



Momfulness

I want to be straight with you. Momfulness is not about perfection. It is also not about motherhood as bliss. Nothing is bliss all the time. I love being a mom, and at the same time, motherhood can be incredibly grueling and frustrating, often pushing me to my limits.

Momfulness is also not about adding another thing to your to-do lists. So if you think you're too busy to engage in a spiritual practice, think again. You can do this right where you are. If you're steeped in dirty diapers, if you're dealing with acting-out teenagers, if you're trying to balance work and home and it feels like you have time for neither, this is the practice for you.

You can't practice Momfulness by sitting on a meditation cushion all day (not that there's much danger of that happening!). Momfulness is practiced in the trenches—while carpooling and cooking, working and waiting, crying and celebrating. Sometimes it will mean carving out moments of solitude and stillness so that you can listen to your heart and your deepest longings, but most of the time it will mean learning how to meditate in motion in the midst of your family life.

A Beginning Definition

So what is Momfulness? Let me offer a beginning definition, and then we'll briefly look at some of the key concepts:

Momfulness is the spiritual practice of cultivating a mindful, compassionate, mothering presence.

Momfulness Is Mindful

Simply put, mindfulness is being aware of whatever is happening in the present moment without making any judgment. We observe

what is happening here, now, including in our own body and mind. Are we feeling boredom? Anger? Fear? Delight? Are we telling ourselves how things should or should not be? Just notice it all. When we are mindful, we become aware and accepting of whatever is there.

What's not so simple is the actual practice of mindfulness. I don't know about you, but I probably spend 98.9 percent of my life not having a clue about what is really happening in this present moment. As moms, we have gazillions of thoughts: we worry, we feel stress, we become attached to life going a certain way. We race from one job to another without being in touch with our bodies or with what we need. Many days we barely make eye contact with our family. We tend to live mindlessly, caught up in the world of our thoughts, judgments, and obligations. We think that this is reality, and we end up missing so much.

See if you can spend a day, or even a few minutes, eavesdropping on your mind. My guess is that you'll discover a continual tape recording going on in your head. You might be thinking about something that happened yesterday, or you might be worrying about something that could happen tomorrow. You might be telling yourself that you're not good enough, smart

enough, or thin enough, or that your child is spoiled. Just relax and be curious about it all.

In this book we'll be doing a number of practices that can help us be more mindful in our daily lives. These, however, are just a beginning. There are many other valuable resources that can help you develop a mindfulness practice, and I encourage you to explore some for yourself.

Momfulness Is Compassionate

The English word *compassion* comes from the Latin, meaning “to suffer with.” It is defined as a deep awareness of the suffering of another, together with the wish to relieve it. In Hebrew, the word for compassion is *raham*, which comes from the word *rehem*, meaning “womb.” To be compassionate is to feel for another with your womb, to hold the person with love, as you might hold a child in your womb.

In practicing Momfulness, we cultivate compassion, not only for others but also for ourselves. We increase our ability to see our own suffering—how tired we are, how hard we are working, how much we don't know. We develop the capacity to forgive ourselves, to love ourselves, and to give ourselves some

of what we need. Our hearts open, and we make friends with even the most difficult experiences of our lives.

As we become more tolerant and compassionate with ourselves, we are able to extend that compassion toward our children. We recognize how they suffer, and we are able to better understand what underlies some of their difficult behavior. This awareness increases the chance that we will respond in a helpful, rather than reactive, way.

Our compassion extends beyond our family; we feel in our wombs the suffering of so many in our community and in our world. Rather than let this overwhelm us, we continue to practice, strengthening our capacity to hold suffering instead of avoiding it or numbing ourselves to it. As our hearts open, we awaken into helpful and compassionate action.

Momfulness Is Mothering

Becoming a mother changes us forever. Our psychological, spiritual, physical, and emotional boundaries all undergo a profound shift. As Elizabeth Stone, now a professor at Fordham University, once said, “Making the decision to have a child is momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking

around outside your body.” It is no longer only about us. The “I” has become a “we,” and nothing is ever the same.

