

Sanity Parenting:

**THREE PRACTICES FOR RAISING
CHILDREN WITHOUT LOSING YOUR MIND**

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INTRODUCTION

SANITY: THE ABILITY TO THINK AND BEHAVE IN A NORMAL AND RATIONAL MANNER.

Imagine you're heading out on a road trip with your kids. You pack your bags, charge the iPads, and grab some car-friendly toys and activities. You load up on enough snacks to feed a preschool class, program the GPS, and head out.

But in all of your packing and prepping and rushing, you don't notice that you have a flat tire.

Once you realize the problem, you stop and fix it. Of course you do. Because driving on a flat tire is INSANE.

Parenting is kind of like one long road trip, and chances are that you're heading out each day with at least one flat. You may have the best of intentions for your kids, but it's just not possible to parent well when you're maxed out, burnt out, and stressed out. Fortunately, there are a few easy and free ways to take care of yourself. I refer to them as "sanity practices" because they will help you behave like a normal, sane, rational parent, rather than someone who keeps driving around on a flat tire.

The three fundamental sanity practices are *sleep*, *singletasking*, and *self-compassion*.

THE SANITY PRACTICES

There are many different ways to stay sane and grounded in the chaos of parenting. I've chosen these three because they're doable for all parents. They're simple, straightforward, and with the exception of additional sleep, they don't take more time out of your day. In addition, there is a significant body of research showing that these practices help folks feel calmer and happier, and less reactive, impulsive, and stressed out.

One note: in order for these to work, *you need to actually do them on a regular basis*. This may seem tough at first, but stick with it. Pretty soon, you'll be doing them without even noticing, and your plate will start to feel a whole lot lighter even though it's just as full as it ever was.

SANITY PRACTICE #1: SLEEP

Why It Matters: Sleep is crucial for every aspect of your physical, mental, and emotional functioning. Sleep deprivation makes you more irritable and impulsive, and it impairs your judgment, reflexes, memory, and ability to think clearly and solve problems.

Exhaustion fogs your brain, and makes you say, think, feel, and do things that don't make sense, aren't helpful, and can often make things worse. The flip side is that when you do sleep, you'll be more engaged, effective, and empathic with your children.

How To Do It: It can feel impossible to get consistent sleep when you've got young kids, but don't give up. This is too important. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- **Make it a priority.** Don't dismiss the importance of sleep, and don't give up on it before you've even tried. You will fall off the sleep wagon, because, well, kids. That's ok. Do what you can to get yourself back to bed as soon as you can.
- **Help your child develop healthy sleep habits.** There is no right and wrong when it comes to how and where to sleep. What matters is whether or not your current sleep patterns are working for you and your family. If not, it may be time to tweak your schedules and develop healthier habits. This can be a rough transition, but it's worth it.
- **Give yourself a bedtime.** You've probably learned by now that it's harder to get a tired child to sleep. The same is true for adults; the more exhausted we are, the more difficult it is to get off the couch at a reasonable hour. Setting a nighttime alarm for 20-30 minutes before you want to be in bed can help you stay on track.
- **Trade sleep nights with your parenting partner.** Take turns being on night duty. Even if you can't get good sleep every night, every other night is better than nothing.

