks that we listen with our hearts not just our heads. This type of available and empathic listening is what creates and sustains loving connections.

The key to deeply listening to another is to paraphrase and reflect on their words and body language. You restate the basic idea and feeling the other person has said as much as you can. As you do so, you explain to them that you want to clarify what's going on inside them to understand better. This demonstrates to the other person that you care and that you've understood them. It also clearly tells them that your intention is to accept what they've said, not question it with your own interpretation or opinions. If you do this well, especially if they are

uncomfortable or struggling in some way, it helps the person clarify their own thoughts and feelings.

Eliminate All Assumptions

You know what they say about making assumptions? Through good reflective listening you're able to help clarify what is spoken and unspoken in the other. It's not just mimicking back; your aim is to attempt to interpret the person's feelings to some degree beyond what you think you know about what they're saying. Easier said than done, especially if they're fire hosing all sorts of animated data, strong feelings, opinions, etc. in your direction. One of the greatest aspects of good listening is to be able to get out of our own way to meet the moment with what it needs not just what we think or assume it does.

The Gift of Helping to Clarify Feelings

To reflective listen you might start by saying something like, "That must be really hard," "Let me just check... you're feeling xxx or is it more like xxx?" Mostly, the feeling state is much more important to the person than the actual content of what they're saying. But mostly the person doesn't actually know how they feel. So, as the listener you would need to make a guess by thinking about how you would actually be feeling if you were in their position. Their body language will give you clues, as will their tone and words. Putting yourself in the same body position by mirroring as mentioned previously can also help you identify and feel these feelings more easily.

When reflecting how someone is feeling, you are less certain of having understood the person than when you are just reflecting information or facts. It can help if you reply, “It almost sounds like you feel xxx” or “From the way you say that I get the impression you feel such and such.” Once you reflect the meaning as you’ve understood it, the next step is to stop and actually listen for confirmation or not. If your reflection was correct, the person usually nods or says yes or continues talking like you didn’t say anything. This is a good sign. Sometimes, they even let out a subtle sigh of relief or tear up when you’ve guessed correctly; there’s a kind of physical release of emotional energy and a sign that the person is returning to balance. If your reflection is not what they meant, they will let you know in some way, usually quite directly by saying so. Whether you’ve guessed correctly or not is unimportant. The key is that your reflection has helped the person get clearer within themselves and let off some steam.

To re-cap, effective rapport-building reflective listening:

- Actively reflects feelings and information without personal distortion, judgement or entanglement.
- Compassionately demonstrates crystal clear boundaries... these are your feelings, not mine. I’m just here to reflect to you what I perceive. It’s not about me.

- Is transparent and shown/proven, not just a thought about it in your head.
- Is a full body-focused affair, congruent at every level of messaging through your body, tone, and words.
- Creates a feel-good connection in the other even if the territory you covered during the conversation was difficult.

Remember true listening is *not* happening if we are:

- Planning what to say next;
- Thinking about what to have for dinner;
- Feeling rushed;
- Checking our messages;
- Sending that one last text;
- Distracted by our own feelings;
- Making assumptions or judgements about what the other is saying or feeling;
- Trying to come up with helpful advice or solutions;
- Attempting to impress the other.

TIME-OUT 16: My Communications Commitments

Honestly assess your last important conversation with your child. What are the skills you will practice to build connection and relationship going forward?



SECTION VI:
TAKING IN THE VIEW

***“Nothing has a stronger influence psychologically
on their environment and especially on their
children than the un-lived life of the parent.”***

Carl Jung

Be the Change

We cannot give what we do not have. We also cannot be what we want but haven't practiced. The truth of our being is revealed all the time in many small ways through the quality of our thoughts and actions, and mostly we are unaware of it. You are more visible than you know. You're especially transparent to your children. In fact, you are see-through to even the most seemingly unaware child. Your child is much better than you are at living in the present moment and will watch you like a hawk. I learned this growing up in Alaska watching my own mother.

My mom was rarely at peace, unless she was cooking. Mostly she was in turmoil, emotionally unstable and sometimes scary in her seemingly instantaneous mood swings. As a kid I watched her like a herd of caribou watched the wolves on the tundra: continuously and from a distance. And yet she was incredibly loving. I knew she loved me with all her heart. She told me repeatedly and, because of this, worked hard to be the 'perfect mother'. This was a big part of the problem. She tried too hard. And it had limited effectiveness on my siblings and me because what she didn't understand was that what she *modelled* had far greater influence on us than what she wanted to do or said she would do.

Even if you're not in emotional turmoil, as my mom was, your words have limited effectiveness in terms of raising your children. Don't get me wrong, they're still incredibly

important, but far less so than how you act. This is because children are highly tuned to body language. I talk more about this in the chapter on communications. The focus of this section, however, is to discuss the powerful skill of modelling and how you can use it more deliberately to influence.

