

Mother Nurture

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Taking In the Good Stuff

I get to the end of a long day and I feel just used up and sort of empty . . .

You, like every mother - and many fathers, too - put out so much during the day that it's easy to get depleted: more is going out than is coming back in. And after awhile, it is natural to feel like you are running on empty.

That's why it's so vital to keep putting back in your tank. We've written a lot about how to replenish yourself with good nutrition and vitamins (all posted on our website). Here, let's look at how to fill yourself back up emotionally.

The key is to look for positive moments, and then take an extra few seconds to savor the experience and let it sink deeply into your emotional memory banks. It's as simple as that.

This is especially important if a fair amount of the day to day experiences you're having are stressful or upsetting -- which is pretty typical for a parent of young children, even when there are also lots of wonderful, sweet times with the kids. Negative experiences get instantly recorded by the brain to help us survive, leaving a kind of residue in the mind - an internal mood or atmosphere that shapes how we feel about life, other people, and ourselves.

But unless it's a million-dollar moment, positive experiences are not recorded in the same way: we have to hold them in our awareness for some seconds so that they sink in. Of course, if you do that consciously a few times each day, those new positive experiences will gradually build up to make your mood more positive over time, and help you be more optimistic and cheerful and happy.

This is also a great way to help all children, but particularly those whose temperament is either spirited or anxious. Spirited kids tend to zoom along so fast they are onto the next thing before they've registered the positive experience they just had. And anxious kids especially need the positive inner resources of reassurance and encouragement that come from soaking in good feelings.

OK, so how to do it?

It's incredibly simple. There are four steps, but these will become very quick and automatic with just a little practice - and you can adapt them for your children:

- Notice positive events and then let them become positive experiences for you. (Even better, actively look for opportunities to have positive experiences, such as looking for good things about yourself, or kindness and respect toward you from others.)
- Savor the experience. Make it last. Try to feel it in your body - like sensing a feeling of love as a warmth filling your whole chest.
- Sense that the positive experience is soaking into your brain and body - registering deeply in emotional memory. Maybe imagine a treasure chest in your heart (an especially good method for children). Consciously intend for it to really sink into you.
- For bonus points: Sense that the positive experience is going down into old hollows and wounds within you and filling them up and replacing them with new positive feelings and views.

Like current experiences of worth replacing old feelings of shame or inadequacy. Or current feelings of being cared about and loved replacing old feelings of rejection, abandonment, loneliness. Or a current sense of one's own strength replacing old feelings of weakness, smallness.

The way to do this is to have the new positive experience be prominent and in the foreground of your awareness at the same time that the old pain or unmet needs are dimly sensed in the background.

The new experiences will gradually replace the old ones. You will not forget events that happened, but they will lose their charge and their hold on you.

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Try those four steps a few times and you'll see how effective they are. And from about age 3 on, when you are putting your child to bed, you can take a minute or two to have the child think about something happy, and then feel like those good feelings are sinking in, like water into a sponge, like sunlight into a shirt, or like jewels going into a treasure chest.

In sum, this is a profound, far-reaching, and genuine way to help yourself, or your children. It literally changes the brain in enormously healthy ways.

(Rick Hanson, Ph.D. is a clinical psychologist, Jan Hanson, M.S., L.Ac., is an acupuncturist/nutritionist, and they are raising a daughter and son, ages 14 and 17. With Ricki Pollycove, M.D., they are the first and second authors of Mother Nurture: A Mother's Guide to Health in Body, Mind, and Intimate Relationships, published by Penguin. You can see their website at www.nurturemom.com or email them with questions or comments at info@nurturemom.com; unfortunately, a personal reply may not always be possible.)