

CHAPTER 1

# Why Are You Losing Your Shit?

COMMON FEATURES OF  
PARENTAL FREAK-OUTS



THE DOWNSIDES OF  
EXPLODING



WHY IT'S SO HARD TO  
STOP LOSING YOUR SHIT



A WEE BIT OF  
BRAIN SCIENCE



**F**irst up, we need to get clear on what I mean by losing your shit. Grown-up meltdowns look a little different for each of us. They're a bit like pornography in that way. No, not like that. Geez. I mean that they can be hard to define, but we know them when we see them.

## How to Know If You Are Losing Your Shit

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**M**ost episodes of shit loss share a few common characteristics, which we can remember with the acronym **FART** (**F**eelings, **A**utomatic, **R**eactive, **T**oxic). Not the sexiest acronym, but hopefully it will remind you that you're not alone. Like flatulence, losing your temper is an unfortunate yet completely normal part of the human condition. Everyone does it (even though some of us try to pretend we don't). While we can make changes in our life that may reduce our flatulence, it's still going to happen. The good news is, if we notice it's coming, we can take steps to mitigate the impact. Also, and most importantly, I will take every opportunity I can to remind you that this parenting gig is far too serious to be taken

seriously. So, yeah, we're gonna talk about FARTs.

Without further ado, here are the common features of most Parental Freak-Outs:

**FEELINGS.** Meltdowns generally involve Big Feelings, and not just anger or rage. Almost any strong emotion will do, including fear, sadness, confusion, powerlessness, stress, annoyance, anxiety, embarrassment, guilt, or shame. Even positive emotions can trigger us, as any parent who has seen a child laugh herself into tears knows. Sometimes our Big Feelings are related to our kids' antics, and sometimes they're not. Sometimes we're aware that we're having all the feelings, and sometimes we're not. What you need to remember is that (a) losing your shit is an emotional reaction, not a rational one, and (b) we don't have nearly as much control over our feelings as we'd like to think. We can't force ourselves to feel a particular way; all we can do is notice that we're actually having a feeling so we can choose how to respond.

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**AUTOMATIC.** It's important to remember that most meltdowns are neither conscious nor intentional. It's not as though you come home from a bad day at work and think to yourself, "Huh. I'm pretty stressed. I think I'll go ahead and totally lose it on my kids tonight." In most cases, melting down is an unconscious process beyond your control, one that can often be traced back to your childhood and the ways your parents lost their tempers with you. This is why you can't simply

decide to not lose your shit and then just not lose it. Your explosions are a predictable outcome of developmental, neurological, and biological processes, rather than logical decisions.

**REACTIVE.** We can think about reactivity in two ways. First, it's about what we say and do *in reaction* to something else. Something has to happen to get us to freak out; it doesn't come out of nowhere. Sometimes the reason for our freak-out is abundantly clear; we can draw a straight line from the trigger to the meltdown. Other times we have no clue why we lost it. Something may have happened five minutes, five hours, or five years ago, and it may have nothing to do with our kids. Whatever it is, and whenever it happened, identifying the thing you are reacting to is crucial. If you never realize that May is a terrible month for you because it's the anniversary of your first miscarriage, you can't make the choice to take extra care of yourself during that time. If you don't acknowledge that the pain in your molar isn't going to magically disappear, you can't suck it up and go to the dentist.

The other definition of reactivity has to do with our ability to act quickly *in response to real or perceived danger*. The human brain and body developed to keep us safe from physical threats. Unfortunately, they still haven't figured out that most of the stressors we face these days are emotional or psychological, and not life-threatening, so they react quickly to situations that don't require such intense and fast reactions. In addition, our brains aren't always great at telling the difference between Serious Problems and Minor Issues, which is why we end up with a shit-loss-level reaction even when it's not necessary.

**TOXIC.** Remember the last time your child darted into the street or nearly fell down the stairs? You probably had some Big Feelings that propelled you to react automatically, perhaps by yelling or quickly grabbing your child's arm. Even if you yelled or grabbed a bit harder than you intended to, I wouldn't categorize that as losing your shit. This is an example of your nervous system reacting appropriately in a potentially dangerous situation. The moment wasn't toxic, by which I mean unnecessarily harsh or harmful to your relationship with your kiddo. So, yes, it is possible to go FAR without FARTing.

## THE MOST TOXIC EXPLOSIONS AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT THEM

**A**LTHOUGH THERE ARE many ways to lose your shit with your kids, some are worse than others. Insults and threats are particularly damaging, as is physical aggression or violence of any kind, including hitting, slapping, spanking, or throwing things. Perhaps this is part of the culture you were raised in or are parenting in, or maybe it's a new experience for you. Either way, if any of this is happening in your home, it **needs to stop**. First, do what you can to stop blaming and shaming yourself. Yes, the situation is serious, but the sooner you can find a little forgiveness and kindness for

yourself, the sooner you'll be able to get some help and make some important changes. You're not the only parent to ever hit your child, but that doesn't mean it's OK. You can do better. I promise. You may not be able to do it alone, and that doesn't mean you've failed at parenting. It just means you're in over your head. Talking to someone you trust is the first step: It can be a friend or family member, your doctor or pediatrician, a therapist, counselor, minister, rabbi, priest, or imam. It's not going to be an easy conversation or an enjoyable one, but it needs to happen. You can do this.

Toxic explosions are unpredictable, disproportionate reactions that can include angry words, physical outbursts, personal attacks, shame, and blame. The moment feels out of control. Toxic outbursts happen when we are triggered, and they continue to trigger everyone involved. Examples may include screaming at your child over spilled cereal, exploding because he's taking too long to put on his shoes, or angrily berating a daughter for forgetting her homework. These reactive explosions can rupture and weaken the connection between you and your child.