Modelling originally comes from the field of psychology but has been incorporated into Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) to help people model more consciously and with greater effect. It's based on the premise that as human beings we copy the behaviour of those people we like and respect. The more you like someone, the more of their values and behaviours you tend to model. Because our children love us without thinking about it, we have tremendous influence over them. They model our behaviours, especially those that we repeat consistently. So, if you use respectful language and kindness in the car, for example, every time you drive your children to school, despite what the other drivers all around you are doing, your children will integrate this behaviour into their own at a future time. Another example of automatic modelling is when our children begin to speak and the occasional, and usually abrupt, swear word comes streaming out of their mouths. The first time this happens we're often shocked because we are confronted with the reality of parenting as a whole and the reality of our parenting specifically. Children, in fact, are parrots and sponges.

Not long ago, I was on a packed flight from Napier to

Auckland and a father and his son, who was about three years old, sat across the aisle from me. The little boy was chatty and cheerful throughout the flight but when it came time to disembark, there was a rather lengthy delay in getting the plane doors open so that we all had to wait for what seemed like an interminable amount of time. About five minutes into the wait, the little boy became restless, asking his dad when he could get off. By about 10 minutes into it while everyone sat or stood in silence the following loudly burst from his vocal cords, “What the fxxk is taking so long?” With this, the entire plane load of passengers began to snicker and eventually you could hear some more obvious chuckles as this boy expressed what we had all been thinking anyway. Despite his father’s embarrassment, this moment is one that many parents of small children share, and it illustrates perfectly the unconscious power of modelling. I’ll never forget the time I caught my three-year-old daughter, Emma, walking around her bedroom, repeating, “Shxt, shxt, shxt” to herself because she couldn’t find her frog pyjamas.

Now, I’m not telling you anything new here. You know all of this, but the question is what are you modelling for your children? Do your behaviours and words reflect your core values?

TIME-OUT 17: Modelling What I Want

We can model many things in our lives. What do you model for the people around you every day? Frustration and impatience, or joy and peace? Wholeness and integrity, or distrust and fear?

Make It Look Good

Many times I have watched my daughters model my interests and values, particularly those they saw me enjoy, for example my love of popcorn, jigsaw puzzles, and reading. Sharing my love of exercise, particularly yoga, is still a work in progress, because I do a lot more talking about exercising and yoga than actually doing either one of them. Funny, but now that my girls are grown, I hear them talk positively about yoga and how good it is for our bodies, but rarely do they ever actually do it. This is how modelling works!

We can't just talk about what we want our children to do or how we want them to behave; we actually have to behave in these ways ourselves... that is, if we want to pass on our passions and values to them. The old adage, "Your actions speak louder than words" takes on new importance in this light.

One of the areas that I have been successful at modelling is in the area of work and responsibility. As part of

my coaching practice, many parents comes to me and say, “My teenager is just so lazy. Why can’t I get him to take responsibility for himself and do some work?” If we really understand the power of parental modelling, then the first question we must ask is: What are you as the parent modelling at home with regards to work and responsibility? Another way of asking this question is: if I were a fly on the wall every day at your house what would I see and hear about how you relate to your work?

Most people, once they stop and think about how they model hard work, will quickly realise that they’re expert at making work look really awful and not very much fun. If you come home from work every day exhausted, depleted, and complaining about how tired you are and how much you hate your job, is it any surprise that your children will try to avoid work at every opportunity? Not really. Because you’ve made it look unappealing. Your children are watching you every day working hard and they’re thinking, why would I want to do that? Look how miserable my parents are.

The same goes with taking responsibility for our lives. If you blame your setbacks on your boss, spouse, or even the economy, for that matter, you model the opposite of self-responsibility. You send the message that taking responsibility for yourself is less desirable than finding someone else to blame it on. Which, by the way, can be more fun, even if it’s not useful. So if we want our children to value hard work and responsibility then we need to

make them look appealing, at least in some way.

One of the ways I did this was by talking openly about the ways my children saw me behave. If I came home exhausted from a hard day at work, for example, I talked honestly — and age appropriately — about my day. But I also made a point to explain to them that I loved my work overall but that once in a while I didn't like it very much. I would also proactively look for ways to talk about working hard and diligently for what I believed in and the sacrifice those things entailed. This transparency is incredibly important as we depression-proof our kids because it is honest and doesn't sugar-coat our lives. It helps our children understand that life is not as black or white as their young minds perceive sometimes and it shows them that even as adults we struggle. Brené Brown calls this vulnerability.

Often, things are hard; they are not fun and not fast, but they're valuable. We do difficult things all the time and need to share this with our children. I'm not sure we are being honest enough with our kids about how much we've worked and what it takes. To model healthy respect for hard work we have to have honest conversations with them about how we encourage ourselves to keep showing up and to keep trying.

