

CALMING OUR EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY TO OUR CHILDREN

A Guided Meditation for Therapists to do with Parents



DAFNA Lender

This guided meditation can be used by therapists to help parents become less reactive to their children's behavioral challenges, allowing them to be more present with their children. Use this guide to introduce this concept and exercise to your clients and help them restore regulation and a sense of calm in stressful moments. This loose script can be adapted to meet your and your client's needs.



- ▶ **THERAPIST:** We have talked about a number of behaviors or problems your child has that you want help with. I'd like you to take a piece of paper and write down 4 or 5 behaviors that bother you, frustrate you, or make you the most angry. These are the things that may make you feel exhausted and like you want to give up. Take your time thinking about these.

Give parents as much time as they need to create the list. If they can't come up with 5, that's okay. If they have more than 5, that's okay too. Continue when the parent indicates they are finished.

- ▶ **THERAPIST:** Look at the items you listed. Are any of them similar/connected? Draw a shape (square/circle) or highlight in the same color behaviors that seem connected. Is there a common denominator? Is it about disrespecting you, not seeing you as a person? Anything that makes these issues seem like they're part of the same root cause.

If the parent can't see similarities, the therapist can look at the items the parent wrote and help the parent explore if some of the behaviors are related. This should only take 2 or 3 minutes). If some of them are related, call them a "cluster". Once the clusters are identified, ask the parent these questions.

- ▶ **THERAPIST:** Which of the clusters bothers you the most? Let's focus on that. Think of a specific incident where your child did this behavior. Now I want you to think about that incident. Bring it back in your mind, hold it in your mind. I am going to ask you a few things about the experience as if you were in the moment. Close your eyes if you need to and draw the image up in your head. Take some time to recall how you were feeling.



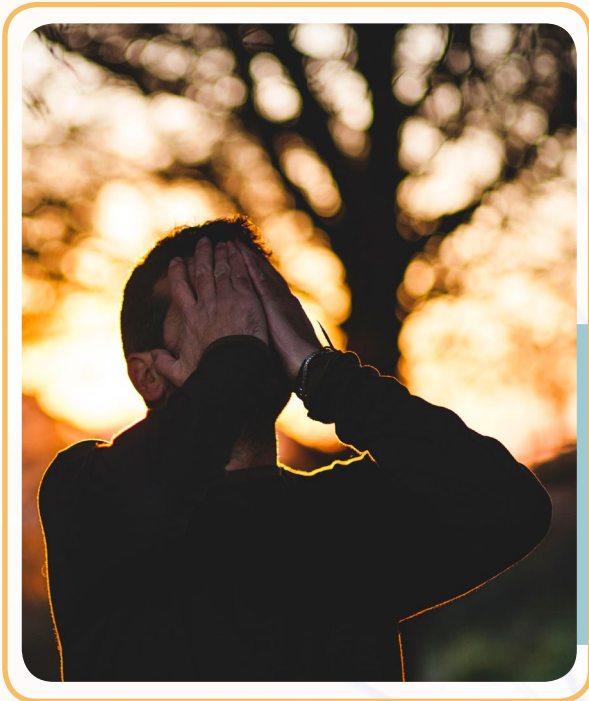
When the parent indicates they are visualizing the incident, ask the parent the following two questions.

- ▶ **THERAPIST:** (1) What do you say to yourself in the moments that the behavior is happening? What does your inner voice say to yourself at that moment?

Parents will often start by saying what they think about the child, like “He’s never going to stop; He is doing this on purpose,” etc. Ask them the question again, emphasizing What do you say to yourself? If they need help, clarify:

- ▶ **THERAPIST:** What do you tell yourself about yourself as a parent? What does this mean about you as a parent?

After working through this question with the parent, have them write the core questions down. We want to help them reach a self statement. For example: “why don’t I have what it takes to make this better?”



- ▶ **THERAPIST:** (2) Put yourself back in that moment, what feeling do you have in your body when you are in that situation? Where does the stress/tensions/tingling/heat reside in your body?

If they struggle to identify the feeling, walk them through a body scan to support their awareness. them reach a self statement. For example: “why don’t I have what it takes to make this better?”

We are looking to see the core issue that they are struggling with from their own history. For example:

- I'm going to die/He is going to kill me
- I want to hurt my child
- I feel out of control
- I hate my child
- I am a bad parent/person
- I am a failure
- I cannot protect my other children
- I'm trapped
- It will be this way forever
- I will lose everything I love
- I'm alone/no one will ever help me
- No one cares about me
- My needs aren't important
- I don't care/I can't feel anything



Once they have identified their core negative belief, ask them to try to remember when is the first time they felt the same way? Have they been in a similar experience before? When is the first time they can remember a similar feeling or thought?

If they can remember a similar situation from their childhood, let them know that there is likely a connection with why the specific behavior in their child is causing them the most distress and hampering their ability to stay regulated. If they can't remember or make a connection, let them know that your guess is they may have been in a similar situation in their childhood, but don't push it. It lets them know that there is a reason why they "lose it" or become dissociated/ineffectual around certain behaviors.