In addition, frequent tension and stress mess with the brain and nervous systems, increasing the likelihood you'll be triggered in the future. This is why it's so important for you to figure out not only how to lose your shit less often, but also how to reconnect with your child each time it happens.

Just to recap: Losing our shit is about FARTing. There are Big **F**eelings involved, and our behavior is **A**utomatic, **R**eactive, and **T**oxic. Speaking of our behavior, there's a reason I didn't get all hung up on whether

you snapped, screamed, or slammed, or just stalked off in a huff while muttering sarcastically under your breath. We all explode differently, with varying levels of intensity, so it's more helpful to focus on the characteristics rather than the actual behavior. I've seen silent stares that are just as hurtful as flying remote controls; I've heard steely threats that could rival Clint Eastwood on a bad day.

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Having said that, most of us resort to a few habitual behaviors (snapping, screaming, slamming, etc.) when we lose it, and it's super important that you get clear on exactly what you do when you freak out because that behavior is the *only* thing you can control.

I hope I just threw you for a loop with that last sentence there because if I didn't, you haven't been paying attention. I just told you that you *can't* control your feelings and that your meltdowns are automatic and reactive, and then I told you that you *can* control your behavior during an outburst. If it's all automatic, how the hell are you supposed to do that?

That's what the rest of this book is about. Don't worry, I'm not going to tell you that you should just choose to chill instead of losing your shit. If you coulda done that, you woulda done that, and I woulda done that, and we'd all be relaxing with Netflix and hot tea instead of looking for help in a book. Instead, I'm going to teach you how to reduce the likelihood that you will lose your shit by recognizing and responding effectively to your triggers, calming your buttons, and learning how to notice when you've been pushed too FAR so you don't let loose and go all toxic on your kiddo. Finally, I'm going to teach you exactly how to get your shit together after you've lost it so you don't lose it again.

Got it? Good. Now that we're clear on what it means to lose your shit, we need to talk about what it looks like when you don't.

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# What Does It Mean to Not Lose Your Shit?

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Some folks think that the opposite of losing it is staying calm and collected all the time, and never getting into any sort of conflict with your child ever. They assume it means feeling happy, patient, and present at every moment, and responding to your children with a song in your heart and a smile on your face no matter what sort of crap (either metaphorical or literal) they dump at your exhausted feet. This sort of thinking just reeks of perfection and clearly won't work for me or you or any other parent on the planet.

Conflict and disconnection and unpleasant feelings and strong emotions are all completely normal and reasonable and acceptable, and *they don't mean you're doing anything wrong*. Living in close proximity with other people—who you may love dearly, even if you don't like everything they do—is not easy. It's especially challenging if one of you is chronically stressed and the other one is a small person with an immature brain. As a clinical social worker, I worry more about the folks who say they never fight than the ones who acknowledge and own the tension that exists in their families.

You can be overwhelmed by emotions and still not lose your shit. You can be deeply pissed off or scared or sad or confused, and still not reach a toxic level. You can let your kids know you're having Big Feelings without exploding all over them.

Not losing it is about having just enough self-awareness to notice what's going on in and around you so you can make a conscious



choice to get still and calm down or just shut your mouth before you react—even if you have no idea what to do next. Even if you have absolutely no clue how to respond to your kid’s offensive or obnoxious or only-slightly-irritating-but-you-just-can’t-handle-it-today behavior, I promise that anything you come up with from a place of relative calm will be more effective and empathic than whatever knee-jerk reaction you bust out with when you’re freaking out.

## Why You Should Stop Losing It

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**T**his seems fairly self-explanatory, but over the years I’ve had enough conversations with parents who have a hard time understanding why losing their temper is problematic that I want to address it.

**IT’S NOT GOOD FOR YOU.** Every time you blow up, your nervous system gets all jacked up and your stress hormones go through the roof, which negatively impacts virtually every part of your body. Eventually, chronic stress can increase your blood pressure, weaken your immune system, cause migraines, and screw up your sleep. Frequent explosions and the related stress lead to long-term health issues. But it’s not just about the impact on your body. Over time, your explosions will literally rewire your brain, and not in a good way. The more you lose it with your kids, the stronger and more connected

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*Each time you explode, your confidence is undermined, and you begin to doubt your ability to parent the way you want to.*

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your “lose it” neuronal pathways will become, allowing your brain to freak out more quickly and easily in the future.

And then there’s your relationship with your kids, which is probably what made you pick up this book in the first place. Take a moment and remember the last time you lost your shit with your kids. It feels awful. Losing control

is scary, and can leave you feeling ashamed, anxious, and isolated. Each time you explode, your confidence is undermined, and you begin to doubt your ability to parent the way you want to. The bottom line is that losing your shit can be damaging to your relationship with your kids and your sense of yourself as a parent.

**IT’S NOT GOOD FOR YOUR KIDS.** All those things I just said about how our meltdowns impact us? Well, they’re even more true for our children because their brains and bodies are still developing and may be especially vulnerable to the negative effects of stress hormones.

Our tantrums can leave our kids feeling anxious, ashamed, scared, and disconnected, which makes it harder for them to learn and integrate new information, tolerate new experiences (whether it’s a new food on their plate or the first day at a new school), and generally function well in daily life. The strong, unpleasant feelings they have in response to our explosions can also trigger kids and make it more likely that they’ll act out and have meltdowns of their own.