Sharing Yourself

Shame and vulnerability researcher Brené Brown defines authenticity as a “collection of choices that we make every day. It’s about the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to let our true selves be seen.”

Unfortunately, despite the power of authentic parental modelling and Brené Brown’s words, we often do just the opposite. As parents we want to protect our children from life’s struggles, including our own, as much as possible, and this is, indeed, important. However, we often do this so effectively that we give away one of our most important parenting tools: our vulnerability. When we hide our weaknesses and setbacks and minimise our successes, we also miss out on many healthy ways we can connect with our children. In an age where their devices are doing more of the conversing with them than we are, we need to actively find ways to connect to our children and thereby influence them in the ways we want to.

Like our humanity, our ability to share both our successes and our failures is critical for our children to understand because it helps them realise that we:

- *Are human, too, and don’t always get it right*
- *Want to repair our mistakes*
- *Acknowledge what we achieve*
- *Are always learning as we go*

- *Are striving to become better and more capable every day*
- *Are gentle on ourselves as we learn*
- *Want to help them to be gentler on themselves also.*

One honest conversation about something that is important to you and the journey you took to get there is amazingly transformational for our children. This is, in fact, how they learn to embrace all parts of themselves and the people they love. It forms the fabric of the rich essence we call a well-lived life. It is at the heart of what being human is, and it is *real*. When we can be real with our children, this gives them permission to be real, and a real life is a fulfilling and heartfelt one.

In my own life, the most profound moments that I've shared with girls have been when we've all taken off the masks and seen and heard one another for exactly who we really are. When my eldest daughter was about 14 and started dealing with boy issues, I shared with her my own struggles growing up, wanting desperately to be loved. Not that this is unusual, as we're programmed to seek it out. And yet, for me, it was extreme, off-kilter, and out of balance. I shared with Isabella how for almost fifteen years, I had the same dream. I loved a man who didn't love me in return. Sometimes that man was my father, but mostly it was a romantic partner I didn't recognise, and whose love I longed for, yet never secured. Different settings, different men, but always the same outcome. I loved him, and he didn't reciprocate. It wasn't

that he was unkind or anything, he just didn't care. And this broke my heart.

As a teenager and into my adulthood, because I was what you could call desperate for love and acceptance, particularly from the opposite sex, I settled for boyfriends who were unkind, self-obsessed, or in some way emotionally unavailable to me. I also shared how it took me many years to realise that nobody could give me the love I sought; I was only able to find it when I figured out how to bring it out from inside me. I told her my experience but at the time she didn't really say much, and I didn't understand significance of that. It wasn't until many years later when she was going through her own break up that Isabella told me how much my struggles helped her navigate her own. It was then that I realised how critical moments of honest sharing with our children really are.

TIME-OUT 18: Transparency

What was hard for you as a child? What were your struggles and setbacks?

What parts of you and your experiences can you share appropriately with your children to help them better navigate their own lives?

“To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Living At-Cause

One of the most important learnings I've gathered over the years is supported by eight major clinical studies, and that is the idea that we are 'at-cause' in our lives or, more precisely, that if we act as if we are, we have much better outcomes. But not just one kind of outcome. This one core belief if adopted and fully lived by:

- Positively influences our health
- Improves our relationships
- Improves our ability to learn new information and skills
- Increases our mental and emotional well-being
- Increases our generosity and loving expression
- And, as a bonus, also makes us a lot more fun to be around (cheerful and less moody).

The Magic Bullet

Through my own experiences and the research I've examined, this one concept is as close to a 'magic bullet' that humans have to living a life of empowerment, fulfilment, and joy. And it's fully grounded in a learning orientation to life: everything is learning.

But what does it really mean to be at-cause of our lives? It's to own absolutely *everything* that happens to you. To

adopt the belief that everything happens *for* your benefit is incredibly empowering. If you act as if this is true, everything that you're involved with is in some way within your charge to change if you want to. Now, I'm not saying this is true in some existential way. We could argue back and forth for an eternity about whether there really is such a thing as free will and still not have an actual answer. I'm focused on the question of whether it is useful to act as if it were true, and the resounding answer to that question is YES, as the research conclusively shows.

And the reason for this is because of learned helplessness and our adopted explanatory styles. Learned helplessness occurs when we decide that, over time, something is pointless, so we give up trying. Dr Seligman's experiments on dogs and rats in the early 1970s are important for people, too, especially as they relate to being at-cause in our lives. Since these early studies, Dr. Seligman's team of researchers have published over 35 scientific and scholarly studies on learned helplessness and its impact on the health and welfare of people. Seligman found that the way people view both positive and negative events, in particular, has an impact on whether they feel helpless or hopeful.

