

## PRAISE FOR *LOVE YOUR KIDS WITHOUT LOSING YOURSELF*

“If you’re feeling easily triggered, guilty, and overwhelmed by parenting, you’re not alone—and there’s nothing wrong with you. In *Love Your Kids Without Losing Yourself*, Dr. Morgan Cutlip explains why so many of us feel this way and offers a practical five-step method to reduce mom burn-out. There’s no laundry list of self-care strategies here; instead, you will leave this book feeling equipped and empowered to take care of yourself and manage the day-to-day of motherhood.”

—DR. BECKY KENNEDY, CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST, FOUNDER AND CEO OF GOOD INSIDE, AND #1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

“Dr. Morgan unpacks a topic every mom needs to hear about (including me)! Motherhood can be so challenging—add in everything else going on in our lives, and we can feel like we’re losing. But Dr. Morgan does an incredible job encouraging us moms with truth and practical ways to love our kids and ourselves more. I’m so thankful moms everywhere will hear this message!”

—RACHEL CRUZE, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR AND PERSONAL FINANCE EXPERT

“A must read for busy moms who have been on the back burner for way too long. Dr. Morgan gives moms a practical plan to feel whole in motherhood. *Love Your Kids Without Losing Yourself* offers solutions to the most relevant issues moms face but offers these tools in a relatable and digestible way. If you feel overwhelmed or lost in motherhood, you need this book.”

—DR. SHEFALI TSABARY, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR AND CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST

“Get this book into the hands of every mom, stat! Dr. Morgan expertly recognizes the identity struggle modern moms suffer with and provides encouragement and practical tools to help. You will find yourself nodding along with, underlining in, highlighting in, and loaning this book to each of your fellow mom friends.”

—MANDY ARIOTO, PRESIDENT AND CEO OF MOPS INTERNATIONAL

“Want to rid yourself of mom-guilt for good? Dr. Morgan Cutlip shows you how. You’ll laugh out loud as you read *Love Your Kids Without Losing Yourself*. You’ll also discover a practical and proven plan for becoming the mom you want to be. We’re not exaggerating when we say that reading this book just may be the most important thing you do all year for your kids, as well as for yourself.”

—DRS. LES AND LESLIE PARROTT, #1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING  
AUTHORS OF *SAVING YOUR MARRIAGE BEFORE IT STARTS*

“I will admit, I usually expect books like this to just add to the overwhelm and pile more on a mom’s plate that is already incredibly full. But *Love Your Kids Without Losing Yourself* brings an entirely new perspective to the mom-burnout conversation. Dr. Morgan reminds moms that they require the same care that they provide to all their other relationships and offers five important steps to help moms care for themselves in deep and meaningful ways without piling more on. Every mom needs this book.”

—ASHLEY LEMIEUX, MENTAL WELLNESS AND GRIEF  
EXPERT AND BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *I AM HERE*

“As a social researcher who is a frazzled mom and who talks to a lot of frazzled moms, I can tell you that this book is the one we’ve all been waiting for! Dr. Morgan shares the eye-opening truth that thriving in motherhood is not about somehow finding the perfect balance. It’s about how to make slight changes in our day-to-day lives that make a real difference in how we love ourselves and our kids well. This is going to give every mom less stress and more peace.”

—SHAUNTI FELDHAWN, BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
OF *FOR WOMEN ONLY* AND *FIND REST*

**love**  
**your kids**  
*without*  
**losing**  
**yourself**



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**5 STEPS TO BANISH GUILT AND BEAT BURNOUT  
WHEN YOU ALREADY HAVE TOO MUCH TO DO**

**DR. MORGAN CUTLIP**



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*Love Your Kids Without Losing Yourself*

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Names and identifying characteristics of some individuals have been changed to preserve their privacy.

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*To Effie and Roy. My life is infinitely better  
because I get to be your mom.*



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## BALANCE IS BALONEY

**T**his book is for you if:

- You spin through your day at warp speed but never feel like you're enough or that you get enough done.
- You don't recognize yourself anymore and feel just generally uninspired.
- You don't feel like a whole person in your family. It's almost like the boundaries between you and your family have blurred and you're unsure where they end and you begin.
- You're doing all the things for your family and kids but you're still haunted by guilt.
- You're weary and exhausted and you're sick of the typical "take a walk" advice.
- Whenever you have a moment to yourself, you have no idea how to spend it in a way that actually offers true rest and reprieve from your busy pace.
- You're desperate for a new perspective on "self-care" for moms. You know the problem but you've yet to find a solution that actually makes a meaningful difference.
- You're hesitant to make changes and upset the balance in

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your family but you know that you can't keep going on as you are now.

I just want to acknowledge for a moment something I believe is almost a universal desire of moms and that is that we want to be good moms, but we also want to *feel good in motherhood*.

My guess is that you've got the good mom part down (more on that to come) but the feeling good part has been more difficult to come by.