► **THERAPIST:** Think of another time now; the first you can remember having a feeling similar to this feeling with your child. A lot of times the things that make us feel the most stressed are things we experienced in our earlier lives that have a similar flavor. They give us the same feeling of being overwhelmed, like we can't cope, or it takes us into strong feelings of anger or withdrawal.

If you have that earlier incident in your mind, the first thing I want you to note is that **the physical symptoms you are experiencing is an autonomic nervous system response and it's Not. Your. Fault.**

When you feel overtaken by powerful negative feelings, overwhelmed or disconnected, or when you feel rage or shame, those are automatic responses in your nervous system. They are not in our control and can feel frightening, so we may respond by checking out or getting angry. But these automatic responses can and will pass. This is not a failure on your part – it is a survival mechanism that served a function at another time in your life. There is nothing wrong with you. You can get back to a better, more present state of mind if you gently ride out the automatic response. You can do that by:

STEP 1

Paying attention to the feeling you have in your body and focusing on it without judgment.

STEP 2

Identifying the negative thought that comes into your head and acknowledging it without becoming attached to believing it.

STEP 3

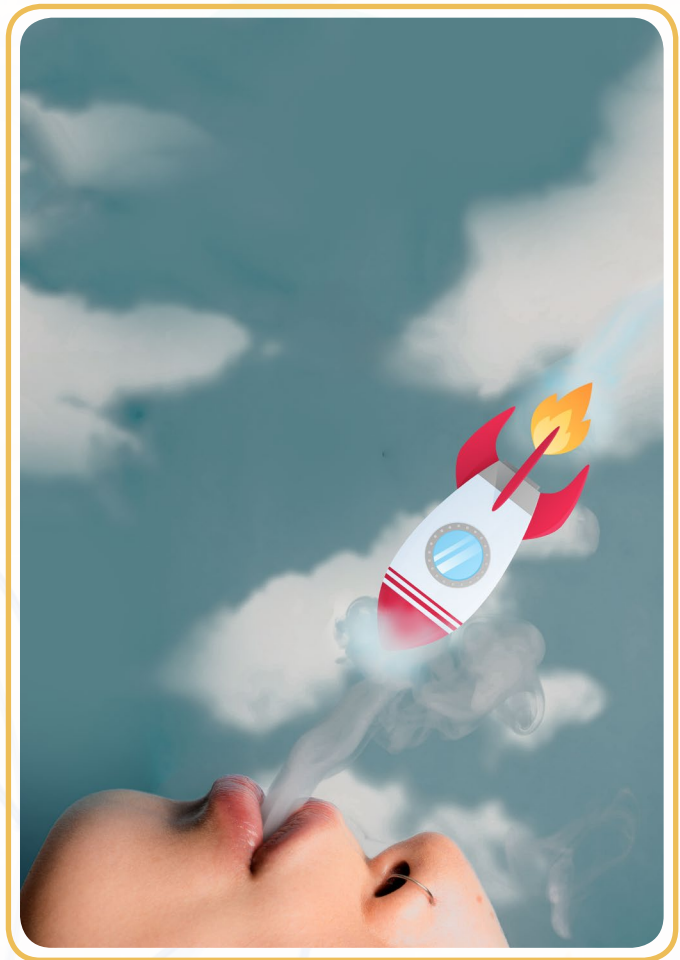
Taking 4 belly breaths – inhaling for a count of 7 and exhaling on a count of 8.



► **THERAPIST:** Are you willing to practice this with me?

If they are, walk them through the following steps.

- **THERAPIST:** Now we're going to think about an experience you had in the past and try an exercise in extending self compassion through a visualization.
- Close your eyes if you feel safe enough.
 - Conjure up the incident in your head and give me a thumbs up when you are picturing the incident.
 - Tune into your body and focus on the feeling in your body.
 - Now imagine that you are sending a vessel into your body with a message. This vessel is able to travel through your body and settle on the places that are feeling the stress or strain associated with this experience. What is the vessel for you? It might be a capsule, rocket ship, bubble - what works for you?
 - When the vessel arrives at the location in your body, imagine it opening and letting out a message of self-compassion. What is the message of self compassion that this vessel carries? It could be "This is not your fault," "You didn't do this one purpose," Or, "You are not a bad person". "It is your nervous system's way of trying to protect you. Trying to keep you safe."
 - *Guide them to take 3 deep breaths with a 7 / 8 count. 7 count inhale, 8 counts exhale. Do the breathing with them.*
 - Open your eyes.




Process with them what that was like and how they feel now and provide some context.

- ▶ **THERAPIST:** What we practiced is bringing together the experience of feeling that stress, strain, and tension along with an awareness of your body and how you feel and loving messages of self compassion. Combining those things with this breathing technique teaches your autonomic nervous system that it can move through the strong feelings by using your breath as a tool. We can exercise our mind this way to help pass us through stressful times at home and teach our body to calm down so we can be available to our kids.





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