If your daughter comes home from school after failing to make the sports team, for example, the way she explains the event to herself contributes hugely to whether she victimizes or empowers herself in the future in a similar context. There are different ways she can explain the

event, which may seem minor to the untrained ear, but actually have profound implications for how her relationship with the entire world of sports will unfold in the future. If she, for example, explains it as “The coach is bad or biased” there’s not a lot she can do about either. If, however, she explains it as “I didn’t try very hard for this one because it wasn’t as important as something else” then she takes back the power she does have, and she’s said to be at-cause. She could also explain it that she’s not very good at that sport but could practice more for the next trial.

It’s important to understand that being at-cause is *not* blaming ourselves. That is different. Living as if we are at-cause is to decide that everything that happens to me, even if I cannot see it at the time, is actually FOR me in some way. And in this way, you can take responsibility for it and really own it. This is how, in alchemical terms, we transform lead into gold.

Living at-cause means to be thankful for everything that happens to us — good and bad — for what it teaches us and how it shapes us as human beings. This is the most empowered mindset a human being can adopt in any area of life.

It means that when we look around both inside ourselves and out there in our lives, if we’re not 100% happy with what we see, then it is up to us to change what we can, mostly how we explain it, which ultimately changes how we feel and act.

If we live as if we're at-cause we:

- don't blame others or circumstances;
- don't give our power away;
- set a powerful example to others;
- are more likely to take helpful steps towards progress;
- are nicer to be around;
- live happier, healthier and more fulfilled lives.

But to live in this way congruently takes practice and vigilance to catch ourselves when we slip back into bad habits. Being at-cause is something we have to demonstrate in our families to our children as they grow. We can't just demand that they live at-cause, however, or force it in some way. We have to live it first and then invite them to join us as they look at setbacks differently.

We empower our children by modelling being at-cause and through asking questions like this one that I used to ask my girls: "What can you do to make this situation better for yourself?" This question always reminds them that nobody else really has the ultimate say in how they feel. Another great line, which we use in my family, borrowed from Brené Brown, is, "What story am I telling myself about this situation?" or "What story are you telling yourself about it?" This gives us a way to explore how we're feeling and get to the root of our upset while

fully owning that it's just one interpretation of the situation and not the only version. In fact, my daughters got so good at this that they would remind me, sometimes annoyingly, when they caught me explaining events away by diminishing my own personal responsibility.

To be at-cause in our lives is not an either/or proposition. It's really just a continuum in which, if we can live closer to the at-cause end of the continuum, we do a lot better on every outcome. The research shows that the other end is not as useful for depression-proofing. It's important to remember, however, that there's no perfect here, there's just awareness and healthy striving towards what we want for ourselves.

If we can show our children how to be at-cause in their own lives by living that way ourselves, they can then develop the skills of being able to solve their own problems. And to do this, we have to look to our earliest programming and decode the messages that our own parents sent us (consciously or not) and then reflect on how many of those messages were at-cause or at-effect. These are the real messages we will send our children.

TIME-OUT 19: Living At-Cause

Where in your life do you live at-cause and where to you have a tendency to disempower yourself?

It's All in the Repair

The fact that we can fix what we muck up is one of the most liberating parenting beliefs I've ever come across. It has certainly liberated me. While initially this doesn't seem terribly profound, it is, in fact, one of the most useful understandings for depression-proofing our kids and creating and sustaining a fulfilled life.

Until I deeply understood this concept and started to reach for it by default, I was often too afraid to try, especially new things, so in many ways, I didn't. I held myself back from people, places, and opportunities. Because let's face it, messing up and making mistakes feels terrible. We know that living within the safety of the boxes we create for ourselves somehow feels less risky. You know the one I'm talking about: that box encased in prison bars that you feel but cannot see. The one you live from when you don't use your time to change what you know you must.

The core to depression-proofing ourselves is to do things, especially those that persistently tap, tap, tap on our shoulders. Anything of value requires risk: the courage to put ourselves out there in some way. As Brené Brown says in her inspiring *Man in the Arena* talk, "There's nothing more frightening than the moment we expose ourselves to the world." And do it we must, otherwise, we dampen our spirits and become depressed. The reality is that when we fail to risk, we still get things wrong, albeit

in smaller, less significant ways and without the elation and uplifting sense of purpose. In other words, we get all the lows without any of the highs that make it worthwhile.

To be clear, parenting exposes us in ways that few other activities do. Every decision we make impacts our families. To parent means that we will get hurt. This is non-negotiable. Thankfully, however, our repairs — even small statements or actions — set us free. The understanding that we can repair what we don't get 100% right makes your parenting climb so much easier and more fulfilling. Repairs help us recover from setbacks quickly, re-establish equilibrium and stay emotionally connected to others. Sincere repairs soften emotional negativity and keep it from escalating and spiralling out of control. This is what true freedom is all about; experiencing upset and returning to balance. Repairs help us do so swiftly and effectively.

Repair Parenting

In parenting, there is nothing more important than being able to repair. In fact, you could call it a foundational parenting superpower, which is why I encourage every parent I coach to live by it. Using the repair as the basis of parenting not only makes you feel a lot better about the mistakes you make along the way but also makes you a much better parent. Adolescence is the time when effective repairs become particularly paramount.