In the pages that follow you will be offered a new approach to motherhood that you haven't seen anywhere else. I feel confident that you will benefit from what's inside this book because I struggled with each point in that bulleted list, and when I implemented the tools and system I am going to share with you, I found so much more peace and joy in motherhood. The content of this book is consistent with research but is explained in a simple, practical way and I can assure you that you will leave each chapter with actionable skills you can use right away.

## MY WHY

I have a confession.

I thought I would be one of the best moms that ever lived. I realize that's ridiculous, so maybe top 100 or so, since the world is a pretty big place. Allow me to justify my expectation. I have a degree in human development and family science. I'm not sure what that actually did for me, but I thought it would, at least, offer some assurance I was prepared for motherhood. I also have a doctorate in psychology—that has to do something for my mothering skills, right? My father also has his doctorate in psychology, and I grew up in a family that had “family meetings” and did *those* types of things. I had an excellent mother who provided a top-notch example

of what a “good mom” looks like. I mean, I had all the makings of a top 100 mom.

I went into motherhood knowing how I wanted to discipline our kids. I imagined doing time-outs; before you slam this book shut, I realize those are out of fashion to many now. But it’s what I grew up with, and therefore it’s what I figured I’d do. I imagined our three-year-old sitting in time-out thoughtfully examining her poor choices and me bending down to meet her at eye level and putting all my psychological skill set to use, analyzing her behavior with her and talking about her plan for making better choices in the future. We’d hug and skip off into the sunset holding hands. Easy peasy.

The thing is, I made one massive oversight. I never factored in the type of kid we would have. I have a stinkin’ degree in human development and family science and I didn’t factor in temperament.

Our daughter, Effie, was born with preferences. She came out having strong opinions and gave me a total run for my money. She’s a ball of fire and incredible, but I really wasn’t prepared for her at all.

When Effie was born, my husband, Chad, and I were living in Florida. We had just moved there from the DC area to be close to my parents. If you don’t know this, when you’re from the East Coast and you get close to retirement, you move to Florida. That’s what my parents did and we realized we didn’t want to be without family and support when we had kids, so we followed them there. When we moved into our house in Florida, I was nine months pregnant. Around the time Effie was two months old, Chad was offered a promotion that required relocating to California. He had turned several down already, so this one came as a sort of promotion /ultimatum situation.

This was a painful decision, but he took the job and we decided that he would go to California and I would stay in Florida near my family until we found a new home. Looking back, I think I would

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have made the same decision, because he was busy and overwhelmed adjusting to his new role and I needed the support. But it was a really difficult time.

We spent the next eight months apart, seeing each other every other weekend or so. If you're already a mom, you know all that happens in those eight months: the dreaded four-month sleep regression and introducing solids. I breastfed, so you can imagine the shock and stink when her poop changed. Oh my! I spent so many nights feeding Effie in the darkness of her room feeling deep loneliness and despair, wondering, *Will I ever sleep again?* I read all the sleep blogs in existence at the time; I figured there had to be a way of cracking this code. Looking back, her sleep was totally normal. I wish I had saved my sanity and just accepted that exhaustion was a normal part of early parenthood.

As Effie got older, her temperament didn't really change, it just got bigger and louder. And by the time I finally met up with Chad in California, I had become so accustomed to taking care of her "my way" that I didn't make much space for him to step in. And his lack of experience over those early months bred such a feeling of insecurity in managing our very opinionated baby that he didn't do a great job of inserting himself either.

I was exhausted. I didn't recognize myself anymore. And I was burned-out, becoming very bitter, and buried by my overwhelm in early motherhood.

I thought I would be really good at being a mom. Yet I was constantly confronted with feelings of falling short. I felt guilty asking for any time for myself, caught off guard by how much freedom I had lost, confused about how to manage Effie's personality, and disconnected from who I knew myself to be. I was lost in motherhood and it felt heavy.

This is what happens to so many of us: we lose ourselves in our children, feel overwhelmed and stifled by motherhood, and then

come up for air just to be filled with guilt and shame. We either swing like a pendulum from one extreme to another or surrender to chronic burnout, accepting that this is just what motherhood feels like.

We spread on yet another layer of the guilt and shame because *shouldn't we be doing this better?* We're told that motherhood is magical, so why does it feel hard? Isn't there a better way? Shouldn't we be able to find a way to care for ourselves and fill ourselves back up so we can experience all the bliss motherhood has to offer? Shouldn't we be drinking the green smoothies, working out, getting our nails done, and looking presentable? Shouldn't we be starting small businesses based on our passions while also planning the birthday parties and baking the organic, gluten-free, grain-free, vegan cupcakes? Shouldn't we be able to *be it all* and *do it all* without feeling the weight of it all?