Finally, we're always modeling a way to behave, whether or not it's something we want our children to learn. Each time we lose it, we may be unintentionally wiring their brains and nervous systems to freak out in a similar way whenever they're triggered, perhaps by something that happens at school, at home, or inside their tiny little brains and bodies. We're demonstrating the very behaviors we're trying to decrease and we're modeling a relationship style we surely don't want them to repeat later in life. (Side note: This may be why you're struggling with this issue. If your parents lost it with you on a regular basis, they were inadvertently raising you to react similarly in stressful situations. Fortunately, you can break this intergenerational pattern.)

**CALMER PARENTS MAKE FOR CALMER KIDS.** Our temperament and energy levels help set the tone for the house. Every time we freak out, we raise the level of tension in our homes, which is exhausting and can create painful rifts in family connections. Alternately, the calmer we are, the calmer our kids might be. I'm not saying that you're 100 percent responsible for your children's behavior and energy level, and your Jedi mind tricks won't work all the time. However, to the extent that we can avoid adding fuel to their psychotic little fires, there will be a significant and noticeable difference for the entire family.

Having said all of that, I kind of get the appeal of losing your shit. It's quick, easy, and requires relatively little thought, and can we all 'fess up and admit that sometimes it feels good to stick it to the kid? What's more, it can be effective. Sort of. For a few minutes. It's certainly possible that if you scare the crap out of your children often enough, they'll do whatever you want just to keep you from losing it

again. But walking on eggshells around someone is not the same as respecting them, and as soon as your kids are old enough to take some control over their time and space, they're going to react to you the same way you did the last time you worked for an explosive, unpredictable boss: AVOID. AVOID. AVOID. Once they disconnect from you in that way, parenting becomes a lot harder and less fun. While it's always possible to rebuild a relationship, that's a challenge you don't need.

Much of parenting is based on trust, which is an especially tricky issue for kids. They're wired to trust their parents and caregivers because we're the ones who are supposed to keep them safe. As a result, when we lose our shit with them, they tend to blame themselves because that's easier than questioning or doubting the person who keeps them alive and runs their lives. Over time, our kids may learn to not only tolerate and expect bad behavior in others but to also blame themselves for it.

Fortunately, it doesn't have to be that way. We respect the people we trust, the people who tend to treat us with kindness and honesty. When we respect people, we want to help them. We want to make them happy. We want to get home by curfew even though the party is really, really awesome. (OK, that's a total lie. Your kids won't want to leave that rockin' party, but they'll be much more likely to do it anyway *and* tell you about the guy who tried to get them to smoke a joint and what they did instead if they think they have a snowball's chance in hell at not getting reamed out the minute they walk in the door smelling like cheap beer.)

The reality is that our children learn more from what we do than from what we say, and their little kid brains don't necessarily make a distinction between our smart parenting moves and our terrible,

impulsive ones. Every time we lose it we're not only demonstrating how to do the very thing we're trying to get them to stop doing, but we're actually wiring their brains to make it more likely that they do it again rather than wiring them for calm behavior and trust.

## Why Is This So Hard?

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**I**n order to change a behavior, it's helpful to get a handle on what's causing it in the first place. That's what our brains naturally want to do. The human mind loves a good story. Stories help us make sense of our experiences, understand the world around us, and feel connected and engaged with ourselves, our friends, and our community. But stories aren't just about understanding where we are and where we've been. Our stories are the maps of our lives, and the right story helps us figure out where we're going and how to get there.

Unfortunately, not every story is a good one. Our brains are so desperate to put the pieces together that they'll believe any tale, whether or not it's true or helpful. In the absence of accurate information, our minds will just make something up. Kids do this all the time; just the other day my daughter tried to tell me that she whacked her sister because she was remembering a joke about a monkey throwing a banana and her arm tried to throw a banana all on its own and it just happened to land right on her sister's nose. This, of course, was total BS. My kiddo had no idea why she hit her sister, but she's only eight, so instead of saying, "The thing is, Mommy, the part of my brain designed to help me control my

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impulses doesn't exist yet and that's why I hit my sister," she fed me a line. Our own brains feed us similar lines all the time.

Fortunately, most parents don't usually fall for their kids' insane stories, because they're, well, insane. Unfortunately, we generally believe most grown-ups' explanations, especially if those grown-ups (a) are wearing uniforms or have fancy letters after their names, (b) post them all over social media, or (c) happen

to live inside our own minds. We fall for our own crap all the time. We think our thoughts are The Truth, but the reality is that sometimes they are, and sometimes they're just mental monkeys throwing bananas.

The stories we tell ourselves about why we keep losing it are a perfect example. The most common reasons I hear from my friends and clients are generally some variation of "I'm a bad parent" or "My kid is a jerk." It's easy to see why our brains come up with these explanations; they're logical enough. A good parent doesn't lose her shit, therefore the shit-losing parent is a bad one. Or perhaps it's that we don't lose it when the kids are being helpful and reasonable, so if we are losing our shit, it must be their fault. Makes sense, right?

Wrong. Because even if you think these stories are true (which, as I hope to convince you, they're not), the more important point is that they're not helpful.

Let's start with the bit about your kid being a jerk. There's no question that children's behavior can range from mildly annoying to mind-blowingly horrifying. They throw toys out the car window and refuse to nap and poop on the stairs and stomp on the baby's head and steal candy from the drugstore and draw penises on the classroom wall and don't even get me started on booze and drugs and sexing that punk with chin fuzz. Kids do idiotic, obnoxious stuff. That's unlikely to change any time soon, so if your plan for keeping your cool depends on your child's ability to do the same, that's going to end poorly for everyone. As you may have said to your kids a time or two, we can't control anyone else's behavior—we can only control our own.

So, let's talk about us.

