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Letting It Settle

A Gentle Reminder

There's a lot going on in the world today, and if you've been feeling a heightened sense of emotion lately, I want you to know that you're not alone. The demands on adults today personally and professionally can be overwhelming, because we exist in a time when a constant stream of information tells us what is wrong, warns of dangers and threats, and puts us all in a state of confusion and worry. You're expected to be so much for so many, and often it can feel like no matter how hard you try, it's never enough. All of this contributes to a feeling of unease, and the level of anxiety that exists daily can be overwhelming. Given everything going on around you, you may have no concept of calm. The thought of stillness may seem foreign, and while you know that something needs to shift, you don't know how to move yourself toward a life of ease.

Most of us share a feeling of unrest, unease, and uncertainty about how to handle our emotions. It's a feeling that we're too much, too little, too angry, or too scared; that we're living in the extremes and never knowing who we are supposed to be. Beneath that unsettled feeling is a desire for peace, for stillness, for calm.

Finding a space of calm is more necessary than ever. Between information overload brought on by social media and 24-hour news sources, increased demands for productivity, a breakdown of the boundaries between personal and professional life, and rising levels of stress and anxiety, it's essential to carve out moments of calm to preserve our mental and emotional health. I know it may not seem possible right now, but my hope is that by exploring the tools and techniques presented in this book, you can begin to find a way to connect back to yourself, become aware of what's going on internally, and gain the strength to be gentle with yourself through it all. None of this is easy, and some of the tools and techniques I share may not work for you. Finding calm is a process of trial and error and requires a great deal of patience. You're asking yourself to rewrite decades of learned behavior and beliefs, so if you find yourself frustrated, that's OK. But your peace is worth fighting for, and my hope is that together we can get you one step closer toward the peaceful existence you deserve.

Understanding the Power of Letting It Settle

A signature phrase that I often use while guiding meditations and in my coaching sessions is “let it settle.” I'm often asked to explain the exact meaning of the phrase. It's an invitation

for you to allow your mind to find a place of rest, your body to relax, and your emotions to become less charged. The meaning of “let it settle” is quite simple, but where the phrase comes from is a much more interesting story. It doesn’t come from any tenets of mindfulness or training that I received; rather, it comes from my time spent in a preschool classroom.

Before gaining my certifications as a professional coach and a mindfulness instructor, I spent more than a decade working with children. I often tell clients that the majority of what I know and what I pass on to them comes from my time in a preschool classroom. The work that we do as adults to find emotional regulation is similar to working with children, who are bundles of emotion trying to navigate through life.

It was in a preschool classroom where I learned the power of letting it settle from a three-year-old named Jack. I met Jack and his family on the first day of his new preschool separation program. This was the first time that Jack was going to be away from his family for an extended period of time, so it was a big deal for him. He walked in holding his mom’s hand, and his big blue eyes lit up as he saw the room filled with color and toys and kids. I greeted them and introduced myself, pointing out all the areas Jack could explore. While still holding on to his mom’s hand, he went over to the brightly colored alphabet rug and began to play. He reached for a car and started to zoom it along the rug, making sure to yell “beep beep” when he passed anyone and to make crashing noises as he bumped his toy into the car of another child. The two boys laughed as they began to play together, slowly venturing away from the adults but glancing back every few moments to make sure that the mothers were still there. After a few minutes, when Jack seemed fully engaged and

comfortable, his mom decided to say good-bye and leave the room. If you're a parent who has gone through the initial separation process, you know that it's not always easy. With a swift kiss and promise that she'd be right outside, Jack's mom made her way to the door.

I could see a rush of emotions come over Jack as he watched his mom walk toward the door. I watched as the toy car dropped from his hands and the physical manifestation of fear became apparent as his body became tense, his face started to flush, and a flood of tears came. For Jack, his whole world had just changed. In the absence of his mother's comforting and safe presence, no toy in the world could distract him from his fear. In this unfamiliar place of fear, the only thing he could do was let the tears fall and rush toward the door to return to his place of safety.

Often in those moments an adult's instinct is to distract a child, to create a spectacle that would be so enticing that they would forget about their fear and join in on the fun. Occasionally that works, but it's not what Jack needed that day. In fact, the sensory overload of our attempted distraction was causing more stress for him and leading him further into panic. With each attempt we made to distract him, Jack grew more focused on his fear, and his sole intention was to return to that space of safety in his mother's arms.

I sat with Jack for several minutes trying to be as present as possible and to calm and soothe him. I hoped that he would begin to find a way to settle down, but it was clear that he just wasn't ready that day and was going to need a more gradual separation process. I went into the hallway and discussed the situation with his mom and had her come back into the classroom. The moment she walked through the door, Jack rushed to her side and clung on even tighter than

before. He sank into her, and in his return to safety his temperature dropped, his breath became less shallow, the tears stopped, and eventually he was able to find his way back to the rug, grabbing the race car and zooming along.