The illusion that there's a perfect, achievable balance sets mothers up to feel like we're getting it all wrong because we haven't discovered the "right" way. We begin believing that if we just google the right combination of words, find the right Instagram post, or mix the right ratio of fats and carbs, we'll reach the victorious, self-actualized place that is balance.

I want to give you a clear statement to hold close to your heart. If that doesn't work, you can tattoo it on your forehead. The statement is simple: *balance is baloney.*

Let it go! Set that myth straight and know that achieving the ultimate, perfect, and permanent balance isn't the goal—nor is it a realistic outcome to aim for. Feeling like you're out of whack, falling short, or behind is completely normal and to be expected.

Please, stop internalizing this imbalance as an implication that you're not measuring up or that you're not "enough." This tendency in motherhood is severely detrimental to your self-concept and quality of life. The goal isn't to achieve a balanced resting state; instead, it's

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knowing how to easily recalibrate your day-to-day life. This knowledge will take you from feeling like you're frazzled and falling short to feeling equipped and at peace.

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I knew when I came out of my haze that I wanted to find a way to help moms navigate motherhood differently. This is my *why*. When I emerged many years and a son (Roy) later, I dug into research, books, and blogs and pulled from my expertise from working in the relationship education field for over fifteen years to compile what I am sharing with you in this book.

Rather than telling you to seek balance, I'll teach you how to quickly make micro-adjustments in your relationship with yourself. I also want to make a promise to you about the pages that follow: I won't waste your time. You'll find practical and helpful information in these chapters that will change the way you experience motherhood. You'll gain new insight into how to navigate the age-old conflict we women face: Do I sacrifice myself for the kids or sacrifice my kids for the preservation of myself? (Hint: the answer isn't so black and white.)

You'll learn practical tools for

- staying connected to yourself,
- seeing yourself in a positive light and ditching the mom guilt for good,
- assessing and asserting your needs with confidence,
- prioritizing your relationships and responsibilities in ways that you can feel at peace with, and
- listening to your body when it's speaking to you.

You'll see that to really nourish your relationship with your kids, you must nourish your relationship with yourself.

## BALANCE IS BALONEY

This message is so close to my heart. It's the one I wished I had received in those early years of motherhood and am so grateful that I know it now as my kids are growing up. I'm so honored you're here; I know how valuable your time is, and I am really eager to share this message with you.

Let's do this.



*part one*

# how did we get here?

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# Chapter One

## WE MOM SO HARD

I will never forget trying to pack up to take our youngest child, Roy, to his first pediatrician appointment shortly after he was born. I was barely able to find a moment to pull myself together. Our oldest, Effie, was two and a half, and she rattled off demands like an auctioneer. How could I possibly get dressed, let alone shower, breastfeed every two minutes, and meet the “needs” (I use that term loosely) of a toddler? Those were really my days at that time: meeting the demands of a relentlessly needy toddler and feeling the guilt when I was pulled in two directions. I felt constantly forced to choose between giving Effie attention to avoid her potential tantrum and giving attention to our newborn son. I was spinning and exhausted and burned-out.

When I finally sat down to speak with the pediatrician, frazzled and breaking a sweat, she took a look at his umbilical cord.

“Did you get this wet?” she asked.

“I don’t know. He probably peed on it. I’m not used to changing

a boy's diaper." I put my head down and felt my face get hot as the shame rushed in. Roy's umbilical cord was getting infected. I was a week in and already falling short as a mother of two kids.

The doctor smiled at me.

"It's okay; this happens a lot."

I appreciated her words, but they didn't do much to console my heart and mind. I had already concluded that I wasn't seamlessly transitioning into this role as I'd envisioned I would.

As we wrapped up the appointment, the pediatrician swiveled her chair toward me.

"Oh, one more thing. This can be a tough time for Effie, so try to get fifteen minutes a day of playtime with her."

"Excuse me, did you say fifty minutes?"

"Nope, fifteen."

I think, in that moment with all my newborn haze, I wasn't able to fully process the gravity of her statement. Had she just given me the most amazing gift of my life: permission to ease the heck up on my crazy standards? Fifteen minutes? Are you kidding me? I spent the majority of my day playing with our daughter while also trying to juggle a colicky newborn, stay on top of my work obligations, nurse, feed our family, not run out of toilet paper, and keep the home put together.

I wish I could tell you this message was my turning point and that I walked out of that office with a newfound freedom and lightness that forever changed my mothering experience.

But alas, I was hell-bent on being a mother who had it all together. My mantra was "I can do all the things and look good doing them. I won't lower my standards because that's weak and means I've given up and given in to the curse of mediocrity. I am woman; hear me roar."

So I left that appointment like the pack mule we all become in the beginning of motherhood. Armed with a car seat in one hand, a diaper bag slung over my shoulder, and a wailing toddler on my hip,

I felt ready to conquer this parenting business. I refused to risk the possibility of selling my two-and-a-half-year-old short. What if the doctor was wrong about fifteen minutes being all that Effie needed? How could I possibly take the chance of permanently affecting her in some negative capacity, such as stunting her emotional development or inflicting trauma she'd unpack in therapy twenty years from now? Put my kid's well-being on the line for some indulgent consideration of balance? Heck no!