Our behavior can be nearly as ridiculous as our kids' (although in my defense, I am an excellent napper and have never once pooped on the stairs). We make promises we can't keep and issue threats we have no intention of following through on; we hold our children to unreasonable expectations and then get supremely pissed off when they don't meet them; we set similarly unreasonable expectations for

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ourselves and then berate ourselves when we don't live up to them; and many of us rival our little ones in our tantrum-throwing abilities.

We all behave in ways that just don't make sense, especially when we're triggered and our buttons are pushed. But our brains start to get a little twitchy when things seem random or unpredictable; they prefer predictability, not chaos. This is why even

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an inaccurate story can seem better than no story at all. When we don't have a clue about what just happened or what might happen next, we grasp (often without realizing it) at any available information to explain and understand the situation. Hence the "I'm a bad parent raising a bad kid" line.

Despite any and all evidence to the contrary, any explanation that starts or ends with you or your kid being a jerk ain't gonna cut it. I know what you're thinking here, and it's something like,

"Oh, honey, if only you were a fly on the wall in my house, if you saw what goes down in my Casa de Crazy, you wouldn't be writing those words." The thing is, I have been a fly on the wall in many, many houses, as a child who grew up in a deeply dysfunctional family, as a parent who has lost her shit on her own kids on multiple occasions, and as a clinical social worker who has worked with, and been in the homes of, many families struggling with heartbreaking addiction, assault, abuse, and neglect. I know how bad it can get. And I still say that the bad parent / bad kid line doesn't work. Here's why.

Telling yourself that the reason you keep exploding is because you're a bad parent or you have a bad kid is an unhelpful story because it doesn't offer any options for change and growth. There's no movement, no fresh air, no possibility of a new perspective or different outcome. When you've already decided you're a bad parent, it can feel impossible to turn into a good one. You get stuck in the shame and have no idea where to start, and it all sucks and, oh well, maybe you



can send the kid to boarding school or off to live with Aunt Louise in Sheboygan or divert some of their college money to a therapy/pharmaceutical/ashram fund.

Fortunately, there is another option. How about a new story, one that not only gives you a more accurate picture of what's actually happening but also offers a map for how to get to where you want to go? How about this one? *You're doing an incredibly hard job, and you're doing it without the right information, support, resources, and rest.* When we do something really hard every single day without those things, we lose it. It's the human way. We are literally wired to freak out when our buttons are repeatedly pushed. And I think we can all agree that parenting is nothing if not an exercise in repeated button pushing.

I talk about this with the parents I work with all the time. I remind them over and over again that raising children is insanely hard and that (a) it's not their fault that it's hard, and (b) they need to start doing what adults do in tough situations, like taking care of themselves and getting some help. They smile and nod and give me the old, "Yeah, yeah, I know. Can we please get back to my son's latest issue and what, exactly, I'm supposed to do about it?" And so I keep repeating myself, all the while imagining that I'm Robin Williams in that super-intense scene in *Good Will Hunting* where he keeps telling the traumatized Will, "It's not your fault. It's not your fault. It's not your fault." Eventually, Will breaks down in tears, presumably able to truly hear for the first time that his traumatic childhood is not his fault.

If for some unfathomable reason you haven't seen *Good Will Hunting*, go ahead and watch it now. Oh, wait. You can't because you're a parent and you don't have two free hours. So do the next

best thing and google “good will hunting it’s not your fault scene.” Go ahead. I’ll wait. Then imagine me with a beard, argyle cardigan, and Boston accent as you read this next paragraph.

You’re *not* a bad parent, and while your shit losses are absolutely your responsibility, they’re *not your fault*. This is a crucial distinction that bears repeating: There’s no reason to blame yourself for your temper, but it’s time to step up and make some changes. Remember, you’re a mere human, trying to raise another mere human, which may be the hardest thing any of us ever do. It’s hard at different times and in different ways for different parents, but it’s hard for *everyone*. I promise. I double pinky swear.

## WHY IS PARENTING SO DAMN HARD?

**T**his is such an important question that we’re going to take a moment to explore some of the reasons why parenting can be so challenging. Some of these reasons are universal and timeless, and some are specific to this generation of parenting and to you and your family. Understanding why parenting is so hard is a crucial first step toward dealing with it in a skillful way.

**PARENTING IS HARD BECAUSE IT’S A PART OF LIFE, AND LIFE IS HARD.** Our cultural obsession with happiness has created the false delusion that life should be easy and that we should be happy most, if not all, of the time. The carefully curated and filtered world of social media further perpetuates this BS idea that there are folks out there who effortlessly have their lives together in a consistent, ongoing way. The end result is that those of us (which is actually all of us) who have to deal with flat tires and debilitating anxiety and dwindling

bank accounts and difficult family members and ingrown toenails are left thinking that everyone else has figured it out and we're the ones doing something wrong.

Every time I come across the Life Is Happy lie, I imagine my great-grandmother, a tough old bullfrog of a woman who lived through the Oklahoma Land Rush. I have a picture of her sitting on a dusty stoop in front of a log cabin, and you can just see the challenges of her life etched into the deep wrinkles on her face. If she could hear the advice of today's positive-thinking gurus, she'd probably think back on everything she'd been through (most of which I can't even imagine), laugh her ass off, and then tell them to take their happiness crap and get the hell off her land.

Life is hard. Sure, there are things we can do to make it a bit easier, and if we're lucky, we string together a few good days and a few good years and that's not nothing. Parenting is no different. If parenting and life are feeling particularly

challenging for any reason, it's not always because you're doing something wrong. It's because hard is part of the deal for everyone, no matter how good they make it look on Instagram.