Through repairs, a parent gains integrity, compassion, and vulnerability enough to hold space for children with strong respect and boundaries.

We can repair anything. This may seem nonsensical because you could say, “What about the time I lashed out physically at my four-year-old when I shouldn’t have?” True, you cannot go back in time, but you can still help it heal. A key part of mending what we get wrong is to catch it and then fix it quickly as possible, but it’s not essential. I’ve seen life-changing repairs happen between parents and their children even decades after the episode. Recently, for example, I helped a mother in her 80s craft a repair for her 40+-year-old-daughter with lifechanging effects for both women and their extended families.

We often don’t know how emotionally healing repairs can be. What this means is that taking corrective action in some way through an apology or acknowledgment for something we don’t feel good about redresses the energetic imbalance created in the first place. And this is regardless of whether or not we justify it as necessary. Effective repairs require you to let go of the process and the outcome of that repair and do it anyway, especially when it makes you cringe thinking about it. Repairs are the vehicles to depression-proof parenting, and love is the fuel that propels them.

This means that it’s critical that you not only catch and implement repairs swiftly but that you also do so from a

place of great love, respect, and empathy for your child, yourself, and the situation in which you find yourself. Without this sincerity, repairs are ineffective. The key to living a life centred in this way is that it doesn't matter whose so-called 'fault' it is. In fact, this is one of our least useful bad habits. This is because fault and blame are entirely subjective and focusing on them is like trying to contain the entire ocean by grabbing a handful of water. It's impossible. We can, however, focus on redressing upset and injustice, regardless of who started or escalated it.

Repairs in Relationships

Couples' psychologist and researcher John Gottman calls the repair the "secret weapon" of emotionally connected couples. After researching more than 3,000 couples in his Love Labs over 30 years, Gottman created some good repairs in his 'checklist' to help make the unfamiliar useful so we can practice it.

Here are a few examples:

"I didn't get that right. I'm sorry."

"I overreacted. I'm sorry."

"I apologise that I didn't say something earlier, so I'm speaking up now."

Essential Repair Steps:

To repair successfully, first and foremost we must take responsibility for our part in the upset or mistake. We must be at-cause, as explained earlier, because it is only our behaviours and words that we can mend, not anyone else's.

In crafting a successful repair try to:

1. **Catch it quickly** - Understand what you could have done better or what you wish had been better. But even if you let time pass, a successful repair will still improve a relationship.
2. **Reach out to the other party(s)** - Own and clearly verbalise your part or 'mistake'. It's all about communication. You don't have to point out their mistake, however. A successful repair will make it obvious, and they will usually do it for you.
3. **Let it go** - Once you've said your piece, allow the repair to work its magic. But don't try and anticipate the outcome. Just be proud of yourself for extending it.

When we practice these three steps compassionately and consistently, repairs become a way of life. They help define how we as human beings relate to the world and what we leave behind. Because of this, I now remind myself daily that "it's all in the repair", and this gives me a lot of courage to do and say what I must. It also

empowers my children to do the same.

TIME-OUT 20: It's All in The Repair

How have you repaired things with family members in the past?

Who in your life do you need to repair something with now?



“The opposite of play is not work; it is depression.”

Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*

Play & Downtime

We live in a culture that prioritises fast and easy and judges everything that is laborious and difficult as if it shouldn't be, so, you would think we'd prioritise light-heartedness and play more than we do. But fear and stress suppress play. Studies on animals have shown that all play stops when they're under threat or in danger in some way. Many people live their lives as if feeling they're unsafe, even if it's only in their minds. On the whole, we are living serious and stressed-out lives, and this is hurting our children. The reality is that play is essential to human health at every age.

Stuart Brown, an MD from the National Institute of Play, says that his research with violent offenders over two decades, "...makes it clear that play, in its many manifestations, serves a wide variety of survival-promotion functions pertaining to stress management, overall competency, as well as learning, emotional regulation, innovation, and social co-operation."

This understanding of the nature and importance of play is vital in depression-proofing our children and helping them reconnect to their inherent worthiness. Device-free play helps them navigate a digitally dominant world that prioritises comparisons and idealisations over authenticity and creativity.

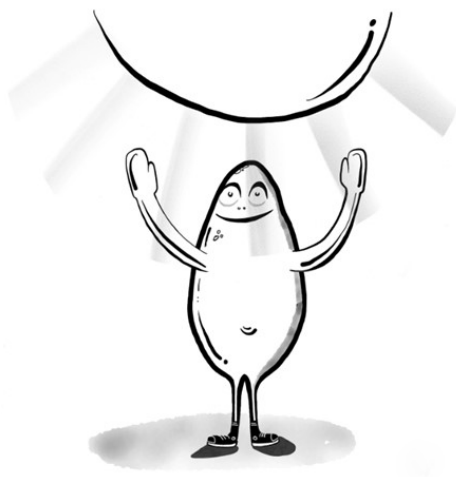
What Happened to Play?