My resistance to recalibrating my life and saving my sanity isn't unique to me. In fact, I'd bet the reason you're here is because this resembles your experience. This desire to feel better in motherhood—to feel free, untethered, and more like the former you—tugs at your soul, but your kids, your love for them, their needs, your guilt, and your sense of responsibility tug right back at your heart and mind.

I've spent a lot of time thinking about the undercurrents of our experiences in motherhood—those things that suck the joy out of it and fill us with guilt and shame and feelings of falling short. Throughout my study of the research and literature, it became clear to me that mothers contend with three primary conflicts that, if left undefined and unnamed, dramatically impact the motherhood experience. I want to offer you a new way forward that will not only dramatically change the way you feel in motherhood but ultimately will be better for you and your relationships.

## **THE CONFLICTS ALL MOMS FACE**

There are three core conflicts that define and shape the motherhood experience:

1. The Sacrifice of Your Identity: my needs versus the needs of everyone else

2. The Idealization of Motherhood: my ideals versus my reality
3. The Intensity of Your Parenting Standards: my parenting must be perfect versus my parenting is good enough

Most of the time these conflicts are just operating in the background, unbeknownst to us. They eat away at our confidence, whisper reminders of all the things we wish we'd done differently, and keep us "in line" when we attempt to care for ourselves. These conflicts create feelings of discomfort in motherhood, and we try to avoid that discomfort by altering our behaviors. This can look like overinvesting in our relationships, overcompensating with our kids to narrow the gap between our ideals and our reality, and overparenting to discharge the worry that we're totally messing up our kids. We think doing these things will make us feel better. But we don't. Instead, we feel depleted and weary.

When these core conflicts aren't named and defined, they operate like a nasty, hidden smell in your car. You can definitely tell something stinks, but you can't figure out where the smell's coming from, which means you can't get rid of it! Consider me your nose, sniffing out the conflicts that stink in motherhood.

### **Core Conflict 1: The Sacrifice of Your Identity: My Needs Versus the Needs of Everyone Else**

Navigating your needs versus the needs of your relationships is a tale as old as time for women. One central and defining aspect of becoming a mother is the idea that you have a moral obligation to self-sacrifice for the greater good of your family and children. We spend much of our youth and young adult life trying to understand and meet our needs, but once we become mothers, we begin believing our needs must almost cease to exist because we've been summoned to the higher purpose of motherhood.

I'm sure if you think about it, even just for a moment, you can

recall messaging you've received about this "duty" to love your family well—even if it costs caring for yourself well. Throughout our lives we've been programmed with this messaging. Some of it is subtle, whereas other instances are more overt.

A perfect example of this happened when I was talking to my mom on the phone. My mother-in-law had been in the hospital for over a week, and her condition wasn't improving. In the past eight months, she'd had two knee-replacement surgeries and a gallbladder removal, and she was now in the hospital for pancreatitis. Understandably, my mother-in-law was fed up. During our conversation, I mentioned to my mom that I wanted to send my mother-in-law something. She'd been through so much, but flowers seemed pointless.

"How about you send your father-in-law dinner? I mean, what is he even doing for food?"

When she said this, something inside me exploded. In that moment, my mother-in-law lay frustrated and hopeless in the hospital, and even my own mother (a strong woman who advocates for me to assert my needs) was suggesting that I send a gift to the husband. There was an assumption in my mom's suggestion that what my mother-in-law needed most wasn't something for her but rather something to ensure her loved ones were okay. This is a perfect example of messaging that says our needs should be less important or nonexistent. If you start to pay attention, you'll see similar messages everywhere.

Harriet Lerner wrote about this in her bestselling book *The Dance of Anger* as "de-selfing." She said, "'De-selfing' means that one's self, including one's thoughts, wants, beliefs, and ambitions, is 'negotiable' under pressures from the relationship."<sup>1</sup> In other words, when women feel their relationships will suffer if they prioritize themselves, they sacrifice their own needs, desires, and wants to preserve the well-being of the relationship.

Emily and Amelia Nagoski also talk about this phenomenon

in their book *Burnout*, where they use the term “Human Giver Syndrome.”

Human givers are those who have a moral obligation to give their humanity to the human *beings*. Human givers feel they must be small and needless, caretakers, not too ambitious or emotional or demanding—and, surely, they shouldn’t inconvenience others.<sup>2</sup>

Does this sound familiar?