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### **YOUR LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES CAN MAKE PARENTING HARDER.**

Raising children can be brutal, even for folks who are physically and emotionally healthy, have supportive partners and family, and don't have to worry about how they're going to cover their bills next month.

But it's especially challenging if you're unemployed, underemployed, financially stressed, homeless, parenting without a partner, living with addiction or violence, mourning a loss, caring for aging loved ones, managing physical or mental illness, raising a child with special needs, or dealing with conflict or drama with your friends or family members. Some of these problems will pass, and some of them will continue to add stress to your life for the foreseeable future. But they all trigger us, and when we're triggered, we're more likely to lose our shit.

**YOUR CHILDHOOD CAN MAKE PARENTING HARDER.** If you grew up in a home with addiction, violence, loss, abuse, or neglect of any sort, it's going to impact your parenting, and probably not in a good way. This can happen for a lot of reasons, including:

★ You may be more likely to struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, addiction, or chronic illnesses, any of which will interfere with your ability to parent your kids the way you want to.

★ If you haven't yet made sense of your childhood and how it impacts your adult life, the early lessons you learned about how families work and parents behave may rear their ugly heads in ways that you don't even realize. Seemingly small moments that barely register on other folks' radar can trigger you, and all of a sudden you're screaming even though you don't know why.

★ Your family of origin may be an ongoing source of stress in your life, which is a double whammy because it also means they aren't available to offer you the support and assistance that can be so useful from grandparents and other family members.

★ You don't have a model for how you want to parent, which is kind of like building a house without a blueprint. Chances are you're going to end up with a fairly confusing and uncomfortable house, one that you never feel quite comfortable navigating.

Even if your early years weren't traumatic, the experience of being underparented or parented in ways that you don't want to replicate will make it harder for you to figure out how you do want to raise your kids. Not knowing what to do can increase your stress, which makes parenting harder.

**SOME KIDS ARE HARDER TO PARENT.** Some babies sleep through the night. Some kids figure out how to walk and talk and solve geometry proofs at the same pace as all the other kids on the block. Some kids are chill and flexible, some kids actually enjoy following rules, some kids just freak out less often than others. Other children struggle with insomnia, chronic illnesses, or learning disabilities. And other children are constantly distracted, or they have Big Feelings that they express in loud and unpleasant ways in very public spaces, or they require years of therapy and tutoring, or they were high-strung from the moment they emerged from the womb.

And some children, regardless of their temperament or temper are, quite simply, a better fit for their parents. Their style, whether they're early birds or night owls, loud or quiet, adventure seekers or

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homebodies, matches well with the rest of the family. And some kids just don't. The painful truth that no one wants to talk about is that some kids are just harder to parent.

**MOST PARENTS SUCK AT TAKING CARE OF THEMSELVES.** I'm sure you've read more than a few listicles explaining all the reasons you should be taking better care of yourself and all of the ways to do it: Pedicures and Pinot with the ladies! Trivia night! Train for a marathon! (Ugh. Ugh. Double ugh.) As long as we're on the topic of marathons, though, they do make a great metaphor for parenting. Those of you who have actually run a marathon know that you're unlikely to perform at your best if (a) your training runs keep getting interrupted by calls from the school nurse, (b) your carbo-loading consists of inhaling the remnants of your kids' mac 'n' cheese, and (c) you haven't slept through the night for nearly a decade. Runners who know they haven't been able to properly prepare their bodies lower their expectations and cut themselves some slack when the race doesn't go as well as they had hoped.

Yet most parents do nothing of the sort. Whether you're home full-time, working outside the house, or doing some hybrid of the two, you're absolutely running a marathon every day, and you need as many hours of rest and recuperation as you spend parenting. (HAHAHAHA \*SOB\*) But are you even coming close? How often do you get eight hours of sleep? Are you moving your body regularly? When was the last time you had a day or a morning

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or even an hour free to read a book or go for a walk or do something just for fun? (For the record, zoning out on the couch in exhausted-zombie mode with your tablet in your lap and Netflix on the TV at the end of the day doesn't count.) And even if you can point to a fortunate afternoon last weekend when the stars aligned and all of your children were out to playdates at the same time, I'm betting it doesn't happen on a regular basis. Too many parents move through their days running on fumes, exhausted, stressed-out, overcaffeinated, and poorly fed, and yet still hold themselves to the same high standards and berate themselves for their "bad parenting" when they don't measure up.

**CHRONIC EXHAUSTION MAKES PARENTING HARDER.** Sleep is so crucial that it gets an extra special nod here. The majority of parents I work with are exhausted. Fatigue makes it harder to think clearly, solve even the most basic problems, focus our attention, manage our emotions, make good choices, and stay healthy. Basically, when we go too long without enough sleep, we become the worst version of ourselves. We get cranky and bitchy and reactive and we are far more likely to lose it. And no, you can't think or work or willpower your way out of exhaustion because the very part of your brain that's responsible for that kind of adulting is the first part of your brain to shut down when you've been up all night with a sick kid. So that stinks.

**MOST OF US ARE RAISING OUR CHILDREN WITHOUT ENOUGH SUPPORT, OR WITH THE WRONG KIND OF SUPPORT.** I recently had dinner with some folks from Canada and my jaw hit the floor as my pregnant friend described the year—YEAR!—of paid maternity leave she would enjoy before going back to the job that her employer

was required to hold for her. Then she started throwing around phrases like “government-supported childcare” and “guaranteed health care” and I nearly choked. The current American system has very real implications for our lives; the daily grind of rushing from childcare drop-off to work and back again, perpetually on the verge of running out of time and money, is stressful and exhausting.