Modern culture doesn't prioritise play for any age group except the under 5s. And this is bad for our families. I was lucky to have played for many years growing up without access to any technology. Boredom was a trigger for play beyond my earliest years. As children age and spend more time in school and at other adult-directed activities, they're prevented from play, often for so-called safety reasons, or because of parental anxiety about school performance, college prep, etc. Without play we're too serious and our children don't dwell in the free, self-directed, and sometimes risky ways that have characterised children's play in the past. Brown says, "There is good reason to believe that such restrictions are deleterious to children's physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development." He even talks about the need for play to continue into our adult and senior years for strong mental and physical health.

We Must Model Play

Just hearing another person laugh triggers the mirror neurons deep inside our brains. Laughter in others can feel as though we, too, are actually laughing, even if we don't physically take the actions or make the sounds. According to neurologists, hearing laughter lightens our experiences and helps us see the world more optimistically. You could say laughter is the opposite of anxiety and depression.

As adults we need to create play time in our lives, even if that's just for creative expression and mindless enjoyment. We need to think about what do we do with no purpose, reason or end goal in mind. Because it is during these times that we reconnect with our essence and give our children permission to do the same. One time when my daughter Chiara was little, a friend of hers came over to the house for a play date. I was busy in the kitchen but I overheard Chiara and the other girl playing make believe with a figurine family in the next room. "Oh, there's my mom working hard, making dinner and going to bed early," Chiara said. This seemed reasonable enough until I heard what the other girl said about her play mom: "My mom likes to dance around the house listening to really loud music, dancing in her high shoes!" This stopped me in my tracks. I realised in that moment that I did not model play very well for my girls, and that Chiara's reflection mirrored back to me how much I modelled work and ignored play.



Prioritise Play

So, how do we prioritise play more?

- 1. Remove all blocks to play*
- 2. Find out how my younger self likes to play*
- 3. Set aside time specifically for play*
- 4. Commit to it, regardless.*

Firstly, we have to figure out why we block our playfulness each day and how we do it. We may need to get support to release the major stressors in our lives. What can we do today to take some of the heaviness out of our lives? What commitments do we need to uncommit to? Where are we being overly responsible? Where are we being irresponsible? I find that it's the things we avoid doing that we know we need to do that drain us the most and zap our zest for life. Worry is contraindicated with playfulness. We need to take action to reduce our worries so that we can reclaim our verve and playful spirits.

The next step is to get in touch with your Inner Child and ask how they want to play. Thinking back to what I enjoyed doing when I was six or eight years old is a good place to start. What did I do when nobody was watching? What would I do even if nobody ever acknowledged it or paid me to? In other words, this step is to find out what we really enjoy and allow ourselves to do it more often without any expectation or end goal.

The next step is to set aside time to prioritise play. In other words, diarise it. The girls and I used to nominate Friday nights for board games and takeaways. We called these Friday Fun nights. In doing this, we were scheduling play time into our routine consistently, and it became something we all looked forward to. Finally, we have to prioritise our play time and commit to it every time.

TIME-OUT 21: Parenting Through Play

When was the last time you enjoyed a really good belly laugh?

How often does your family share laughter?

When and how do you feel silly?

Are there enough opportunities for your children to play free from adult directives?

How do your children deal with boredom?



A Parenting Roadmap

The Five Core Depression-Proofing Strengths are:

- 1. Optimism**
- 2. Emotional intelligence**
- 3. Resilience**
- 4. Empowerment**
- 5. Communication**

The essence of the depression-proofing approach is captured well by Brené Brown's Wholehearted Parenting Manifesto:

- “Above all else, I want you to know that you are loved and lovable. You will learn this from my words and actions—the lessons on love are in how I treat you

and how I treat myself.

- I want you to engage with the world from a place of worthiness. You will learn that you are worthy of love, belonging, and joy every time you see me practice self-compassion and embrace my own imperfections.
- We will practice courage in our family by showing up, letting ourselves be seen, and honouring vulnerability. We will share our stories of struggle and strength. There will always be room in our home for both.
- We will teach you compassion by practicing compassion with ourselves first, then with each other. We will set and respect boundaries; we will honour hard work, hope, and perseverance. Rest and play will be family values, as well as family practices.
- You will learn accountability and respect by watching me make mistakes and make amends, and by watching how I ask for what I need and talk about how I feel.
- I want you to know joy, so together we will practice gratitude.
- I want you to feel joy, so together we will learn how to be vulnerable.
- When uncertainty and scarcity visit, you will be able to draw from the spirit that is a part of our everyday life.