In so many ways women have been taught to nurture their relationships over themselves. One of the most impactful ways this shows up in motherhood is in all the responsibilities that require physical and cognitive effort that we pile on. Eve Rodsky’s *Fair Play* perfectly captured this experience by calling women the “she-fault partner” in relationships, meaning women are the ones who tend to be the default person who takes care of all the things and all the people.<sup>3</sup> This is the mental load also referred to as “invisible labor” or “invisible load.” This isn’t just an issue of inequality within the home. The invisible load is also a deeply rooted pattern of generations of women taking care of their homes and family members’ needs at the expense of themselves, their sanity, and—oftentimes—their happiness in motherhood and marriage.

In most of the books I’ve read on motherhood, there are vast descriptions of patriarchy, cultural shifts, and theories on why they exist.<sup>4</sup> This isn’t one of those books. The reason why is because those books have already been written, and when I read them, I sometimes feel helpless. How can I *feel* better if I can’t immediately go fix society? I wanted to offer moms something that they can implement in their lives and homes right away. However, we can’t talk about motherhood without acknowledging this major truth: women are most often the ones who fulfill the “human giver” role. Women are the ones who tend to “de-self” in order to care for their relationships. Women, almost always, take on the role as nurturer, relationship manager, and default parent.

This tendency to de-self is so deeply ingrained in us that we

wear it as a badge of honor. We can even perpetuate the messaging in the narratives we form about ourselves and about mothers we perceive as stepping out of line by not de-selfing. For example, think about *that* mom: she looks put together all the time, she always has her nails done, or she seems “too indulgent” by frequently going to yoga. On the surface, we commend her for how she’s able to care for herself, but then we give her the stink eye behind her back.

We do this to ourselves too. If we tip the scales a bit and take a moment for ourselves, we tend to judge our own actions in the same way. *What kind of mom would leave her kids for that long? What kind of mom would drop her two-year-old off at preschool? That’s too young.* Why do we do this? Because this conflict between how we invest in ourselves versus how we invest in our other relationships runs deep. The messaging that it’s our moral obligation to de-self for the greater good of our relationships has been ingrained in us for generations.

I want to mention that this capacity to care so deeply and selflessly for our relationships is a beautiful aspect of women. We’re exceptionally equipped in this way. However, when motherhood hits, responsibilities skyrocket, and free time is hard to come by, it becomes even harder to determine who should get priority. Herein lies the crux of the conflict we face in motherhood: Who’s to be sacrificed—you or your kids?

When we throw ourselves fully into our kids, we burn out, develop resentment, and feel discontentment with life. When we put ourselves at the forefront of our lives, we also feel terrible things like shame, guilt, and worry that we’re missing out on those special moments with our kids. Finding a balance of priorities feels futile.

This conflict is one I struggled with as I prepared to go to the pediatrician’s office that day many years ago. Our daughter literally made her demands loud and clear, and I shrank my needs to meet hers. I, like so many other moms, felt consumed by my identity as a mother, and it didn’t feel good.

In my study and research, I've discovered that there is another way. We have more to choose from than just the two extremes of self-abandonment or child-abandonment. Our relationship with our children is symbiotic; we're interconnected, and there's opportunity for both to thrive. We'll dive more into this later.

## **Core Conflict 2: The Idealization of Motherhood: My Ideals Versus My Reality**

Have you ever noticed that pictures posted to Instagram of moms crying seem to perform really well? You know the picture: a mom is sitting outside somewhere like the grocery store—maybe holding her baby over her shoulder (or with the baby in the background)—and she has red eyes with tears streaming down her face. It's an honest and real glimpse into motherhood. The likes and reassuring comments pour in. Why? Because there's deep messaging in our society that motherhood is magical, that it's the pinnacle of our lives and completes us as women. Yet when we actually become mothers and are immersed in the fog of no sleep, self-doubt, lack of freedom, and guilt about our own needs, we feel completely and utterly confused. These pictures are momentary reprieves from the confusion because they remind us and reassure us that we're not alone in this experience.

I once posted a question to Instagram, asking my community about the messages about motherhood they'd received before they became mothers. Hundreds of direct messages poured in. I read stories of moms who expected to feel love at first sight for their baby but experienced numbness and postpartum depression instead. Some moms expected a baby with a calm temperament but instead were faced with the reality of a colicky newborn. Other moms thought they'd feel a sense of mother's intuition that just never showed up after giving birth. Many moms expected motherhood to complete a part of them, but they instead discovered motherhood felt really hard. Motherhood can be draining, and it often leaves moms feeling

like a hint of their former selves, rather than the actualized version they hoped to become.