- ◉ **Delegate the parenting so you can sleep.** Contrary to popular belief, you don't have to interact with your children all the time. Send your kids out for playdates and sleepovers so you can get some shut-eye. As your kids get older, teach them to entertain themselves in the morning with books, quiet games, or TV.
- ◉ **Track your sleep.** There are a wide range of apps, gadgets, and wearable sleep-trackers that can give you a decent sense of your nighttime habits. The accuracy of these devices is questionable, but if you track your sleep consistently, you'll start to see how one night compares to the next. Sometimes just knowing how well you slept (or not) is enough to motivate you to get into bed a little earlier.
- ◉ **Do a little experimenting with caffeine, alcohol, and exercise.** Sleep experts will tell you to cut down on coffee and booze and increase your exercise. This is good advice, and you need to find the balance that works for you. Some folks can tolerate a fair amount of caffeine, but find that even one glass of wine messes them up. Others need regular, intense exercise. Try a few variations, track your sleep, and notice how you feel the next day. It won't take long for you to figure out which changes you need to make.
- ◉ **Put down your screen.** The blue light that comes from your smartphone or tablet is like an evil wake-up laser shooting straight through your eyes and into your brain. While many devices now have filters that allow you to dim the screen or reduce the amount of blue light, the research on their efficacy isn't conclusive. However, the research has clearly shown that staring at a screen at night makes it harder to fall asleep and reduces sleep quality. Put down your device and pick up a book instead.
- ◉ **Don't give up!** Your kids will wreck your sleep time and again. That's the reality of parenting, and it will get better. In the meanwhile, stay committed to your sleep. It will make everything else you do easier and more enjoyable.

SANITY PRACTICE #2: SINGLETASK (DO ONE THING AT A TIME)

Why It Matters: We live in a culture of multi-tasking. We have been taught that the more we do at one time, the more productive we will be. Multi-tasking can seem like a necessity for parents; even if we want to focus on just one thing, our kids and phones and constant thoughts rarely fall in line.

Research has shown that the human brain just isn't capable of multi-tasking. Instead, your awareness jumps from one thing to another and back again in a process known as task-switching. Rather than making you more effective or efficient, task-switching:

- ⦿ Increases the likelihood that you will drop, break, forget, or lose something (including your temper).
- ⦿ Makes you less productive; all that jumping from one thing to another actually slows you down.
- ⦿ Limits your ability to think creatively and solve problems.
- ⦿ Makes you snappier at your children. When you're already doing three different things at once, any additional interruption can send you over the edge.
- ⦿ Increases stress. (If you're not clear why, go back and read numbers 1-4.)

How To Do It: The trick to singletasking is doing just one thing at a time. Simple, but not always easy. Your brain wasn't made to singletask; it was made to think all the thoughts all the time. Fortunately, you can get better at singletasking. Here are some tips to get you started:

- ⦿ **Do one thing at a time whenever you can**, even if it's only for a few minutes at a time. Just as multitasking can leave you feeling maxed out and overwhelmed, giving yourself even brief breaks from the constant juggling will help reduce your stress.
- ⦿ **Be smart about your multitasking.** Multitasking is part of our lives, and that's unlikely to change. However, you can be smart about it. Talking on the phone and driving is bad news, but there's nothing wrong with folding laundry while you watch TV. Doing just about anything else while you're managing your children is unlikely to end well.

- ◉ **Intentionally practice singletasking.** Choose something you do every day that you enjoy, and try to focus on it. Perhaps it's drinking your coffee, reading to your children, or cooking dinner. Each time you notice your mind wandering, come back to what you're doing. The goal here is to give your mind a break from the constant task switching and practice doing just one thing at a time.
- ◉ **Try to notice when you are doing more than one thing.** Sometimes you will choose to multitask because it's unavoidable in that moment. More often than not, you may be multitasking without realizing it. The ability to notice when this happens is a crucial first step towards changing these habits.
- ◉ **Give yourself a phone-free hour.** Smartphones are the most common source of distraction for many of us. Setting them aside isn't easy, but you may find it immensely helpful. If an entire hour is too hard, start with 10 or 15 minutes.
- ◉ **Either pay attention to your children or don't.** Kids don't need our attention all the time. Really. They don't. This can feel tricky at first, but it will get easier. Rather than trying to unload the dishwasher or check your email while you build a block tower with your toddler or help your kiddo with her homework, pick one or the other. Not only will your kids get more independent as they learn to leave you alone for 10 or 20 minutes at a time, but you'll feel less harried. You won't always be able to do this, but look for opportunities whenever possible.
- ◉ **Spend a few minutes each day in the ultimate form of single-tasking: mindfulness meditation.** Notice where your breath is most prominent (in and out of your nose, or in your chest or belly, perhaps), and then pay attention to it. You don't have to hold or count your breaths (unless you want to). Just notice the in and out, in and out. This is incredibly boring, and your mind will wander almost immediately. That's ok. Just notice the wandering and come back to your breathing. Not only will you get all the benefits of meditation, but you'll get even more practice at singletasking.