Mothering (in case you don’t know!) is not just about apple pie and sweetness. The archetype of Mother is a complex one. Our mothering can be nurturing, protective, and creative—or fierce or destructive, if necessary. In practicing Momfulness, we pay attention to how our mothering might need to shift with various circumstances. We learn how to step into an empowering mothering stance and develop a wide range to our mothering. As poet Zelma Brown articulates:

I have hands big enough
to save the world,
and small enough
to rock a child to sleep.

In practicing Momfulness, we mother not only our children but also ourselves. When I work with clients (who are mostly moms) in therapy, often the work is in helping them find a mothering and nurturing parent within themselves. Too often their inner voice is a harsh and critical one. As they develop a positive mothering presence within themselves, they are better able to

soothe themselves when they are feeling stressed or anxious. Then they are able to mother their own kids in a much more compassionate way.

Momfulness Is About Presence

When I ask moms in seminars, “What is it you long for?” the number one answer I hear is, “More time!” So I pretend to wave a magic wand that gives us all twelve more hours in each day. After the glee and downright giddiness of imagining twelve more hours to nap or exercise or empty the “In” basket or the laundry basket, reality begins to hit the women. They realize that by tomorrow, their calendars would start filling up again, and in about a week or so they’d be complaining that they still don’t have enough time. Amazing how quickly those extra hours would disappear!

So, if it’s not more time that is the magical solution, what is it? I suggest that much of the problem at the root of our longing lies in the fact that we don’t feel really present in the time that we do have. In the limited twenty-four hours of this day, are we showing up? Are we really here? Now? Are we home, in the deepest meaning of that word?

Our ability to be present has a profound effect, not only on the quality of our own lives but on our families' lives as well. As mothers, our interactions with our children quite literally shape the structure and the functions of their brains. This fact alone suggests that the practice of Momfulness, in which we work on connecting with ourselves and with our children in a fully present way, has important long-term implications.

Momfulness Involves Cultivating

Cultivate is a gardening term; it is from the Latin word meaning “to till.” Dictionary definitions include “to improve and prepare,” “to loosen or dig soil around,” “to grow or tend,” “to promote the growth of,” “to nurture or foster,” “to seek the acquaintance of,” or “make friends with.” All these definitions are apropos to Momfulness: we cultivate a mindful, compassionate, mothering presence. We loosen up the ground within us, we turn it over, we tend it, we promote growth, and we get to know ourselves in a friendly way.

Cultivating, like gardening, is not a linear process, where we start at Point A and move in a straight line to Outcome B (sorry!). Cultivating works with all the earthy elements of life: rainy seasons, droughts, pests, sunshine, weeds, the good,

the bad, and the ugly. No matter what happens, it's grist for the mill; we can use it all to our benefit. We simply begin noticing, listening, and observing what's happening inside us and around us, and develop a mind-set that says, "Oh, isn't that interesting!" instead of making judgments about it all.

As we cultivate mindfulness and compassion, we strengthen our ability to understand what we need, what our child needs, what a moment needs. We also begin to realize that we can't pull on growing things to make them come up any sooner. Patience is a key to cultivating things in a healthy way. As you probably already know, patience is one of those qualities of parenting that we will be invited to experience, like it or not, each and every day!

So here we are—cultivating our own little plot of mindfulness, of compassion, of a mothering presence, guided and supported by grace. We practice Momfulness for our children, being mother to them in such a way that they might thrive. We practice Momfulness for ourselves, being a mother to ourselves in such a way that we might thrive. And we practice Momfulness for our world, mobilizing the powerful, fierce, wise, and nurturing mothering presence in such a way that all children—all beings—might thrive.

Why Momfulness Matters

My three sons—all now young adults—were science majors in college. Ben studied neuroscience, Dave received his degree in microbiology, and Matt is completing his studies in biopsychology. I was an English major, and science was never my area of expertise. But I have learned so much from my sons, and now I often find myself interested in scientific findings that shed light on everyday experience. I'd like to share a couple of these with you because I think they underscore the importance of a practice like Momfulness in this day and age.