I know I had a very clear vision of the mother I would eventually be. Scenes would play out like a movie in my mind. I did this all the time. I have an entire mental film collection of my ideal motherhood moments. I'll share one of my movies with you; I've titled it "The Fun Mom: *Little House on the Prairie* Edition." It goes something like this: I'm walking through my farmhouse kitchen wearing a beautiful floral housedress that shows no hint of previously birthing a child. My hair is effortlessly swept into a bun with the perfect pieces falling down, framing my face. I'm barefoot, duh, and walking toward our young daughter, where she's waiting for me at the end of the counter. Her hair is in pigtails, and she's dressed tastefully in neutral tones, wearing a tiny-size apron that must have been ordered on Etsy. She is perched on a stool holding a wooden spoon, ready to stir the rest of the ingredients in a scalloped-edge, robin's-egg blue bowl that perfectly suits my farmhouse kitchen. I carry a glass jar of flour over to her, dip my finger in the flour, and wipe some on her cheek. She giggles and a flour-throwing party ensues in the kitchen. We start laughing hysterically as puffs of white flour fill the kitchen, and we break into a slow-motion dance scene and "My Girl" (or something nostalgic) plays in the background. End scene.

Here's the thing: I don't have a farmhouse kitchen. But if I did, I would be so worried about flour getting into the crevices of my vintage farmhouse floors and having the energy left over, after baking with a toddler, to clean up the mess we made making this movie-worthy memory. It just wouldn't happen. My reality was more like a tired mom in sweats, on day three of not washing my hair so it's crunchy and up in a messy bun, trying to be "chill" while my three-year-old wants to run the mixer and keeps eating all the chocolate chips, so I'm internally freaking out at the sugar tantrum that's surely coming for me in the next hour. My anxiety would be

increasing, my energy would be dwindling, and it most definitely would not end in a slow-motion dance party.

I could go on endlessly with these scenes I created in my mind. They were all so far from my reality that I spent a great deal of my time in early motherhood feeling like I was doing it all wrong or missing out on creating magical moments. Unfortunately, dissatisfaction, hurt, and self-doubt occur in the gap between our ideals and our reality. I'm sure, like me, you can identify areas of motherhood in which your ideals are far from your reality.

This mismatch between cultural messages that idealize motherhood and the reality of our experiences is a breeding ground for feelings of inadequacy. Most of us believe we're falling short, and we're desperate for reassurance that we're not alone in our experience.

Our ideals about motherhood are largely shaped by culture, by our early caregivers, and by our relationship experiences. These ideals cover a vast number of categories, from the type of mother we imagine we'll be, to the type of child we believe we'll have, to how easy or hard parenting will feel. The chapters that follow will cover this conflict in more depth, but we must first recognize that it exists. We're regularly carrying two realities in our hearts and minds that feel conflicting: *that motherhood is amazing and that motherhood is really hard*. Managing these conflicting realities uses our bandwidth and has a powerful impact on our day-to-day lived experiences in motherhood.

### **Core Conflict 3: The Intensity of Your Parenting Standards: My Parenting Must Be Perfect Versus My Parenting Is Good Enough**

The gist of the third conflict is this: as moms, we're encouraged to devote an inordinate amount of time, money, and energy into the development and care of our children while simultaneously being subjected to increased judgment (from ourselves and others) and feelings of comparison with other women. All of this inevitably

leads to weariness and the worry that we never really measure up. However, when we seek to ease up and parent less intensively, we feel a rush of guilt and shame. It's the hamster wheel of motherhood. How can we get off this crazy-making cycle without experiencing major consequences?

In 1996, Sharon Hays coined the term “intensive mothering.” She defined five key tenets to this ideology:

1. **ESSENTIALISM:** the belief that mothers are the most important or essential parent
2. **FULFILLMENT:** the belief that parents should be fulfilled by their children
3. **STIMULATION:** the belief that involved parents should provide consistent intellectual stimulation for their children
4. **CHILD-CENTERED:** the belief that the parents' lives should revolve around their children
5. **CHALLENGING:** the belief that parenting is hard and draining<sup>5</sup>

Do any of these feel familiar? Numerous studies have been conducted on the concept of intensive mothering and have found, not surprisingly, that this ideology results in increased stress and guilt, less satisfaction with life, and a feeling of being burdened by motherhood. Furthermore, intensive mothering qualities were studied in regard to mental health outcomes like depression, stress, and life satisfaction. The three most impactful dimensions of intensive parenting on mental health outcomes were essentialism, challenging, and child-centered.<sup>6</sup>

This just makes common sense; if you believe that you, as the mother, are the most important and essential parent, it will be difficult for you to involve support and childcare. Because how could you, in good conscience, put your kids in the hands of second-rate caregivers? So moms who ascribe to this belief don't tend to ask for

or accept help. Or when they do, they are overwhelmed with guilt for doing so. This creates a lose-lose situation. This also increases something called *maternal gatekeeping behaviors*, which is a mother's protective belief about how much parenting and childcare responsibility to turn over to the other parent. Maternal gatekeeping tends to restrict co-parenting efforts and ultimately sabotage a mother's mental health, even setting her up to carry more of the mental load later in the relationship.<sup>7</sup> Buying into the essentialism belief ultimately "increases stress and lowers life satisfaction among women as they focus more on caring for their children than themselves."<sup>8</sup>

The "challenging" ideology also makes sense. If you believe parenting is difficult and stressful, you will experience more difficulty and stress (see more in chapter 8). Now, we all know parenting is difficult at times, but holding this belief as a central and defining aspect of motherhood can erode feelings of confidence and impact your mental health.