SANITY PRACTICE #3: SELF-COMPASSION

Why It Matters: If you have been a parent for longer than, say, 30 minutes, chances are that you've felt inadequate, unprepared, or uncertain of how to best care for your child. It won't be long before you feel quite sure that you have screwed up this parenting gig completely. With time, that sense that you are failing (with your children, your job, your home life, or just adulting in general) can become all too familiar.

It's possible that you're responding to your failures, both real and perceived, by beating yourself up, usually in the form of negative self-talk. This is all too common, especially among parents, for whom the stakes can feel so high. You're not doing yourselves any favors each time you tell yourself that you're screwing it all up. It just makes you feel worse and even more stuck in your parenting challenges.

It doesn't have to be that way. You can be kind to yourself in your difficult moments. Not only does self-compassion feel better, but research has found that it helps folks be more effective in making healthy changes and getting back on track after they've fallen off a wagon. Whether you're trying to be more patient or yell less, treating yourself with compassion when you've missed the mark is going to make it easier for you to change old habits that are no longer working for you and your family.

How To Do It: Self-compassion is primarily about how you treat yourself in the face of real or perceived failures and challenges. It's a specific internal response, one that most of us just aren't used to. Practicing self-compassion can feel a little weird at first, especially if you're stuck in a habit of negative self-talk, but stick with it. Here are a few ways to get started:

- **Notice your negative self-talk.** You may not realize how nasty your inner voice can be until you actually start listening to it. The crazy thing is that your self-criticism impacts you even when you don't notice it. Becoming aware of what's going through your mind after a parenting snafu is a crucial step towards changing that dialogue.

- **Speak to yourself in kind, compassionate ways.** Instead of beating yourself up, try responding to your harder moments the way you might support a good friend. You would never tell her that she's a terrible Mom, so why would you say that to yourself? Here are a few phrases to get you started, but I encourage you to find the words that work for you:
 - "It's ok. This is a hard moment, but you'll get through it."
 - "You're feeling really sad (angry, overwhelmed) right now. It feels awful. Can you give yourself a minute to breathe or take a few sips of tea?"
 - "Today is a rough day. Can you put the kids in front of the TV or send them outside to give yourself a break for a few minutes?"
 - "Raising kids can be brutal. Hang in there. It will get better."

- **Remind yourself that you are not alone.** It's common to feel as though you are the only parent on the planet who yells at your children or ignores them in favor of your smartphone. Trust me - you're not. I promise. One of the most compassionate responses you can have in difficult moments is to remind yourself that parenting is challenging for everyone, regardless of what you might see on Facebook or Instagram. Phrases as simple as "You're not alone," and "This parenting gig is rough for everyone," can help you feel more connected, supported, and less isolated in whatever you're going through.

These three sanity practices are the equivalent of filling up your tires on a regular basis so you don't end up with a debilitating flat. The more frequently you practice them, the more helpful they will be. Sleeping well at night, singletasking during the day, and being kind to yourself when you veer off course will make parenting feel easier and a whole lot more fun, so you can be the kind of parent you want to be.

If you'd like to learn more about how create a calmer and happier relationship with your children, follow me on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), and check out my books:

- [Parenting in the Present Moment: How to Stay Focused on What Really Matters](#)
- [Ready, Set, Breathe: Practicing Mindfulness with Your Children for Fewer Meltdowns and a More Peaceful Family](#)