- Together we will cry and face fear and grief. I will want to take away your pain, but instead I will sit with you and teach you how to feel it.
- We will laugh and sing and dance and create. We will always have permission to be ourselves with each other. No matter what, you will always belong here.
- As you begin your wholehearted journey, the greatest gift that I can give to you is to live and love with my whole heart and to dare greatly.
- I will not teach or love or show you anything perfectly, but I will let you see me, and I will always hold sacred the gift of seeing you. Truly, deeply, seeing you.”

Parenting is Like Painting

I truly believe that high-functioning parenting begins with an artist’s eye and a great question: How can I see my children as an artist would? How do I truly see them without trying to change them? Great artists — like great parents — seek to gather and enhance what is right in front of them, not change it. It is only through total acceptance and presence that a higher vision born from acceptance and unconditional love can unfold.

Parenting is fundamentally an act of creativity. It is an act so sacred and life-changing that few rival it. Good

parenting starts with these three powerful words: “I see you.” They mean that I see you beyond myself and my own needs; I see you without wanting or needing anything. It means that I do not see you for my own validation, fulfilment, or security.

Your job as a parent is to truly see your children as they are and to be aware of who you wish them to be so that you can continually return to loving them for who they actually are. But what does it mean to really see a child, or anyone else for that matter? It means to let your veils of fear, judgment, ambition, possession, and expectation drop completely. It means to acknowledge, affirm, trust, and be gentle with each accomplishment and setback you encounter. This is the centre-point from which skilful parenting radiates. It is the grounding from which the seeds of all good parenting originate.

When I really see you, I take my small self with all its quirks, fragility, and insecurities and lay her down at your feet, not as your subordinate but as your true equal, painting a carpet of wildflowers for you to dance upon. In this way, I coax you on tip-toe to gently cross this floral bridge and reconnect with all of humanity. This is the greatest gift I can give you and your children. A gift that expects nothing in return, but one that brings so much, bearing witness to our blossoming and growth.

I promise you that your parenting journey will not look the way you or I expect it to. This is why, if we are to truly help our children, we must see them and ourselves exactly

as we are. Not through our suffering: the limiting beliefs and assumptions from our own upbringing to which we automatically return.

Instead, we must promise to see them fresh, new, every day, for as long as they live. Mature parents can do this because we see the parts of our children that they have not yet met: the parts emerging from the chrysalis; the parts that few take the time to imagine and even fewer take the time to cradle or to hold without needing anything in return. We are truly fortunate when we can reach this point, even if only momentarily, as we work to remind ourselves of this truth daily, laying it down at your children's feet like a carpet of wildflowers.

TIME-OUT 22: Observing the Perfection

Close your eyes and picture your child's face when he/she was a baby. Imagine looking at her freshly born or at any other time when she oozed perfection. Admire his little forehead, eyes, cheeks, and chin. Notice her curves and colour. Forget any of your child's behaviours or ideas about the world right now, and just allow yourself to soak up his perfect wholeness. Please know that as you do this, you're also connecting to your own essential goodness. It is here at this deeper level of awareness that you can keep connecting back to your own perfection.

A Recap

Remember that love and acceptance is the essential foundation for depression-proofing children, and that depression-proofing our children happens all the time in little moments of time and care – in every conversation, whether we're speaking or not.

I hope through this approach you will...

- Accept the child that you have, not the one in your fantasies.
- Understand there are no bad children, just behaviours that we can't condone.
- Trust inherently that they are perfect just as they are, and so are you.
- Get help if you're struggling and know this is the greatest gift you can give your family.
- Reconnect with your inherent goodness – this is a soul level remembering.
- Adopt healthier explanatory styles.
- Understand states of high emotional arousal/trance-like condition, so you can change your responses.
- Prioritise play and relaxation every day.

TIME-OUT 23: Wholeness

Before moving on, write down answers to the questions below:

Here in this timeless memory, your child is whole and complete and so are you.

What does this wholeness feel like to you?

What feelings does this wholeness evoke in you?

Where do you notice it in your body?

What would it look like as a painting or sound like as a piece of music?

Epilogue

As explained in these pages, I do not know all the answers to depression, but I do have a few, and they are powerful. I know what helps and what worsens this very human condition. And I am lucky to be able to share what I witnessed growing up, living with my brother, my late husband and through helping people as a well-being coach to recover and thrive.

When depression fills us with hopelessness over hope, resignation over curiosity, and self-blame over self-love, we must take action. Otherwise, it zaps us of our essence and the very life force needed to function and fulfil our purpose on Earth.

I've learned that depression is also a cry for meaning and significance, speaking persistently and honestly about our spiritual, as well as our emotional and physical, well-being. If we do not fill the meaning gap in our lives and live by the promptings of our true selves, then the darkness waiting in the wings may move in and try to fill that hole for us. And fill it, it will, but not with what we desire.

