



ABOUT TO BLOW YOUR TOP?

If you find yourself snapping at your kids during breakfast, fuming in the car after work or losing it during the dinner-and-homework scramble, it's time for a mad-mommy makeover.

BY TERI CETTINA ILLUSTRATED BY MARTA ANTELO/AGOODSON.COM

Bridget Melson knows a thing or two about helping other moms calm down. Part of the Temecula, CA, family therapist's work involves counseling angry parents so that they can find kinder, gentler coping tactics for manic mornings, deranged dinner hours and the cranky kids who exacerbate them. So she was surprised when she recently reached her own boiling point at home. Bridget was cleaning up after making dinner for her children, Lucas, 8, Landon, 6, and Allie, 1, when she noticed that the back door was wide open—again—and the family cat had gone AWOL. This was a big deal, as their last cat was eaten by coyotes that had infiltrated the neighborhood.

"I yelled at the kids for leaving the door open, and things spiraled downward from there," Bridget says.

Her 6-year-old flung himself to the ground in a crying tantrum over math homework; her eldest shrieked from his shower, in need of a bar of soap; and baby Allie toddled down the stairs with a mouthful of tiny red Legos—which her brothers had supplied to her.

"That's when I lost it," Bridget admits. After failing at every calming technique she'd ever taught her clients, Bridget called her husband, who was working late. As soon as he arrived, he escorted his red-faced wife upstairs, ran her a bath and told her she had the rest of the night off.

Hell hath no fury like an overtired, overstressed, overworked mom. Hard as it is to admit, we're perfectly capable of freaking out and screaming at our kids—then beating ourselves up for it afterward.

A full 93 percent of moms with 4-year-olds yell at their little ones at least once or twice a week, according to University of Texas research. In another survey, two thirds of moms say yelling is a primary guilt inducer.

Lots of times, we don't even see the "big blow" coming, says Cheryl Rampage, PhD, a psychologist with the Family Institute at Northwestern University in Evanston, IL. "The pressure builds, and before you realize it, you're over the edge—yelling at your kids, your spouse, maybe even your colleagues at work." When you finally calm down, you may feel embarrassed or ashamed. "You may try to 'stuff' the pressure and anger for a while, but unless something changes, that cycle will probably come around again."

Dr. Rampage explains.

Ranting and raging rarely solves anything or gets children to listen and learn. Instead, it often makes everyone feel worse. But it's truly not the end of the world, says Dr. Rampage: "Yelling at your kids doesn't mean you're a bad person or parent, or even that you lack self-control." But it can be a wake-up call that you want to do things differently.

Ready for a cooldown? Follow our six-step madness makeover.

1

YOUR ANGER IS TALKING TO YOU, SO LISTEN.

"Anger is actually a useful emotion if it spurs us toward something that really needs to change."

“Smoke came out of my ears as I ranted and raged and lectured. It was a no good, very bad morning.”

says marriage and family therapist Hal Runkel, author of *ScreamFree Parenting* and *ScreamFree Marriage*. If you can start to identify what’s underneath that mad-mom exterior—schlepping your kids to too many evening activities, doing 95 percent of the household chores—you’re less likely to yell or threaten to put your kids in time-out for life. Pay attention to what makes you mad, and work to change the situation.

After one of many mad-mommy mornings, Sheryl Bone did just that. “My seventh grader is pretty good about making the school bus,” says the Rochester, MI, online professor, “but no matter what I say or do, my eight- and ten-year-olds dawdle like there’s no schedule, deliberating on everything from school snacks to hairstyles. This particular day, I watched the bus pull away with one kid while the other two were still in the kitchen debating. I had a conference call in ten minutes, but I had to drive them to school. Smoke came out of my ears as I ranted and raged and pointed fingers all the way. It was a no good, very bad morning.”

Sheryl, whose blowup left her feeling mean and

out of control all day, realized that her anger was telling her to do something different. “I had let the morning’s mad dash escalate too far,” she says. But her anger helped her focus on this recurring problem and take steps to put a more effective morning schedule in place. A better approach can include clear directives rather than blaming. “You two need to get your backpacks and lunch bags right now” is far more proactive than “You two always make us late!”