Stress Is Contagious

Entrainment is the term coined by a Dutch physicist in 1666 who was working on pendulum clocks. He noticed that the pendulums of two clocks, which had been swinging at different rates, began swinging at the same rate if placed in close proximity to each other.

This principle of entrainment, whereby one object affects another so that they begin to move “in sync,” is also found in

other areas of life. If two heart cells are placed near each other, they will entrain to a common beat. When women live together in close quarters, they discover that their menstrual cycles tend to coincide. When we sit by the ocean, we feel ourselves literally slowing down because we are entraining to the in-and-out, in-and-out, rhythmic movement of the waves.

Now think about times when you lovingly hold your child or partner. Are you aware that your breathing becomes synchronized? You may not know it, but even your heart rates and brain waves are entraining to each other's. Through your close physical connection, you are having a profound effect on one another, literally shaping who the other is becoming.

So far, so good. But if we ask ourselves, *What rhythms are we being entrained to by our modern-day world?* we begin to understand why we are exhausted so much of the time. Technology has transformed our day-to-day lives, filling them with constant noise and speed and way too much information. We live under the influence of powerful, though invisible, rhythms that can, if we're not conscious about them, easily dictate how we live our lives. The stress around us can be, quite literally, contagious.

A curious event at the San Francisco Zoo several years ago reminded me of how easy it is to become entrained to a frenetic rhythm. Six small, sweet, and docile penguins were transferred from Ohio to join forty-six large, fairly lazy, and sometimes ornery penguins at the zoo in San Francisco. As soon as the six were released onto Penguin Island, something changed.

Within two hours, the six Ohio birds somehow convinced the forty-six old-timers not only to join them in the pool but to begin a great migration—to nowhere. Even though the San Francisco birds had never migrated anywhere, the new arrivals persuaded them, within the course of a couple of hours, that this was the way to go.

So for almost three months the fifty-two penguins swam 'round and 'round and 'round, making visitors dizzy. They only came out to sleep for a few hours, then back they went into the pool. Nobody knew when this was all going to stop. Prior to the arrival of the six newcomers, the forty-six penguins could not be coaxed from their homes. "Before, it took a grenade to get them out," said Jane Tollini, their puzzled keeper. As they kept swimming 'round and 'round in circles, Jane joked, "I keep thinking they must be going, 'Didn't we just see that palm tree? Haven't we been here before?'"

The frenzy didn't even stop when the pool was emptied. The penguins simply jumped in and bumped into one another on the dry bottom. Feeding time was, in the keeper's words, hell. "I am kind of like a drive-through restaurant now. They see me, see the fish, run past me, grab the fish, and keep going."

It's easy to laugh at the penguins and the seeming insanity of their pool migration. Yet we can also recognize ourselves and our own tendency to swim swim swim swim swim. How often do we stop and ask ourselves where we are going and why we all seem in such a rush to get there? Are we aware of how we are being entrained by the pace of life around us?

Many moms know they're doing too much, but they don't know how to get out of the pool! They say they'd like to get on another track, but they don't know how. It seems as if everybody else is in this race to somewhere, and it's so easy to get caught up in it. Even our kids are being entrained to the stressful and endless rhythm, and we're beginning to see the cost.

Through practicing Momfulness, we have a chance to help ourselves and our families become just a little bit saner. We experiment with shifting the rhythm of our lives. We practice becoming more mindful of what we are doing and what is driving us. We discover that awareness is often all we need to free

ourselves to make other choices. Granted, we don't have as many choices in some areas as we do in others, but my guess is that there are lots of things that we could shift in our families' lives that would slow us down to a healthier and less stressful pace.