The final ideology that showed the most impact for moms was "child-centered." As I've discussed already, we moms already tend to be the human givers. We tend to be the de-selfers and the she-faults. The last thing we need is feelings of guilt and shame when we do something that doesn't put our children at the center of our world. One of the most difficult aspects of becoming a mother is the loss of freedom.<sup>9</sup> This ideology fuels that loss. If we believe we must revolve our lives around our children, we lose the ability to step out of that constraining bubble and do something for ourselves. This belief also sabotages asking for help and involving support. We weren't meant to mother this way, and the impact of intensive mothering has not been good for our mental health or the joy we feel in motherhood.

One of the key takeaways from the research on intensive mothering is that mothering in itself may not be the direct cause of depression, stress, and decreased life satisfaction, but rather it's signing on to these beliefs and the behaviors that support intensive *ways* of mothering that relate to these negative outcomes.

Mothering didn't always look this way. Allow me to give you a brief overview of how we got here.

There was a marked shift in parenting in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Prior to then, parenting advice was largely concerned with children being spoiled. Behavioral psychologists like John Watson argued that children didn't need much attention or affection and that overindulgent parenting would mess up children.

In 1946, Dr. Benjamin Spock published *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* and argued a totally different perspective on parenting. He suggested that the core of good parenting was attending to your kids' needs carefully at their different stages of development.

Right on the heels of Spock's book was the introduction of one of the most prominent theories in psychology: attachment theory. Attachment theory, pioneered by John Bowlby in the late 1950s, found that the way early caregivers respond to infants' needs forms the templates for how the infants will attach in their relationships throughout the course of their lives. Guess who the main caregivers usually are? Yep, moms! Talk about some serious pressure! You, the mother, have the power to impact *all* of your kids' relationships throughout the course of their *entire* lives based on how you respond to their needs as an infant. No pressure.

These two major landmarks in parenting history shifted the narrative around mothering and rearing children. Kids are not, in fact, little adults; they're delicate creatures we have major influence over. We can help them thrive or completely thwart their growth. This was the beginning of a domino effect in how we parent and the intentionality and intensity with which we raise our children. Don't get me wrong—these shifts were important and positive; however, the pendulum began to swing from detached parenting to intense, hypervigilant parenting.

Moms, we're faced with an unwinnable situation. Do we turn down the intensity and face ridicule and judgment from others or

from ourselves? Or do we continue with this intensity, burnout, and struggle to enjoy motherhood?

Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels, authors of *The Mommy Myth*, described intensive mothering so well:

Intensive mothering insists that mothers acquire professional-level skills such as those of a therapist, pediatrician, consumer products safety inspector, and teacher, and that they lavish every ounce of physical vitality they have, the monetary equivalent of the gross domestic product of Australia, and most of all, every single bit of their emotional, mental, and psychic energy on their kids. We must learn to put on the masquerade of the doting, self-sacrificial mother and wear it at all times. With intensive mothering, everyone watches us, we watch ourselves, and other mothers, and we watch ourselves watching ourselves.<sup>10</sup>

I faced this intensive mothering struggle when the pediatrician suggested that our daughter only needed fifteen minutes of play together. How could I fulfill my obligation to parent intensely while easing up and doing less? The trade-off of parenting less intensely would be that I might experience feelings of falling short or guilt. However, if we look at our generation of mothers objectively, we clearly can conclude that we mom so hard, and our kids aren't likely suffering from any lack of intention, care, love, or time.

For example, did you know moms today who juggle full-time jobs outside the home spend just as much time tending to their children as stay-at-home mothers did in the 1970s?<sup>11</sup> Can you seriously just sit with that fun little fact for a minute until you can feel the relief sweep through your body?

The next time you've spent what feels like a lifetime on the floor playing LEGOs with your kid, just to feel completely guilt-ridden later when you need to answer some emails, remember you probably

just spent more quality time with your kid in that moment than moms in the 1970s did in a week.

Research on the millennial mother echoes what I'm guessing you experience: mothers judge themselves more harshly than previous generations, and they are judged more harshly than previous generations.<sup>12</sup> As the first generation to parent in a social media age, parenting has never been more open to public criticism as well as affirmation. A BabyCenter survey of moms found that 83 percent of the respondents said it was important to them to be the "perfect mother."<sup>13</sup>

You may read this and roll your eyes—who really thinks we can actually be perfect mothers? It's inconceivable (said in the voice from *The Princess Bride*)! But I ask you to really take inventory of how you live as a mother. Do you believe perfection is impossible while you unconsciously strive every day to achieve it (and feel like crap when you don't)?