2

REVIEW YOUR “SHOULD”S AND “SHOULDN’T”S.

“People scream when the reality they’re experiencing is in direct contrast to the one they think they *should* be experiencing,” says Runkel. You may be thinking: “Parenting *shouldn’t* be this hard.” “My house *should* be as clean as my neighbor’s.” “My boss *shouldn’t* expect me to work late.” Expectations like these can lead to resentment and anger.

First, says Runkel, it helps to accept that sometimes parenting *is* hard. You *don’t* have time to match your friend’s



HEALTHY WAYS TO RELEASE ANGER

Holding anger in can lead to self-destructive behaviors like drinking or over-eating to try to squash feelings. But there are better things to do than rant and rave. From our experts, effective ways to release negative emotions and find relief.

WALK IT OFF. Remove yourself from an angry moment and take yourself out into fresh air. Walk around the block or to the park. Inhale deeply and exhale slowly as you walk

to regulate your breathing and calm yourself down.

WORK IT OUT. Embrace the value of vigorous exercise in letting off steam. Heart-pumping activity—fast walking, a cardio machine at the gym, a Zumba class—puts the adrenaline that anger generates to positive use and produces endorphins, which can improve your mood.

WRITE ABOUT IT. Try scribbling in a journal; ask your spouse

not to read it, and stash it well away from your kids. Often, the process of writing can help you clarify your situation and release frustration.

TALK IT OUT. A good therapist can help shed light on what’s bothering you and help uncover memories or behavioral patterns that influence you. Once you’re aware of anger catalysts, those powerful emotions quickly lose their grip.



MAD-MOMMY QUIZ

Could you be depressed?

In the past month, have you:

- 1 More than once, found it very difficult to cool off after you got angry? Yes/No
- 2 More than twice, had two or more alcoholic drinks at night to calm yourself down? Yes/No
- 3 More than once, found yourself mindlessly surfing the Web for several hours very late at night? Yes/No
- 4 Experienced sleep difficulties, particularly waking in the middle of the night and having trouble falling back asleep? Yes/No
- 5 Without thinking, smacked your child or even your husband out of anger? Yes/No
- 6 Been regularly hypercritical with your spouse/partner, and found yourself arguing regularly as a couple? Yes/No

If you answer **YES** to more than three of these questions, it might be worth talking to your doctor or a professional therapist about your anger and whether you might be depressed. Angry outbursts can be a symptom of depression.

Source: Cheryl Ramage, PhD

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squeaky-clean house-keeping. Your boss *does* expect you to put in long hours. You don't have to like these things, but they may be the truth.

Next, allow yourself to cool off and accept what *is*. Then you can work to make adjustments. Instead of yelling at your chronically back-talking teen, calmly assert that you're her mom, you love her and you deserve to be spoken to with the same courtesy she usually reserves for her friends. Figure out what part of your home must be neater (perhaps your living room) and what can stand a bit of sloppiness (the bedrooms—they have doors). Talk to your boss about covering some of your work at home after hours. "Your solutions will be better and longer lasting if you choose them while you're calm and accepting rather than when you're angry," Runkel adds.

3

CATCH YOURSELF BEFORE YOU BLOW.

Get to know the warning signs that tell you you're about to lose it, says Judith Siegel, PhD, author of *Stop Overreacting: Effective Strategies for Calming Your Emotions*. Your goal is to take evasive action *before* you say or do something you'll regret.

"Start by asking yourself: 'What do I feel in my body when I start to get angry?'" Siegel says. If you're not sure, pay attention the next time anger starts to bubble. "You might notice knots in your

stomach, a vacant, floaty mind or a tingling or flushing in your face," she explains. Focusing on your bodily reactions rather than your angry thoughts can actually help you cool down more quickly.

Once you know your about-to-blow alerts, you can try some calming techniques before you start yelling or stomping around. You can also use these methods to head off meltdowns at trigger times—like right after work, or when you're rushing to get your kids to sports practice.