The lack of support is not just a problem on the systemic level; it’s a problem on a local level as well. As folks move away from home for schools or jobs, they’re also moving away from their families. Sometimes that’s a good thing, but it also means we’re losing the communities that once guided us in how to raise children. Yes, those villages may have been the source of some epically crappy advice (Put orange juice in the baby’s bottle! Spank them! Ditch the seat belts—kids need their physical freedom!), but at least that advice came

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The lack of support is not just a problem on the systemic level; it’s a problem on a local level as well.

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wrapped in a package of “Well, that’s how everyone did it.” There is great comfort in the knowledge that if we’re making poor parenting choices, at least we’re doing it together.

The customs of our local villages have been replaced by an endless stream of advice from the global village, thanks to the power of the Internet. Instead of taking comfort

in the fact that we’re not the only ones stumbling through parenting, we’re constantly reminded that we’re the only ones who *aren’t* getting it right. The attachment parents are attaching better, the French moms are feeding their kids better, the Scandinavian kids are happier, the Asian kids are smarter and harder working, and meanwhile I’m



just trying to figure out how to get my kid to stop picking her nose and wiping it on the wall.

### **SOCIAL MEDIA AND SMARTPHONES MAKE PARENTING HARDER.**

I enjoy social media as much as the next smartphone-addicted, update-obsessed, overly-prone-to-comparisons parent. But the constant updates make life harder in significant ways. Images of perfectly frosted birthday cupcakes and videos of six-year-olds playing their first piano recitals make us doubt ourselves and our parenting choices and abilities, which, you guessed it, is a major trigger for most folks.

But it's not just the constant comparisons. Every time we open up Facebook or Twitter, we risk coming across distressing news, whether political or local or a tragic update from a high school friend. Those of us who grew up in the age of CNN and the twenty-four-hour news cycle fail to realize how truly insane this is. We are often unaware that this level of exposure to all of the terrible things that are happening in every corner of the planet is incredibly anxiety-provoking.

Example: I had to reset my smartphone the other day, and I forgot to turn off notifications when I restarted it. Generally, the only time my phone lights up or dings is for calls or text messages. I was making dinner when the screen flashed and the phone vibrated on the counter. The headline said something about the president declaring a state of emergency, at which point the text was cut off. I freaked out. Something terrible was happening. An earthquake? An invasion? An invasion of what? The body snatchers? What are body snatchers anyway?

It took me several deeply agitated minutes—during which time I totally snapped at my daughters—to calm down and figure out what

was actually going on. I breathed deeply and checked the phone again. The president was declaring a state of emergency about the opioid crisis. Oh. Huh. Yes, addiction is a big deal, but it wasn't going to send me and the girls scurrying to the basement any time soon. I took several more deep breaths, apologized to my kids, and immediately turned off all the notifications.

**TOO MUCH INFORMATION FROM TOO MANY EXPERTS MAKES PARENTING HARDER.** This may sound a bit rich coming from a parent coach who has written three parenting books, but hear me out. There is a ton of excellent advice out there that makes parenting easier. But there is also a tipping point at which the information becomes overwhelming and unhelpful, and not just because it can be inconsistent and constantly changing. No peanut butter before age one! All the peanut butter before age one! No screen time! Some screen time! No, not *that* much screen time!

In addition, all that advice creates the illusion that we can fix any parenting problem that comes our way, even though some of the most common problems just aren't fixable, not even with the prettiest star charts or the smartest words said in the perfect tone of voice at just the right time or the advice of the most accomplished child psychologist your side of the Mississippi. Some problems are just part of the imperfect life we imperfect humans are living, and the best we can do is muddle through, ideally with a hefty dose of compassion and the help of a good friend who will make you a snack and keep you laughing even when it feels like it's all falling apart. But that's hard to hear and even harder to accept because we parents have been led to believe that it's our job to ensure our children's happiness. So we keep reading and researching and consulting and working our asses

off, and we take whatever advice we can. But when it doesn't work, we end up thinking we've failed at parenting rather than realizing that the advice has failed us.

OK. Whew. Now that I've dropped you into the depths of despair about how rough parenting can be, it's time to pick you up, dust you off, and get you back in the game. Remember, you're not a bad parent raising a bad kid. Life is hard and parenting is hard. It's not your fault you're losing your shit, but it's absolutely your responsibility to do what you can to reduce the likelihood that you will lose it and to stay cool as often as possible. On the off chance you're having a little pity party right now, well, go ahead (we all do it sometimes) and then keep reading because taking responsibility for shit that's not your fault is what parenting is all about. Let's get to it.

## Why We Lose It When Shit Gets Hard

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**A**t first glance, it may seem as though the whole “parenting is hard” shtick is just another unhelpful story; after all, if it's so challenging, then what's the point of even talking about it? The point is that understanding the nature of the challenges we face is the first step toward change. The next step is understanding why we lose our shit when shit gets hard, and it's all about your brain and nervous system.

There is no question that the human brain is awesome; it gave us *Grey's Anatomy* and Velcro sneakers and broccoli you can steam right in the bag. Unfortunately, it can also lead us astray in some pretty major ways. I'm guessing that no one ever gave you the instruction manual on how your brain develops and works, how to take care of it, and what exactly happens when you don't. Now, in their defense (I'm not entirely sure who "they" are, but roll with me on this one), they hadn't yet figured it out themselves. But now we're starting to get a decent handle on brain science and what might be going on when we lose it.

Right off the bat, there are a few things you need to know about your nervous system, which includes your brain, spinal cord, and the nerves that run throughout your body. One of these is that your brain is made up of many different parts. Those parts are responsible for various aspects of your functioning, and they all have ridiculous names that you don't need to remember. There are a few parts of your brain that are relevant to your shit loss, though; we'll focus on two of them.