After class Jack's mom and I discussed how to best move forward. Together we came up with a plan for me to work with both of them and discover ways to help Jack find safety and security in the space. Our goal was to eventually, when the time was right, work toward a full separation during the class.

Over the next few weeks, we tried a lot of different strategies with varying degrees of success. What finally helped Jack find comfort and safety in the classroom was a process that involved some of the mindfulness techniques I had practiced on my own in times of stress.

Learning to Settle

Teaching preschool wasn't what I had planned to do when I moved to New York. I graduated from college with a degree in music and relocated to the city to pursue a career on Broadway. Shortly after arriving there, I was fortunate enough to be cast in several musical productions around the world; one included singing with an orchestra touring China. It was an amazing opportunity to explore a foreign country and perform each night in front of large crowds with a full orchestra behind me. In fact, it had been what I had dreamed of since I performed in my first musical in sixth grade. But while it was the realization of a dream, it was also the start of a series of severe anxiety attacks.

Many nights on that tour I sat in my dressing room unable to breathe and on the verge of tears. I forced myself to go on stage to perform, then I went back to my hotel and experienced the anxiety all through the night. I kept this anxiety inside and

didn't tell anyone, but fear of it happening again finally forced me to decide to step away from performing and give up that part of my life. By doing so, I lost something I cared deeply about. I recognized that I had to find ways to deal with my anxiety.

Eventually I found a meditation class, where I learned the power of presence and grounding in times of stress and anxiety. While sitting in a yoga studio in Queens, New York, I found the technique that allowed me to calm myself during anxious moments. On one particularly anxious evening, Yuval, my meditation teacher, guided us through an open-eyed meditation that brought attention to our senses and began to teach a grounding technique called the 5-4-3-2-1 Calming Technique for Anxiety. We began by bringing our attention first to five things that we could see in that moment and then shifting our awareness to four things that we could touch. Next we explored three things that we could hear and then two things we could smell. Finally, Yuval invited us to find one thing that we could taste. This exploration of the senses brought me back into the present. For the first time in months, my breath no longer felt labored, and a sense of calm washed over me. I could let my mind stop running and settle into that moment, feeling a safety I hadn't felt in a long time.

That simple exercise became a consistent practice of mine in times of stress and was the first tool in my "Calm Kit." It also happened to be the exact tool that Jack needed to begin to conquer his fears and gain independence in the classroom.

Grounding in the Present Moment ———

At work, I'd start each day by sitting with Jack as he said good-bye to his mom. Although over time he had gained a lot of trust and felt comfortable in the classroom, the initial

shock of watching her leave always caused Jack stress. I'd give him the space to feel into those big emotions without trying to make them go away, distract him from them, or imply they were wrong in any way. I was simply there to be with him. Then I would begin to acknowledge what he was going through. I would give his emotions a name and let him know that it was OK to feel them. I'd tell him that it's OK to feel scared, it's OK to feel sad, and it makes sense that those feelings are there. When I noticed his emotions starting to settle, we would begin to find ways to return the present moment and explore all of his senses.

Using the 5-4-3-2-1 Calming Technique for Anxiety, I'd have him begin to look around the room and find five things of interest that he could see—a blue rug, 1; a red firetruck outside the window, 2; the white clock on the wall, 3; Mr. Michael's brown hair, 4; and Jack's red race car shirt, 5. Next, we'd explore four things that he could touch, noting how each one felt: the soft feeling of shaggy purple carpet, 1; the smooth feeling of the art table, 2; the bumpy feeling of the race car wheels, 3; and the slimy feeling of the Play-Doh in his hands, 4. Searching for three sounds Jack could hear in the room, we would listen carefully and hear the clock ticking on the wall, 1; the garbage truck picking up the trash outside on the street, 2; and the Baby Shark song playing on repeat from the stereo, 3. With a big breath in through his nose, we'd search for two things that Jack could smell: the yummy smell of cupcakes on the counter, 1; and yes, most days if he was feeling silly, Mr. Michael's stinky feet, 2. Finally we'd get to walk over to the table and pick between two different snacks he had brought that day and decide which one thing he wanted to taste. On most days it was his favorite, Goldfish, 1.

With that final connection to his senses, Jack would start to step away from the fear and come back to the present. In that moment of present awareness, he was able to recognize the safety and comfort of the space he was in, and everything would start to relax. His body would soften, the tears would stop, his mind would stop racing, and he'd simply let it all settle. From there he would be able to experience everything that was around him and find the excitement of what was right there the whole time.