The millennial generation, in general, is obsessed with self-improvement and with being their best selves. In fact, they spend twice the amount of money on personal care and improvement as boomers and make more "personal improvement commitments than any generation before them."<sup>14</sup> Don't believe me? Just take a look at the online course options that are available these days! Want to learn to raise chickens? There's a course for that. Do you need to heal your inner child? Take your pick. Do you want something on meditation and deep breathing? The options are endless.

To be clear, I'm not knocking this quest for self-actualization. I live in the self-help and education world. It's my livelihood. However, it's important to realize and take comfort in the fact that this mentality has flowed into how we mother and has dialed up our felt pressure to parent more intensely—and the impact is palpable.

The bright side of what we learn from survey data on millennials is that we really value being moms. Some have even suggested we're the most family-friendly generation yet, and 93 percent of

parents surveyed said being seen as a “good” parent by their spouse is extremely important to them.<sup>15</sup>

The bottom line is that we’re highly invested in being good moms; we want to do a good job. In fact, we take it to another level in that we consider parenting our first priority and part of our core identity—93 percent of moms say that being a mother is “extremely” or “very” important to their identity.<sup>16</sup>

So what does this all really mean in practical terms? It means we mother in such a way that our kids, and all outcomes associated with them, are extensions of us. Our parenting has become an expression of ourselves. This sounds beautiful, self-sacrificial, and almost poetic, but there’s a dark side to it. When our kids lose it, we feel like it means we totally suck. Or if we have a child with a temperament that’s harder to navigate, it feels like we’re constantly failing. Or if our kid develops anxiety, we believe we’re somehow responsible.

One of the most profound parts of motherhood is the loss of self-preoccupation. However, if we consider our children as an extension of ourselves (whether consciously or through lived-out actions), we’ve actually become intensely self-preoccupied. This means that everything our kids do is a direct reflection of either our competency or incompetency as mothers.

The message we’ve all received loud and clear is that our kids are living proof of how good of a mother we are. We must train hard for this role and perform at all costs. This is the difficult mix of feelings that accompanies this conflict. We want to feel light and joyful, but when our “enoughness” is tethered to the outcomes associated with our kids, we’re in for a roller-coaster ride of highs and lows.

## THE WAY FORWARD

Combine the conflicting messages of motherhood with the myth that we can achieve some perfect balance, like I mentioned in “Balance Is

Baloney,” and it’s clear why we feel like we’re falling short. There’s inevitable exhaustion in trying to be everything to everyone. We’re under immense pressure to do it all well. We’re doing a great job as mothers, we’re pouring into our kids in major ways, but we’re doing it at the expense of ourselves.

Please hear this loud and clear: we can’t parent our kids with intention and care while abandoning ourselves for the cause. To truly care well for our children, we must care well for ourselves. My hope is that this chapter has reassured you that you already have the “caring well” for your children down. If you were up for a motherhood review, you’d most definitely receive an “exceeds expectations.” The piece that’s missing is how to care well for your kids without neglecting yourself.

You already empower your kids to know themselves, listen to their intuition, and explore their passions; there’s a way for you to know yourself, listen to your intuition, and explore your passion too. You already guide your kids to have a positive belief in themselves; there’s a way for you to see yourself in a positive light too. You already help your kids identify and honor their emotions; there’s a way for you to tune in to your emotions with compassion and care too. You already encourage your kids to prioritize and assert their needs; there’s a way for you to prioritize your needs too. You already teach your kids the power of making and keeping promises; there’s a way to keep promises to yourself too. You already help your kids care for their bodies; there’s a way for you to honor and nourish your body too.

The way forward isn’t a perfect balance. It’s not about behaving perfectly in an attempt to resolve the conflicts we’ve struggled with in motherhood. Instead, it’s about adopting one simple decree: *care for yourself the same way you care for your children.*

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## LOVE YOUR KIDS WITHOUT LOSING YOURSELF

Most moms are naturally the managers of relationships. We are the ones who do the heavy lifting in our relationships: checking in on our partners, worrying about our kids, becoming experts in our families and intuiting their needs. However, we sort of stink at doing these things for ourselves. Imagine how cared for we'd feel if we took this incredible skill set and turned it toward us. We must learn to mother ourselves like we mother our kids.

Rest assured—I know you don't have a surplus of time, and your plate is already beyond full. I know you don't need more to do or carry around in your mind. Part of what makes motherhood so hard is that when we feel drained and overwhelmed, we don't know *how* to feel better.

I will give you a clear plan of action, with things you can do in mere moments, that can fit seamlessly into your routine or be squeezed in between diaper changes. The approach I'm offering in this book is targeted and efficient because I know that's what you need most.

I know you'll also need convincing that you deserve care. I know you'll struggle to assert your needs and shift your self-concept. I know you won't want to inconvenience your family in order to find time for you. This book will address all these concerns (and then some), and it will be a place you can return to when you need to be reminded of why caring for yourself is important for you *and* for those you love.