First, your prefrontal cortex (PFC). This lives right behind your forehead, and it's the part of your brain that comes online when you're adulting. Your PFC helps you plan ahead, make decisions, think logically and creatively, manage your feelings, and calm down when you're freaking out. Two things you need to know about it: First, it gets tired when it has to work too hard for too long, which is why it can feel impossible to figure out what to make for dinner at the end of a long day. Second, certain practices (which generally fall under the umbrella

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The calmer we can get (and stay), the calmer our kids will be as well.

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of self-care) will make your PFC more effective and efficient so it can get you through the day without falling apart.

One more fun little factoid about the PFC: Your kids don't really have one yet. The latest thinking is that the PFC isn't fully developed until the early twenties, which is why even college students are still lighting stuff on fire for no good reason. Having said that, all is not lost. The calmer we can get (and stay), the calmer our kids will be as well. Basically, our PFCs are functioning for theirs.

What, you say? My child doesn't have a prefrontal cortex? If that's true, then what part of their brain is running that crazy little show? Great question! For the purposes of oversimplification, it's their limbic system. You also have a limbic system. It's tucked away inside the middle of your brain, and it includes the amygdala, hippocampus, and hypothalamus, and all of the neuronal highways their information travels on. (I told you they have ridiculous names.) Your limbic system has a few different functions, but for now, just think of it as your inner toddler. It's responsible for your Big Feelings, and it triggers your Fight, Flight, Freeze, or Freak Out reaction. (In the event that you've forgotten how good toddlers are at freaking out, just go tear a cheese stick the wrong way.) The limbic system takes over when your PFC goes off-line for any reason, including exhaustion, Big Feelings, real or perceived threats, being overwhelmed, or having your buttons pushed. Needless to say, your limbic system plays a major role in shit-loss-related situations.

Although we all have PFCs and limbic systems, they're wired a little differently depending on the person. They can be bigger or smaller, and more or less active, for a variety of reasons. Brain development (which includes both structure and function) is influenced by a ton of different factors, including genetics, gender, illness, life

experience, education, traumatic incidences, and random shit that scientists have yet to figure out.

Fortunately, you're not stuck with what you've got now. The human brain changes and grows throughout your life. Many new parents get super hung up about the first three years being the height of brain development—if you don't expose Little Susie to enough Baby Mozart and kale before she heads off to preschool, you've screwed her for life! This is an unhelpful story for every single person on the planet

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*Your thoughts and feelings impact and change how your body feels and functions.*

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who is older than three, and it's not true, so let's ditch it. The truth is that there is a lot of activity in those early years, and another truth is that our brains continue to learn and develop, in both helpful and unhelpful ways, as long as we're alive.

In addition, the human brain wasn't designed to be maximally effective at all times. It was designed (a) to keep us alive, and (b) to plan and remember and worry

and anticipate and imagine and fantasize and think and react, mostly in the service of (a) keeping us alive. Those little neurons fire like it's their job, because, well, it's their job. Sometimes all of this brain activity is helpful, but sometimes it's not. Sometimes our thoughts, ideas, and reactions are accurate and useful, and sometimes they steer us in the wrong direction. We can't depend on our brains to guide us like a thoughtful parent or therapist; evolution just didn't design them that way.

Although evolution might not have wired our brains to be super wise all the time, it did wire them to keep us breathing and moving, thanks to our nervous system. There are nerves all over your body,

and each time they sense something, they send messages back to your brain. In the same way, your thoughts and feelings send messages throughout your nervous system and into your body. They don't exist in a vacuum; your thoughts and feelings impact and change how your body feels and functions. This happens constantly and even more quickly than you can imagine, often without you having a clue.

Your brain (and thus, your nervous system) is not self-sustaining. It requires sleep, nutrition, exercise, stimulation, fun, and downtime to function well. It's like one of those little digital pets that used to be so popular; as long as you tend to it, it will beep and smile when it should and generally behave well most of the time. And when you don't tend to your brain, things like parenting become harder and you become much more likely to lose your shit.

One last point: While your brain is not a muscle, it's useful to think about it as if it is. The more you use certain parts, the stronger they get, and the more likely they will be to come online the next time you need them. Have you ever watched a kid the first time they get on the soccer field? They can barely get their foot to connect with the ball. With enough practice, though, they can dribble the ball down the field without a second thought.

The opposite is also true. The less frequently you activate certain parts of your brain, the weaker and more rigid they become. This is why it's harder to learn an instrument or language later in life; the neuronal pathways we need are just too rusty to make those new connections quickly and easily. (This doesn't mean they can't; it's just harder.)

Furthermore, our brains don't make a distinction between the skillful "muscles" that you might actually want to make stronger and the shittier "muscles" that you probably wish didn't exist at all.

Basically, you'll get better at whatever you're practicing, whether it's meditating or melting down. I practiced yelling for years, and man, I got really good at it. Fortunately, once I started noticing when I was about to lose it and chose to shut my mouth and breathe deeply instead, I got a lot better at that. Over time, it became easier and easier to do.

## WHAT YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM HAS TO DO WITH YOUR SHIT LOSS

**B**y now you're probably wondering what this all has to do with you and your temper. It's all about your Fight or Flight response, which I prefer to think of as Fight, Flight, Freeze, or Freak Out.

When some part of your nervous system senses—either consciously or unconsciously, accurately or not—that Something Big and Possibly Bad is happening or might happen, it immediately sends a warning to your limbic system, which then activates your sympathetic nervous system. Your body is flooded with stress hormones, which trigger a series of reactions. Your heart starts pounding, your blood pressure shoots up, you start breathing harder and faster, your muscles tighten, you may start shaking or trembling, and your pupils dilate. This can happen so quickly and subtly at times that you might not even notice.