Moving Beyond Preschool

I always held on to the image of watching Jack settle into the moment and seeing that fear melt away. Years later when I started coaching, a corporate coaching client came into her first session and broke down. She had been holding on so tightly, pushing through the fear and anxiety to succeed, and although her life appeared perfect from the outside, internally she was struggling with something she couldn't understand. When given the opportunity to put words to what she was feeling, the floodgates opened, and she started to cry. In that moment, I saw her entering a state of fear and watched as her body and breath reacted to that fear. It was so similar to Jack watching his mother leave the room that first day, but this time the client was an adult who seemed to have it all. I sat with her and let her feel into her emotions for a moment, not trying to distract her or put any pressure on her to move away from her pain. I acknowledged her feelings, giving her permission to simply let herself be with them, and validated what she was going through. The pressure of the responsibilities placed on her would bring anyone to their knees, and this feeling was completely valid. As

the tears stopped and the intensity of her anxiety and fear lessened, I reached back into my Calm Kit and had her move through the 5-4-3-2-1 Calming Technique for Anxiety. The method wasn't as playful as in the preschool classroom, but as we moved through the practice, it was just as effective. As she explored the final sensation of taste, I watched as she sat back in her chair, sighed deeply, and let it all settle. Over the next year we worked through a variety of mindfulness-based stress reduction techniques and saw both her personal and her professional life transform. Whenever we'd meet, we'd start our sessions in the same way, taking a deep breath in, breathing out, and letting it all settle.

Experiences like these two are why the phrase “let it settle” became my shorthand way to let people know it's OK to come back to yourself and settle into the moment. It's my small way of helping you as you work toward finding calm.

The Process of Letting It Settle

We'll cover many tools in this book as you start on the process of finding calm: mindfulness-based stress reduction practices, guided meditations, visualizations, somatic release exercises, and others. But here I want you to begin with the simplicity of finding your way back to the present moment and letting it settle with these four steps.

Step 1: Create a Space of Presence for Yourself

In those times of stress and anxiety, whatever they may be for you, it's important to remember to be gentle with yourself, just as you would with Jack. You would never judge him for

having an intense reaction to a stressful situation, so why are you judging yourself for having an intense reaction to the stressful situation you're going through? That judgment isn't helpful, and it isn't necessary.

Step 2: Acknowledge and Validate the Emotional Experience

“Why does it—your reaction to a stressful situation; a thought, feeling, or action—make perfect sense?” You’ll hear that question from me a lot in this book. When you are feeling stressed or overwhelmed, it’s time to explore. Given everything that is happening around you and everything you’ve experienced in your life, think about why it makes perfect sense to be feeling the way you are. When you can begin to validate an emotional experience, you lessen the weight that judgment places on you and open yourself up to find your way through the situation.

Step 3: Ground Yourself in the Present Moment

Present moment awareness is about bringing your attention back to the immediate world around you and the experience you’re having in each moment. In moments of chaos, our minds can race to the past or to the future, and emotional triggers can shift our bodies into overdrive. Grounding yourself in the present moment allows you to see things as they are and make conscious decisions about what is best for you. It also opens your eyes to the beauty that exists around you. Use the 5-4-3-2-1 Calming Technique for Anxiety as a starting point for this grounding.

Step 4: Letting It Settle

Magic happens when the body and mind begin to release fear and come back to the here and now. There's a physical release of the muscles, a letting go of tension and tightness, a settling of the mind as intense and overly protective thoughts begin to fade away, and a slowing of the breath as the heart returns to a slower pace, no longer pumping frantically to ensure survival. Let a sense of calm wash over you as you let everything settle.

Calm Kit Tool #1: 5-4-3-2-1 Calming Technique for Anxiety

The 5-4-3-2-1 Calming Technique is a simple mindfulness exercise designed to help manage anxiety and ground yourself in the present moment. Here's how it works:

1. **Identify five things you can see.** Take a moment to look around and consciously identify five things you can see in your immediate environment. These can be objects, colors, or any visual stimuli. By focusing on your surroundings, you shift your attention away from anxious thoughts and into the present moment.
2. **Acknowledge four things you can touch.** Pay attention to the sensation of touch and identify four things you can physically touch or feel. This could include the texture of your clothing, the surface of a table, or the feeling of the floor beneath your feet. Engaging your sense of touch helps to anchor you in the present and provides a sense of grounding.
3. **Notice three things you can hear.** Tune in to your auditory surroundings and identify three things you can

hear. This might be the sound of traffic outside, birds chirping, or the hum of appliances. Listening to the sounds around you can help move your focus away from anxious thoughts and into the present moment.

4. **Recognize two things you can smell.** Take a moment to notice any scents or smells in your environment and identify two of them. This could be the aroma of food cooking, the scent of flowers, or even the smell of your own body wash. Focusing on your sense of smell can further ground you in the present moment and promote relaxation.
5. **Acknowledge one thing you can taste.** Finally, become aware of your sense of taste and identify one thing you can taste. This might involve taking a sip of water, chewing a piece of gum, or simply noticing the lingering taste of your last meal. Bringing attention to your sense of taste can help to anchor you further in the present moment and provide a sense of calm.

The 5-4-3-2-1 Calming Technique is a helpful tool for managing anxiety by redirecting your focus away from anxious thoughts and into your immediate sensory experience. You can practice it virtually anywhere and anytime you feel the need to ground yourself and alleviate feelings of anxiety or being overwhelmed.