Back in 1946, psychologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl reflected in *Man's Search For Meaning* that we needed to stop asking, "What is the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as being questioned by

life — daily and hourly.” It must become a conversation. When we ask what life wants from us, and, at the same time, explore what we desire from life, this two-way questioning provides an expansive view and a roadmap for living in a more sacred way. It allows us to co-create with something more vast than ourselves, which builds hope and mental resilience, something that was needed as much during WWII as it is in our materialistic, secular and often isolated modern lives.

I now realise that I have an obligation to share what few answers I have with those who are lost, confused, and at the mercy of depression’s grip. I help people find the strength to rise and rewrite their personal ‘stories’ and make different choices from the ones they practiced growing up. I am driven to help people battling their way through dark and meaningless lives. Doing this work was not a choice I made, but one I now embrace wholeheartedly.

One of my life’s most precious gifts, it is a privilege to be able to give families ways to increase their mental well-being through radical acceptance of both their light and dark, thereby creating space to experience their own inner divinity and that of their children.

Every day, I lean in and listen closely to people as they struggle, and, in doing so, I show them how to hold their condition (or that of a loved one) more gently and with greater room for abnormality and darkness. Because when we do this, magic happens. Often for the first time,

we can feel the hope and love all around us. In moving towards, not away from, our darkness, we transform depressive episodes and deepen our connection to our true selves. My true self, too, has grown deeper because of this exchange.

I hope we can use this approach to child raising to deepen our connections to one another, to be able to intervene early, model resilience and great love for one another. I hope we can help our children practice more joy and gratitude for all of life and the unique roles they play.



Getting Help

Below is a list of some of the services available in New Zealand and Australia that offer support, information and help for mental health. Most services are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

NZ National Helplines

Need to talk? Free call or text 1737 any time for support from a trained counsellor

Lifeline – 0800 543 354 (0800 LIFELINE) or free text 4357 (HELP)

Suicide Crisis Helpline – 0508 828 865 (0508 TAUTOKO)

Healthline – 0800 611 116

Samaritans – 0800 726 666

NZ Depression-specific helplines

Depression Helpline – 0800 111 757 or free text 4202 (to talk to a trained counsellor about how you are feeling or to ask any questions)

www.depression.org.nz – includes The Journal online help service

SPARX.org.nz – online e-therapy tool provided by the University of Auckland that helps young people learn skills to deal with feeling down, depressed, or stressed

Sexuality or gender identity helpline

OUTLine NZ – 0800 688 5463 (OUTLINE) provides confidential telephone support

NZ Helplines for children and young people

Youthline – 0800 376 633, free text 234 or email **talk@youthline.co.nz** or online chat

thelowdown.co.nz – or email **team@thelowdown.co.nz** or free text 5626

What's Up – 0800 942 8787 (for 5–18 year olds). Phone counselling is available Monday to Friday, 12 noon–11pm and weekends, 3pm–11pm. Online chat is available from 3pm–10pm 7 days a week, including all public holidays.

Kidsline – 0800 54 37 54 (0800 kidsline) for young people up to 18 years of age. Open 24/7.

Australian National Helplines

For people who need support with depression, anxiety or suicidal thoughts:

Lifeline provides 24-hour crisis counselling, support groups and suicide prevention services. Call 13 11 14, text 0477 13 11 14 or chat online.

Suicide Call Back Service provides 24/7 support if you or someone you know is feeling suicidal. Call 1300 659 467.

Beyond Blue aims to increase awareness of depression and anxiety and reduce stigma. If you or a loved one need help, you can call 1300 22 4636, 24 hours/7 days a week or chat online.

MindSpot is a free telephone and online service for people with anxiety, stress, low mood or depression. It provides online assessment and treatment for anxiety and depression. MindSpot is not an emergency or instant response service. Call 1800 61 44 34.

Medicare Mental Health gives advice and will connect you to local mental health services. Call 1800 595 212.

MensLine Australia is a professional telephone and online counselling service offering support to Australian men. Call 1300 78 99 78, 24 hours/7 or chat online.

For young people who need mental health support, and their parents or carers:

Kids Helpline is Australia's only free 24/7 confidential and private counselling service specifically for children and young people aged 5 – 25. Call 1800 55 1800.

headspace provides free online and telephone support and counselling to young people 12 – 25 and their families and friends. Call 1800 650 890, or **chat online**.

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“Depression casts a ripple, impacting not only close family and friends, but also wider communities. If left unchecked, devastating, life-changing, traumatising are not too strong to describe the effects of depression.”

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Molly Ireland is a Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) Master Practitioner, Instructor (NZANLP) and well-being coach (ICI). She specializes in the reduction of anxiety, depression and other mental health disorders.

Since Molly's husband committed suicide in 2008, this mother of four has helped thousands of families suffering from anxiety, depression and suicidal episodes find hope and healing. To get in touch visit:

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ISBN 978-0-973-29928-1



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