These aren't random reactions; they're specifically designed to keep you safe by preparing you to kick ass, freeze up, or sprint away. If you can't do any of these things, perhaps because you're stuck at home with a toddler and a newborn, all of that tension and energy may get diverted into a parental explosion instead.



At the same time, your sympathetic nervous system also shuts down the “unnecessary” systems in your body so it can divert the energy to where it’s most needed. Unfortunately, those allegedly unnecessary systems include your prefrontal cortex, the adulting part of your brain. This totally made sense when our brains were still developing; if a woolly mammoth was coming at you, you didn’t need to stop and invent the wheel. You needed to run, and you didn’t need your PFC to help you do that.

Many folks assume we only go all 4F (Fight, Flight, Freeze, or Freak Out) when there’s a bear chasing us or a car driving straight at us, but the truth is that our nervous system can react quickly to almost anything—from the sight of our kid climbing too high at the playground to a jump rope on the sidewalk that looks like a snake but is really just a rope. As any parent who has grabbed a tiny hand away from a hot stove can tell you, it can all happen in a matter of seconds.

There’s just one problem with all of this evolutionary awesomeness. Our survival system evolved in response to physical threats such as the aforementioned woolly mammoth, which is why our reaction is almost entirely physical. But times have changed and most of the threats we now face are psychological, such as rude colleagues, intrusive in-laws, and late-night panic attacks about the concerning email from our child’s teacher. Sadly, our nerves and brains and everything in between haven’t quite figured that out, which is why we still have physical reactions to situations that pose no physical threat at all. This automatic reaction can literally save our lives, but it can also cause us to lose our shit unnecessarily.

The brains of parents may be even more finely tuned to potential

dangers than those of folks who don't have kids. Evolutionarily speaking, it makes sense. The cave moms and dads who tended toward the paranoid and vigilant may have been more likely to detect and respond to threats to their offspring, making them more likely to survive and procreate, thus passing along the nervous wiring that kept them alive in the first place. The super-chill cave parents may have been so busy carving happy faces into the wall that they didn't notice their cave child wander away right into the waiting jaws of a saber-toothed tiger, thus killing off the chill gene along with any hope we may have once had at not losing it with our kids.

As I've mentioned before, I want you to think of your nervous system as a bunch of buttons all over your body. I'm not talking about the buttons that keep popping off your kid's sweater; I'm talking about your big red ones, just aching to be pushed. (This, of course, is in no way physiologically accurate, but for the purposes of this book, it works.) When we're calm, fed, well rested, appropriately caffeinated, etc., our buttons are small, dim, less sensitive, and generally less vulnerable to being pushed. That's not to say they are totally pushproof; anyone who has been in a car accident or been awakened in the middle of the night by the screeching of a smoke alarm or a small child knows that our nervous system can go from zero to sixty in the course of a few seconds. But for most of us, that's not how it happens most of the time.

More commonly, we're exposed to smaller triggers over time, and our buttons slowly get bigger, brighter, more sensitive,

Think of your nervous system as a bunch of buttons all over your body.

and easier for our kids to push. Our baseline functioning gets elevated, bringing us closer in general to losing it. The more triggered we are, the more our limbic system amps up, ready to send us into reactive mode, until we get to the point where it just takes one thrown toy or smart-ass comment to send us over the edge. The limbic system takes control, the prefrontal cortex goes off-line, and shit is lost.

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*When we're calm, fed, well rested, appropriately caffeinated, etc., our buttons are small, dim, less sensitive, and generally less vulnerable to being pushed.*

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Fortunately for the sanity of everyone involved, the opposite is also true. Each time we get enough sleep, move our bodies, stretch, breathe, spend time with friends, do a crossword puzzle, read a book, and take care of ourselves in basic ways, we're calming those buttons down. We're activating our parasympathetic nervous system (the relaxation and connection part of our nervous system), strengthening our prefrontal cortexes, and lowering our overall baseline, bringing us closer to a place of chill. Basically, we're creating more space between our current state and freaking out. But if we don't take care of ourselves properly, our buttons never really power down. And for those of us dealing with constant chaos or chronic stressors, it can be harder (but not impossible) to get our system to cool off in a consistent way.

## Wrapping It Up

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**W**e've talked about a lot in this chapter, so here's a quick recap. We all lose it with our kids, and most of our parenting meltdowns share a few common features. There are lots of **B**ig **F**eelings involved, and our behavior is **A**utomatic, **R**eactive, and **T**oxic. Not losing our shit doesn't mean our hearts and homes are filled with rainbows and baby unicorns, it just means we find skillful ways to manage the conflicts and express the unpleasant emotions that arise. And arise they will, because parenting is hard, and it's even harder when you're doing it without the right information, resources, rest, and support. The challenges of parenting and life can be incredibly triggering, making our buttons (aka our nervous system) bigger, brighter, and way easier for our kids to push. We all get triggered; it's not a personal weakness or moral failing. It's just part of what it means to be human. I've been so triggered at times that my sweet girls needed only to glance in my general direction in order to push my buttons, and next thing I knew, I was snapping at them to stop looking at me. In case it's not clear to you, dear reader, this was not a pro parenting move.

Fortunately, the rest of this book is all about pro parenting moves. It will help you get a handle on what triggers you, how to manage those triggers whenever possible, and how to take care of yourself when you can't. We're also going to explore what to do when you've done everything you can and you're still on the edge, or you've already fallen off that cliff and you have no idea how to peel yourself off the ground and get it together.

But first, we're going to talk about me.