As just one example, we might notice a lot of "shoulds" inside our minds that keep us moving in frenetic activity: *I should be a perfect mom. My kids should be involved in lots of extra-curricular activities. Birthday parties should be big extravaganzas like everyone else's.* The moment we become curious about these internal messages and observe the power they have over us, they become a little less powerful. And as we begin to experience compassion for ourselves and for others as we race around the pool, perhaps we begin to see another way.

The good news from the story is that it took only six penguins to influence the behavior of the forty-six. Imagine if more and more mothers began to ask, "Is this working for me? Is it working for my children? What societal changes could I help support so that this frenetic pace isn't the norm?" As more and more of us shift into a healthier pace, it is not only our own families who will benefit; it is also society at large.

Relationships Shape Us

Less than five miles away from the penguins at the San Francisco Zoo are three psychiatrists at the UCSF Medical Center: Thomas Lewis, M.D., Fari Amini, M.D., and Richard Lannon, M.D. They have written a book titled *A General Theory of Love*, which draws on the latest research showing that from the time we are born, we are deeply affected by the people close to us. The authors show how our brains link us with the people we love; as a consequence, who we are and who we will become depends, in large measure, on who we love. In a process of entrainment, our brains connect with our loved ones in a rhythm that shapes and changes the very structure and function of our brains. We also sense each other's emotional state and attune ourselves to that.

Most of our communication with others—over 90 percent—is nonverbal. Do we make eye contact with our families? What tone of voice do we use? Is the timing and intensity of our response in sync with our children's? These nonverbal ways of communication are how we let our children know that we see them, that we understand them, and that we love them. The strength of the attachment we form with our children and the healthy creation of their sense of self depends primarily on this

communication system that operates underneath the level of our words. Through the way we attune to our children, we shape their lives and, in turn, they shape ours.

In this modern-day world of machines and technology, the subtle nonverbal signals of human beings are often discounted or overlooked. But because the research is so clear on the importance of our children feeling that we really understand what they're communicating and who they are, even the engineers are getting into the act. One dad in Spain was having a very hard time understanding his baby's constant crying, so he did what seemed logical to him. He invented a machine: a baby cry analyzer.

Previously, I had heard about a machine that helped dog owners interpret their pooches' barks, but a *baby cry analyzer* left my mouth hanging open in disbelief. The machine "listens" to a baby's cry for twenty seconds, taking into account the differences in pitch, the frequency of crying spells, and the changes in volume. Then, voilà! A light appears under one of five little faces, indicating whether the baby is experiencing hunger, boredom, discomfort, sleepiness, or stress. When used in conjunction with the accompanying symptoms chart, it claims a success rate of 98 percent. The parent then knows how to respond.

Wow!

I'm really supportive of parents learning to read their children's emotional signals so that they can experience attunement, but I'm curious: What if the buyers of these machines spent those twenty-second interludes learning, instead, to analyze or understand what's happening inside them and their child? What if they discovered that they could trust themselves rather than a machine to listen, learn, make mistakes, and respond to their child in an attuned manner?

It is important to remember that we will never respond perfectly (with or without a machine!) every time our children need us. Often it is hard to make sense of a baby's signals, or we are just too tired to be able to listen. Children are amazingly resilient; we can be "good enough" parents, and when a disconnection or a lack of attunement occurs, we can work to repair it as quickly as possible.

The information about how a child's sense of self is shaped and how a child's brain gets wired, particularly in the early years, is vital in helping us make choices about how we care for our children. (It also underscores why it is crucial for our society to ensure that all parents who work have access to quality caregivers who can provide adequate mirroring to infants and children.)

As we understand such processes as entrainment and attunement, we begin to realize what a positive impact a mother who is mindful, compassionate, and fully present can have on her child's development. If we are constantly stressed, we will find it hard enough to soothe ourselves, let alone our little ones. If we lack flexibility and are rigid in our own predetermined thoughts or ideas about what our child needs, it will be easy to miss what our child is really communicating.

Throughout this book, we will practice entraining to a healthier rhythm. We will increase our ability to attune both to ourselves and to what we need, as well as attend even more deeply to what our children need. Let's turn now to some guidelines for the practice of Momfulness.