Tamika Hammond's trigger for losing it with her 3-year-old son is when he cries for seemingly no reason. The scenario: He cries—she yells—he whines and cries harder. Recently he shouted, "I want my daddy," which was a wake-up call for the often exhausted mom, a correctional officer in Milwaukee. "I felt so bad about yelling at him out of frustration, which only made both of us feel worse," she says. "I know I should try to breathe calmly and talk in a soft voice when I don't want to yell. Next time I'll give myself a time-out before I deal with the situation. I think time-outs were originally established for adults anyway."

Tamika has the right idea. Dr. Siegel suggests a plan like this for heading off mad-mommy moments: **Escape to the bathroom.** Take a few minutes to breathe deeply and slowly, paying attention to your breath and what it feels like going in and out of your nasal passages. **Identify your feelings.** Say aloud or in your mind,

“I’m really frustrated about my kid’s constant crying.” Siegel says acknowledging what ticks you off can shortcut the overreaction. **Recall a good memory.** Remember that trip to Italy? Focus on what you saw, heard and smelled. Pulling that experience out of your mental filing cabinet can help you calm down so your brain doesn’t flood with emotion.

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STEP UP YOUR SELF-CARE.

This strategy is crucial, says Dr. Rampage, since moms who blow their tops are almost always running on empty—taking care of everyone and everything except themselves.

When Molly Lee Craig’s 10-year-old twin boys were babies, she felt that energy spent on anything other than working and caring for the children was utterly wasted. “I went for more than a year without getting my hair cut,” reveals the Portland, OR, trucking company communications coordinator, who describes herself at that time as “a harried mom who was fraying around the edges.” Little by little, Molly wised up. “I realized the kids, and my husband, would prefer a happy, well-rounded woman to an angry one.” She now makes it a point to give herself spa pampering sessions, go out with girlfriends and take crafts classes—and her whole family benefits.

Dinnertime used to be meltdown time for Sherrie Wagoner, a university

research and grants program officer in Los Angeles and mom of two, until she realized something had to give. She started taking after-work yoga classes and now comes home “transformed after even the worst workdays.” To make this happen, she had to put other adjustments in place, so she taught her daughters at ages 14 and 10 to make their own simple dinners when her husband worked late. A bonus beyond Sherrie’s anger management: “The girls are proud that they can take care of themselves when needed, so it boosted their self-esteem.”

To figure out what might refuel you, take a look at what you did for fun and relaxation before you had kids, says Runkel. Reading best-sellers? Running? Theater? “It’s time to remember how to push your own pause button,” he advises.

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GET CREATIVE ABOUT WORK.

Anger can take a toll not only at home but also on the job. Your boss isn’t married to you. If you rail at co-workers or walk angrily out of meetings, you may eventually find yourself on the chopping block, says Dr. Rampage. What you can do if your job is really getting you worked up is try to make changes. “Consider negotiating for extra help or more time on a project, adjusting your hours so you can pick up the kids earlier from child care or



even shifting to a lower-stress position in another department, if that’s what you need,” she suggests.

Many working moms are reluctant to ask for accommodations for fear of seeming “not committed enough.” But if job issues are spilling into your family life and causing you to lash out at loved ones, or leading to chronic conflict with colleagues, it’s worth exploring options.

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FESS UP TO OTHER MOMS.

You probably dish with friends and co-workers about toddler meltdowns and potty-training travails. But talking about our own tantrums? Well, that’s embarrassing—even shameful—so we’re mum. The reality: “Most working moms lose their grip from time to time,” says Dr. Rampage. “If you can talk to trusted friends about it, you’ll find out how normal you are.”

That’s exactly what now works for Bridget Melson. When she’s at the end of her rope with her kids, she calls, texts or Skypes one of two good friends (neither lives close by) who have slightly older children. “We have a pact that we’ll call back as soon as possible if one of us has a parenting emergency. They’ll even text me from a work meeting, if need be,” she says.

After her volcanic night of the escaped cat, math meltdown and Lego munching, Bridget’s friends Elayne and Julie helped her brainstorm some new parenting strategies—particularly for dealing with her younger son’s temper tantrums. Within three days, her family life was back on a more even keel. “Do we still have issues and crazy times? Of course!” she says. “But they’re quickly reduced due to the support I get from my mom friends.”

As for the cat? Oblivious to the family explosion he ignited, he strolled back home later that night—not a scratch on him. ■